Gendered Support Strategies of the Elderly in the Gwembe Valley, Zambia

Lisa Cliggett

University of Kentucky, lisa.cliggett@uky.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/anthro_facpub

Part of the Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons

Repository Citation
https://uknowledge.uky.edu/anthro_facpub/7
Gendered Support Strategies of the Elderly in the Gwembe Valley, Zambia

Notes/Citation Information
Published in Tonga-Speaking Peoples of Zambia and Zimbabwe: Essays in Honor of Elizabeth Colson, Chet Lancaster & Kenneth P. Vickery, (Eds.). p. 219-236.

© 2007 by University Press of America, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

The copyright holder has granted the permission for posting the book chapter here.
Gendered Support Strategies of the Elderly in the Gwembe Valley, Zambia

Lisa Cliggett

Introduction

In the Gwembe Valley of Zambia's Southern Province, old women and men play highly active roles in securing their own support as they age. Contrary to stereotypes many westerners, and indeed Africans themselves, hold of communal and altruistic family relationships in rural African villages, not all old people receive the same assistance, nor do men and women have the same access to support networks. Without taking initiative to encourage relatives or neighbors to give support, an old woman or man risks living an extremely marginalized and impoverished life during his or her last years. Part of the difference in support systems to which men and women have access as they age lies in a familiar history of women's economic marginalization as Tonga society became increasingly linked to a national and global economy over the past fifty years (Colson 1999; Leonardo 1991; Mikell 1997).

This article traces one facet of Tonga women's trajectory of exclusion from valuable economic resources, and also points to the strategies women use to counteract their lack of a material economic base and to mobilize support as they age. In the Gwembe Valley, as throughout Africa and elsewhere, household, kinship, generational, and gender dynamics influence who has access to resources like land and cattle, and members of these different groupings benefit from these resources in different ways. In particular, older men and women have vastly differing access to, and benefits from, these highly important material resources. Furthermore, these gender differences in access to resources, and investments in those resources over the life course, lead to very different strategies in how aging parents mobilize support from their children and kin.

Choice within Constraint, and Bending the Rules: Colson's Contribution to a Theoretical Framework

Anthropological theory over the past 25 years has placed great emphasis on what has been called “agency,” “practice,” and “structuration” — that is, in layperson's terms, the roles individuals and social structures play in shaping each other (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1976; Herzfeld 1997). However, while the terms may be new, foreshadowings and earlier conceptualizations of these ideas (without the labeling and jargon) can be found in a broad spectrum of anthropological work of the mid twentieth century, particularly from the group of anthropologists associated with the “Manchester School” of British social anthropology.
As early as Raymond Firth’s work among the Tikopia we see recognition of individual choice within a broader social group (1936; 1964). But it was Max Gluckman and the cadre of social anthropologists associated with the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in then Northern Rhodesia who, through numerous case studies, illuminated early on the highly dynamic nature of social systems, and how individuals, kin, and social groups acted to press the boundaries of what had been believed to be rigid systems of social structure and organization (Colson 1977; Kuper 1996).

Elizabeth Colson’s contribution to this body of work provides vast depth of cultural richness and detail, as it emphasizes the theoretical argument that individuals act within a surprisingly flexible system, sometimes to change it, sometimes to be constrained by it. Anthropologists and other social scientists often do not recognize the value of Colson’s theoretical contributions to the body of anthropological scholarship, perhaps because her thorough ethnography shines as a model for others to follow, giving the theoretical framework second stage. It could also be that with adherence to deep description and to revealing systems of unique culture groups, some anthropologists often hesitate to make broader generalizations, which can lead to “macro-theory” (complete with new terminology as signifiers) down the road (Milton 1996: 17-22).

Colson’s ethnography certainly privileges accurate and detailed description, but within those descriptions emerges a theoretical argument for the ways individuals and social structures play upon one another, certainly in the Gwembe Valley, but quite easily beyond the African continent as well. Her Gwembe work repeatedly highlights the range of choices people have within systems that both constrain and enable action, whether in conflict and health decision making (1973), in times of food scarcity (1979), in transformations of religious rituals and economic activity (Colson and Scudder 1988), negotiations of ethnic identity (1996), or changing kinship relations and cases of suspicion and witchcraft (2000).

