

## **CONTESTED LANDSCAPE: THE STRUGGLE FOR THE CONTROL OF GONAREZHOU SINCE THE INCEPTION OF COLONIAL RULE IN ZIMBABWE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the intricate contest that has occurred over the control and management of Gonarezhou since the inception of colonialism in Zimbabwe. It posits that this contest is best understood from a broader perspective of land dispossession and the subsequent debate on the ownership of the area. The contest involved various players such as the state, Shangani villagers, conservationists, poachers and foreigners. The paper argues that state monopoly over the control of the wildlife of the area and the marginalisation of the indigenous people was the core of this contest. This had the tragic consequence of turning locals into unwilling 'rebels' and 'poachers' and this impacted negatively on the sustainable development of the area. The paper further contends that it is only through the full engagement of stakeholders which takes cognisance of historical realities and advocates a win-win situation that the contest would be ameliorated and sustainable development realised.

**Keywords:** Gonarezhou, contest, landscape, poaching, restitution & wildlife.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Gonarezhou is the second largest game park in Zimbabwe after Hwange National Park. It is located in south eastern Zimbabwe, a remote part of the country which falls under climatic region 5 of the country. This region happens to be dry and receives an annual average rainfall of 466 mm (Gandiwa, 2011). The region experiences two contrasting seasons. Between October and March, it experiences a hot and wet season while between April and September, it experiences a cold and dry season.

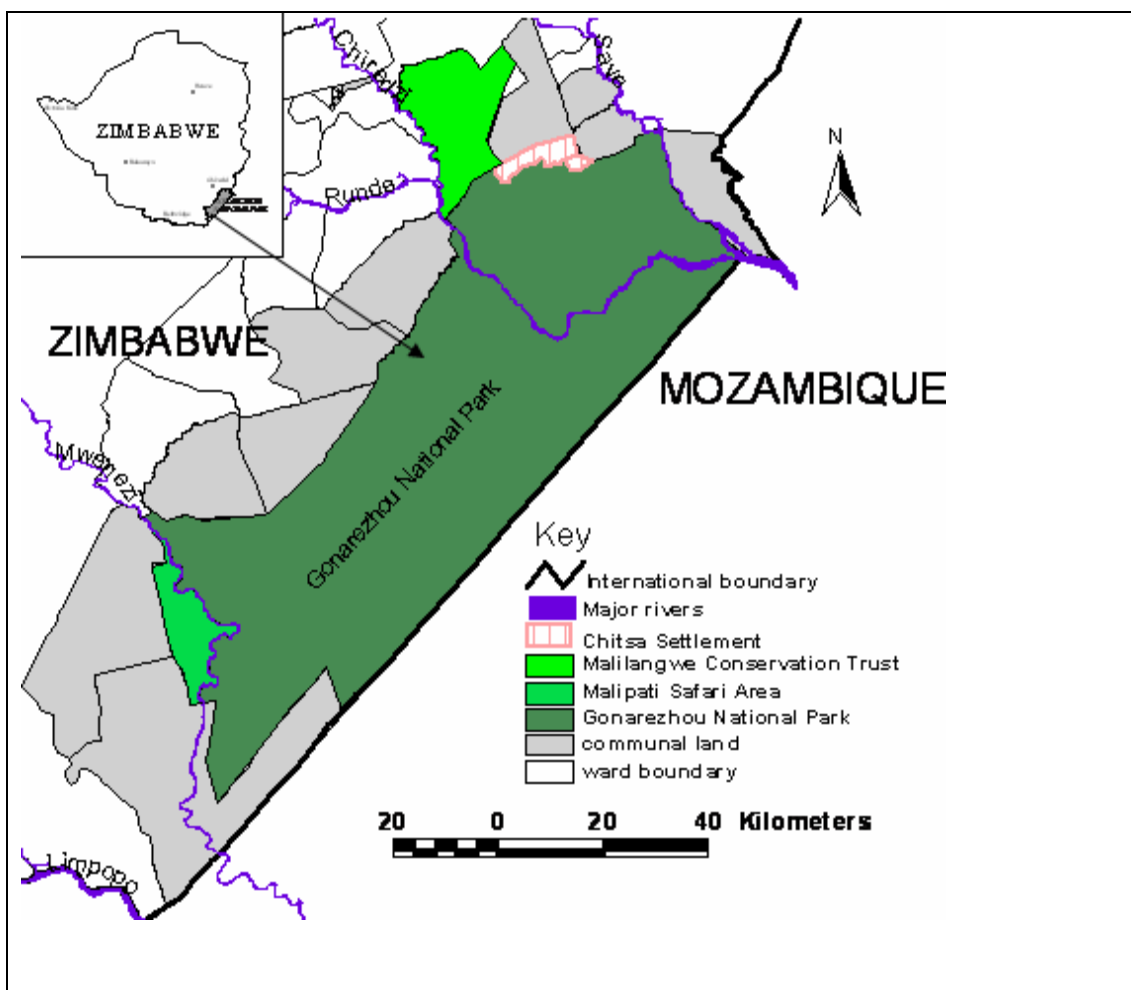
Gonarezhou covers a surface area of 5 053 square kilometres of open grasslands and dense woodlands (Bulpin, 1967). This is mainly mupani woodland that covers up to 40% of the game park (Gandiwa, 2011). The mupani woodlands are complimented by acacia thorn, baobabs and scrublands. Gonarezhou has beautiful scenery that is inter-spaced with several rivers the biggest of which are Save, Runde and Mwenezi. There are also several kopjes that cap the beauty of the park.

The park borders South Africa's Kruger and Mozambique's Limpopo National Parks which meet at Crook's Corner (Bulpin, 1967). The park is 40 km wide and stretches for over 100 km in length along the country's south eastern boundary with Mozambique. In the north it is bound by the Save-Runde Junction, in the south by the Limpopo River, in the east by Mozambique and in the west by Malipati safari area. It is divided into two administrative districts dissected

by the railway line from Rutenga to Sango border post. In the north eastern and southern part of the park respectively lies Chipinda Pools and Mabalauta camps (Mavhunga, 2008). Today, the park is part of the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Peace Park, a joint project linking Gonarezhou with South Africa's Kruger National Park and Mozambique's Limpopo National Park.

