

**Constructing Difference and Managing Development:  
Material and Discursive Visions of “Progress”  
among African Elites,  
Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, 1953-1980**

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**Introduction**

The urban elite in Africa has played and continues to play a key role in the way development and progress have been defined and pursued in colonial and postcolonial African societies. Yet we know little about their perceptions and practices of development and progress. The research described here and funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) was undertaken by Jane Parpart and Miriam Grant in order to provide an in-depth look at the way a particular group of elite<sup>1</sup> Africans in the middle class housing area of Pelandaba in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, fashioned their conceptions of development and progress during two crucial periods: the colonial Federation (1953-1964) and settler rule (1964-1980).<sup>2</sup> The focus on this township is

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<sup>1</sup>Elite in this proposal refers to urban Africans who were either middle or upper class. Elite urban Africans tended to be engaged in business or professional activities such as management jobs, clerking or teaching. The middle class housing area (township) targeted these elites, who would have very few other residential choices due to racial segregation laws. Further differentiation of elites emerged from the research.

<sup>2</sup>The research was funded by SSHRC from its three-year major research grants program and was carried out between 1999 and 2003, with the help of two graduate students at Calgary and one at Dalhousie. Difficult field conditions slowed down the research, but the writing of a book is currently underway.

critical for a detailed and thorough analysis of household and community changes and transformation over time. Even as the second largest city in Zimbabwe, Bulawayo has still been completely overshadowed by the capital, Harare, with respect to research focus; yet it is an ideal and rich locale for this research, and with results which are easily transferable to the rest of the nation, and to development literature. The research used both historical and geographical approaches to understand the way men and women in a particular middle class area of Bulawayo came to understand notions of progress and development, the way families sought to transform these visions and dreams into concrete lived realities, and the intersection of these ideas and practices with efforts to improve the conditions of life within the township of Pelandaba, in the city of Bulawayo and the nation at large.

## **Objectives**

The objectives of the research were:

- To examine the way in which the African urban elite have perceived and practiced ideas of development over two significant periods of colonial rule: the Central African Federation (1953-1964) and the Rhodesian settler state (1964-1980) in Zimbabwe, in order to investigate the impact of changing political, economic and social circumstances on attitudes and praxis among the emerging African elite.
- To uncover how notions and dreams of progress were transformed into lived everyday space and material culture within the African urban elite household and how this varied by gender, age and time.
- To determine the role of the African urban elite in development at the community, city, and national levels during these two periods and to evaluate the intersection and articulation of African notions of development with Westernized concepts of modernity and development

## **Context**

Development as an idea was initially introduced into the colonies to invigorate colonialism, increase productivity and legitimate colonialism as a modernizing and progressive force in the post WW II era of “self-determination.” Development discourse and

practice for the most part characterized colonial peoples as mired in “traditional” practices, which could only be modernized by Western expertise, technology and institutions (Crush, 1995). In the case of Africa, which was regarded as a continent in a “very primitive moral, cultural and social state” (Cooper 1996a:12), the need for development assistance was seen as particularly dire.

The African urban-based elites and workers, previously seen as an impediment to rule through traditional structures, now emerged as the “natural” allies in this endeavour. Stabilizing and fostering these groups became a watchword of colonial policy. The educated elite, in particular, were regarded as the standard-bearers and willing participants in Africa’s move towards modernity, but of course, a modernity defined by the West (Cooper and Packard, 1997). These assumptions have continued to dominate development discourse and practice. The current preoccupation with the knowledge and participation of the poor has left the indigenous elite’s role in development unproblematized and unexamined (Craig and Mayo, 1995).

Current scholarship suggests the need for a different interpretation. As Cooper and Packard (1997) point out, “the African elite, and working class, did not simply accept Western definitions of modernity and development.” They soon discovered ways to use the universal assumptions embedded in the language of development for their own ends. For unlike the concept of “civilization,” which remained a Western construct, the discourse of universal rights and potential for future development offered the possibility that this language could be high-jacked in unexpected ways, and this indeed happened. During the nationalist struggles the language of development offered a platform for legitimating confrontations with colonial authority, as well as bases for quarrels between interest groups. After independence, the language and practices of development have often been used to legitimate elite control over political and economic structures, but at the same time, organizations and individuals have, and continue, to use the language of development for their own purposes — sometimes to challenge authority, sometimes to collaborate with it. In all of these activities, the urban elite have played a crucial role.