Although in my own work I have often fallen back on the terminology of the current theoretical era, I have increasingly come to appreciate Colson’s (and Scudder’s, and other RLI anthropologists’) earlier formulations of these ideas. Indeed, as I teach graduate courses in Social Organization, I frequently ask my students to find the common threads that link theory of the 1940s and before with ideas that follow, including those of the present day.

With this appreciation of Colson’s and Scudder’s contributions towards theory, I set the argument of this article within the framework outlined repeatedly in their work, and rephrased in sociological theory of agency, that sees individuals as empowered to make choices within their social structures. Rules and norms shape and constrain behavior, but individuals can test the boundaries of those rules and norms through their individual and social actions.

The norm of caring for elders in African societies offers an ideal example of how individuals do and do not adhere to these cultural ideals. During the Southern African drought of 1994-1995, while I was conducting ethnographic fieldwork in the Gwembe Valley, a man abandoned his grandmother in his homestead, as he and his two wives and all their children moved to their lakeside gardens to protect crops from invasions of hippos, cattle, and birds. Typically, when a dependent (such as an elderly mother, aunt, uncle, or disabled relative) remains in a homestead, an adolescent child or one of the wives will remain in the homestead in order to care for the dependent woman or man. In this case the man’s nuclear family abandoned the whole homestead, and his grandmother with it. Daughters of the elderly woman eventually rescued her, but the abandonment itself suggests that the norm of caring for and respecting elders does not always reflect actual behavior. As this example illustrates, caring for elders is not inevitable or “natural” behavior; individuals make choices as they move through their social worlds.

Within this framework of choice and constraint, households become a place of action, where individuals work both together and apart in their productive and reproductive activity (Netting, et al. 1984; Wilk 1989; Wilk 1991), as the story about the abandoned grandmother shows. Gender differences, between husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, and fathers and mothers also illustrate the range of cooperative and non-cooperative behaviors within domestic groups. Consequently, the domestic group, and the often-competing desires of individuals within the group, becomes a unit for study and analysis. These themes, and the units of study, have played a central role in Colson’s research and writing, from the beginning of her Gwembe work until the present. It is upon this solid foundation that I have built my research, and synthesized my ideas.

Doing Anthropological Research in the Gwembe Valley

The Gwembe Valley carries the reputation throughout Zambia as a drought-prone, isolated and impoverished area. Annual hunger seasons, combined with cyclical droughts, often make subsistence tenuous. Over the past two decades droughts and “hunger years” throughout Southern Africa have occurred more frequently, and in 1992-93 and 1994-95, two of the worst droughts since the 1920s hit Zambia’s Southern Province (Savory 1996). In addition to these aspects of hardship, the Zambian nation has suffered from economic decline since the mid-1970s when prices of copper (Zambia’s largest export) on the world market dropped, causing an economic crisis throughout the country. Since that time Zambia’s economy has fluctuated, with a general downward trend most recently exacerbated by the World Bank and IMF’s structural adjustment program launched in the early 1990s.

These national-level economic conditions impact both urban and rural populations by affecting prices for staples like maize (for food and seed), fertilizer and other household supplies, staffing and supplying of medical clinics and schools, employment options in all locations, and maintenance of infrastructure such as roads and transportation systems. In these austere economic conditions, everyone faces the challenge of daily survival in
conditions of increasing scarcity. For the people of the Gwembe Valley, these conditions trigger familiar responses, such as gathering wild foods that satisfy hunger (but not taste preferences), tapping into larger and larger support networks (such as migrants living in areas with better harvests), and trimming down expenses and consumption (Colson 1979:21-22). In these times of hardship, the elderly often find themselves in tenuous positions at the fringe of the productive domestic unit, at risk of being “trimmed out” and receiving less than their basic needs. Given such conditions, the elderly must become key players in their own survival, negotiating their position and rights to valuable resources with relatives and kin.

