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Title: **Anthropology and History: Audrey Richards and the Representation of Gender Relations in Northern Rhodesia.**

by: **Megan Vaughan**

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Anthropology and History: Audrey Richards and the Representation of Gender Relations in Northern Rhodesia.

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In June 1930, Audrey Richards, a young British anthropologist who had trained with Malinowski, arrived in her research area - the Bemba plateau in the north-eastern corner of what was then Northern Rhodesia. She was to stay until July 1931, returning for a second piece of fieldwork between January 1933 and July 1934. As a result of this research Richards published, in 1939,a book entitled *Land, Labour and Diet in Northern Rhodesia: an Economic Study of the Bemba Tribe* [*LLD*].
[In the first part of this paper I will describe what I feel to have been the major contribution of this work. Then I will go on to talk about the context in which it was produced, and finally to say something about the difficulties of following it up].
The concerns of *LLD* are familiar ones to the Africanist anthropologist and historian sixty years later. In LLD Richards documented the material circumstances of the lives of a rural African people. She described in detail their agricultural system, paying particular attention to the gender division of labour within this. She described the way in which her Bemba informants used the land, and what meanings they attached to the land and its uses. She described what is now fashionably called 'indigenous knowledge', and particularly local ecological management. She paid close attention to the seasonality of agricultural production, her discussion of which provided the link bewteen her analysis of production and that of consumption, for LLD is not only about how and what an African agricultural people *produced*, but is also about how the product was distributed and consumed.
LLD is one of the very first studies of what Richards called the 'primitive diet', and there were two aspects to Richards' approach to this issue. On the one hand (and following logically from her earlier work on hunger which I will discuss in more detail later), she was concerned with the social meaning of food, with the emotions which food engendered in a people who were familiar with hunger. She was, in particular, concerned to test out the hypothesis that some 'primitive peoples' might hold beliefs about food, and especially food taboos, which were directly detrimental to their nutritional status. The other aspect of her study of diet, however, was quantitative and positivistic in orientation. This was a direct and pioneering study of consumption, involving not only daily records of what she observed different groups and individuals eating, but also, on a smaller scale, the weighing of food consumed and a calculation of its nutritional value. Since the Bemba diet included centrally, at certain times of year,a significant proportion of wild and gathered foods (including caterpillars and mushrooms), this calculation of nutritional values was no mean task.
What we have in LLD then, is both a wonderfully detailed account of the production and consumption of food, but also an account of how *ideas* about food are produced and consumed within this society through ritual and day-to- day behaviour. Though Richards did not discuss her work in these terms, this is a study which sets out to link the material and the ideological in a direct, but non-deterministic, way. It is also a study which is centrally concerned with gender,and it is this aspect of the work that I will now describe in more detail.

Richards travelled over a large part of the Bemba plateau (a sparsely populated area) in the course of her fieldwork, staying for a few weeks in one village before moving on to another. [Reasons for this method to be explained later]. In each village she spent most of her time with the women, who,she says, "were much less in awe of the European than the men, who had so much more practical experience of the white man's power".(p12).Her own gender she regarded as something of an advantage, for it meant that she was more easily able to avoid identification with what she termed the "three main classes" of Europeans in the area - Government

officials, missionaries and traders. She was, however, treated as though she was a person of authority, and had no illusions about being regarded as an equal by her informants (p13). Bemba society was in one sense extremely hierarchical, with gender and political status being to some extent cross-cutting systems. This meant that Richards was frequently referred to as a "chief",and not just as a "chieftainess", and addressed in terms reserved for members of the royal family. She was, like some senior Bemba women,at times treated as something of a surrogate man.

Richards was centrally concerned with gender as a material and a cultural system. She did not,of course, ever describe her interests in these terms, and one must be careful not to read back into her work something which may not have been there. However, I have been struck, on re-reading LLD, by her intelligent interrogation of gender relations, at various levels.
The first level at which she addresses gender is as a structuring principal in the systems of production and distribution. The Bemba system of production, which centred on the shifting cultivation (known as chitemene)of a staple millet crop, was one in which the gender division of labour appeared to be very marked. Richards played close attention to this, documenting the work which men and women did, and describing the seasonal variation in the labour inputs of each sex. As a summary of her more detailed discussions of the division of labour, she presented this table :

Food Production

Men	**Women**
Tree-cutting.Sowing. Fencing.Hoeing. and fishing (nets,spears and poisoning). Collecting honey.	Branch-piling.Sowing. Harvesting.Hoeing.Fish-Hunting -ing (poisoning). Collecting bush foods.

Domestic Work

	Cooking.Brewing.Fetch- -ing water.Mudding floors.Collecting firewood. Making salt and soda.

Other Activities

Building huts and granaries (cutting stakes,mudding walls thatching).Path-making and clearing.Making furniture,musical instru- -ments etc. Baskets.Fish traps.Mats.Ironwork.Sewing Laundering.Barkcloth (formerly).	Hut-making (preparing clay for walls and whitewashing). Path-cleaning. Pottery.