The park is surrounded by villages of disgruntled displaced Shangani people. These villages include Shilothlela, Malipati, Chikombedzi, Boli, Muhlanguleni, Chibwedziva, Chitsa and Mahenye. The displacement of the Shangani into these adjacent villages and their subsequent anger is the focus of this discussion. The displacement was followed by the erection of a fence to separate them from the game and this became a bone of contention throughout the period under review.

**Figure 1: The location of Gonarezhou Park and surrounding Shangani communal lands**



**Figure 1:** From Gandiwa, E. (2011). Wildlife Tourism in Gonarezhou National Park. *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*, 13(1), p. 305.

### THE COINING OF THE NAME GONAREZHOU

The name Gonarezhou was coined by Alan Wright, a conservationist and Native Commissioner of Mwenzezi District during the years 1958-1968 (Wright, 1972). In Shona language, Gonarezhou means ‘a place of elephants’ (Forget

Nhanga, personal interview, August 16, 2011). The area was recognised as wildlife Crown Land on occupation by the British in 1890. It was designated a Game Park in 1968 and subsequently declared a National Park under the Parks and Wildlife Act of 1975. In 2002, it was declared part of the Great Transfrontier Peace Park that also encompassed adjoining Mozambican and South African lands (Mavhunga & Spierenburg, 2009). Carruthers, (1997, p. 126) argued that the declaration of the area into a national park created some contradictions in that while national parks “are saved for people” [for they should benefit from them in areas such as tourism] they at the same time are “protected against people.” It was this ambiguity of the national park concept that underscored the contest for its control hence the question of its sustainable management.

Gonarezhou is home to various species of birds and animals. It has a large variety of bird species with over 350. It houses over 140 species of mammals with various species of large herbivores including buffalo, rhinoceros, giraffe, waterbuck, antelope, sable, wildebeest, elephant and hippopotamus (Gandiwa, 2011). It maintains one of Africa’s largest elephant population hence the name Gonarezhou. It also hosts a variety of large carnivores such as lions and hyenas. The game park also teems with large varieties of small game such as the endangered wild dog.

### **COLONIAL DIVISION OF THE LAND**

The first stage of conflict was propelled by the displacement of the indigenous Shangani people from their ‘fatherland’ at the onset of colonial occupation. The area that constitutes Gonarezhou today had been occupied by the Gaza-Nguni [Shangani] under Gungunyane before the coming of white settlers (Mazarire, 2009). The area overlapped into present day Mozambique. Following the defeat of the Gaza-Nguni by the British in 1895, Gungunyane got exiled to the Azores Islands where he died a decade later (Rasmussen & Rubert, 1990). The Rhodesian side of the area was immediately declared Crown Land and this meant bringing both the locals and game under direct government control. During the period leading to the 1920s the border remained fluid and so contested by the Portuguese, Rhodesian and South African governments (Mavhunga, 2008). When the boundary issue was finally resolved, the land under dispute was parcelled into Portuguese, British and Afrikaner territories and the indigenous Shangani people who had lived there since ‘*kale kale*’ (long back) became subjects of the three colonising powers (Delineation of Communities: Kaschula, 1967). The Zimbabwean side was then declared unalienated land reserved as future game land. It was declared unfit for human settlement because it was labelled tsetse-infested and unsuitable for crop production. The local people had to leave the area.

What must be realised though is that when the declaration was made, scores of Shangani villagers were still living in the area. They had co-existed with wildlife and engaged in crop production in this allegedly uninhabitable area for almost a century (Omer-Cooper, 1966). In this they had managed their forest resources sustainably. The implication of the declaration was that they were now supposed to be pushed off the forests where they had lived since *kale kale*. These forests had been a source of their livelihood. The Shangani had always used the forests for their survival. There were no boundaries between them and animals. The symbiosis between them and the forests had provided for some dynamic equilibrium in the management of the territory’s eco-system. Because they depended so much on the forest resources, they harvested the resources in an orderly manner to ensure that they reaped the maximum from the forests. According to Forget Nhanga (personal interview, August 16, 2011), the hunting of game was for example done by skilled people who only went on hunting errands after receiving blessings from their ancestors. Hunting laws were put in place and hunting itself was regulated by the elders. Similarly collection of wild fruits, edible worms [*macimbi*] and vegetables was not

done haphazardly. Indigenous knowledge in the form of traditional taboos was applied in the management of resources. All this was done to ensure that the forest remained the source of their livelihood and survival. Over and above this, the landscape was used for cropping, grazing and as shrines and cemeteries for their departed. Lisenga Maponda (personal interview, August 20, 2011) added that they also harvested firewood and timber from the forest. The fauna and flora of Gonarezhou was therefore part of the nexus of the Shangani heritage.

The sudden declaration of their ancestral land as a state protected area had a devastating effect. The new colonial regime mandated itself the custodian of the wildlife of the area which they gave priority over the indigenous people. Traditional hunting was outlawed. Only those with hunting licences could now reap benefits from their 'ancestral heritage'. The granting of such licences became the exclusive preserve of the new regime, a regime that was detested by the locals. In practice, Africans were denied such licences as they were labelled poor resource managers, the very resources they had sustainably managed all along. They were declared 'illegal' settlers and were subjected to all sorts of abuses associated with illegal settlers throughout the new colony. This declaration then became the first centre of contest between the government and the local Shangani.

The Shangani villagers were irritated and so protested. They rejected the arbitrary boundaries created by colonialists. They refused to accept the loss of their hunting and farming lands. Throughout the period under this study, they engaged in acts of sabotage and resistance to protest their loss. Some were involved in 'poaching' and at times even worked in cohort with bandits such as the infamous Bvekenya in poaching episodes (Bulpin, 1967). The irony of it all was that the displaced were re-located next to the Gonarezhou forest and some of them even remained in the forest until it was declared a game park in 1968. Their proximity to the forest gave them hope of re-possessing their land in the near future. On the other hand the government, represented by the Native Commissioner, Peter Forrestall, had limited control over the area as he managed it from Chibi which was 100 miles away (Mavhunga, 2008). The people of Chitsa, Mahenye and Ngwenyenye continued to move their cattle into state controlled land and continued to hunt willy-nilly in the 'protected area'. The state was therefore too far away to do much in controlling these Shangani inhabitants. Poaching of game went on uncontrolled during the early phase of colonial occupation. It was fuelled by the activities of foreigners who were coming in large numbers to recruit manpower for South African mines and to reap ivory (Bulpin, 1967). The net effect of all this was the depletion of game in the area.