Many scholars of social change and African studies know of the matrilineal Gwembe Tonga people due to the research Elizabeth Colson and Thayer Scudder have conducted over the past 40 years (Colson 1960; Colson 1971b; Colson and Scudder 1988; Scudder 1962; Scudder and Colson 1978; Scudder and Colson 1981). Their original research agendas focused on cultural continuity and change in the face of massive upheaval caused by the building of Kariba Dam on the Zambezi River, and subsequent resettlement of approximately 60,000 Gwembe Tonga. In 1956 Colson and Scudder initiated the “before” study of Gwembe Tonga life ways, and in 1962, after resettlement, they returned to their original sites in order to understand the process of change and adaptation. Since that time, Colson and Scudder have returned to these original field sites approximately every three years, and continued systematic data collection on a vast array of socio-cultural, economic, political, religious, and demographic information.

In 1994 I joined the Gwembe Tonga Research Project as part of the “next generation” who would increasingly manage the project as Colson and Scudder began the process of retirement. I went to Zambia in the spring of 1994 and settled in Sinafala village to begin approximately 18 months of anthropological research for my dissertation on support systems for the elderly among the Gwembe Tonga. In 1956 Colson and Scudder initiated the “before” study of Gwembe Tonga life ways, and in 1962, after resettlement, they returned to their original sites in order to understand the process of change and adaptation. Since that time, Colson and Scudder have returned to these original field sites approximately every three years, and continued systematic data collection on a vast array of socio-cultural, economic, political, religious, and demographic information.

In 1994 I joined the Gwembe Tonga Research Project as part of the “next generation” who would increasingly manage the project as Colson and Scudder began the process of retirement. I went to Zambia in the spring of 1994 and settled in Sinafala village to begin approximately 18 months of anthropological research for my dissertation on support systems for the elderly among the Gwembe Tonga. In 1956 Colson and Scudder initiated the “before” study of Gwembe Tonga life ways, and in 1962, after resettlement, they returned to their original sites in order to understand the process of change and adaptation. Since that time, Colson and Scudder have returned to these original field sites approximately every three years, and continued systematic data collection on a vast array of socio-cultural, economic, political, religious, and demographic information.

I also conducted extensive interviews in two migration destinations for Gwembe villagers: Chikanta, a frontier farming area on the Plateau northwest of the Gwembe Valley, and Lusaka, the capital of Zambia and the primary migration destination for those people seeking wage employment. The data presented in this article comes primarily from Sinafala village, although I found the behavioral patterns I describe in all of my research sites, as well as in other areas where I visited briefly and had a chance to hear about local life.

When I began my fieldwork in 1994, I initiated contact with 92 individuals, aged 55 or older, in three different research sites. Lusaka, my urban research site, had no permanently resident elderly people; Zambians attribute the small population of elderly people living in urban areas to the high cost of urban life, and the lack of institutional support for seniors in the absence of kin networks. When men or women reach their senior years, they typically return to home villages or establish new farms in “frontier” land, abandoning their urban home. Although I worked with Gwembe villagers in Lusaka, this population consisted of the children of elderly people living elsewhere.

The Gwembe central village, Sinafala, housed 45 of the 92 elderly people with whom I worked intensively. In 1994-95 Sinafala had a total population of approximately 500 people. By the end of my fieldwork in 1995 three of these elderly people in Sinafala had died. Mazulu village, with a 1994-95 population of approximately 400 people, housed another 37 of my study group, and by fall 1995 five elderly people had died. The frontier farming region northeast of the valley became a popular migration destination for many Gwembe people in the 1980s, including children of many aging villagers. In 1994-95, I found ten elders living in Chikanta; these aging men and women had left Sinafala village, or retired from urban centers where they had wage employment, to settle with relatives in the frontier. The migrant destination of Chikanta poses challenges for identifying a “total population” because the region covers a vast territory, and the residents include migrants from many areas of the country. However, our Gwembe Tonga Research Project (GTRP) data shows that in 1994-95 approximately 150 migrants from Sinafala, or descendents of those migrants, lived in the Chikanta region. In all three sites, the group of elders with whom I worked constituted the total population of people aged 55 or older.

The methods of data collection that I employed included extensive open-ended interviews, focused discussions on resource access, support networks and gift exchanges, and surveys to collect detailed information about family members, residence patterns and frequency of contact with non-resident kin. I interviewed all 92 elderly people, in their homesteads, and also interviewed most of their children, both in the village and, in the case of migrant children, in their homes in town or other rural areas. With the help of my research assistant, I conducted most of these interviews in ciTonga, the local language all Gwembe Tonga people speak.