(Source: LLD,p382)

In this system in which men performed the initial clearing of the land through the cutting of trees, Richards was concerned to document the effects of the increasing absence of men as labour migrants (a point I will return to later). In order to do this, she first painstakingly measured the amount and timing of male and female labour required in this system to produce self-sufficiency in the staple. It is clear from Richards' observations (and she makes this point herself), that male labour was crucial to the chitemene system, both ideologically and materially, but that in terms of hours worked, and the regularity over the year of labour input, it was women rather than men who were the backbone of the system. In particular,subsidiary crops, primarily cultivated by women, were centrally important to the year-long supply of food. Whilst men performed the dashing work of lopping branches, women performed the essential, if less culturally acclaimed work of hoeing, weeding, and harvesting.
It is here, in describing the gender division of labour, that Richards makes the point that its cultural meanings are inseparable from its material consequences. Bemba masculinity, which in the nineteenth century had perhaps in part been defined through a warrior tradition, in the twentieth century was to be centred on a new tradition of labour migration. Bemba men became known, through colonial myth-making and the elaboration of an ethnic division of industrial labour, as strong, fearless (they were assigned deep-mining tasks) and volatile. They were generally disdainful of the tasks of agricultural production, as Richards points out, but they prided themselves on their branch-cutting expertise. The Bemba system of chitemene cultivation, unlike neighbouring systems, involved the pollarding rather than the stumping of trees, and the cultural and symbolic importance given to this difference is described by Richards in one of her more colourful passages:

> ...the Bemba particularly pride themselves on this *chitemene* system. They constantly brag of their climbing feats as they talk together around the fire, the morning's trees growing taller and taller in retrospect. 'Look at that man! He is an absolute monkey!" is a high compliment to pay a cultivator. Young men try to go out together to cut trees, and when the chief's gardens are being cleared as many as thirty or forty boys sometimes work together on the first day.
> The young men seize their axes, and rush whooping up the trees, squabbling as to who should take the highest trunk.They dare each other to incredible feats and fling each other taunts as they climb. Each falling branch is greeted with a special triumph cry. I collected about forty different *ukutema* cries at the cutting of Chitimukulu's and Mwamba's gardens in 1933-4. These are formalized boastings like the praise songs commonly shouted before a Bantu chief. The cutter likens himself to an animal who climbs high, or to a fierce chief who mutilates his subjects,cutting off their limbs like the branches of this tree...

In this and other descriptions of the Bemba agricultural system, Richards makes the point that the gendered nature of that system is significant in a number of ways. The cutting of branches by Bemba men, Richards implies, contributes not only to the production of food, but to the production of ideas about masculinity, and also to the maintenance of the political system. The political system itself, and particularly the institution of the paramount chieftainship, is continually reproduced through the seasonal cutting of trees and burning of the land. The division of labour, then, in an area of very sparse population and little direct chiefly control over land, is central to the maintenance of political authority. The Bemba chieftaincy maintains is social significance through the household division of labour, reproduced daily in the tasks of men and women and studded by seasonal events such as the cutting of trees.
[I will return to this analysis later and to possible reinterpretations of Richards' material].

But Richards' analysis of the gender division of labour included, crucially, a discussion of the labour of social reproduction as well as of production. It is here, possibly, that she made her most significant contribution to our understanding of the causes of malnutrition in what had always been a somewhat precarious agricultural system. In *LLD* Richards spent an enormous amount of time documenting and accounting for women's domestic labour and responsibilities, with detailed descriptions of the time taken to fetch fuel and water, of cooking procedures and of what she called 'housecraft'. In discussing the domestic labour of women, the tone of her writing changes significantly. Whereas the men's cutting exploits are described in the dashing and lyrical terms which her informants themselves used, the domestic duties of the women are being translated for the reader in what I can only describe as 'Women's Institute' terms (a parallel which Richards herself uses).

> Strolling through the village late in the afternoon the European will notice little groups of women and girls working together at different tasks. Two women may be grinding side by side at one grind stone, while others have carried their mortars to the door of the same hut and are pounding their grain in unison. On another veranda a group of young girls are shelling nuts, while the leaves for the vegetable stew are being cut and stalked by an older householder. Two grandmothers may be squatting by the fire stirring the porridge, while babiesd from various households are scrambling in and out of the hut looking for tit-bits. Little girls between 8 and 12 belonging to different families come into the room to beg for something to cook on their own fires, and retire, laughing and talking, to miniature fire-places at the back of the veranda. Young matrons come in and out to borrow pots or a pinch of snuff - there is,in short, a constant coming and going of women from hut to hut, while the boys and men of the different families are somewhere in the distance. (p121)

