

# Land: An Empowerment Asset for Africa

The Human Factor Perspective



Edited by  
**Claude G. Mararike**

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# History of Land Disempowerment in Africa

Kenneth D. Manungo

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## Introduction

It is important that there be a general acceptance of the premise that “access to and ownership of land” are at the centre of the discourse of this book. If that is accepted, then the “control and utilisation of this asset” should precede all the other debates and discussions. There is, therefore, the need to go back to the past and find out how humans worldwide have related to land. The emphasis on “humans worldwide” should never be lost sight of.

Land is at the centre of the human being’s existence all over the world. Let us take the simple beginnings of the human being at birth. In the Zimbabwean experience, or more specifically the Shona experience, when one is born the ‘umbilical cord’ is cut and then buried in the ground. This is a very significant step in the life of a human being in Zimbabwe, and perhaps worldwide. For the Zimbabweans, that simple step of burying that which gave life to the newborn signifies the connection between the newborn and the land in which the umbilical cord is being buried.

For that reason, there is that connection which is permanent between the two: the land and the human being. God in His wisdom, decided to place each group of human beings in its own geographical location on this earth. The Africans, in their different groupings, were placed in Africa. The Asians, in their different groups, were given their own locations. The Native Americans too were placed in their own areas. The problems started when individuals and some groups among the different groups became greedy and, subsequently, expanded and encroached on other people’s lands.

## The Halcyon Days: “*Pasi Chigare*” or The Golden Era

The Shona have an expression which refers to the era before everything was disturbed and changed to what it is today. This period is referred to as “*pasi chigare*” (halcyon days) (Manungo, 1991:22). It is essential that this earlier period be understood because it forms the basis upon which succeeding periods are interpreted. The earlier period remains as a reference point upon which all other successive periods are compared.

What were the halcyon days like in most of Africa? The experience from Zimbabwe is very useful in showing what these days were like. “The Shona and the Ndebele had thriving economies and well structured political systems long before the imposition of colonial rule in Zimbabwe” (Manungo, 1991:25).

The chiefs were descendants of the former rulers, who, though no longer alive, were regarded as the owners of the land. No one among the living generations owned the land. The chiefs held land in trust for the living and those not yet born. All living generations had access to land which they used until their “passing on”, therefore, leaving the land to those not yet born. That connection with the past should not be overlooked as it is at the centre of how the Africans in general, and Zimbabweans in particular, view the land issue.

No one had the right to claim ownership of the land because the land belonged to everyone. The land belonged to the “children of that soil”. Everyone had a right to the land; they could use it for their sustenance. One William Rayner, a British school teacher, then living in Southern Rhodesia, described the centrality of the land in the lives of the Shona in precolonial era. He stated that land was held collectively. Land did not belong to anyone.

Land was regarded as part of nature, no more to be alienated as was the air or rain. People worked the land and then left it at death for use by the young who were taking over. They did not own it. The whole Mashona (sic) way of life denied the idea of private accumulation of such a fundamental resource as land. To take the land away from someone would have seemed like depriving him or her of the right to breathe or drink water from the river (William Rayner, 1962: 104).

That was the “*pasi chigare*” era. The coming of the outsiders, especially the Europeans, disrupted the golden era of the past.

## **Early Land Disempowerment in South Africa: Part One**

Land disempowerment completely changed the lives of Africans as they tried to grapple with the loss of land which had been at the centre of all their livelihoods. The establishment of a colonial Dutch settlement at the Cape in 1652 is chronologically the earliest place in Africa where the Khoikhoi and the San were disempowered as they lost their land to the Dutch intruders led by Jan van Riebeck. “Land was seized from the Khoikhoi and later the San, to increase Dutch grazing pastures, expand farming activities, and to establish settlements” (South African History Online, SAHO, June 2014).

The Dutch East India Company used the Cape as a place for resupplying its sailors with fresh food on their way to India and other parts of Asia, where they traded for spices to be used in preserving food in Europe before refrigerators had been invented. At first, the Dutch were trading with the Khoikhoi but, later, they wanted to grow their own food and raise their own cattle for fresh meat which was essential as sailors suffered from scurvy after being at sea for long periods without fresh food.

Eventually, the Dutch were demanding more land, which led to clashes with the Khoikhoi. The Khoikhoi were defeated, which led to more land being taken away from them. This loss of land to the Dutch settlers deprived the Khoikhoi of their main source of livelihood. With the loss of land, the Khoikhoi were forced to then seek employment on the farmland which had once been their land but was then in the hands of foreigners. The Dutch settlers were the new owners (SAHO, June 2014).