The 1920 Imperial-Order-In-Council that delineated land into 'native reserves' deliberately left out the land between the Limpopo and Lundi (Gonarezhou) unalienated and went on to declare it 'vacant' Crown Land (Wright, 1972, p. 325). As alluded to earlier, the state's argument was that it was unsuitable for human settlement, an argument not supported by any empirical research. The Responsible Government that assumed power in 1923 upheld the 1920 declaration. It established a Department of Agriculture and Lands and gave it the sole administrative responsibilities over the area. In particular, the Department was given charge of all wild animals in the designated area. The Lands section was given charge of the land while the Veterinary section was given charge of the boundaries between game and livestock. The Native Commissioner was given the responsibility of policing the boundaries (Mavhunga, 2008 & Wright, 1972). Again these powers were fluid because, as earlier said, there was no strong mechanism to enforce them. The state remained in control of the area on paper while the people continued to have their freeway on the contested landscape.

## GIVING WAY TO GAME

The Department of Commerce first mooted the idea of establishing a game park as early as 1924. It suggested then the relocation of Shangani traditional communities to pave way for the establishment of an animal park. In this, it was supported by hoteliers, safari operators and the Wildlife Protection Society for Southern Rhodesia (Wolmer, 2005). The same kind of debate was taking place across the Limpopo River. The argument was that it made economic sense to turn this vast ‘under-utilised’ area into a game park that would promote tourism and subsequently generate income for the country. Proponents of this argument contended that local people would also benefit from employment in the tourism industry. It was further argued by colonial conservationists that the declaration of the area as a game park would ‘lock out’ poachers and ‘protect’ wild animals from extinction. Such an argument smacked of typical colonial parochial thinking that perceived pre-colonial peoples as having been devoid of any conservation knowledge. It was a thinking that used Western standards to define what conservation ought to be. Indigenous Knowledge Systems of the locals on resource conservation were discarded. It was this kind of thinking that set the stage for further conflict with the local people.

From 1925 onwards, Gonarezhou became entangled in the politics of land apportionment that gripped the whole country. The Carter Commission of 1925 reserved large tracts of land for future demarcation. According to Alan Wright (1972, p. 325) these included:

*the Crown land bounded on the north-east by the Lundi river, on the south-east by the Anglo-Portuguese border, and on the south-west by the Bubyne and Limpopo rivers and on the north-west by the Nuametsi Ranch and the Matibi No. 2 Native Reserve, a total of 1 783 000 acres.*

This land included what later became Gonarezhou, Buffalo Bend and Sengwe Tribal Trust Lands.

In 1926, Kruger, just across the Limpopo River was declared a National Park by the South African government. The desire to do the same was heightened in Southern Rhodesia. The same argument of protecting wild animals was proffered. It was once again championed by conservationists and those from the Department of Commerce who anticipated high economic returns from such a venture. Those advocating for the promotion of tourism had already identified the magnificent Chipinda Pools as the epi-centre of such a project (NAZ S914/12/1B).

When the contentious Land Apportionment Act of 1930 was passed, Gonarezhou was re-designated as an ‘unassigned area’. This meant that the land was “neither African area, European area nor Forest area, but it could at any future date be assigned to one of these categories” (Wright, 1972, p. 325). Again in the re-designation of the land, the concerns of the Shangani inhabitants were disregarded. They reacted by increasing poaching in the contentious area. The South African government protested over uncontrolled poaching across the Limpopo “which allegedly resulted in the scattering of animals across the Limpopo...in search of refuge” (Mavhunga & Spierenburg, 2009, p.729). The Rhodesia government reacted by passing hunting prohibition Proclamation 31 of 1931 that aimed at ameliorating the situation. This was followed by a grand proposal to create a transfrontier game corridor stretching from Kruger National Park to Tanganyika (Rhodesia Herald, 13 August, 1937).

Mavhunga & Spierenburg, (2009) record that there were still a lot of Shangani clans living in the now designated land in the 1930s. Up to 7000 Chitsa people were still living in the Save/Runde junction area in 1934 which was still part of the area earmarked for game. They owned up to 3000 cattle which could be jeopardised if the area was declared game land. They were considered a threat to game as they were “experts with the bow and arrow and the setting of traps” (Mavhunga & Spierenburg, 2009 p. 722) and were reported to be killing ‘large quantities’ of wild animals. The government, through the Department of Commerce accused them of killing game randomly and suggested that this be stopped in the interest of game and tourism. They were supported once again by hoteliers who even suggested that a hotel be immediately built at Chipinda Pools and that a station manned by a warden with police experience be established to control lawlessness from Africans (NAZ S1194/1645/3/1). The station at Chipinda Pools would employ ‘reliable natives’ to serve visitors. This way, the state would keep some of the ‘natives’ in check. While the employment of ‘natives’ was perceived to be a favour extended to the Africans, it nevertheless did not have the support of the majority who wanted to be left alone to lead their own traditional life. On their part the Shangani continued to exhibit some independence in the way they managed their landscape. This was in spite of the fact that they were now considered squatters.

By 1937, the plan to convert the Gonarezhou area into a game park had been temporarily abandoned as the Department of Agriculture and Lands argued against it. They argued that the reserves so created out of the displaced and disgruntled people would become centres of predators of game. The Veterinary Department further argued that such reserves would be centres for the spread of diseases such as malaria and foot and mouth. A battle between the advocates of the above argument and the Department of Commerce ensued for the next two decades during which time little progress was made into converting the area into game land.