The point which Richards is making here, and making effectively I think, is one about the importance of inter-household and inter-generational links between women in the labour of social reproduction. The intimacy of the scene, with its quiet purposefulness is described with this in mind. At other points Richards describes the domestic work of Bemba women by explicit reference to the parallel work of a British housewife of the 1930s. Indeed, sometimes she seems to be addressing the British housewife of the 1930s! She describes for instance, the labour involved in 'turning out the house',asking us to sympathise with the daily struggle against dust.She also describes the difficulties continually faced by the women who, because of the complex etiquette of food distribution, never know, from one meal to the next, how many mouths they will have to feed, making 'household budgeting' extremely difficult. There are moments, I think, when Richards runs the risk of 'domesticating' the Bemba woman in her description, but her purpose is a serious one. This is her wish to bring to her readers' attention the centrality of women's domestic labour to the entire economic and social system, and to validate this as work. In particular, she makes the point that Bemba women, with their joint productive and reproductive roles, are frequently exhausted. At certain times of year, when they have been busy labouring in distant fields for much of the day, they are simply too exhausted and too hungry to perform their domestic duties. In such circumstances they and their children may go hungry, not because of the lack of food, but because of the pressure on women's labour. In a striking passage Richards described one such instance that she had witnessed:

> ...(from my records), during the month of September (1933), two out of four women were too tired to cook properly in three days out of twenty and one on four days. Most of the housewives in the village failed to cook on

> one day. In this case there was the apparently extraordinary situation of women with granaries full of food failing to prepare their families a proper meal....They were, in fact, sitting hungry with millet in their granaries and relish to be found in the bush.(p105).

In this and other passages, and in her detailed reconstruction of women's working days, Richards makes a point which is ,perhaps, of even greater significance today than it was in her time. This is essentially this - that poor nutrition in self-provisioning or partially self-provisioning societies may not be the direct result of a shortfall in production, but may rather be the result of the sometimes crippling dual burden on women of productive and reproductive labour. Whilst for a large part of the year, and when fit, most women manage to both produce and process the food required to feed their families, at some times of the year their own poor nutrition combined with additional labour burdens,tip them over the edge into total exhaustion. At such moments, and as Richards graphically describes, the material consequences of a a gender division of labour which assigns virtually all domestic tasks to the women, are seen at their most extreme. Men sit waiting for their wives to cook. When they don't, they simply go hungry.

Though Richards is primarily concerned, in LLD, with the gendering of the agricultural and domestic economy of the Bemba, she also addresses other aspects of gender relations in this society, which I will refer to briefly here. The Bemba have been called a matrilineal people who, when Richards studied them, practiced a form of uxorilocal marriage.(though caution here - as often as not they did something different). In this system, boys aged 12 to 14 were betrothed to a girl in another village and would move from their own village to live with their future in-laws, where they are fed in return for labour performed for their future father-in-law. Marriage was a a long process rather than an event.As time went on, and as the couple produced children, so the husband would eventually earn the right to remove his wife and family to his own home village. Richards, along with many other anthropologists, was interested in the contradictions which this system seemed to set up in the area of gender relations. In the first place, this social system seemed, in some ways, to empower women. A successful Bemba man was one surrounded by his married daughters and their offspring : "The more daughters a Bemba has the more fortunate he is considered to be", wrote Richards (p112). The young man,by contrast, was,for many years an outsider in his wife's village and the butt of jokes. Richards described this scene which seemed to to her to sum up the position of the young bridegroom:

> I have seen a young bridegroom stand sheepishly in the distance watching his wife laughing and talking with five of her female relatives on the veranda of her mother's hut. He was afriad to ask her to bring him water, scared by the sight of so many members of his wife's family all sitting together, and unable to join the group because of the in-law avoidance rules. Yet he would have been demeaned in Bemba eyes if he had gone to draw the water himself. Onlookers were much amused..."(p126)

The 'puzzle' of matriliny was an issue which interested many functional social anthropologists like Richards, who were concerned as to how such a system had evolved and if it could survive the impact of a money economy and colonialism. The apparent contradictions set up within the system, between the residential group and lineage, between the position of a man as an uncle and as a father,for example, were thought to render marriage unstable and the whole system extremely fragile (compared to that of bridewealth societies, for example).It is not now clear whether those assumptions about the fragility of matriliny were well-founded, but the discussion of the contradictions within the system was, in fact, a discussion about the nature of gender identity. Richards in LLD, and in her work on the Bemba girls' initiation ceremony,*Chisungu*, was concerned with the question of the

acquisition of gender identity, which she clearly saw as made and not given. In Richards' accounts, it is not merely that girls and boys are taught behaviour appropriate to their sex, both in ritual and in day-to-day activities, but also that the meaning of their gender changes with age and status. The newly betrothed man in his wife's village is expected to behave with humility, performing the duties expected of him and giving proper respect to his in-laws. But this behaviour would not be appropriate in the older Bemba man, who would be expected to command the services of others, and who would stand in a position of authority over a number of women.

Throughout her accounts, both in LLD and in *Chisungu*, Richards is concerned, not only to document what people do, but also to register something of what she calls the 'emotional' aspect of behaviour, particularly as this relates to gender. She is concerned, we might say, with the acquisition of subjectivity, and relates this to the structural features of the society she is observing. Furthermore, she appears to wish to demonstrate that the 'emotional' aspect of Bemba lives is not divorced from their material circumstances, and she sees the emotions surrounding food as being as significant as those surrounding sex in this regard.

