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THE RULES OF THE GAME:
THE POLITICAL LOCATION OF WOMEN IN NORTHWESTERN ZAMBIA

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THE RULES OF THE GAME: THE POLITICAL LOCATION OF WOMEN IN NORTHWESTERN ZAMBIA[1]

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> [The Women's Affairs Committee should formulate] policies for the development of women and children in political, social, cultural, economic, scientific and technological development... [it should] work out ways and means of instilling in women a sense of responsibility towards their work, families, country and the Party.
>
> (UNIP Constitution, GRZ, 1988:66)

From the colonial period on, northwestern Zambia has always been a poverty-stricken rural backwater. Remote from the main urban centres that grew up around the mining industry, with a thinly scattered population and poorly served as regards roads, schools, hospitals and other government services, North-Western Province has repeatedly been referred to as Zambia's 'cinderella' province. This paper looks at the way the men and women of two small rural communities in the Kaonde-speaking region of North-Western Province in the 1980s were located within the arenas of formal politics[2]. It is based on fieldwork that I carried out in two communities in the Chizela District of North-Western Province. I have called these communities Kibala and Bukama[3].

The people among whom I worked in the 1980s were agriculturalists growing primarily sorghum and maize. Since this is a tsetse area cultivation relied on the hoe. For a whole host of reasons, including the poor transport infrastructure, it has always been difficult for the people to sell their crops to the

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[1]This paper is taken from a larger study based on fieldwork I carried out in Zambia in 1988. Within a short paper it is impossible to do more than adumbrate my argument in the most perfunctory way. Inevitably, since I have chosen to concentrate on mapping out certain broad contours of the political topography, I have had to neglect the complex way those contours intersect with the lives of individuals. All I can say is that in the book I do try to explore not only the underpinning structural relations but also how these come into being, are reproduced, but equally may be challenged and even transformed through the agency of individuals.

[2]The fieldwork was carried out shortly before the end of one-party rule in Zambia. The paper does not therefore reflect changes that have taken place since the coming into being of a multi-party democratic system.

[3]I have used pseudonyms for the names of all individuals and places with the exception of the District itself, Chizela.

national market, and agricultural production was still to a large extent based around meeting the producers' own consumption needs. At the same time people also needed access to a wide range of goods and services that they themselves could not produce. People were therefore *both* firmly locked into the wider national economy, *and* in certain ways disengaged from it. My focus in this paper, however, is on the political rather than the economic sphere.

While government officials and the inhabitants of Chizela's rural communities may not have seen eye to eye on many points, there was one on which they were in full agreement: formal politics was the business of men. All the recognised decision makers, the headmen, chiefs, ward chairmen, government officials, development planners and so on, were almost always male, and everybody assumed that they would, and should, be. The question addressed by this paper is: in this overwhelmingly male political world what spaces were there for women?

WOMEN AND THE POLITICAL ARENA

If a group is to have a sense of itself as constituting a particular *political* entity, it must also have its own understanding of its location vis-a-vis other groups in the political landscape it inhabits. It must have some sense of having its own distinct interests; and be able in some form to articulate these. I want to begin, therefore, by asking: how did the women of Kibala and Bukama themselves see the gendered landscape within which they lived. To what extent can they be said to have had their *own* account (or accounts); accounts that were different to those of men?

As far as I could tell the women I talked to in Kibala and Bukama did not have anything like coherent and explicit, alternative *female* accounts of the world in which they lived, with which they explicitly challenged the dominant male hegemony. While they often complained about men - particularly when no men were present - they seemed to accept the existing gender hierarchy as 'natural' and unalterable. One dimension of hegemony is indeed the ability of dominant groups in society to make their account of social realities the *only* account, and to repress potentially counter-hegemonic understandings. A power to stifle alternative accounts that tends to be especially effective when individuals are asked to verbalise their experience in a public setting.

