“IN NATIVE AREAS, STORES HAVE A BIG INFLUENCE ON THE PEOPLE”

Trading Sites and the Reorganization of African Agriculture, Colonial Zimbabwe, 1945–1955

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the experiences of African traders as they applied for trading sites in the African reserves in colonial Zimbabwe between 1945 and 1955. Using empirical evidence and drawing on previously underutilized archival sources, it argues that the trading sites became intertwined with the colonial state’s efforts to reorganize African agriculture during the 1940s and 50s. As such, officials of the Native Affairs Department (NAD) used the trading sites to reward and punish Africans who cooperated with, and flaunted the state’s conservation efforts, respectively. At the same time, white traders gained ground in the African reserves because of their capacity to buy African grain, a key concern for the implementors of the Native Land Husbandry Act (NLH Act) of 1951. Cumulatively, this undermined African entrepreneurship exposing the colonial rhetoric of “protecting” African traders in the African reserves. African responses, in turn, showed resourcefulness and involved the employ of lawyers and colonial institutions such as African Councils.

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KEYWORDS: trading sites, Africans, entrepreneurship, trade, African reserves

Introduction

The scholarship on African entrepreneurship in colonial Africa has rightly given weight to state measures to stifle the development of African enterprise.¹ Even in West Africa, where the scholarly consensus is that African traders fared better than their Southern and East African counterparts, the state actively undermined the development of African commerce.² While the broader scholarship has demonstrated how the state, through a variety of policy and legislative measures, handicapped African traders, this article goes a step further and demonstrates the micro ways in which state actions, in the allocation of trading sites, disadvantaged African traders in colonial Zimbabwe.³ In dialogue with the literature on colonial conservation in the African reserves, the article extends our understanding of the historical impact of the colonial state’s reorganization of African agriculture pioneered by American missionary Emory Delmont Alvord during the late 1920s.⁴ The reorganization of African agriculture was initially anchored on persuading African farmers to adopt the colonial state’s reforms on good husbandry during the 1930s. The measures became more arbitrary during the post Second World War period, culminating in the passage of the NLH Act in 1951.⁵ Cognizant of Ian Phimister’s caution against overstating the impact of the NLH Act, the article makes the case that trading sites became interwoven in the reorganization of African agriculture with the result that African traders failed to gain space to trade in the African reserves while white traders consolidated their hold.⁶

Throughout the colonial period, the state insisted that African traders could engage in entrepreneurship in the African reserves unencumbered by white competition.⁷ The colonial state’s policy on African development, known as separate development and anchored on the Land Apportionment Act (LAA) of 1930, governed colonial policy on African entrepreneurship in the African reserves. According to this segregationist policy, Africans had to develop in their own areas. To that end, trading sites in the African reserves were theoretically reserved for Africans. Conversely, Africans were barred from trading in the central business areas of towns and were confined to the African townships.⁸ In reality, as this article demonstrates, the policy on separate development with regards to trading sites in the African reserves was implemented selectively, with considerations over the reorganization of African agriculture taking center stage.
By making the above case, the article challenges Volker Wild who argues that African business culture and not the state was responsible for the poor performance of African traders during the colonial period.9 In calculating the “costs” of opening a business in the African reserves, Wild notes that “in order to open a shop in the country, about £600 was needed in the late 1940s, £200 to build the shop, £300 for goods and £100 for wages. Many aspiring businessmen managed to overcome these initial costs but failed sooner or later due to poor business skills.”10 In reality, the costs also involved the politics around the allocation of the trading sites which disadvantaged African traders more than white traders.11

Consequently, African traders remained on the margins of commerce in the African reserves dominated by white traders partly because of the manipulation of the trading site application process by the Native Affairs Department (NAD) officials discussed here. African attempts to gain inroads in commerce in the African reserves faced several impediments as trading site application bundles from the 1940s and 50s reveal. Officials in the NAD, charged with granting these licenses, employed colonial patronage and used the trading sites as a tool to control and coerce African traders into following the demands of colonial centralization of African agriculture. In other cases, Native Commissioners withheld trading sites if they reasoned that this could hinder their effective administration of the African reserves.12

The 1940s and 1950s were a period of colonial intrusion in the African reserves. The objectives of these measures were so wide reaching that they had an effect on various aspects of African lives in the African reserves. Scholarship on the subject and period has given attention to how these reform measures influenced colonial conservation, African agriculture, and helped in the formation of an African working class and ultimately the rise of nascent African nationalism.13 At the same time, others have questioned the extent of impact of the NLH Act noting that its implementation was at best patchy.14 This article takes a different route and looks at how efforts at reorganizing the African reserves impacted African entrepreneurship. Trading sites, the article argues, became sites of contestation with NCs using these spaces of trade to influence the state’s destocking programme and the marketing of maize, for example.15 In the end, African enterprises were stifled, with white traders gaining leverage.

Previously unused by historians, the trading site application bundles offer insights into how the centralization of African agriculture in the African reserves served to impede the growth of African entrepreneurship there. Trading sites became points of conflict within the NAD over the centralization of African agriculture and the implementation of the NLH Act. G. Thomson shows how a closer inspection of the workings of the NLH
Act “illuminates other contradictions of settler colonialism, particularly the conflicts within the bureaucracy and white interests that influenced the law’s introduction and implementation.”