In 1954, an area of 1.4 million acres adjacent to Gonarezhou was designated into Gonakudzingwa African Purchase area (Wright, 1972) to accommodate the Sengwe people of chiefs Samu and Gezani being moved from the proposed game area (Kaschula, 1967). African Purchase areas were pieces of land that were given to a class of favoured African peasants who were considered to be more advanced than their kinsfolk in their agricultural skills. The argument was that such a group of ‘elite’ African producers would eventually wean themselves from the rest because of their favoured position and become supporters of the regime. Indeed this was part of the divide and rule strategy of the colonial regime

When Alan Wright was appointed Native Commissioner (NC) of the remote district of Nuanetsi in 1958, he immediately put into motion a programme meant to incorporate a wide area of Gonarezhou into game land. It was during his tenure as NC of the district (1958-1968) that the Gonarezhou dream came to fruition. As an ultra-conservationist, he embarked on a programme of curbing poaching in Gonarezhou. This he did by establishing firm authority and permanent administrative structures inside the designated game area. He increased foot and bicycle patrols, established roads and makeshift bridges and established a reliable patrol system connected by radio and supported by district messengers and villagers (Wright, 1972). This reduced indiscriminate shooting of animals.

As a friend of wild animals, he did all he could to ensure their safety and ‘happiness’. His efforts were rewarded as there was a noticeable increase of game of all types during his short stint of duty in the area-hippopotamus, elands, kudus,

impalas, zebras, warthogs, buffaloes, elephants, duikers, lions, bush pigs and baboons (Wright, 1972). The area became more popular as more and more outsiders came for game viewing and fishing instead of game hunting.

A protection fence, to defend wild animals from villagers was erected along the border with Mozambique and adjacent Tribal Trust Lands (TTLs). Mavhunga (2008, p. 2) postulates that the fence was seen as the first line of defence against wanton poaching by 'irresponsible' villagers. This again was a colonial philosophy based on baseless assumptions. The fencing of the 'protected area' had the effect of heightening tension with the local villagers who felt unfairly closed out from their hunting, grazing and cropping grounds. To make matters worse, animals such as elephants and buffaloes encroached into their TTLs destroying crops and threatening their lives. Lions, hyenas and leopards played havoc by killing their livestock yet the villagers could not retaliate by killing them because they were now protected species. The reaction of the villagers was one of anger which often forced them to become unwilling 'poachers' as they sought revenge.

### **PUNISHING THE SHANGANI OFF THEIR LAND**

We here use two cases to illustrate the callousness of the colonial regime in dealing with villagers who were still in the game area during Wright's tenure. Such callousness triggered sharp reaction from the locals hence the continuation of the contest. By 1966 when the 'game scheme' was taking shape, Headman Ngwenyenye of Marumbini and his subjects were still in the game area resisting eviction. They argued that their "great-grand fathers were born there, lived there and were buried there" and so were going nowhere (Kaschula, 1967, p. 84). They had lived along the banks of the Lundi River since before colonial occupation and had over the years spread to Chiredzi River and to the other side of the Sabi River into the Mahenye area (Kaschula, 1967). They were accused of being illegal occupants conducting 'uncontrolled' hunting and of showing "no respect for a white man" (Mavhunga & Spierenburg, 2009, p. 722).

In 1966, the new Under Secretary for Lands, Archie Frazer labelled Ngwenyenye's people a menace to the 'game scheme' and so were to move (Wright, 1972, p.339). Assistant Native Commissioner, Bawden supported their translocation to Matibi Native Reserve II to create more space for game and also shed off the responsibility of having to administer "these remote localities" (Mavhunga & Spierenburg, 2009, p. 722). It was further argued that this had all along been put forward as the surest way of buffering Nuanetsi Ranch from Gonarezhou's lions and veterinary diseases (NAZ, S1194/1645/3/1)

On the other hand, and for different reasons, Wright wanted 'these wild and unsophisticated Africans' to stay. He argued that these 'inoffensive tribesmen' who were still "primitive, ultra conservative, unspoiled---living as they had [been] a hundred years ago" be allowed to stay and be "part and parcel of any National Park scheme of the future" (Mavhunga, 2008, p. 260). Tourists would watch both game and the 'wild tribesmen' and this would be a wonderful opportunity to combine the two great attractions in a unique and beautiful setting (Mavhunga, 2008, p. 260). One is persuaded to conclude that the intention of letting them stay was not a noble one. If anything, it was born out of the stereotyped views of the colonialists of the time that Africans were not much different from animals hence the reason why the two would be considered to be 'two great [possibly equal] attractions'. To Wright, the Shangani were just another species of predators whose poaching activities would be part of the checks and balances on the eco-system.

On their part, Ngwenyenye's people remained defiant arguing they would not leave their birth place. They protested that uprooting them would be unjust. Frazer insisted that they were squatters and should be evicted (NAZ S2929/8/4). He and his colleagues could not reconcile the concept of permanent African residents living peacefully with wild game, as if this was a new thing. After concerted efforts, they were finally removed in 1968 to pave way for the declaration of the game park. They were re-settled in an area on the east bank of lower Nuanetsi River, right on the boundary of the Buffalo Bend wild life reserve "which really is not a suitable location for them" (Wright, 1972, p.341). While this area was still next to the game park, it was satisfyingly out of the designated area. The Director of Wildlife observed that soon after the removal of the Ngwenyenye people, elephant mobility immediately improved and "where elephant herds were previously unknown, large herds were occupying the area only eight days after the squatters had been moved out" (NAZ SRG/3 report, 1968).

The Nwenyenye people protested their unlawful eviction. William Wolmer (2005) narrated how their forced eviction to Matibi II created lasting bitterness and how this was converted into anger against game through full scale poaching. Records indicate that soon after their eviction, 63 of them were arrested for organised village poaching. In response to the escalation of poaching, the Regional Warden for the Lowveld, Douglas Newmarch reported in 1970:

*Snaring and poaching [in the lower Buffalo Bend reserve] is very bad and it appears it is coming from the group moved out of the Marumbini area and placed along the lower Nuanetsi-an embittered lot; why, I don't know (Wright, 1972, p. 341).*

As if he did not know!

The second case is of the Chitsa people. According to Bennerman (1981) the Shangani of Chitsa had for close to a century lived in the area that is now called Gonarezhou, south of the Chionja Hills between the Save, Runde and Chiredzi Rivers. Their area extended to the Save-Runde Junction close to Mozambique. Their neighbours were the Mahenye people who lived south of Ndowoyo Tribal Trust Lands. Both were of Tsonga origin. By 1954, they were still resident in the game designated area. In 1954, a government official, a Mr. J. Philpot painted a gloomy picture of them when he explained that while they had retained "much that is picturesque and primitive" they were "rapidly being civilized" and that their tribal society was "in an advanced state of disintegration" (NMMZ J.Philpot, 1954, p.47). The supposed state of the disintegration of their tribal life was a result of the continuous harassment through displacement.