This leads me to the second part of this paper in which I will try describe the context in which Richards' work was produced, and indicate what this might mean for our interpretation of it.

LLD: The Context of its Production

In 1932 Richards had published a book entitled *Hunger and Work in a Savage Tribe* [H&W]. This was partly based on her first field visit to the Bemba plateau (1930-1931), and part based on library research on the southern African area more generally. When she returned to the field area in 1933, it appears that she did so primarily with a view to studying the political institutions of the Bemba. Indeed, in her Introduction to LLD, Richards implies that she learnt about the economic system of the Bemba almost by accident, and that she did not regard this as 'real' anthropology:

> The material for the present study was collected during two expeditions to North-Eastern Rhodesia...In both I was engaged on a purely anthropological investigation, but since agriculture is the chief economic activity of the Bemba, and gardening and food their principal topics of talk, it was natural that I should have found myself constantly considering the question of the people's food supply.(p10)

Reading LLD, it seems highly implausible that Richards simply 'picked up' information on the Bemba economy in the course of her study of political structures. A more likely explanation is that then, as now, the study of gender and of domestic relations was not regarded as the kind of thing upon which one could build an academic reputation.Her interest in the political structure of the Bemba did, however,have a profound effect on aspects of her methodology. She worked mostly in villages which were, in some sense or another, significant, in the Bemba chieftaincy system. This involved travel over a very wide area,and gave her, she argued, a wider knowleldge of the country as a whole:

> I reckoned to spend three to six weeks in each village. the type of chieftainship - the dominant institution in this culture - necessitated my travelling rather extensively from district to district in order to complete a study of ritual and political forms. These visits to different villages from one end of the country to another were valuable from an agricultural point of view since they showed me the range of local variation in cultivation and gave me comparative material on the social and economic changes introduced into Bemba villages by European contacts of different types.(p11)

Richards' method did, indeed, have a number of advantages over staying in one village for a more extended period of time, but it also had consequences which were,perhaps, unforeseen by her. Travelling from one Bemba 'heartland' to another, meant that though she acknowledged the importance of local agricultural and ecological variation, she spent very little time in areas which were really different in terms of their social and political structures. The Bemba plateau was, and is, studded with non-Bemba villages and with communities of mixed ethnicity. These communities were not only different in terms of their social and political structures (having been in the nineteenth century conquered by the Bemba to varying degrees), but they also occupied sometimes radically different local ecological zones, practised a different agriculture and exhibited a different gender division of labour. To the extent that a regional economy had existed in this area in the nineteenth century , it had been dependent on these different ecologies and modes of exploitation of natural resources. Similarly, the Bemba way of life and the viability of the Bemba economy had also been built on the exploitation of of these other groups.

It is possible to argue, I think,(and I will expand on this later), that the Bemba agricultural system, as a system, had only very recently come into being when Richards first visited this area, and was hardly a stable system at all. Richards, as a functionalist anthropologist, saw the Bemba use of land and their gender ideologies as intimately connected with the hierarchical and ritualistic political system, and this outlook must have been reinforced by her concentration on villages of political significance. She saw herself as studying a traditional system which was undergoing change as a result of the impact of colonialism and the rise of male labour migration. Change there undoubtedly was, but it seems to me that the 'baseline' was not a stable system but one which, in the thirty years leading up to Richards' visit,had been in a state of flux. What came to be seen as the Bemba economy, typified by a form of chitemene cultivation was, I would argue, a relatively new and unstable phenomenon when Richards studied it, and one which had barely had time to establish itself before it became subject to further major changes.

Richards, then, was studying the Bemba at a very particular historical moment, and this had consequences for her analysis of gender relations which I will discuss later. But history is important to an understanding of her work in another way. Richards was herself,of course influenced by the intellectual and political climate in which she worked. There are two aspects of this climate which I think need to be considered here. Firstly, as is very evident from her book *Hunger and Work in a Savage Tribe*, she was working at a moment when British social anthropology was both influenced by, and reacting to, psychoanalytic theory. Richards' work on hunger was written quite explicitly within this context, as Malinowski's preface, and this passage from page 1 of the book, clearly indicate:

> Nutrition as a biological process is more fundamental than sex...Yet in current sociological theory man's nutritive needs play a very insignificant role. While discussions on sex are thrust constantly before us, both by the scientist and by the man of practical affairs, the proportion of serious attention devoted to nutrition is almost fantastically small...The impulse to seek food is, after all, a desire that cannot be inhibited or repressed, at any rate beyond certain limits. Unlike the drive for sex,it is a periodic urge, recurring regularly evry few hours. (p1)

After reading the book, Malinowski wrote, his conviction "deepened that society is not animated by one obsessive force, that of sex. The drives of hunger and appetite, the cooperative economic interest and the bonds of commensualism, are independent of any sexual motives in the sense that they are not by-products of erotic pursuits, but determined by an entirely autonomous physiological process and anatomical apparatus". (H&W pxii).

