

The State, Africans, and Livestock Regimes in Zimbabwe, c.1890 to Present

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Wesley Mwatwara has published widely on livestock disease management in colonial Zimbabwe. He will utilize his stay at the RCC to kick-start a project that focuses on local responses to the precarious environmental and livestock disease challenges that afflict Africa in general, and the Zimbabwean smallholder livestock owners in particular from a socioenvironmental history perspective. This work is a pioneering investigation of livestock diseases and local coping strategies across the African continent. It specifically focuses on the key actors in Zimbabwean livestock disease-control mechanisms, which were the state and the poor livestock owners who owned mainly goats, cattle, and chickens. Devastating livestock diseases such as FMD, coccidiosis, gall sickness, and Lung Sickness among poor smallholder farmers threatens individual livelihoods and regional food security. Smallholder livestock owners rely on their intimate knowledge of the environment as well as the vernacular prophylactic and therapeutic mechanisms in order to keep their animals healthy.

This study is an examination of the bodies of veterinary knowledge and practices of black African smallholder livestock owners in Zimbabwe. It analyzes the changing political and economic movement of knowledge on livestock issues. By bringing to the fore major themes such as climate change, gender, livelihoods and local resilience, and therapeutic choices and food security, this study interrogates the intersection of postcolonial politics and veterinary health in colonial and postcolonial Zimbabwe. It explores African ingenuity amidst climate change and economic stress. Since livestock disease management is gendered, this work discusses how communities (both men and women) tackle and come together to utilize community-based knowledge as a group or in their individual capacities.

This study reveals the need for environmental history that will help in elucidating the ways in which humans have in the past caused livestock diseases, reacted to them, and attempted to deal with them. It adds voice to the critique of the “transfer-of-technology” paradigm often advocated by state bureaucrats, scientists, and development experts by raising questions: What have been the major factors in the movement of “knowledge” among individual smallholder livestock farmers and between communities? Does/Did the state use veterinary diseases as an excuse to justify, facilitate, and consolidate its control over the local population? What shapes/shaped therapeutic choice among communal livestock owners in the era of shortages? What implications does this knowledge have for the future? How has the mistrust of the state’s intentions influenced smallholder farmers’ perceptions? At a time when prices of veterinary drugs are increasing and income earnings are increasingly depressed, this history is particularly important as it offers possibilities for proposing livestock disease management practices that are inexpensive, effective, environmentally friendly, and socially acceptable. This is pertinent as a more nuanced understanding of the country’s veterinary past offers opportunities to influence veterinary policy in the present dispensation and the future.