In addition to the formal data collection techniques I used, I also observed the ebb and flow of daily life. I lived in a homestead with a man and his three wives, and their thirteen resident children. Sharing meals with this family and
other villagers offered a multitude of opportunities to witness village life in action, including many moments of resource distribution, a primary aspect of my research agenda.

**Gendered Resource Access, Gendered Personal Styles**

The Gwembe Tonga Research Project and the questions we ask in this specific ecological setting are part of a broader context of cultural and political ecology. Specifically, development induced relocation and its aftermath profoundly influenced the Gwembe's past and present. But many other pressures play key roles in the social history of this area. The multitude of micro-level pressures, such as village and chieftaincy political struggles, and household and kinship power dynamics, all influence local people's choices, decisions, and behavior.

In the Gwembe, as elsewhere throughout the world, household- and kinship-level dynamics influence who has access to what resources, and how they can use them. During my year and a half living in the Gwembe, I saw women mobilizing their relationships to children by calling on concepts of “mother” and the reproductive experience as evidence for their right to demand support. Older women offered the statement, “don’t they know that I’m a human who gave birth to them?” as enough reason for a child to give her material assistance in her old age.

Men, on the other hand, most often used their control of resources, especially plow and draft animals, to extract assistance and support from their children. One of the wealthiest men in Sinafala managed to keep four adult married sons living in his homestead, and thus contributing to the domestic group in a variety of ways. According to both the father and the sons, these sons exchanged their labor farming their father’s vast fields for the use of his cattle and plows in their own fields.

Another case study tells of the conflict between father and son over use of the father’s farming implements and the son’s personal cash income. Lazwell and his new wife of four months lived in his father’s homestead. His father gave him use of his plow and two cattle in exchange for labor in his father’s fields. A unique opportunity to build a brick house in the village gave him a small sum of cash as payment for the job. When his father demanded a portion of those earnings, Lazwell refused, claiming that his father had no right to the income, and that he already worked in his father’s fields. As the heated discussions continued and the conflict grew to include relatives outside the homestead, Lazwell’s father finally stated that Lazwell no longer had use of his cattle or plows, and in addition, Lazwell’s wife could no longer use any of the cooking pots of her mother-in-law. Faced with the prospect of having no farming implements for the fast approaching planting season, Lazwell chose to migrate to a frontier farming area where he would work in his cousin’s fields, in exchange for the use of the cousin’s cattle and plow. Such conflicts frequently lead to some kind of migration, whether to town, distant farming areas, or nearby regions with matrilineal kin (Cliggett 2000). Colson (2000) also suggests that the recent shift in witchcraft accusations from more distant male kin, to fathers, is associated with these types of conflicts between fathers and their offspring. These conflicts also demonstrate the authoritarian nature of fathers’ relationships with their sons in particular, but other relatives as well (for a discussion of the dynamics between brothers and sisters, see Cliggett 1997 and in press).

Cultural notions of gender and obligation certainly influence these differences in styles of interaction between men and women and their children. The Tonga typically see men as strong, aggressive, and warrior-like, while they view women as more sentimental, nurturing, and protective.

However, the differences between mother-child and father-child relationships are not simply culturally constructed notions of intergenerational relations. Very real differences in material wealth exist between men and women, and these differences influence the leverage with which elderly parents can negotiate their support in old age. In order to understand the contemporary situation of gendered strategies in elderly support, we need to look at the history of women and men’s access to wealth, starting with the role of land and the increasing importance of cattle.

**The Changing Value of Land**

Prior to the forced relocation of the Gwembe Tonga people, the majority of the population farmed on the alluvial soils of the Zambezi River, using the horticulturalist technology of hand-held hoes and digging sticks. Cereal crops (predominantly millet and sorghum, but increasingly maize), vegetables, and tobacco made up most of their crops.

On portions of this land, both dry and rainy season harvests were possible. Alluvial gardens on the riverbanks maintained their fertility over time due to annual flooding, and generally allowed two harvests a year. Consequently, these gardens on the riverbanks were highly valued. Corporate matrilineages held communal access rights to this land, but individuals within lineages and clans often competed for the same land, particularly as the population grew. Colson and Scudder document many dramatic stories of witchcraft and murders attributed to disputes over land from that time period (Colson 1960; 1963; 1964; Scudder 1962; 1969).

