

The mutapa state



Afternoon once again some more on Zimbabwe. (NOV 2008) The rise and ultimate expansion of the Mutapa State owed in part to the decline of Great Zimbabwe. According to oral traditions, Nyatsimba Mutota migrated from the declining Great Zimbabwe and began his conquests of the Korekore and Tavara of the Dande and Chidema areas. It has been claimed that his victims were so impressed by his military exploits that they nicknamed him Mwene Mutapa, 'owner of conquered lands' or 'master pillager', hence the birth of the Mutapa dynasty.

He then embarked on an expansionist policy that resulted in the creation of a vast Mutapa empire which stretched from the Zambezi valley into the Mozambique lowlands and towards the fringes of the Kalahari Desert. The Mutapa's control in these far away lands was probably peripheral and not regular. It has been suggested by some including the archaeologist Peter Garlake that religion was also significant to the rise and expansion of the Mutapa State. In as far as religion is an important component of ideology, this suggestion is plausible.

It is generally accepted that religion is part of statecraft and plays an important role in reinforcing and maintaining political power. Parallels can be drawn from contemporary European political systems that were bound together by a shared religion. In these states, the political power of the rulers was reinforced by religious doctrines that claimed that kings had a divine right to rule and was therefore not accountable to their subjects and should not be forcibly removed from their positions. There is a general consensus among historians that cattle ownership played a significant role in the rise of the Mutapa State.

The use of cattle as a source of social or political power among the Shona in Zimbabwe in the distant and recent past is well documented (Mudenge, 1974, 1988) and also recounted in Shona oral traditions. Indeed for the Mutapa state, the Portuguese refer to their importance in this regard. The hypothesis is that cattle rich immigrant communities settled among a people who were not so rich, but who were very keen to use cattle products or own more cattle herds. The immigrants used cattle gradually to build up economic power, prestige and social dominance.

At some stage they translated that prestige and social dominance into political power. It has also been suggested that the rulers' control of external trade also contributed to the rise and expansion of the state. Imported goods like glass beads and ceramics testify to the participation in long distance trade. Trade goods obtained from far away places were also used in further developing and building up a strong political power base. That was achieved by redistributing them among people who may not have participated in long distance trade on a large scale.

This fits in well with the contention that 'luxury goods from a distant source are often distributed to reproduce a system of rank status or offices within a polity' (Kipp and Schortman, 1989). G. Pwiti argues that if one of the reasons for the collapse of Great Zimbabwe was the shift in the focus of trade to the north, then it is logical to credit the early rulers of the Mutapa state with the introduction of large scale external trade in northern Zimbabwe. The emerging Mutapas made alliances with Musengezi chiefs and assured them of continued political power as well as access to cattle and trade goods.

Archaeological evidence from the excavated sites suggests mining was also important in the rise and expansion of the state. Finished metal products as well as wastes from processing have been dug up and these all point to mining activities. Mining led to the making of tools such as hoes and axes which were all important for agricultural production as they facilitated the clearing of large tracts of land. Iron spears and arrows were made to facilitate game hunting which augmented meat supplies as well ivory for trade.

The weapons manufactured also contributed to the rise and expansion by facilitating military conquests of weaker groups like the Korekore and Tavara of the Dande and Chidema areas. Agriculture was another economic activity that contributed to the rise and expansion of the state. Farming was for the most part subsistence and labour intensive. Crops like sorghum, millet and rapoko were grown on the family plots. The generally favourable climatic conditions ensured successful harvests and resulted in the accumulation of surplus grain, animals and other forms of wealth.

All this stimulated the population growth that was so crucial in the emergence and growth of so large and powerful a state such as the Mutapa. Agriculture not only enabled the subject peoples to produce for themselves but for the state in order to pay tribute to their rulers. They paid the tribute either by way of actual agricultural produce or through the provision of agricultural labour. It has been said that one day out of each month, different parts of the state offered labour to the royal fields, the zunde (Mudenge, 1988, 164). Trade also played a hugely significant role in facilitating both the rise and expansion of the Mutapa state.