Reading on in H&W one could argue, I think, that the anthropologist had exchanged one form of determinism for another. Richards was concerned to

distance herself from a social evolutionist position on the 'primitive economy', and from a sociological position which she characterised as taking no account whatsoever of biological needs. Human nutrition, she argued, could not be considered separately from "the cultural medium in which it is carried". Food was not only about biological needs and social organisation, but also about cultural values and emotional development. The functionalist anthropologist, then, would study all of these connections. In Chapter 5 of H&W, Richards argued that the kinship system of the 'Bantu' , and the kinship 'sentiment' which it carried with it, was largely determined by nutritive needs, which necessitated a particular form of economic cooperation. Chieftainship, she argued, could be similarly analysed, annual events such as the blessing of the harvest being public expressions of the "whole nutritional system".(H&W p60).
Food and hunger, argued Richards, were centrally important to the 'primitive' society, and worked at all levels, from the biological, through the sociological, to the symbolic.Political organisation , social organisation, ritual forms and 'emotional' expression,could all be seen as connected by this thread.
In LLD, Richards modifies this position somewhat, but the functionalism of her approach is still very evident, and has important consequences for her analysis of gender relations. In LLD Richards is arguing that the system of production of the Bemba is one which is highly structured and which carries important cultural and political meanings. In the cutting of the trees and the burning of the land, she argues, the entire Bemba social and political system is symbolised. Furthermore, the gender division of labour is the carrier of many of these meanings, and it is in the process of acquiring gender identity and performing the work assigned to one's sex, that the individual learns what it is to be a Bemba.
We may be sympathetic with many elements of this analysis. In Richards' account, gender works at all levels, from the material to the symbolic, and gender ideologies are seen to have direct material effects. But this account can also give a misleading impression by assuming a rather too neat fit between gender ideology and the practice of gender relations. In her discussion of the kinship system, and in her analysis of the *Chisungu* ritual, Richards does discuss the contradictions arising over gender in this social and political system. When analysing the gender division of labour, however, I would argue that she runs the danger of drawing a too direct line between ideology and practice.

Richards' argument was essentially this: The Bemba were a rural African people who identified themselves collectively with their system of staple food production - the chitemene system. Most of LLD is taken up with a detailed description of the elaborate workings of this system and the variations within it, but she nevertheless describes it as 'primitive', and extremely vulnerable to externally-induced change, particularly in the area of labour supply. She also argues that the gender dividion of labour was fundamental to the operation of this production system, and that gender ideologies, and hence individual identities, were strongly implicated in chitemene. Radical changes in the social division of labour occasioned by the intrusions of the colonial state and the development of labour migration, could therefeore be predicted to have devastating effects on both the material and the social fabric of Bemba society.

This brings me to the second aspect of the context in which LLD was produced. LLD was conceived in part as a piece of practical,or applied anthropology.The problem which Richards addressed in the book was one which had, to a large degree, been defined for her. This was a time when the Colonial Office was becoming increasingly concerned about the ability of so-called 'primitive peoples' to withstand the changes being brought about by colonialism and capitalism. Much of this concern became focussed around the issue of nutrition,as a peg on which to hang the much larger issues of social order and colonial control. Both anthropology and the study of nutrition were new 'sciences' in the 1930s,and members of these disciplines were eager to prove their practical uses.In LLD then, Richards was both

addressing, and helping to formulate, what had come to be known as 'the problem of the African diet', and she did this using the newly elaborated scientific tools of both anthropology and nutrition. In her Introduction to LLD, Richards described what she saw to be the complementary skills of these two disciplines in the study of the 'primitive diet':

> Thus our discussion of the special problems of primitive diet research seems to have led us to two conclusions. In the first instance quantitative studies of native dietaries require the development of new techniques, in particular special methods of estimating the consumption of food and the standards of living among peoples not living on a money economy and also of recording the seasonal chnages in diet in those many areas where the alterations from month to month are very great....Secondly, if changes are to be made in diets that are obviously deficient a general knowledge of the tribal structure of the different African peoples is essential as well as more detailed investigations of their economic activities and ambitions, their beliefs, and their habits of using food.(p9)

Here, then, was an agenda for collaborative research, and agenda which was to be realised soon after she wrote in the interdisciplinary Nyasaland Nutrition Survey. It was also an agenda which positioned the anthropologist as a scientist, following Malinowski's vision for the discipline. The anthropologist would use the science of her discipline to specify the workings of a culture in much the same way as the physiologist would define the workings of the human body. While the nutritionist weighed and measured food, the anthropologist would measure and weigh up the degree of cultural change taken place in any given society. Since cultures functioned rather like human bodies, in the sense of being made up of a number of interdependent parts, so it would be possible to predict the effects on the entire culture of change effected to one part of it. In the society which Richards studied, the most immediately obvious change taking place, and one which most concerned the colonial authorities, was the development of male labour migration. Much of Richards analysis of Bemba society and its gender relations, was an attempt to specify both the immediate and future consequences of the absence of men. This was, of course,a centrally important question, but it did frame Richards' study of gender relations in a rather particular way.