When Magumbe was appointed chief of the Chitsa people by Mr. Leatt in 1957, many of his people were still occupying Gonarezhou Crown Land. This area included Lundi River No. 4 Pool and Tembohata pan near the border junction (Kaschula, 1965). Kaschula's report mischievously alleges that Chitsa's people were minimally affected by the Land Husbandry Act of 1957 when it was known that throughout the country, this Act had the effect of compulsorily reducing individual family livestock, especially cattle. The Chitsa people could not have been an exception.

To control the movement of people into the game area, the Department of Agriculture and Lands erected a fence between Sabi [near Bandai Hill] and Lundi rivers. This was a heinous crime against the Chitsa tribesmen who were totally fenced off from their ancestral land and source of livelihood. The struggle for the control of this contested landscape continued in various ways, chief among which was poaching.



## **POACHING FOR SUBSISTENCE OR GREED?**

The poaching of animals in the game area was the next theatre of the conflict. This section traces the various forms of poaching since the occupation of the area in order to explain why it turned out to be the greatest threat to the Gonarezhou experiment and the sustainable management of wildlife in the area.

In the circumstances under discussion, the term poaching was understood differently by the different stakeholders. An indigenous Shangani villager understood the term differently, for example from government officials and conservationists. Prior to colonial occupation, the term did not even exist in local vocabulary. We shall here begin by defining it from the state's point of view, which is the western foreign view. Here it is defined as an improper way of harvesting game (illegal hunting, killing and capturing of animals). It also involves the use of illegal hunting weapons. In Gonarezhou it involved the taking or reaping of wild animals from a gazetted sanctuary without a licence or permit. This implied that those with licences or permits were allowed to hunt. This was now defined as legalised hunting. The state appointed itself the regulator of hunting in Gonarezhou. It monopolised the issuing of licences and permits. Those issued with licences and permits were not poachers and those who hunted without were poachers and were subjected to harsh prosecution under the laws of the country. Foreigners suddenly became beneficiaries of ancestral resources while the locals were denied their heritage. Such a scenario was difficult to comprehend for most locals and in defiance, many decided to 'break the law' by continuing to hunt in the designated area. The state labelled them poachers and proceeded to persecute them. Conflict ensued as the state and the locals contested the control of the Gonarezhou landscape.

There were basically two types of poaching in Gonarezhou, subsistence and commercial. Subsistence poaching was driven by the desire for meat and normally targeted small game (Bulpin, 1967). Other products reaped were hides, ivory, horn, teeth and bones. It was usually organised at village level. The poachers used rudimentary hunting instruments and traditional hunting methods such as snares, spears, bows and arrows and hunting dogs.

The main drive behind local subsistence poaching was survival. As alluded to earlier, the Shangani had all along depended heavily on Gonarezhou resources and their continued survival was hinged on unhindered exploitation of these resources. The new state barred them from doing this and their livelihood was shattered. They responded by 'breaking' the law in order to survive and hence the contest.

The Shangani tribesmen used various methods to hunt game in Gonarezhou. Snares were used to trap small animal species such as impala, hyena, leopard, zebra and wildebeest. Cable wires were tied on trees to trap such animals around their necks or legs as shown in Plates 1 and 2 below. When an animal managed to escape, it would carry the snare round its neck, leg or waste, sometimes until it dies. This was an indiscriminate and cruel method of killing game. This method has remained in use. Traditional hunters also used dogs and spears. Animals were chased by dogs and speared when they got tired. At times they used poisoned spears, a method that has continued to be used by Shangani hunters. Trap nets or pitfalls were another popular method of hunting game. Trenches were dug across busy animal paths and covered with disguise grass. Animals were then driven into these trenches and bludgeoned by the poachers. According to Lisenga Maponda (personal interview, August 20, 2011), this method was used to kill even big game like elephants, buffaloes and zebras.

On the other hand, commercial poaching was mainly profit driven and externally controlled. Commercial poachers targeted animals with high international market value such as rhinoceros for the horn and elephants for ivory. These are shown on Plates 3 and 4 respectively. The elephant in particular was targeted for its tusk that was in high demand in the world market. Indeed as alluded to earlier, Gonarezhou was home to thousands of elephants that had survived the 19<sup>th</sup> century massacres by foreign ivory seekers (Bulpin, 1967). Both subsistence and commercial poachers played a significant role in the contest for the control of Gonarezhou and in particular, in the depletion of wildlife.

Writing in his book, *The Ivory Trail*, Bulpin (1967) narrated in detail how one infamous elephant hunter, Cecil Stephanus Rutgers Barnard or *Bvekenya*, in local circles ravaged the entire game area and killed over 300 elephants during his 19 year stint as an illegal hunter in Gonarezhou. During this period, he rose to become a notorious elephant poacher and blackbirder (Edgumbe, n.d). While he had come into the area in 1910 as a ‘blackbirder’ (recruit Shangani labour force for South African mines), he quickly abandoned this mission when he realised that hunting elephants for ivory was more lucrative. During the years, he successfully smuggled his ivory ‘past the law’ by devising ingenious ways of doing so. In this, he was aided by Shangani tribesmen who were beneficiaries of his generosity [provided them with meat during their times of need] and were also a disgruntled lot who sought revenge against the state in any way they could.