Trading activities were internal as when then Mutapa people traded among themselves exchanging items like iron tools, pottery and agricultural produce. It also assumed an external character like when they traded with other African groups and with the Swahili-Arabs and Portuguese. They traded gold and ivory for luxury goods such as mirrors, cloth and even guns. Trade has often cited as the main factor behind the growth and expansion of the state but it could not have been enough on its own and it depended on other economic activities.

As Randles rightly pointed out, trading activities require that what is sold on the external market be procured in the first place. For the Mutapa state, this is where agricultural production and livestock herding played an important role. According to Portuguese documents, when the Mutapa needed gold for trade he would give his subjects cattle and they in return would mine and supply the gold (Randles, 1979, 86). It can therefore be concluded that the early development and growth of the Mutapa state was facilitated by the successful integration of different economic activities. These included agriculture, pastoralism, mining and trade.

Mutapa-Portuguese relations were also characterized by intrigue and conspiracies that ultimately led to conflict within the Mutapa and with outsiders. Portuguese attempts to Christianise the locals in the 1560s sparked conflict within the state as they opposed by traditional religious authorities who feared the loss of their own influence over the rulers and subjects in general. They also bred a rivalry with Swahili traders based at the court. The latter feared that this would result in the loss of their privileged trading position in the state.

The Swahili then conspired with the traditional religious authorities to have the Portuguese priest Father Goncalo da Silveira assassinated in 1561. The murder only aggravated tensions in the Mutapa state. It fuelled Portuguese demands for the expulsion of all the Swahili traders from the state and the surrender of Mutapa gold mines to the king of Portugal. The Portuguese had clearly found a pretext to conquer the state. Between 1569 and 1575 they organised three abortive expeditions to conquer the Mutapa State and to control the gold.

In 1561 Goncalo da Silveira, a Portuguese Jesuit missionary, visited Mutapa, where he quickly made converts, including the Mutapa Negomo Mupuzangutu murdered. The presence of the Portuguese had a serious impact that left the empire so weakened that it entered the 17th century in serious decline. By the mid-17th century the Portuguese controlled Munhumutapa Empire. Another significant aspect of the Mutapa-Portuguese relations was the persistence of violence.

Even the Portuguese documents mention a terrible wave of violence generated by the Portuguese prazo holders and their Chikunda armies from the Zambezi against the various Mutapas who were politically and militarily weak. There are references to attacks made on the people of Mukaranga, some of whom were enslaved and forced to work in the gold mines by the Portuguese. They fled leaving the core of the state largely depopulated. Some prazo holders seized areas of the land that belonged to the Mutapa and tried to convert them into prazos. Some local rulers joined them, for example, the Nyachuru dynasty of the upper Mazowe.

Clearly the Mutapa State lost control of the plateau area around this time. In 1561 Goncalo da Silveira, a Portuguese Jesuit missionary, visited Mutapa, where he quickly made converts, including King Negomo Mupuzangutu. However, the Swahili traders who lived there, fearing for their commercial position, persuaded Negomo to have Silveira murdered. The presence of the Portuguese had a serious impact that affected some of its trade and there had been a series of wars which left the empire so weakened that it entered the 17th century in serious decline. By the mid-17th century the Portuguese controlled Munhumutapa Empire.

Another aspect of Mutapa-Portuguese relations was the military co-operation between the two. In c. 1599, the Mutapa sought and received Portuguese assistance to fight Chikunda who led rebels in attacking villages under Mutapa control. In 1607, Gatsi Rusere also sought Portuguese help to deal with threats to his rule. That war dragged on for some years despite Portuguese assistance. Mutapa Gatsi Rusere was eventually deposed from his throne and his capital taken over. In a desperate situation, he surrendered all his mines to the Portuguese Crown so as to receive some assistance. Bocarro dates this event to August 1607.

A joint Mutapa Portuguese army then engaged the rebel Anconhe forcing him to flee to Chizinga where he joined another rebel called Gurapaza. Bocarro reports that some of the villages in Chizinga were attacked and razed but the Mutapa and the Portuguese forces were eventually forced to retreat to the Mazowe River. Portuguese military assistance was however obtained at the heavy cost of Mutapa submission and this turned them into vassals or puppets of the Portuguese. Mutapa rebels like Mavura were forced to sign

treaties of vassalage to the Portuguese thus tying the Mutapa state to the Portuguese crown.