In the 1950s, a few men began clearing bush areas for larger fields that they plowed with oxen. These fields allowed for more extensive cultivation of bulrush millet, and also solved the problems of decreasing fertility of some fields, and population increase (Colson 1960; Colson 1971; Scudder 1962). In contrast to the alluvial gardens that did not require clearing, these “bush fields” required extensive woodland clearing. The men who cleared these fields had rights over the land. Upon a man’s death, the matrilineal inheritor of the man’s property expected to claim rights to the land. The same inheritance distribution
occurred with river land, except that while only men had rights to the large cleared fields (because they had done the work of clearing), women, as well as men, had rights to the alluvial gardens, and daughters, as well as sons, could inherit these riverside gardens (Colson 1966).

In the Tonga inheritance system, men are primary inheritors of men's property, and women usually inherit from women. The growth in bush fields meant that men gained access to land that women had little chance to inherit or clear on their own.

After relocation in 1959, people were forced to rely more heavily on cleared fields; thus, the imbalance in women's and men's access to land, and the preference for ox-drawn plows, increased. Most women depended on their husbands for fields and plows in the new location, rather than clear bush themselves and plant such large areas with a hoe (Colson 1999).

In effect, the Tonga agricultural system changed almost overnight. Close to 60,000 people replaced intensive agriculture on alluvial soils with extensive farming on fields cleared from the bush, using ox drawn plows.

Communities that resettled close to the lake made gardens along the lakeshore. Some of the older women informants described to me how they "grabbed" garden plots next to the lake when they found them, and used the familiar hoe to plant. However, because the lake level can change unexpectedly due to variability in rainfall and inconsistent dam releases downstream, these lakeshore gardens, although more fertile than their counterparts on higher land, can be precarious. With little warning, a rising lake will drown grain seed, and a retreating shoreline can reduce the ground water table, thus drying out germinating seeds. These days people rely more on rainy season fields, cleared from the bush and ploughed with oxen, for their subsistence. Shore gardens, usually planted by women, are most often used during the dry season to grow vegetables that supplement sauces eaten with the carbohydrate staple.

While Tonga are matrilineal, and inheritance ideally follows through the matrilineage (mukowa), there is also a patrilineal link (lutundu) between fathers and their children that provides the basis by which a father claims his sons' and daughters' labor. This link also allows for children to make claims to their father's property upon his death and inheritance. Since relocation, the tendency to inherit from fathers has increased, particularly since the passage in 1989 of the new inheritance laws, giving children and wives more legal access to a deceased man's property. The fact that the men who cleared the fields from the bush in the resettlement areas owned the fields facilitated this transition to patrilineal inheritance. Children could expect to inherit land from their fathers because the fathers held original, and individual, rights to that land. However, the rights to land could fall to the clan if a man died without allocating the fields he cleared to his children prior to his death.

In addition to increased reliance on large, rain-fed fields, and an increasing tendency to inherit from fathers, the growing reliance on cattle and plows for farming accentuated the ties children have to their father. Fathers depend on children's labor in fields. In exchange he gives them land and lets them use his plow and oxen for their own farming. The increasing importance of huge cleared fields made plows and oxen critical resources for farming, so that young men were willing to work for their father in exchange for access to farm implements. In effect, the role of patrilineal ties grew in importance, as plow farming became the norm. This echoes other Africanist scholars' work suggesting that matrilineal societies often rely on hoe farming while patrilineal societies are plow based (Goody 1976; Murdock 1949; Schneider 1979).

Most adult women did not have their own fields after relocation, both because clearing the bush demanded male labor and because local gender perceptions allowed women to expect that husbands would provide fields (Colson 1999:32). Although women could gain access to land via their husbands, both before and after resettlement, a field was not allocated to them as "owners," merely as wives farming on behalf of their husbands (ibid.). Upon the death of a husband, relatives can challenge his wife's right to use his land. A son can claim his father's land on behalf of his mother, but if there are no sons present to help a mother, she risks losing access to the fields completely. In these cases, an old woman is dependent on her kinsmen and community for productive land.