**Plate 1:** Leopard killed by a snare

**Source:**[http://www.africanwildlifeconservationfund.org/projects/gonarezhou-predator project/](http://www.africanwildlifeconservationfund.org/projects/gonarezhou-predator-project/)



**Plate 2:** Snared hyena

**Source:** (<http://www.africanwildlifeconservationfund.org/projects/gonarezhou-predator-project/>)



**Plate 3:** Rhinoceros in the bush/ wild

**Source:** (<http://www.africanwildlifeconservationfund.org/projects/>)



**Plate 4:** Elephant in the bush/wild

**Source :** ( <http://www.gonarezhou.co.za/index.htm>)

Bvekenya's was an epic story of the exploits of one determined white hunter who contributed greatly to the decimation of the elephant population in Gonarezhou. In this, he was not alone. He worked with many other white poachers such as Fred Roux. He and his colleagues had made Crooks' Corner their poaching headquarters during the early years of colonial occupation (Bulpin, 1972). The poachers specifically operated from a bush store at Makhuleke which had been turned into an ivory trading centre. Bulpin (1972, p. 14) observes that in 1910, "the store at Makhuleke was a bustling place, with perhaps a hundred Africans and two dozen European adventurers coming in on a single day, trading ivory...". It was turned into a place of plotting and intrigues by both African and European adventurers and poachers. What must be noted is that these white commercial poachers were not working alone but in cohort with disgruntled local Shangani tribesmen who had a vendetta to settle with the state and also received favours such as meat from their poacher white colleagues. Disgruntled locals went into alliances with white poachers as a way of settling scores with the state that had rendered them 'landless'. They provided the poachers with information on how to evade capture. They also provided them with accommodation. Bvekenya even married two local women [Kami of chief Sengwe and Chinengise of chief Masivamele] to ensure acceptance and local protection (Wright, 1967).

Another notorious commercial hunter was Shadrech of Mahenye, a *mullatto* believed by locals to be a grandson of Bvekenya (Mavhunga, 2008). His poaching stint in Gonarezhou spanned from 1960 to 1974. He used sophisticated hunting weapons that he received from some Portuguese white friends who were the buyers of his ivory. Shadrech killed lots of elephants during his 14 years of poaching in Gonarezhou. During the latter part of that period, he got hooked up with Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) forces that were using Gonarezhou as a transit route into Zimbabwe during the war of liberation. Through the ZANLA connections, he was protected from capture. It however turned out that he was a double agent involved in also providing information to Rhodesian forces in return for their protection as well. He was arrested just after independence by the Zimbabwe Republic Police and so ended his adventurous poaching life.

The rhinoceros was another of those species that were targeted by commercial hunters because of its most distinguishing feature, the horn. The horn was believed to have medicinal properties that treated ailments such as headaches, fevers and cancer. The hunting of the rhinoceros, especially the black species was most noticeable after Gonarezhou was declared a game park in 1968. Hunting of elephants and rhinoceros was largely done by armed gangs

or syndicates. These were politically well-connected and dangerous people determined to kill if confronted. They used high forms of technological communication and engaged local contacts in their surveillances. The 1989 ban on ivory trade by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) was an attempt to curb the uncontrolled harvesting of ivory. Illegal harvesting has however continued unabated. The increased demand for ivory in the 1970s and 1980s, witnessed an escalation of elephant poaching by powerful international syndicates. During this period, a large number of the African elephant was gunned down by illegal hunters.

These animals and especially the elephant were not just passive bystanders in the whole contest. Poaching made elephants aggressive, especially when injured by poachers or when nursing youngsters. They at times took the law into their own hands and attacked human beings to revenge for past human harassment. Cases have been recorded where poachers were trampled to death (personal interview with Shalati Mukaha, December 22, 2011). Some of these go back to Bvekenya's time when he was 'begged' by villagers to kill one old rogue elephant bull that "had some grievances against life...and was certainly an unpleasant character" (Bulpin, 1967, p.65). The bull had killed three people, two men and one woman and "generally terrorised the whole countryside" (Bulpin, 1967, p.65). Bulpin graphically described how he killed his victims:

*He would spike them on one of his tusks, toss his head to send the body flying, and then trample the victim into a horrible lump of mangled flesh and bone. Like most elephants, he did not like trampling on anyone lying down and keeping still. He liked to catch his victim running. He always covered up the body of his victim afterwards by burying it under the branches he stripped from the trees.*

Elephants were also known to cross into adjacent Shangani villages to destroy crops in 'retaliation' to human harassment.

### **CONTEST DURING THE PERIOD OF ARMED CONFRONTATION**

Between 1976 and 1980, Gonarezhou became a battle zone between the Rhodesian government and ZANLA guerrillas. The guerrillas literally took control of the area as they used it to infiltrate into the country from their bases in Mozambique. From the game, they penetrated adjacent villages of Chitsa, Mahenye, Chikombedzi, Chibwedziva, Boli, Masivamele and Pahlela (Tavuyanago, 2011). As war progressed, the game area became a liberation 'landscape' and no go area for the Rhodesian forces. Locals in the above villages were roped into the war and became ardent supporters providing food, information and moral support to the guerrillas. According to Lisenga Smart (personal interview, November 25, 2011), they were promised recovery of their lost land after liberation. They in turn enthusiastically supported the liberation war.

Under siege, the government abandoned its efforts to protect wildlife in the game as all park services were suspended. It became a free for all time for the big time game poachers. Elephants, in particular had a tough time. Besides suffering at the hands of poachers, they were also victims of landmines which were seeded along the Zimbabwe/South African border during the war of liberation. Under siege, elephants became vindictive and attacked human beings in the adjacent villages willy-nilly (personal interview with Lisenga Smart, November 25, 2011).

During the Mozambique National Resistance (RENAMO) war of 1982 to 1992, the game park suffered from a combination of refugees fleeing the war in Mozambique and RENAMO fighters infiltrating into the country to revenge

for what they said was Zimbabwe's meddling in their internal affairs. Tavuyanago (2011) posits that this period witnessed uncontrolled movement of refugees and RENAMO fighters into the park which was transformed from being a refuge for animals to one of Mozambicans fleeing war in their country. Both engaged in poaching game for subsistence and trading. Statistics on illegal hunting of elephants show that during the RENAMO war period there was a sharp rise of recorded numbers of elephants killed by poachers. The Herald [Zimbabwe] of 9 January 1983 reported that increased ivory poaching was caused by people coming in and out of the country illegally [mainly RENAMO fighters and refugees]. Mavhunga (2008) propounds that between September 1983 and April 1984, the park recorded 60 killed elephants worth Z\$120 000-00 and 12 black rhinos worth Z\$60 000-00. Tavuyanago, (2011) also records that there was a noticeable rise in the number of elephants killed in the game from 2 in 1983 to 823 in 1988, a scary rise indeed. It became apparent that the park that had been used as a symbol of liberation between 1976 and 1980 had now been transformed into a 'landscape' of terror as most of the people abducted by RENAMO from the adjacent villages 'disappeared' into Gonarezhou. Game was decimated and the physical landscape suffered from uncontrolled destruction of woodlands.