In general the *articulated* accounts given by the people of rural Chizela - and I stress articulated - of 'the way things are', looked at the world through the eyes of senior men. A vantage point that saw men and women as necessarily and inescapably bound together in a mutually beneficial and non-exploitative interdependence. According to this view, their interdependence wound around women and men a diffuse net of reciprocal moral expectations. This sense of inescapable interdependence meant that

while there were many legitimate demands that rural women could make of their menfolk, the *legitimacy* of these demands depended on women accepting that there were also legitimate demands that men could make of women. The general shape of men's demands on women and women's demands on men, although not their precise demarcation in concrete cases, was laid down by the general norms of the sexual division of labour. For people in Kibala and Bukama, these reciprocal obligations between men and women were inherent in the very meaning of 'being a woman' and 'being a man'. Part of what this meant for women was that it was only from *within* the existing sexual division of labour that they could make demands on men. For women to challenge the accepted allocation of tasks between the sexes would have been firstly, tantamount to questioning the legitimacy of their expectations of access to the labour of husbands and male kinsmen. Secondly, it would in a sense have been to deny their identity as women. The problem as local women saw it was not the sexual division of labour *per se*, but how to make men fulfil their obligations as these were defined, albeit in a very general way, within that division of labour.

Away from the public spheres of rural life when there were no men around, women tended to be less deferential but they still seemed to content themselves with ridiculing male pretension. While such mocking subversion may be seen as an implicit refusal to acknowledge the desirability and benignity of the dominant account, in no sense did it amount to a claim that things could be other than they were. While individual women often came into conflict with particular men, husbands, sons and so on, the tactics used tended to be those of passive resistance.

An incident in Kibala illustrates a common pattern of private ridicule/public deference. One day when I was walking with a female research assistant we came across two old women busy in their fields. We started chatting and I asked about the role of men in cultivation; one of the women, Kyela, snorted and said very emphatically, "men just eat, women cultivate". Since she seemed an interesting woman with decided opinions I was anxious to talk further with her, and we arranged a time when I hoped we could sit and talk at our leisure. But when I turned up at the appointed time, I discovered that it had been decided that her husband should be present. It was he who was sitting in pride of place next to the chair that had been put out for me, while Kyela was sitting some way off; and I had no choice but to interview her through her husband, most of the time with him answering for her. The opinionated old lady I had met in the fields was unrecognisable in this respectful and deferential wife. In Chizela, as Kyela well understood, it was men, not women, who were the main actors on any formal occasion, the hearing of court cases, the adjudication of disputes, church services and encounters with anthropologists. This indeed was part of the very definition of being a senior male.

Women did have a very clear sense of their location within the

prevailing hegemony, and that this gave them a legitimate set of claims on their husbands and male kin. But this political identity was one firmly located within the domain of kinship and its hierarchical structures. Central to this political identity was a basic premise that the relationships between individuals are always relationships between brothers, husbands, wives, mother's brothers, sisters and so on. All of whom are linked together in irreducibly hierarchical ways. In other words, it is assumed that the most basic of the socially recognised relationships that establish the network of claims people have on one another are woven out of the strands of kinship; and that the ordering of these strands is necessarily and inescapably hierarchical[4]. According to this view of political life, it is impossible to tear individuals out of this kinship fabric to make of each an autonomous *citizen*, whose rights, as a citizen, transcend their gender and kinship location.

But, of course, the people of Kibala and Bukama *were* citizens of the Zambian state. As with any other modern state, political rhetoric in Zambia is underlain, firstly, by the assumption that the basic units within it (its citizens) are autonomous (and genderless) individuals; and, secondly, that all citizens are equal. Those who wish to operate in the formal political arenas of the state have no choice but to adopt the dominant egalitarian rhetoric. The problem for the women of Kibala and Bukama was that they did not have an articulated account of how things were for them as women that based itself on these kind of egalitarian claims. Implicitly, it is true, their stress on their particular claims as women could be seen as the germ of a critique of assumptions inherent in the homogenizing rhetoric of citizenship. A critique, that is, that challenges the claim that all 'citizens', regardless of whether they are women, men, young, old, rich or poor, are identically located vis-a-vis the state, and that argues rather that in reality different 'citizens' are often very differentially located. However, in the absence of the articulation of this embryonic critique into a coherent and systematic account capable of challenging the dominant hegemonies of the local community and the state, it was difficult for women's struggles to rise above the level of individual passive resistance.