One elderly widow in Sinafala village told me about her annual practice of "begging" for land from different relatives and villagers, four years in a row. She said that people were willing to lend her a field once in a while, but that after using the field for one year, the owner would say "oh, I'm going to plant that field this year," and they would tell her to ask someone else for land. Her two sons lived in the capital city, and without their support, she had little help in advocating for extended use of any land.

Over the past four decades, men have continued to clear new fields because of the decreasing fertility of the land originally cleared at resettlement. Gwembe people generally do not use fertilizer on their fields, but they do have a good sense of how long particular fields require fallowing in order to restore fertility. However, fallowed fields are vulnerable to requests for use from kin and neighbors. For this reason, men are likely to keep rights to older fields, whether fallowing or not, which they can lend to relatives including children, wives, aunts, and cousins. One result of continually clearing new land while simultaneously farming old fields is the increasing loss of soil fertility, and the growing problem of erosion, which can be seen as one walks through the village and surrounding areas. The changing environment plays a part in the current role of land in the Gwembe.

In the past, land was highly valued and conflict over land was common. Today in some communities with no remaining woodland to clear, land is still worth fighting for. Colson (2000) tells of a recent murder between two half-brothers over rights to an unclaimed field. But conflicts like this are not as frequent as they used to be, particularly in Sinafala where some virgin woodland remains.

My informants told me that land was not as important as it was when they first settled in the relocation areas. Village fields become less productive over time due to overuse and erosion. In some cases young men don't want their fathers'
fields because they are too small for their dreams of cash cropping. When villagers decide they want new fields, they either clear a bit of remaining woodland, or migrate to frontiers where they can acquire plots of more than 100 hectares of virgin bush.

Unless soils are clearly high quality, rainy season fields in the village have become less and less desirable to new generations of farmers. For communities where land used to be highly valued and desired, these changes suggest that the importance of village land has decreased. Unlike the generations before them, young adults told me they were not concerned about land inheritance anymore. When I asked people what they hope to inherit from elders now, they all agreed: they want cattle. They feel that they can get access to pasturage, especially along the lakeshore edge, without access to inherited land.

The Growing Value of Animals

Owning animals is both an investment strategy and a symbol of wealth for Gwembe Tonga people. This point became clear to me when I learned that many people in Sinafala do not view one of the local shopkeepers as “wealthy.” Jackson had two wives, which is also a sign of prosperity, children in secondary school, a cinder block home and at least three small businesses that he runs out of his home. In my subjective opinion, Jackson was very well off; he had a steady income, and could feed and clothe his family better than most other villagers could during the drought of 1994-1995. But he did not have any cattle at the time of my fieldwork. For this reason, I was told, Jackson is not a wealthy man. While cattle don’t provide a regular income, like a business would, they do provide security for financial emergencies, and also a respected social position.

All Tonga desire cattle, but access to animals is not equal. Women and young people experience more difficulty in accumulating cattle than do older men. This is due largely to the bride wealth system, and to the historically male wage earning possibilities, which give men access to cash with which to buy cattle.

In the Tonga bride wealth system, husbands make cattle payments, most of which goes to the father of the bride. The maternal uncle sometimes receives one or two cows or oxen, and recently mothers have begun receiving the share that would go to her brother. The husband making the payments often goes to his own maternal uncle to ask for a cow towards the payment, and sometimes a mother will give her son one of her animals.

The system is somewhat unbalanced; fathers can increase their cattle herds by three to five animals through the marriage of a daughter. Mothers and their brothers may receive one or two cows for the same marriage. At the same time, fathers rarely help their sons with marriage payments, but mothers and their relatives are expected to assist a young man if possible. In contrast to men’s ability to accumulate cattle quickly, women usually obtain cattle through inheritance or as a gift from a matrilineal relative. Brothers can give a woman a cow as his investment towards marriage payment of his nephews (the woman’s sons).

These days it is more common for mothers to be given a share of the marriage payments for her daughter. And sometimes brothers give cattle to sisters, so that the options for women acquiring cattle may be increasing. But for the current population of senior women, obtaining cattle has been difficult throughout their lives.