The Mobile Anti-Poaching Unit (MAPU), which was raised by the state to police the border areas, was overwhelmed by the massive influx of refugees and RENAMO fighters. Besides, they were not allowed to fire to kill but to scare off poachers. In the circumstances, the unit was exposed to attacks from armed poachers who were not themselves barred by any laws from firing at members of MAPU. In the state of this confusion, members of MAPU also encouraged their own to poach (Mavhunga, 2008). Members of the Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA) were reported to have been indiscreetly involved in poaching. It now turned out that those institutions that were supposed to be custodians of the law ended up being the main conduits of poaching. They were breaking the very laws they were supposed to enforce.

Locals also took advantage of the breakdown of law and order and invaded their ancestral lands. Mavhunga (2008) observes that locals devised an ingenious strategy of sending young children on poaching errands because they knew that the courts were generally lenient with children. It was thus noticed that the levels of poaching escalated during the school holidays.

### **UHURU AND CONTINUED CONTEST**

The year 1980 ushered in a new government for the black majority. People's hopes for the recovery of their ancestral land were heightened throughout the country. Guerrillas had promised the people that the white men would be chased off the land and all dispossessed land would be returned to its rightful owners. Expectations were very high among the Shangani villagers that they would now reclaim their ancestral heritage, the land that they had lost to animals. This did not happen as the new government reneged on the promise. The new government continued to apply the old laws, the very laws it had fought to remove, the laws that had taken away the people's land and given it exclusively to wild animals. This was ironic indeed. Yes, it was indeed a paradox the locals failed to comprehend.

The new state argued that Gonarezhou was a 'national' park that could not be tempered with. By this argument, it put the 'national heritage' above the 'local heritage'. This was obviously a colonial concept as there was no national heritage in the pre-colonial period. Shangani tribesmen argued that what was there was local heritage hence their claim for its restitution. Tourism was given precedence over local Shangani land demands. This scenario created a platform for a new

level of confrontation between the 'people's state' and the 'people' [Shangani]. The 'people' interpreted the state's position as 'a great betrayal'. They felt cheated by the 'comrades' they had enthusiastically supported during the war of liberation. This underlined a new level of the struggle for the re-possession of the motherland.

On the other hand, the new Department of Parks has not treated them differently. It has continued to apply the old laws, the very laws the locals had contested hitherto because of their injustice. These were mainly enforced by the same old faces, the very faces that had all along labelled them squatters and poachers. They were frustrated hence they continued with their struggle for justice to re-possess their ancestral land.

A piecemeal attempt to appease the locals was made when a programme called Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE) was introduced in 1982. This was a restitution programme in which locals were to partner with Rural District Councils (RDCs) in the management and utilisation of game resources. The idea was to promote sustainable use of renewable resources such as wildlife, forestry and cultural resources. This project targeted marginalised areas that were close to game parks like Gonarezhou. The argument proffered was that such a programme would empower locals in the management of their wildlife. They would also receive dividends from hunting fees. They would further receive financial support for local projects such as the construction of schools, clinics, roads, dip tanks and community halls (Maveneke, 1998). Safari hunters were also obliged to pay adjacent villagers a share of the proceeds they earned from big game hunting. Locals were further supposed to receive meat from such hunting and during the official culling of game in game parks.

This line of thinking presupposes that the tastes of locals could only be satisfied by foreign donation. It is noteworthy that locals did not see this project as a solution to their appetite for land. What they needed was total empowerment in the control and management of their resources, both land and wildlife.

#### ***ALUTA CONTINUA!-THE JAMBANJA PHASE***

The last phase of the contest came with '*jambanja*' land take overs. The national land take overs since 2000 was seen as a way of correcting the injustices and imbalances of the land tenure system created by colonialism. Soon after the national land grab of 2000, the Chitsa people in the Gotosa and Chionja areas also joined the fray by 'invading' the eastern part of the Gonarezhou game park. Up to 1000 families were involved. In 2007, 150 villagers from the adjacent Sengwe communal area joined villagers from Chitsa and Chitanga who had invaded Gonarezhou (Mavhunga, 2008, p. 401). Again they were insisting that their ancestors had lived on this southern tip of the game and so were simply reclaiming their 'lost land'. The fence that had been erected by the colonial regime to 'keep them out' was brought down and movement into the park became unlimited.

The impact of the occupations was immediate. Game was put under siege as animals were scared off and forced to retreat into the interior of the park. Their drinking places were invaded and this drove them further away from their human predators. There were reports of poisoning of some water sources to kill the animals for subsistence. This was a new method of poaching. In 2010, poisoned cabbage leaves were known to have killed rhinoceros in south east Zimbabwe. National Report, (2011 September 23) reports that 9 elephants, 5 lions, 2 buffaloes and several vultures were known to have died throughout the country after drinking poisoned water.

Trapping of animals increased during the *jambanja* period. It again turned into a free for all show. Makiwa, Z. (2010, June 10) reported the slaughter of 10 elephants at one spot in the Chikombezi area of Gonarezhou. The carcasses of the butchered animals without tusks, were found along Mutandanjiva River. Spent cartridges from an FN rifle were found at the scene pointing to the involvement of armed poachers. Siamachira, J. (2011, August 4) further reported that in 1980, the country had 2 000 black rhinos [world's largest number at the time] but by March 2011 only 700 (400 black and 300 white) were left. The Daily News of May 2010 also reported that a powerful rhino, elephant and lion poaching syndicate known by the name of Musina Mafia was on the loose. Eleven of its members were arrested in 2010 and charged with poaching, illegal possession of arms and other crimes. Their boss is said to have been based in South Africa and was identified as Dawie Groenewald.

The animal habitat was rapidly cleared as locals chopped down trees and fetched grass for their household chores. Veld fires became the order of the day as people sought to use all sorts of methods in hunting game (personal interview with Forget Nhangwa, August 16, 2011). Between 2008 and 2010 the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (ZPWLM) removed 2051 snares and impounded 1532 cattle from Gonarezhou (International Rhino Foundation, 2010, last para.). There appeared to be inaction on the part of government in stopping the occupation of the game land. There actually appeared to have been tacit complicity with what was happening on the part of the government. In a report by Masvingo Bureau, ( 2011, September 5), the Governor and Resident Minister of Masvingo, Titus Maluleke, who hails from the Gonarezhou area, announced that the re-location of the Chitsa people had been put on hold because there were no funds and land. He even went on to dispel the threat of people living in the game park by arguing that many communities throughout the country co-existed with game and so there was nothing peculiar with communities living adjacent to Gonarezhou. Politicians, especially those from ZANU (PF) party were therefore perceived to be supporting the land grabs hence the reason why there was inaction.