The point I am making here is not that Richards was a lackey of colonialism. This seems to me to be an over-simplistic interpretation.Another way of putting it, however, would be this. Colonialism in Africa by the 1930s was not a monolithic institution. Colonial rule had, in places like Northern Rhodesia, set up a number of contradictions which were beginning to threaten the very enterprise itself. In the process of extracting male labour for the Copperbelt, and raising the taxes essential for the running of even the most skeleton of local administrations,the colonial authorities had set in motion a set of social changes in the rural areas over which they had little control and even less understanding. Anthropologists,many of whom were liberal critics of colonialism, used their new science to provide a definition of the problem which stressed that traditional African societies were not simple, but complex entities, organised primarily according to set of kinship rules. Kinship, according to this theory, permeated every aspect of life, and therefore ther effects of any disruption to the kinship system could be profound. Richards, in LLD was making this kind of point and, in her analysis of the gender division of labour,attempts to specify what the effects of the removal of men from the system will be. It is not that Richards was misrepresenting the position on the Bemba plateau to fit in with colonial concerns, rather she was involved in a rather more indirect, but ultimately more important exercise, of specifying 'the problem' scientifically.

As with many pieces of 'applied research', the complexity and indeterminacy of the situation she described so carefully in LLD, could be reduced to an over simplified and overdeterministic policy prescription.This happened in the case of LLd, not

only in the contemporary reading of the text within the framework of the dominant debate on labour migration (did it or did it not result in the destruction of 'traditional' society), but is also evident in the book itself,which shows a constant tension between the general and the particular,the simple and the complex picture. Whilst the bulk of the book stresses complexity, the beginning and end (the basic messages and interpretations if you like) are straightforward : as Bemba men are lured away to the mines, so the chitemene system of production will increasingly collapse, and since this system of production is fundamental to both the material and the social well-being of the community, so the anthropologist predicts dire consequences, which are measurable in a material sense at least, in the diet.

I do not have time to elaborate fully my criticisms of what I think is, and must remain, a wonderful piece of work, but I would like to outline them briefly. These criticisms are derived from a number of sources. Firstly,
from a close reading of Richards' own rich material. Secondly, from taking a longer term historical perspective on the problem she addresses, and with, of course, the benefit of hindsight. Thirdly, from a very detailed examination, using written and oral historical sources, of variations in the Northern province agricultural systems in the 1930s and beyond.
To put the issue very crudely : chitemene appears to be alive and well in NP Zambia in the 1990s, having succombed to neither fate predicted for it : population pressure on the one hand, and the absence of male labour on the other. Since 1930 there have numerous studies of the system, its productivity and its sustainability,many of which are of the highest quality. In 1990, as in the early 1930s, ecologists continue to address the questions: can the system survive, and is there a better way of growing food in this area of poor soils?
What all of these studies have in common is that they build typologies, and systematise - this is, after all, what scientists do. If we take the whole range of works on the NP agricultural systems, and include LLD amongst these, we can investigate a kind of archaeology of knowledge of chitemene, going back over at least sixty years, with one study building on another.
What emerges most clearly from these works is the enormous complexity of the situation being described, and the great difficulty which generations of ecologists have had in creating their typologies. Not only are there many different forms of chitemene (in terms of the methods of tree cutting and burning, the crop rotation employed, the mix of crops within a field, the number of years a field is employed etc etc), but within all these 'systems' there are many other forms of agriculture being practised, most notably the cultivation of permanent village gardens for a number of relish crops, and the widespread cultivation of cassava both in the village gardens and in chitemene fields. Variations exist then, both between different forms of chitemene and within these forms. These variations have been recognised and documented by successive commentators, from Richards onwards, but they have also been subsumed within a dominant discourse which represents chitemene as defined by the cutting of branches or trees, and the cultivation of finger millet in the ashes so produced. In fact, as these studies show, the cutting of new fields, their burning , and the cultivation of finger millet constituted only a part of the production system as a whole. The fact that the 'system' was less a 'system' and more a series of diverse and ingenious adaptations to both micro-ecological variation (of which there is much) and also labour availability, makes its survival much easier to understand. It also provides a somewhat different perspective on the question of the gender division of labour, which was so central to Richards' argument.
My contention is that Richards conducted her study, both in particular parts of the region, and at a particular historical moment, which tended to lead her to conclusions which now appear less certain. Richards saw chitemene as a system, and as one which went a long way towards defining a cultural group- the Bemba.This system she saw as quintessentially traditional -'primitive'in her own terms- and vulnerable to change. I have no doubt that variants of the chitemene