Yet, we know far too little about the way the urban elite has understood development and progress over time, how these

understandings have combined and redefined various strands of thinking, both from colonial and “traditional” sources, and how these definitions have been translated into concrete lived practices in daily life and community affairs, both locally and nationally. To gain a window into this world, much more detailed, historically specific analysis of the urban elite is needed (Pigg, 1992; Cowen and Shenton, 1996). To that end, this research studied a more affluent section of Bulawayo, namely the township of Pelandaba. The study drew on both historical and geographical approaches to the urban experience. It focused on the way attitudes towards respectability, progress and development emerged in this community over time, and how these visions and dreams of development were translated into the material and discursive contexts of daily life, including the structures of housing, the use of space, the gendered character of everyday life. We are concerned not only with the way the urban elite in Pelandaba saw themselves and sought to translate those images into lived realities, but also with elite attitudes towards, and relations with, the urban poor and rural African society. For these attitudes have been, and continue to be, key factors in both community and national development thinking and practice.

The study builds on recent scholarship on attitudes towards progress and development and on the African elite. Scholarship on Zimbabwean notions on progress and development has for the most part emphasized European debates and concerns. Carol Summers, for example, in her carefully crafted book, *From Civilization to Segregation* (1994), explores European attitudes towards civilization and progress in Zimbabwe before 1934. Yet, we discover little about the impact of these ideas on the African elite. Michael West (1990) focuses more squarely on the African middle class, exploring issues such as housing, education, family life, social life and economic and political activities. It is an admirable first step, but provides little in-depth analysis of middle class understandings and practices in particular contexts over time, nor does it highlight women’s role in political life. Terrance Ranger’s study of the Samkange family (1995) is an important supplement to West’s more sweeping approach, where he investigates the experiences and attitudes of one very political elite African family. Though engaged in national politics, the Samkange’s have been

based in Bulawayo, and thus provide important insights into the Bulawayo case. However, the focus on one family, while offering a detailed understanding of individual thinking and behaviour, underplays the role of community in the construction of elite attitudes and practices.

The work of Tim Scarnecchia (1993), Terri Barnes (1992) and Tsuneo Yoshikune (1989) provide important insights into the African experience in Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe. Scarnecchia's work on the mapping of respectability and the transformation of African residential space is particularly helpful, although it only extends to 1957. Terri Barnes' rich oral data offers rare insights into women's lives in Harare, and Yoshikune explains urban migration patterns prior to 1925. Tim Burke's *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women* (1996), offers an exciting entry point into African concepts of, and entanglements with, the material consequences of colonial notions of progress and civilization. He analyzes this process through the lens of small commodities such as soaps, which played a central role in African (re)interpretations of European notions of cleanliness, civilization and progress. His complex, nuanced understanding of the way bodies, objects and ideas interacted and changed over time in colonial and postcolonial Zimbabwe, informed our research, particularly the focus on daily life.

The research draws on this scholarship, but focuses on Bulawayo rather than the capital, both because it is an important, but often ignored, secondary city (1992 population of 620,000 to Harare's 1.4 million) and industrial center, and because the township of Pelandaba offers a window into the way a small group of elite Africans sought to understand and organize their lives around shifting and contested definitions of progress, respectability and development, and the impact of these understandings and practices on community and national development issues.

The study covers two important periods, 1953-64 (the colonial Federation) and 1964-80 (settler rule), in order to investigate the impact of changing political, economic and social circumstances on attitudes and practices among the African elite. While acknowledging settler and colonial influences, this study is based on the assumption that African elites did not simply accept hegemonic assertions and practices, but sought to redefine and

recast these ideas in ways that suited their own situations and aspirations (Cooper and Stoler, 1997). It focuses on the local, on the specific ways elite Africans in Pelandaba and Bulawayo sought to transform their dreams and aspirations into the building blocks of life, while linking these local practices and assumptions to the larger struggles for development, both in Bulawayo and in the national arena. Given the checkered career of the elite in Zimbabwe since independence, particularly in the last five years, the study of this group is all the more important as present actions are invariably embedded in the past.

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