The Khoikhoi tried to resist but to no avail because the Dutch had superior weapons which they used, not only to suppress the Khoikhoi but, in the end, to decimate them completely. The loss of land, in other words, the disempowerment of the locals, had only just begun. Before long, the Blacks were affected as the Dutch moved northwards, searching for more “pastures”.

The arrival of the British around 1800, exacerbated an already volatile situation. The British pushed the Dutch northwards and the Dutch, in turn, pushed the Africans off their land. The Africans faced the same problems the Khoikhoi and the San had experienced, with the same consequences; the loss of their land, which was the beginning of their disempowerment.

### **The Berlin Conference of 1884-1885**

The last part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed clashes and potential conflicts among the European powers throughout Africa. Many of these powers were making claims and counterclaims in different areas of the continent. The German Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, offered to be the “honest broker” of the competing powers in his country. The powers were to “negotiate questions and confusion over the control of Africa” (M Rosenberg, Berlin Conference:1). Rosenberg states that the Berlin Conference was Africa’s undoing as the colonial powers sat in Berlin carving out possessions on the continent that would last until Africa got its independence back.

They drew meaningless boundaries which had no basis, nor factual reasons, for coming up with those new countries that they set up. They

ignored the cultural and linguistic boundaries already set up by the Africans. This is the conference which resolved that the Congo Basin was to be owned by an individual, Leopold II, the then King of Belgium. The Berlin Conference was a turning point in the lives of the Africans which was to last for over 100 years. The Berlin Conference strengthened the British determination of linking the Cape with Cairo. This was what Cecil John Rhodes had always dreamed of.

## **Land Disempowerment in South Africa – Part Two**

The British, with the support of the earlier Europeans, the Dutch, were determined to remove the competition the African farmers were posing. The Europeans wanted the Africans to provide cheap labour on the newly created white commercial farms and also to work underground in the diamond and gold mines.

Brian Dollery (2003) stated that for 350 years, South Africa's history was characterised by unequal "power relations and unfree labour pattern" which had its origins in land deprivation. The South African whites, both the Afrikaner and the British, having disempowered the Africans, began to emphasize what they termed the "native question". The idea was to find a solution to dealing with the African majority in relation to the minority Europeans. As the Europeans continued to dispossess the Africans of their land, it became clear that a wider policy of segregation would be emphasized in any new legislation which affected the Africans.

The one piece of legislation that paved the way for the exclusion of Africans from economic and political participation in South Africa, was the Glen Grey Act of 1894. The Act was drafted by Cecil John Rhodes and his secretary, Milton, the same architects of similar legislation in Southern Rhodesia years later. Rhodes called the Glen Grey Act the "Bill of Africa" (SAHO, 2013). Similar legislations were drafted elsewhere in Africa, most of them with the objective of disempowering the Africans so they would not compete with the Europeans but become labourers in the white controlled economies (SAHO, 2013).

The South African experience would be incomplete if The Natives Land Act (No. 27 of 1913) is not addressed. This is a law which was passed by an all-white parliament in 1913. It allocated about 7% of arable land to Africans who then made about 80% of the population. The law went further to allocate 80% of the more fertile land to the whites who were about 20% of the population (T.R.H. Davenport, 1991). This law was a milestone in the disempowerment of the blacks in South Africa. It was a pillar upon which the apartheid system of segregation rested. About two decades

later, the Southern Rhodesian whites emulated the South African example, when they passed the Land Apportionment Act of 1930.

The SAHO article on the Land Act of 1913, cites the Land Commission headed by Sir William Beaumont, a former administrator in Natal and Supreme Court Judge, saying that in one area of Masiplaats, "the Europeans who lived there were sadly lacking in much that proved the superiority of the white over the black" (SAHO, 2013). His Commission then recommended that the area be allocated to Africans because it had "poor soil with a steep and sour pasturage of so limited extent. . . Only a Kaffir (sic), with his limited requirements could be expected to exist on such terms" (The Report of the Land Commission, Vol. 1, appendix VIII; SAHO, 2013). The Act (1913) went beyond dispossessing Africans of their land; it closed avenues of livelihood for Africans and left them with only one option - that of working for white farmers and industrialists (SAHO, 2013).

### **Disempowerment in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe)**

The African experience in Southern Rhodesia was very much similar to that of South Africa. Some of the Europeans who had created the disempowerment of Africans in South Africa were also involved in the colonisation and disempowerment of the Rhodesian Africans. Cecil John Rhodes and some of his close associates in South Africa came to Southern Rhodesia in the early 1890s under a company which had been formed for the purposes of colonising Southern Rhodesia. Rhodes formed what became known as the British South Africa Company (B.S.A.Co.). The Company invited white settlers to take part in the invasion of Mashonaland and Matebeleland to the north of South Africa. Rhodes promised each of those who were going to join him in the invasion very attractive rewards of land and gold claims. Each settler was promised 3 000 acres of prime land and 15 claims of gold. They were also to be paid seven shillings a day. Rhodes went further and told the invaders that if they stayed with him and went all the way to support his invasion of Southern Rhodesia, he would send them back home to Britain, after making them millionaires (A. Davidson, 1984; see also Manungo, 1991:44).