The Portuguese took this opportunity to advance their imperial interests by using slave labour to work on the land they acquired under these treaties. This resulted in many armed conflicts in the area, causing many Shona to flee to the south where Rozvi rule was being established. The Portuguese at Massapa entered into a secret agreement with the Mutapa rebels of Chizinga. That led to a combined attack on the Mutapa's garrison at Massapa. The Portuguese were after the mines, particularly those of silver reportedly located somewhere in Chikova in the Zambezi Valley.

They had realised the weakness of Mutapa Gatsi Rusere and even prepared a conquest of the whole state. The building of the forts such as St. Estevao (by Dom Estevao) and St. Miguel (by Madeira) on the Zambezi between 1612 and 1614 must be understood in this context. They even rejected some of the gestures of peace made by Mutapa Gatsi Rusere. Their relations were also characterized by trade. The Mutapa state was also rich in gold and ivory which attracted first the Swahili, and then the Portuguese, from the Indian Ocean coastal ports.

The Portuguese, who came to know about the lucrative gold trade from the Swahili, started to collect information relating to the location of gold mines, the quantity of gold produced, the nature of exchange, the African rulers in charge of the gold mines as well as the nature and extent of their political systems (Smith, 1983; Beach, 1980). The Portuguese built up Sofala as part of the grand strategy to tap all the gold and ivory coming from the Mutapa

state. Following their failure to establish a monopoly, the Portuguese decided to penetrate the Zimbabwe Plateau interior.

There was also a cultural exchange that involved Portuguese attempts to Christianise the Mutapa. The Portuguese had quickly realised that there was the close link between politics and religion of the Mutapa state, they sought to penetrate it through religion. When father Gonzalo da Silveira arrived in December 1560, he worked on converting the royal family to Christianity. He was largely successful in this because the vast empire had become heavily riddled with conspiracies, coup plots, succession disputes and civil wars to the extent that the reigning Mutapa probably wanted Portuguese help to hold on to power.

Apart from religion, there was intermarriage or at least sexual relations between the two. Shona oral traditions and Portuguese documents have all testified to Portuguese men obtaining Shona women as wives and concubines. The nature of their interaction also resulted in the introduction of new crops among the Mutapa. Wills (1985) argues that the maize crop was introduced by the Portuguese among the Shona from about the 16th century. It spread rapidly into areas formally dominated by traditional food crops such as finger millet (rapoko or rukweza), bulrush millet (mhunga), and sorghum (mapfunde).

To this day, maize remains the staple food for the Shona. The Mutapa also lost much land to the Portuguese after the introduction of the prazo system. The Portuguese settlement in lower Zambezi resulted in the prazo system and forced some population movements into the adjacent plateau areas. The worst affected in the Zambezi region were the Budya and Sena-speaking

Tonga who moved into Plateau areas vacated by the Mutapa State and built hilltop fortifications. The movement of the Mutapa State into the Chidema lowlands was accompanied by a military transformation meant to counter the Portuguese prazo holders.

The Prazo system contributed to further violence perpetrated by the Nyai, who emerged during the late 17th century and kept the Portuguese at bay until the state declined in the late 19th century. The trade interaction also led to the introduction of firearms and these increased armed conflicts and made them deadlier in the Mutapa state. The Portuguese traded guns for Mutapa goods such as gold, ivory and agricultural produce during the second half of the 16th century.

This changed the nature of warfare in the region where the bow and arrow and spears had been the main weapons. These had been less deadly and destructive. Even settlement patterns began to change as communities abandoned open low-lying dwellings in favour of stone buildings sited on hilltops that were difficult to access. Firearms generated considerable violence in northern Zimbabwe as seen by the civil wars between the Mutapa State and the rebel groups fighting to secede, and the Portuguese interference in the internal politics of these states.