An important factor constraining the participation of women in formal politics was that the division of labour between men and women included an allocation of tasks and responsibilities not only within the sphere of production, but also within the political

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[4]Central to Kaonde notions of kinship was an inherent hierarchy that gave those older (*mukulumpe*) not only seniority but also power over those younger (*mwanyike*). See Crehan (forthcoming) for a detailed account of the Kaonde discourse on legitimate authority structured around this basic *mukulumpe/mwanyike* relationship.

domain. According to this view of things, the whole sphere of 'public politics' was associated with men; it was not 'women's business'. This inevitably had the effect of inhibiting women and constraining their participation in formal political events. Although it is important not to over emphasise women's exclusion. Women were normally present at such events, and some of the older ones could indeed be powerful and vocal presences. Nonetheless, the only public events where women played dominating roles were those in which *only* women participated, such as a special church service for women.

If the women of Kibala and Bukama were in general relegated to the margins of public politics, their marginalization was especially pronounced in the case of encounters between the local community and those belonging to the world of 'officialdom'. The term that everyone in Kibala and Bukama used to refer to the world of local government officials and state employees based in the district centre (and the district centre itself) was the old colonial term for the administrative headquarters, *Boma*. When local community met the *Boma* it was taken for granted, by both women and men, that those who would speak would be men. Women could speak on issues specific to women, such as 'development' initiatives aimed exclusively at women, but men spoke for the *community*; theirs was the voice of authority, and a voice that women themselves tended to adopt, particularly in public contexts when men were present. It was this voice, for example, that tended to be adopted by those older women who did speak up on public occasions. A practical reality that made it even more difficult for women to speak was the language used in encounters between the community and the *Boma*. Not only was the primary language English (even if there were normally also translations into Kaonde), but the idiom used was a bureaucratic one. Those unable to speak English and unversed in the mechanics of modern bureaucracy were, therefore, especially disadvantaged. While it is true that this applied to the vast majority Kibala's and Bukama's inhabitants, there were at least a few men who were comfortable operating in this world of doing things. There were no women.

Given the acceptance, by women as well as men, that on the public stage it is men who act, what then was the role of women in such public arenas? One way in which local women undoubtedly were a significant presence - and this was perhaps their major presence in such contexts - was in as much as men were well aware of wives' and kinswomen's *de facto* power to resist certain demands on them. Men, for instance, did not have free access to the labour of their wives. While there were a range of goods and services that husbands could expect their wives to provide, any demands on a wife's labour that fell outside the accepted range were likely to be contested, or at least to be the subject of negotiation.

Within the structures of Zambia's one party state there was a formal space provided for women. This was the Women's League of

the one permitted political party, the United National Independence Party (UNIP). But what was the reality of this organisation within Kibala and Bukama?

THE WOMEN'S LEAGUE AND WOMEN'S CLUBS

There were three types of UNIP membership: ordinary, Youth and Women. A division that corresponded to three of the main cleavages in rural society: older men, young men (the Youth members of UNIP were exclusively male) and women. The relationship between the three kinds of members was also an accurate reflection of the taken-for-granted assumption that power was the prerogative of those who were neither young men nor female, that is, older men. When UNIP spoke its 'normal' voice was a male one. It was not that 'women' and 'youth' were excluded from the Party, but their participation was carefully contained within *separate* organisations whose purpose was defined by the hegemonic male UNIP voice. Youth and women were, so to speak, special interest groups, whose interests within UNIP were to be represented by the Youth League and the Women's League[5]. The situation of women and youth was, however, both similar and different; while individual 'Youth' in the course of time automatically became senior males, women of course did not. Whatever may have been the effectiveness of the Women's and Youth Leagues nationally, in neither Kibala or Bukama did either have any real presence even to the extent of holding meetings, let alone actually doing anything. Nonetheless, at the time of my fieldwork there were Women's League chairwomen in both Kibala and the ward to which Bukama belonged.