Rhodes had recruited nearly 200 settlers and 500 armed policemen (M. Hudson, 1981:9). The very composition of what was called the "Pioneer Column" (which should rightly be named "the Invasion Column") is surprising when one recalls that Rhodes' emissary to Lobengula, Charles Rudd, had promised that they were asking King Lobengula to come and "dig one hole of gold and then leave his country". Such were the lies of the imperialists which they told the indigenous people when they fully knew that they had come to Africa to dispossess the Africans of their



land and the rich resources. Some examples of how land was taken in Southern Rhodesia leave one in no doubt of the European objectives of disempowering the Africans of their most important resource; land. The settlers were told to get on their horses and to ride in the four directions to mark the extent and size of their farms. The one side of the farm was marked at the place the horse had got tired and then stopped. The settler was to do the same with all the four sides of the farm he was going to take as his (Manungo, 1991:46). There is the story of Dunbar Moodie, who had been part of Rhodes' invasion force, "and led members of his family into the district of Chipinge, in the Eastern highlands, where he marked off nine farms, each about 6 000 acres, one for each family member, including infants and those who were still in South Africa (Manungo, 1991:46).

Following the seizure of African lands, the settlers, like those in South Africa and elsewhere in Africa, realised that they needed labour to work on their farms and mines. They turned on the disempowered Africans and implemented very similar legislation to that which had been enacted in South Africa, the "pass laws". The Rhodesian settlers called it "the registration certificate (*Situpa*) laws". The law was meant to control the movement of Africans throughout the country. An African male, from the age of 16, was obliged to carry the registration certificate on his person at all times. The certificate recorded the full names of the African male, his chief and the district he came from. The certificate also recorded the African male's white employer. All African males from the age of sixteen were required to be working for a white person, who was to write his name, date of employment and, if the African was no longer his employee, the date of discharge was to be entered on the registration certificate. Wherever the African male went, the document was to be carried, in case the police or other authorities wanted to see it. The police had a right to stop all adult African males and ask for the registration certificate. If one was travelling on a bus or train, or even on foot, the police could demand to see the registration certificate.

The objective of this document, like the "pass laws" in South Africa, was to make sure every African male was working for some white man on the farms, mines, or factories, in the urban areas. It was a crime not to be working for some white man. As in South Africa, the colonial government passed the "vagrancy law" which was enforced if you were not working for some European. Forced and cheap labour was, therefore, at the centre of these laws. Disempowerment of the Africans was a well-thought out strategy of forcing the African male to work for the white man.

## **Disempowerment in West and Central Africa**

The British conquest of Ghana and Nigeria in West Africa was almost like a re-enactment of the conquest of Zimbabwe in Southern Africa. The British feared French expansion in West Africa as they did the Portuguese expansion in Southern Africa. They, therefore, attacked the Asante in 1874, and again in 1895 to 1896. This was at the same time the British were fighting the Shona and Ndebele in Zimbabwe. Likewise, Nigeria was also conquered in the same period by the British. Using a company called the Royal Niger Company, the British conquered powerful states such as the Sokoto Caliphate between 1900 and 1903 (K. Shillington, 1995:310). Shillington states that land was seized and raw materials were extracted from the continent with little or nothing given in exchange (K. Shillington, 1995; 333). Whether it was the Portuguese, the French, Germans or the British, they all had one goal in mind: the appetite for the African raw materials.

The common theme in most of the colonial administrations and economies was the issue of taxes. All the colonial administrations imposed taxes on adult males in most of their colonies. The tax was about one pound per annum. This amounted to at least a month's wages on white-owned mines or two months or more on white-owned farms. The tax was meant to force all adult African males into the cash economy, for the purposes of obtaining money for taxes. "It was a deliberate attempt to break African rural self-sufficiency (K. Shillington, 1995:352). The Africans had to provide labour for the settlers. Basil Davidson states that "as the imperial structures took shape, Africans found themselves increasingly deprived of their best land, and often enough of all their land" (B. Davidson, 1991:295).

## **The Congo Basin**

King Leopold of Belgium declared that all the land not occupied and cultivated by its inhabitants was to be regarded as "vacant land" and, as such, it belonged to him. This meant that the indigenous, who lived in the forests practising shifting and hunting agriculture, lost their land. (K.Shillington, 1995:333). Leopold went further and leased an area of 8 000 square kilometres to a Belgian company in return for building a railway line from the Atlantic coast to the interior. Leopold dealt with the Congo as his "medieval fiefdom".