In effect, men have more numerous and more lucrative options for accumulating cattle than do women. Men can build a herd of cattle through the bridewealth system, purchase with wage earnings, and inheritance. Women can inherit cattle or receive them through a gift from a relative, (and increasingly women are given a portion of their daughter’s bride wealth). In Sinafala during mid 1995, senior women (above age 55), on average, had fewer cattle than did men of the same age group (Table 3) and women also had fewer goats (Table 4). In addition, homesteads with any resident man over age 55 had more cattle and goats than did homesteads with women, but no men, over age 55 (Table 5).

What does ownership of animals mean to daily life in the village? Cattle owners are respected within their community, and they have a secure savings account. I saw distinctions between respected women, and women who were pitied for their poverty, in various forms of assistance within the village. When I noticed one young man giving one aunt only a plate of mealie meal but giving her sister a whole bucket of maize, he explained to me that the first aunt was poor, and he gave her that plate out of charity. The other aunt, a relatively wealthy and respected woman, had the potential to help him in the future, so he was willing to give her more maize now. This example supports the argument that material resources influence who supports whom in the village; the change in the value of land and cattle plays a significant role in who has access to what resources.

The Land for Cattle Exchange

As described above, after relocation, land started to lose value. At the same time, cattle ownership increased, and became one of the major local currencies. These changes were taking place from the late sixties into the 1970s. By the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, most of my informants agreed that cattle ownership was the primary source of wealth, and that desire for land was not so frequently an area of conflict. The exception to this is lakeshore land or tributary fields that still exist in some communities; the good soil fertility of the lakeshore and riverbank fields make them highly desirable, and worth an argument.

Two of the major differences between land ownership and cattle ownership are mobility and gendered access. Cattle, a highly mobile form of property, can be hidden, given to relatives and friends nearby and far away, or sold for cash. In fact it is common practice to distribute your herd of cattle among relatives in different regions, as part of risk management in drought prone regions. Also,
when a conflict arises over who should donate animals for slaughter at funerals, a man who has shared his herd out among a number of relatives in different areas will be more able to claim poverty because the community will not know exactly how many animals he truly owns, and thus he can avoid obligation to slaughter more animals than he feels is his share. The ability to keep your wealth somewhat hidden is a primary benefit of animal ownership.

Other benefits of animal ownership include income from the sale of milk or renting the animal out for plowing, and the ability to establish support networks and cooperative relationships over distance. A number of men in Sinamalala periodically give an ox to a brother or cousin in one of the distant frontier farming areas, to help with plowing. The frontier area has frequent outbreaks of cattle-borne diseases, so maintaining a herd in that region is impractical. But using one or two cattle at a time permits completion of the farming tasks, without risking loss of a herd. In addition, through the sharing of the cattle, brothers reaffirm their supportive relationship. That relationship often benefits the cattle owner in the form of food assistance during droughts and poor harvests. Due to better rainfall patterns and good soils, the frontier region produces a larger and more reliable harvest. Gwembe villagers with links to the frontier know they have a form of insurance through those relationships, and providing use of cattle strengthens those links.

In contrast to cattle, land is fixed in location, and in effect, fixed in social relations. Land, although used and managed by individuals, belongs to a broader group of relatives — usually the matrilineage. Land should not be sold for cash, or given for permanent use to someone outside the defined kin group, although this sometimes occurs, and is disguised as “sale of improvements” such as clearing. A particularly disturbing exception to this rule is the increased sale of valuable lakeshore land by chiefs to outsiders, such as Afrikaners or Europeans, for commercial developments like fishing enterprises, crocodile farms, and tourism (see Scudder, this volume). Aside from this kind of alienation, for the most part land remains in the hands, and in the sight, of owners and users. Land cannot be hidden when conflicts erupt over use or wealth, and land cannot be used to establish insurance networks over long distance.

The other key difference between land and cattle is women’s and men’s access to the resources. Over the last forty years, women’s access to cattle has been limited by a male focused bride wealth system, lack of significant cash earning options (compared to male migration for wage earning, income from cash crops, and control of resettlement compensation payments), and gendered inheritance practices that keep cattle in the hands of men. In contrast, prior to relocation, women had relatively open and equal access to land, which was highly valued. In contrast to Schneider’s (1979) argument that land-based societies are more hierarchical than cattle-based societies, the Gwembe Tonga scenario suggests that the transition from wealth in land to wealth in cattle fostered gender inequality and increased hierarchy.