Kibala's Women's League chairwoman was a woman called Zamina. She and her husband were one of Kibala's more prosperous households. In the course of a joint interview, Zamina's husband explained to me how it was that his wife had become the local Women's League chairwoman in Kibala. Although she had not had any formal education, and could not speak any English or read or write in Kaonde, 'in discussions with *Boma* people she conducted herself like someone who has been to school' and so when 'the people in the Boma asked the ward chairman to elect someone as the Women's League chairwoman' (31.viii.88, Kibala, NK), Zamina was elected. Zamina herself complained to me how reluctant women in Kibala were to come to UNIP meetings, seeing them as a waste of time. When I went on

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[5]The basic administrative unit within Zambia under UNIP's one-party rule was the ward (Kibala constituted one ward, while Bukama was part of a larger ward). Each ward was supposed to have its own Youth and Women's Leagues (made up of the local Women and Youth Party members) with a Women's League chairwoman and Youth League chairman, each of whom was a voting member of the District Council. It was through this representative structure that, in theory, women and youth could speak with their own voices within the formal political arenas of the state.

to ask her what she personally thought was the value of these meetings, she told me, using the standard rhetoric of education, that she wanted to learn about the things that were happening in the Party.

UNIP itself defined the role of the Women's League and other women's organisations very much in the terms of education and mobilisation. As, for instance, in the Party Constitution when the Women's Affairs Committee was charged with formulating 'policies for the development of women and children in political, social, cultural, economic, scientific and technological development...' (UNIP Constitution, GRZ,1988:66). The coupling of women and children here is also worth noting. Clearly we are not talking here about an organisation that is concerned with women organising *themselves*.

Explicitly or implicitly UNIP and the Zambian government have assumed that 'women' are a specific, and separate category within an otherwise genderless political domain - and this is an assumption that has been shared by expatriate development organisations (such as the German Organisation for Technical Co-operation (GTZ), which in the 1980s ran an Integrated Rural Development Project (IRDP) in North-Western Province). In line with this assumption, a key strategy that has been promoted as the way to reach women, and to meet their specific needs is the women's club. Both the Women's League and foreign donors have encouraged the formation of such clubs. In terms of their organisation and what they do, these women's clubs have been patterned on models originating from outside the local community. There is always a bureaucratic structure involving a chairwoman, treasurer, secretary, and it is these English terms that are used. The impetus to establish a club has normally come not from rural women themselves, but from someone like a government employed community worker, a Party official, or a foreign aid worker.

The activities engaged in have tended to be based on very 'traditional' notions of the activities appropriate for women. One of the teachers in Kibala, for instance, saw the encouragement of women's work by Kibala ward secretariat[6] (of which he was a member) as meaning 'knitting and so forth' (Kibala, 10.9.88,TE). Apart from knitting, other activities seen as appropriate for women were such things as sewing, cooking, learning about nutrition, making vegetable gardens, candle-making, soap-making and so on. A particular definition of the role of women that derives very much

[6]The ward secretariat was an organisation set up by the local IRDP that was supposed to help co-ordinate the different IRDP activities at the ward level and provide a channel through which problems could be forwarded to the appropriate local government body. The four members of the ward secretariat in 1988 were all male.

from Western missionary models of the good Christian wife and mother, but is also in tune with a local stress on women's subordination to men and the primary role of women being as wives and mothers who service the needs of husbands and children.

The close identification of this model of womanhood with the world of missionaries, the educated, the urban and privileged western women in general, tends to suffuse the model itself with the glow of wealth, the West and modernity. To engage in such properly feminine activities as the knitting of baby clothes and the embroidering of antimacassars is therefore to become a part of this desirable world, and, just as importantly, to show to others one does indeed belong to it. Women's organisations in Zambia have a long history of serving as clubs for the local female elite women, the wives of teachers and other government officials and the generally more prosperous village women. An important factor here is that it is often only these kind of women who have the necessary spare time for such activities. The importance of women's clubs as a means by which certain privileged women are able to demonstrate and reinforce their elite status should not be underestimated.