system had been practised on the northen plateau for thousands of years, but I do have some doubts about the length of association between Bemba identity and this particular form of production. It is hard to substantiate this view, but it is possible at least to point to the absence of conclusive historical evidence on this point.It is not possible to conclusively answer the question which the historian automatically asks : so,for how long had the Bemba been practising chitemene? - but it is nevertheless a question which thows some light on the issues being addressed by Richards. Andrew Roberts has described how the Bemba polity came into being from the eighteenth century, and expanded into a raiding empire over the whole of present day Northern Zambia in the course of the nineteenth century. Bemba was primarily a political identity.Many of the peoples who inhabited the northern plateau prior to the extension of Bemba hegemony were, in Roberts' definition - 'proto-Bemba' -almost certainly speaking a language akin to chiBemba, and probably practising a form of chitemene. Roberts refers to these people as being the physical but not the cultural ancestors of the present-day Bemba people. Another way of putting it would be to say that the cultural identity of the Bemba was one in the process of evolution in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and although the Bemba have traditions of migration from the Luba region,it is misleading to think of them in terms of a distinct group sharing common physical ancestors. What did define the Bemba in the nineteenth century was their particular form of chieftaincy (the Chitimukulus) and their reputation as a group of ruthless raiders. There is almost no written evidence for the practice of any form of agriculture by the Bemba-speaking peoples in the ninteenth century. There are occasional, brief accounts of Bisa agriculture (both mound and chitemene), and one or two brief accounts of what might have been Bemba chitemene. In general,the travellers who passed through the region, from Lacerda onwards, remarked on the absence of cultivation and the great difficulty of procuring food on account of the bemba reign of terror. Of course this does not mean that agriculture was not being practised - it seems highly implausible that it was not, since the women must have been doing something - but it is clear from a number of sources that Bemba male identity at least was closely bound up with NOT practising agriculture.

By the time Richards studied the area in the early 1930s, however, there had already been over 30 years of Company and colonial intervention in the area. Raiding had ceased, and the population dispersed from its ninteenth century pattern of concentrated settlemenets and stockaded villages into a more rational dispersed settlement pattern for agriculturalists raising crops on poor soils. But this dispersal of population, and the extension of chitemene cultivation which went with it, had from the very beginning of Company rule , been the subject of repeated attempts at control and intervention. Chitemene represented for the BSACo rulers, and then for the colonial state,a form of anarchy. Not only did it involve the (to the untrained eye) seemingly reckless burning of the bush, but it also frequently entailed the building of temporary seasonal homes (mitanda) in the fields. Villages seemed not to be villages at all, the chiefs and headmen had little or no control over their people, tax collection and the requisitioning of male labour were made extremely difficult.In the first decade of the twentieth century in particular, the authorities fought a constant battle against chitemene and the building of mitanda. Crops were burned, huts were burned, attempts were made to specify the minimum sixe of a village. Chitemene was banned, then reallowed. Mitanda were banned, then reallowed, but only on the condition that either the husband or the wife slept there, but not both at the same time. Chitemene was seen as wasteful, reckless and unsustainable, and Bemba men somewhat reinforced this view by claiming that they had little interest in agriculture, in comparison with the more sissy tribes of the area - as one Bemba chief explained to a Catholic priest in the early years of the century: the Bisa had been ordered by God to 'cultiver par terre', whilst the Babemba had been orderered to 'cultiver en l'air' (referring to the gallant lopping of the branches).

What, it seems to me, was actually happening in this period, was an evolving indentification of the Bemba speaking people with a form of chitemene cultivation -

this was an identification based not only on material necessity, but also , and most crucially, was borne of conflict with the colonial state.It was a form of resistance if you like. The Bemba were not so much defending a traditional way of life as defending their right to establish a viable agricultural system in the context of the disruptions of the early colonial period. Such a defence inevitably involved the invocation of custom, as it did elsewhere- any this was frequently expressed through the ideology of the gender division of labour. There evolved then, a shared discourse between Bemba men and women, colonial administrators and , eventually, colonial experts of one kind or another, which stated that Bemba livelihood and political identity rested on chitemene, and that central to chitemene was a distinct gender division of labour. As firstly the conscription of male labour for road-building and other projects increased, and then as lobg-distance labour migration took off, so many colonial administrators feared that this would become a chronically food short area. This view was reinforced by chiefs, headmen and by bemba women who claimed that they could not perform the hard work of cuitting down trees, or fencing fields against wild animals, and that in the absence of men, their food supply was in jeopardy.The functioning of the economic and social system of the Bemba entirely depended on the maintenance of this division of labour, it seemed. Of course, much of this was true - labour was, and to a large extent is, the scarce resource in this agricultural system. But what was also the case by the 1930s was that in large parts of the northern plateau adaptations had already been made to the system. For many communities by this period cassava, and not millet, was the staple food, and much of this cassava was grown on near-permanent fields. Chitemene production of millet survived in these areas, but the millet was largely used for the production of beer- an increasingly significant commodity for women who needed to buy in male labour in the absence of their husbands and brothers.Rotation systems were also adapted to the absence of men. It was not necessary to have a field cut every year, if one already had four fields in play. Certainly, the diversity of crops produced probably was reduced in this period, but this was not a system in general crisis, as the detailed colonial tour reports clearly indicate. Some areas were more often food short than others, some regularly produced surpluses, but there was no easy association between the absence of men and the decline of food production. The interactions between changes in the cropping patterns, mico-ecological variations,and labour availability were extremely complex. What is clear, however, is that the gender division of labour was a great deal more flexible than it was represented, and that women were agricultural innovators.
This was not a great peasant success story of any kind - Richards' observations of poverty and poor nutritional standards are not invalidated by my account, but my account might lead to a rather more differentiated analysis of the causes of poverty and poor nutrition.