Prepared the way for the subsequent rise of the Rozvi by the weakening the Mutapa. The wars and infighting that bedeviled the Mutapa state after the arrival of the Portuguese weakened the state. The Mutapa dynasties fractured into autonomous states, many of which later formed the Rozvi Empire. The Mutapa palace were taken over by the Rozvi whose Changamire

(king) extended his control over the mining areas. The Rozvi Empire did not however succeed in controlling an area as vast as the Mutapa had done.

Religion was not the only factor but it was significant to the rise and expansion of the Rozvi State. The cause of the Rozvi rulers was helped by the fact that they shared the same religious values with other Shona people who they incorporated and extended their rule over. The Rozvi believed in the worship of a high god they called Mwari. They worshipped him through ancestral spirits. There were national spirits (mhondoro) and family spirits (mudzimu). It was also accepted that the spirits of dead ancestors possessed and spoke through living people who were called spirit mediums.

Religion was a component of the ideology of statecraft and it played an important role in reinforcing and maintaining political power. Parallels can be drawn from contemporary European political systems that were bound together by a shared religion. In these states, the political power of the rulers was reinforced by religious doctrines that claimed that kings had a divine right to rule and was therefore not accountable to their subjects and should not be forcibly removed from their positions.

Trade was carried out with other Shona groups and Europeans and it also contributed significantly to the rise of the Rozvi. They traded their cattle for the Europeans guns and ammunitions. There was an internal trade where they traded among themselves exchanging iron implements, animal skins and pottery for the grain and other agricultural produce. Hunting activities also contributed to the external trade conducted with the Swahili Arabs and Portuguese. Top of the list of the hunted animals were elephants that were highly prized for the tusks, and meat.

Other trade items included gold, beads, mirrors and ceramics. Trade goods obtained from far away places were also used in further developing and building up a strong political power base. That was achieved by redistributing them among people who may not have participated in long distance trade on a large scale. This fits in well with the contention that 'luxury goods from a distant source are often distributed to reproduce a system of rank status or offices within a polity' (Kipp and Schortman, 1989). The Rozvi were also pastoralists and cattle were important for political, social and economic purposes.

As with the Mutapa, there is a general consensus among historians that cattle ownership also played a significant role in the rise of the Rozvi State. They took advantage of the dry grasslands, low trees and excellent pastureland of Guruuswa to raise large heads of cattle, goats and sheep. The national herd was owned or controlled by the king and he distributed them in a manner that enhanced his position as head of state. Some he distributed to chiefs as an acknowledgement of their loyalty or as a reward for services rendered.

Cattle were also important for the payment of the bride-price and for trade. They were exchanged for European goods such as guns and ammunition and as well as agricultural produce, iron wares and pottery. Like other Iron Age states, agricultural activities were significant to the rise and expansion of the Rozvi State. Iron mining and smelting was followed by the manufacture of iron tools such as hoes and axes. These were far stronger than any of the tools that had been made during the Stone Age and they enabled people to clear forests and cultivate the land much more easily.

Archaeologists have dug up carbonized seeds that clearly indicate the growing of grains such as sorghum, millet, various beans and cowpeas. Farming was a seasonal and labour intensive involving family on individual plots of land. Agriculture ensured much greater food security than could be achieved through a reliance on the environment to provide wild vegetables and fruits. The hunting of big game such as elephants, kudu and buffalo also contributed a great deal to the economy of the Rozvi State. Iron-smiths manufactured much more powerful iron tools like axes, spear and arrow points and knives that enabled them to kill the larger animals.

The big game augmented meat supplies and also provided hides. Of these the elephants were probably the most important because their tusks stimulated the growth of ivory trade. For the Rozvi just like the other Iron Age states like Great Zimbabwe, Mutapa, and the Torwa, the ivory trade was an important source of wealth so much that men often risked the danger to hunt down elephants to trade with the Swahili-Arab merchants and later the Portuguese who came into central and southern Africa via the East African coast.

Tribute collected from subject Shona/Kalanga societies also contributed to the Rozvi economy. Tribute was usually in the form of grain, animal skins and cattle. Tribute was highly significant on two fronts. On one hand it demonstrated the loyalty of the Rozvi subjects and helped to cement the Changamire's political authority. Secondly it gave the Changamire rulers the economic resources like gold and ivory they needed for external trade.