In Kibala, Zamina told me, a former local health assistant (who had since left the area) had established a women's club. When I asked Zamina what the club had done, she told me they had 'knitted socks and some hats.' (31.viii.88, Kibala, NK) By the time of my fieldwork the club no longer existed. Given the fact that the impetus for women's clubs, at least in rural northwestern Zambia, does not seem to have come from rural women themselves it is not surprising that the women I talked to did not explicitly challenge the form these clubs took. For many women they were simply irrelevant. For those women who were interested in being a member of such a club, the idea of transforming their structure and content would probably have seemed as absurd as that they should suggest the transformation of UNIP or the Zambian state. The women's club was a thing of the *Boma*, and it was the *Boma* that wrote the rules. As far as the women of Kibala and Bukama were concerned they were faced with a simple choice: accept the club as it existed and make whatever use they could of it, or ignore it.

Nonetheless, even if women like Zamina did not *explicitly* challenge the accepted model of the women's club, there could be a certain *implicit* challenge. Zamina, for instance, while not criticising activities such as the knitting of socks, referred to the hopes that she and a number of the women had had that the club might have become the nucleus of a co-operative that would have

been able to acquire a small hammer-mill for grinding grain[7]. The idea of a hammer-mill was particularly attractive to the *women* of Kibala since it was they who were responsible for the arduous work of pounding in a mortar and pestle the grain (usually maize or sorghum) that was the basic staple. At the same time, however, there was no possibility of local women actually being able to raise the initial capital necessary for such a venture.

The stereotypical response to my questions about the role of women's clubs, as in the case of other local level UNIP organisations, was that they 'educated' people (see Zamina's response above). In reality, however, a major attraction of such organisation has probably been that in some rather vague and general way they have appeared to provide a channel, or at least a potential channel, to the powerful wider world beyond the local community. It is also important not to overlook the vested interests of the elite women who have always dominated Zambia's official women's organisations, and who were anxious to retain their officially sanctioned role as women's representatives.

In theory women's clubs and the Women's League could have acted as a means through which local women were able to lobby for their interests in the formal arenas of power beyond their community, but they have not in fact done this. They have never directly challenged the structures of male power, either within their own communities or more generally. For instance, they have not questioned the accepted norms of the sexual division of labour which are precisely what make it more difficult for women than men to take advantage of new economic opportunities, such as selling crops to the national market. Nor have they argued for government policy and development programmes in general to be specifically designed so as to enable women to benefit from them. The emphasis has always been on 'educating' and 'developing' women in line with an externally generated model. As the UNIP constitution put it, the role of the Women's Affairs Committee, was among other things to 'work out ways and means of instilling in women a sense of responsibility towards their work, families, country and the Party.' (GRZ, 1988:66) Women's organisations, therefore, have no tradition of operating as campaigning organisations. And yet, there were no other organisations in rural Chizela that provided any recognised space for women, and particularly non-elite women, to speak as women in the formal arenas of the state.

CONCLUSION

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[7]The co-operative is an institution that has been much favoured by UNIP and foreign donors, and at the time of my fieldwork the IRDP had a scheme for supplying local groups with hammer-mills on credit. The idea being that the group would repay the loan out of the profits it made.

Embedded in the political institutions and practices of rural Chizela were two entangled, but different discourses. One, associated with the world of the *Boma*, was a discourse structured around the notion of citizenship and the rule of law, before which all are equal. The other was one belonging to the community of kin. This latter discourse was based not on the notion of autonomous individuals and equality, but on individuals who could not be torn out of their specific location within the overlapping, and always hierarchical, maps of kinship, age and gender. In different ways both these discourses assumed a male vantage point defining *for* women what their role in public politics should be. The discourse of kinship hierarchy both recognised women as having their own interests and legitimate claims on men, but also defined formal politics as the responsibility of men. The discourse of citizenship, with its claim to transcend gender, in practice tends to translate into the implicit assumption that 'the citizen' is male except when specifically identified as female. In the same way that households are assumed to be headed by a male, unless that is, they are female-headed households.

In this paper I have focussed on the constraints that made it so difficult for Chizela women to participate in the formal arenas of political life. This is not to deny that certain exceptional women can sometimes manage to overcome these constraints. Also, I have not explored the ways in which what goes on in the arenas of formal politics may to an important extent be shaped by what happens outside them, where women may indeed be powerful and influential presences. The exploration of this, however, would involve another paper.

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Citations to my own data collected in North-Western Province

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TK Translated transcript of a tape recorded interview conducted in Kaonde.

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