My reading of Richards' own rich material, then, would be rather different from her own, especially when placed alongside other historical evidence from the area. The people of the Bemba plateau were, indeed, experiencing a period of rapid social,economic and political change. The effects of these changes were made all the more significant by the fact that their political, economic and social system was in any case an evolving rather than a stable one. What appeared then to Richards as a culture wedded firmly to certain ideas about the land and about appropriate gender roles, may well have been rather a culture being elaborated 'on the hoof', so to speak. Where this may have been significant for Richards' study of nutrition, was in the fact that the gender ideologies presented so forcibly to Richards by her informants,were much less determining of material reality than she was inclined to believe, holding as she did to a functionalist interpretation of culture.Though Malinowski had warned, in his writing on anthropology and history, that the search for a 'zero-point' against which change could be measured, was probably a mistaken exercise, nevertheless most anthropologists did tend to believe that they knew which aspects of a culture were stable and traditional and which were not.

This brings me to some final comments on the difficulties of following up Richards' work. The north-eastern part of Zambia has been, in the 1980s, again undergoing significant economic and social change resulting from the decline in urban employment on the Copperbelt, and the rise of smallholder maize cash-cropping on a large scale. Both of these developments have potentially important consequences for gender relations in the area, and the nutrition of households. Using Richards' wealth of data on production and consumption as a baseline against which to measure subsequent change seemed, initially,to be a good idea. But baselines do have a habit of vanishing before one's eyes, and for some of the reasons I have already alluded to, Richards' work is no different from any other set of historical material in this regard. Though there are some parts of her data which are relatively easy to use as statements of historical fact, much of her work, like any other piece of research, needs continuous and careful contextualisation and interpretation. Richards was pursuing a number of different agendas in LLD. Firstly, she was studying the political system of the Bemba, a fact which led her, perhaps, to exaggerate the cohesiveness of this group and to underestimate the extent of diversity in the area. Secondly, she was studying the effects of labour migration on the society and economy of the Bemba,viewing the problem of nutrition largely through this lens. Our own historical research has tended, again, to bring to the fore the extent of diversity in relation to this problem as well. The extent, duration and effects of labour migration varied enormously from one locality to another within the general area of the Bemba plateau, and this variation can be partly accounted for by wide variations in the viability of the local production system. In other words, one can, to some extent, turn the anthropological construction of the problem on its head by arguing that, in some cases, it was not that the absence of men was undermining the agricultural system, but that that system could not itself reliably support the existing population even with male labour present. There were other areas, however, which regularly produced a surplus of foodstuffs. In these areas men would still migrate in order to earn cash and to bring back clothes, but they did so for shorter periods and sometimes in smaller numbers, staggering their absences so as not to disrupt the production system too much. The Bemba plateau area was profoundly affected by the development of male labour migration, but specifying its effects is a complex matter and these effects cannot be 'read-off' easily from a structural functionalist analysis.

Thirdly, in her writing Richards represented the gender relations of her informants in particular ways.She was interested in gender ideologies, as well as in divisions of labour, and she was struck by the forceful way in which her informants stressed certain aspects of gender ideology. The drama of the cutting of the trees, and its apparent enactment of the meaning of Bemba masculinity and political organisation,is one example of this kind of forceful representation. Richards' work, like any other, is a reading and a re-interpretation of the representations of her informants. But even before one has addressed the issue of how far Richards' reading of her informants' gender relations was coloured by her own experience and context, one must first ask whether her informants may have had particular reasons for representing reality to her in certain ways. Without be unduly sceptical about the possibility of knowledge, I think that in this case there are good reasons for taking this question seriously.In particular, it seems possible, as I have already suggested, that some aspects of the gender division of labour and of gender ideology, had come to represent, for many Bemba people, a form of resistance against the changes taking place in their political lives : "We, the Bemba do this, and have always done this", is the kind of statement which has to be set within an historical context, not only of colonial rule and its ethnic division of labour, but also of a nineteenth century history of conquest and political evolution.

Notes:
For Malinowski's vision of the uses of a scientific anthropology, and for his discussion of the question of historical baselines see: B.Malinowski, *The Dynamics of Culture Change: An Inquiry into Race Relations in Africa*, New Haven,1945.

The three major works by Audrey Richrads cited in this paper are:
Land, Labour and Diet in Northern Rhodesia [LLD], London, 1939
Hunger and Work in a Savage Tribe [H&W], London,1932
Chisungu: a Girls' Initiation Ceremony among the Bemba of Zambia, London,1956.

For a further discussion of the chitemene system and its symblolic importance, both to the Bemba and to the colonial administration of Northern Rhodesia, see Henrietta Moore and Megan Vaughan,'Cutting Down Trees: Women, Nutrition and Agricultural Change in the Northern Province of Zambia,1920-1986', *African Affairs*,86 (1987), 523-541.

For the nineteenth century history of the area see Andrew Roberts, *A History of the Bemba: Political growth and change in north-eastern Zambia before 1900*, London,1973.