In this cattle-for-land exchange, men increasingly own cattle, which is increasing in importance for both wealth and status. Land, which used to be a source of women’s wealth and status, has lost both its real and perceived value — land is losing fertility and young people do not value it in the same way that their parents did.

If we consider what these differences in resource accumulation mean for an older person trying to mobilize support from a child or nephew, we see that older men have the material advantage. In Caldwell’s (1976; 1982) study of intergenerational resource flows, he suggests that it is the potential to inherit from a parent or other “elder” that motivates young people to provide support. Among the Gwembe Tonga, children typically stand little chance to inherit much wealth from their mothers, but potentially quite a bit from a wealthy uncle, or with recent changes in inheritance systems, from a wealthy father. This begs the question, are older women now destitute?

**Beer Brewing as Women’s Income**

Not surprisingly, women have developed their own mobile property in the form of cash from beer sales. This relatively new form of economic activity supplemented other cash generating options, and had the potential to be highly profitable due to men’s increasing desires for drink. In Colson and Scudder’s book on the importance of beer in the Gwembe (1988), they describe the rise in production for sale from the mid 1960s until the late 1970s, due primarily to the boom in the fishing industry after relocation. This was the same time that cattle were becoming the major source of men’s wealth. Beer brewing gave women a source of income independent of their husbands.

Thus women were developing a cash income at the same time that men were accumulating cattle. These are two very different forms of resources that have different potential for investment.

Over time women can purchase cattle from their beer profits (women can make a profit of between $10 and $15 for one batch of beer), and attempt to join the men in accumulation of material wealth and status. But it is more common for cash to be invested immediately into family needs such as school fees and uniforms, medical costs, clothing or household supplies. Through their less visible and less prestigious material wealth, women are continually participating in behaviors that reinforce the cultural construction of the nurturing, protective mother. That is, they invest their income in “mothering” (Clark 1999:720). This leads us back to the question of women and men’s differing strategies in encouraging support from their children.

**Conclusion: Gendered Strategies for Mobilizing Support from Kin**

Changes in resource ownership in the Gwembe Valley over the past four decades, particularly land and cattle, have led to a situation where older women...
have become marginalized from prestigious and highly valued material wealth, while men of the same generation have increased their holdings — which is not such a new story. However, one important line of questioning for such a story is what this differential resource access means in terms of how men and women negotiate their relationships to children, and how they mobilize support as they age.

If a father hopes to keep his children near him, and extract some of their labor, he is wise to allow controlled use of his equipment. His best strategy for security in old age is to have amassed enough cattle that he can still attract his younger wives and their children.

If they do not have cattle, women have little material base with which to encourage a child's support at the time she most needs it — in her own old age when she is most often divorced or widowed. Instead, she uses metaphors of the mother-child relationship. But in using such rhetoric she is also reminding the child of her earlier investments — including the breast milk she gave during infancy and the school fees, clothing and encouragement she gave while the child grew. In contrast to men, a woman's best security in old age is to have lived out the cultural norm of a nurturing, caring mother. With small investments in her children over time, she can establish a framework for reciprocal support in her old age.

References


### Table 3
Cattle Ownership in Sinafala by Gender (1995 data)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Population</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(age 55+)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Cattle</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(40%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Than 1 Cow or Ox</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(60%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Number of</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cattle Per Person</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4
Animal Ownership in Sinafala by Gender and Animal (1995 data)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Population</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(age 55+)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Goats</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(73%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 1 Goat</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(27%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Number of</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goats Per Person</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Chickens</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(42%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(80%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 1 Chicken</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(58%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Number of</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicken Per Person</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 5
Homestead (Extended family group) Animal Holdings
In Sinafala by Gender and Animal
(1995 data)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Number of Homesteads with One Resident Woman or Man age 55+</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homesteads with Cattle</td>
<td>24 (86%)</td>
<td>10 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Number of Cattle Per Homestead</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homesteads with Goats</td>
<td>15 (54%)</td>
<td>6 (60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Number of Goats Per Homestead</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homesteads with Chicken</td>
<td>25 (89%)</td>
<td>9 (90%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Number of Chicken Per Homestead</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>