Conservationists cried foul arguing that if nothing was done to bring sanity, the game project would soon be scuttled. Their main concern has been that the Parks and Wildlife staff was inadequately equipped to effectively deal with the advanced nature of poaching. Rangers still used archaic rifles such as the AK-47 against advanced weapons used by poachers. The Director of ZPWLM acknowledged that his staff was indeed dealing with well-resourced and powerful syndicates with strong political connections. This made theirs a mammoth task.

The country's legal system was found wanting in complementing the efforts of the ZPWLM. The system was slow in investigating, processing and punishing offenders. Bail conditions were often too lenient and therefore not deterrent enough. Guvamombe, I, (2011, May 12) reported that a poacher caught with 26 elephant tusks [13 elephants killed] was given bail of US\$50.00 because the presiding magistrate had never seen a live elephant and so could not appreciate how serious the offence was. Under Section 6(1) Parks and Wildlife General Regulations and Section 28(1) Parks and Welfare General Regulations 1981, courts were only empowered to impose a nominal fine of Z\$10 to \$40 as fines for "removing meat of animals killed in a National Park" (Mavhunga, 2008. p.273). Rangers were not allowed to fire to kill but fire to scare off poachers. This exposed them as they at times had to deal with heavily armed poachers. Again old laws continued to operate in a completely changed environment in the control of poachers making the work of MAPU insurmountable.



## **WHITHER TO?**

It must be acknowledged that the establishment of Gonarezhou is now a *fait accompli*. What cannot be denied though are the facts of history regarding the past ownership. Any solution to the contest must embrace the above realities. All stakeholders in the Gonarezhou duel must realise that the only solution to the impasse is a win-win situation. All must therefore put their heads together in proffering a lasting solution to the ownership wrangle.

All must acknowledge the fact that the existence of the game is now irreversible. Tourism is now big business in the country and Gonarezhou is bringing in a lot of foreign currency into the fiscus. As such, solutions to the conflict must take cognisance of that fact. A number of measures must be put in place to ensure maximum yields from tourism. The state, as the key stakeholder must show the political will to restore law and order in the game area. Anti-poaching efforts should be fully supported by providing more funding to the Department of Wildlife Management, beefing up patrols, equipping the operatives with adequate armoury, giving them proper training and improving infrastructure such as roads and communication networks in their area of operation.

The laws of the land should be made sterner. In particular, courts should institute punitive measures such as higher fines and lengthy jail terms on poachers. More police stations should be opened in the peripheries of the park to ensure constant and effective monitoring of the area. The state should further partner with local and international environmentalists in fighting local and international poaching syndicates.

The international community must also play its role in curbing illegal trade of elephant and rhino horn by starving international poachers of the market. The West, which today labels itself the champion of good environmental management and conservation happen to be in complicity with these international ivory traders. It should live up to its claim by exonerating itself from ivory trade. The world should further realise that the efforts of CITES alone may not be enough to kill the scourge. Concerted effort is therefore required from all involved.

On the other hand, Shangani villagers who lost their land must first get an apology from the state for unfulfilled promises and receive some meaningful reparation. The state must not give them just crumbs but empower them to enable them to feel they jointly own the resources with the state. That way, they will be able to safeguard and promote their sustainability by going back to the olden days where they peacefully co-existed with their game heritage. They should, for example be allowed to run safaris, tours and lodges in Gonarezhou like is the case with the Makhuleke community of South Africa's Kruger National Park who own and run a lodge in the protected area (Koro, E. 2011). This way they would directly reap associated benefits therefrom. A similar programme is being run by the government for the 42 000 villagers from Chiadzwa in the Marange diamond area who have had to be re-located to allow for the exploitation of the recently discovered diamond. They have been compensated handsomely by receiving a one off cash payments of US\$1000 per family and monthly groceries until their first harvest. They have also been resettled in the productive Odzi ARDA Transau land with modern infrastructure such as modern durable houses, tarred roads, tapped water and electricity (Own Correspondent, The Zimbabwean). They are further to receive royalties from the sale of the gem and are getting preferential treatment in jobs that have been created by this venture. These villagers are indeed reaping the fruits of being blessed with a rich resource and the Shangani villagers displaced from Gonarezhou should receive similar treatment, though belatedly.

Proceeds from safari hunting should also be invested in infrastructural development such as roads, bridges, clinics, schools, bee-keeping, fisheries and eco-tourism. Further investment could be in the development of Rural Growth Points with the goal of creating employment for the youth of the area. Such developments would assuage the pain the people suffered all these years.

## CONCLUSION

This paper reflected on the nature and different levels of contest by the various players over the control of the Gonarezhou landscape. These players included the state, represented by the colonial and post-colonial state, the indigenous Shangani villagers, subsistence and profit driven poachers and conservationists. In particular, the paper traced the historical struggles that occurred between and among these groups in the area since the inception of colonialism in Zimbabwe. The struggles were caused by ill-defined roles of the state *vis-à-vis* other players in the control and management of the contested landscape. This paper revealed that both the colonial and post-colonial states maintained a monopoly on the control of the landscape which monopoly has been challenged throughout the period under discussion by the local Shangani villagers and poachers. Their challenge amounted to a protest that was exhibited through direct and indirect poaching in the game designated area. The paper has argued that the inability of the state to stamp its authority, and in particular curb poaching was due to the vastness of the landscape that made it difficult to monitor fully and the unwillingness of other players to acquiesce. The paper further revealed that the state reaped more than other stakeholders from the landscape's resources and this created bitterness on the part of those [Shangani villagers] who felt unfairly excluded. Again the paper has argued that the post-colonial state was a big let-down to the local Shangani people as it refused to recognise and restore their heritage. This explains why the Shangani have remained a bitter lot. Their bitterness has continued to be a source of continued conflict over the control of Gonarezhou which conflict can only be addressed by adopting a win-win approach.

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