## **Conclusion**

The European powers did not disguise their intentions or motives when they came to Africa in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. They wanted raw materials

for their industrial machines. They wanted raw materials such as cotton, palm oil and rubber. Africa was not going to part with these commodities peacefully. Wars of conquest followed with the result that Africa was defeated, resulting in the disempowerment of the continent's people.

We could cite many more examples from the rest of Africa but all will confirm the common trend running through the evidence for indicting the European powers that came to Africa at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. All the European powers came to disempower the Africans and to loot the continent's people of all their raw materials.

### **The Modern Disempowerment or the New Land Grab in Africa**

The reader may wonder what this section of the chapter is all about. As we were researching on the historical disempowerment of the Africans by the European powers after the Berlin Conference we stumbled upon what was being referred to as the "land grab" in Africa (see also Chapter One of this volume). What is interesting to note is that while disempowerment was all to do with the European powers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the "land grab" is a current issue that needs our attention as scholars who are emphasizing the human factor in development.

Tinyade Kachika produced a well-informed study on current "land grabbing in Africa" which was sponsored by Pan Africa Programme of Oxfam International. The Report covers the following countries: Ethiopia, Ghana, Mali, Mozambique, Senegal and Tanzania. The research shows that land grabbing is currently a big challenge for African countries because of increased interest by foreign agricultural investors who purchase massive pieces of land in rural Africa (T. Kachika, November 11, 2010). The land grab arises from agreements that are entered between external parties with governments which view the coming in of some of the projects as being beneficial to the local communities. It seems Kachika's study refutes this as it points out that the locals do not benefit from these agreements, except that the locals in the end lose land they have farmed on from time immemorial. Some of the agreements cover large areas of land, thus depriving the locals as was the case under colonial rule. Just as the women were affected under colonial rule, it seems the new agreements are not benefitting the women. Kachika stresses the point that despite statements of intent about investments benefitting the local market, it is clear that groups like the small-scale farmers, women and pastoralists, end up losing out on these government-to-investor projects (T. Kachika, November 11, 2010:9).

The publication by the Transnational Institute (TNI) is also very useful as it spells out the dangers of getting into agreements with foreign investors whose primary objectives are to grow food for their nations. The research states that the small-scale farmers in Zimbabwe, using their own resources and buying their own equipment, produce most of the food that is consumed locally (TNI, October 11, 2012). The new “land grab” phenomenon is as frightening as the land disempowerment of the colonial days. What is of concern, however, is that the current disempowerment is with the connivance of the African governments in the name of “development” (see also Chapter One).

There are also some projects being set up in present-day Zimbabwe that are impacting on the livelihoods of communities. A case in point was reported in a local weekly newspaper. A non-governmental organisation called Transparency International Zimbabwe (TZI), carried out research in Chisumbanje, Chiadzwa and the Nuanetsi Ranch, where agreements have been entered into with government but have left communities landless, without access to water (which they had before), and also the communities have been robbed of their spiritual, cultural and sentimental values (*The Standard*, Zimbabwe, June 22, 2014). The paper goes on to say that the communities were forcibly removed from their land to make way for big commercial projects in diamond mining, bio-fuel and ethanol production. Most of these deals are said to require links with the political elite in government who will facilitate the speedy conclusion of these deals. In all these deals, the affected communities are not consulted, just as the colonial regimes were doing in their time. The benefits rarely filter back to those affected communities. We quote the paper to conclude this practice which is like a scene from the colonial era.

The benefits rarely filter through to communities as profits benefit the investors. Implications of every land deal is loss of access to water by local communities. Emissions from ethanol is killing livestock and destroying the environment and there are inadequate notices before relocation and failure to compensate (*The Standard*, Zimbabwe, 22 June, 2014).

The land redistribution under the “Third Chimurenga” which started in 2002, has not been received by the urbanites who are claiming that they were left out when others, especially those in the rural areas, were given land. Some argue that the urbanites were also part of the “Second Chimurenga” as they supplied guerrillas with clothing, money and food which they sent to their rural homes as was demanded by the guerrillas. Others have blamed the multi- acquisitions by some people who have

more than one piece of land just as the white colonials had done. These are legitimate concerns but we should recall that there were those who saw the land redistribution as a wrong thing because it was taking land away from the whites and they did not want to be part of that. It is also possible that some who did not go for the programme are now realising that the programme is succeeding and they have been left behind. The solution would be found in a new land audit which should make sure people have one piece of land and then give another chance to those who want land and would like to go into farming (see also Chapter Eight in this volume).

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