Literature on the subject reveals how the NLH Act had dire consequences for African lives in the African reserves. Consequently, the study argues that the decisions over who and where one was given a trading site were intricately linked to the debates around the introduction and, later, the implementation of the NLH Act.

The article also makes the argument that colonial patronage played a significant role in the awarding of trading sites in the African reserves. NCs arbitrarily refused to give trading sites to African applicants because they were deemed undesirable, illiterate, or refused to comply with centralization efforts. The work by Allison Shutt on the everyday interactions of Africans and colonial administrators opines that colonial patronage characterized the relationship between colonial officials and Africans. Colonial patronage is central in understanding the argument made in this article, since colonial officials used this to deny or reward some Africans with trading sites. Equally critical in understanding the politics around trading site allocation in the African reserves is the work by Jocelyn Alexander. Alexander shows how there was an implosion in the NAD because of the changes brought by the NLH Act, which created internal conflicts. These conflicts were also characteristic in the trading site application process.

Due to the fractured nature of the colonial archive at the National Archives of Zimbabwe, the material that is available on trading site applications does not cover all the African reserves during the period covered here. The missing information may have been deliberately omitted by colonial officials or could have been lost during the archiving process. Be that as it may, the cases covered in the article are representative of the extent of colonial policy on African entrepreneurship in the allocation of trading sites in the African reserves.

Following the Second World War, African traders increasingly demanded trading sites in the African reserves. African-operated general dealer stores, for example, increased from just 65 in 1941 to 1939 by 1955. A number of factors account for this increase. The Second World War, together with the implementation of pieces of legislation such as the NLH Act, impacted African livelihoods. Some Africans lost cattle to the destocking programme while the NAD reduced the size of land holdings available to Africans. To compensate, some Africans turned to trading. As the Chief Native Commissioner notes in his annual report for 1948, “agriculture in the reserves no longer can provide an independent existence for all, and the destocking programme has liquidated a large amount of capital.”
The range of the businesses that Africans applied for trading sites for were as many as they were varied. These enterprises included general dealer stores, eating-houses, tailoring, butcheries, grain milling, barber shops, dry cleaning, bakeries, and service stations. In addition to these more formal trading businesses requiring trading sites, other entrepreneurial Africans were also involved in basketry, brick making, carpentry, photography, and transport riding among other vocations. Of these, general dealer stores, butcheries, grain mills, eating-houses and tailoring businesses were the most popular. Table 1 shows the trend in numbers in African participation in these businesses between 1941 and 1955.

While some of these businesses barely broke even, some were successful. In his 1952 report, the CNC notes that some African traders were “making a profit of £1,000 to £1,500 per annum” and that “In Sipholilo District, one African concern operates 11 buses and transport lorries, five stores, two mills and has its own tractors, diesel filling tanks and pumps; the Assistant Native Commissioner estimates the firm, which paid £4,800 for its last bus without embarrassment must be capitalized at no less than £30,000.” Yet despite the interest in trading sites and the success of some African traders, the NAD still discriminated against Africans in the awarding of trading sites.

The article makes its case in three sections. The first section looks at the seldom successful attempts by African government workers, such as agricultural demonstrators, to apply for trading sites. The article argues that these officials were so indispensable to colonial administration in the African reserves that the NAD frustrated their participation in commerce. The section also examines how the NAD used trading sites to coerce African traders into cooperating with colonial efforts at the reorganization of African agriculture such as destocking. The second section accounts for the presence...
of white traders in the African reserves. It demonstrates that the colonial state gave trading sites to white traders whom they felt had the ability to serve the African reserves community by buying grain and providing cheap consumer commodities. Lastly, the article looks at the multiple ways in which African traders responded to the colonial control of trading sites.

**Trading Sites and the Re-Organization of African Agriculture**

NCs were nervous about the influence that traders might have within the African reserves. A store was not merely a space of commercial transaction, but was also a site of interaction between Africans and other groups. The centrality of stores in the socio-economic setup of the African reserves bothered NCs who tried to give trading sites only to Africans they considered “progressive” and who cooperated with the colonial state’s conservation efforts. As the NC for Bikita, F. S. McCabe noted “in native areas, stores have a big influence on the people in the vicinity, and I have always felt that in administering an area one should always bear this in mind.”

The literature on the African reserves has largely centered on agricultural land as a tool of analysis in understanding African/settler relations during the colonial period. However, trading sites were just as important and played a role in how the colonial state sought to organize the African reserves during the 1940s and 1950s.

As a result, NCs denied trading sites to Africans they felt were a bad influence in the African reserves. The NC for Bikita exemplified this attitude, and in 1948 stressed that “applicants must be of good character and recommended by the chief of the area where the site is to be located.” Later that year, McCabe wrote to the ANC for Southern Mashonaland that, “stores that are not well provided by the right type of native can become the utmost undesirable places both from a health and a moral point of view.” These views were widespread during the 1940s and 1950s and were not limited to McCabe. Maxim Zwikaramba applied for a lease site at Chibeso Kraal in the Masembura Reserve, some 10 km from the town of Bindura. The ANC for Mazowe wrote to the Native Reserves Trust, advising against granting a trading site to Zwikaramba, whom he described as a “nuisance to this office... a most undesirable type of a person to be granted the privilege of a lease of land in the reserve which, if granted, would be abused.” This comes as no surprise given how pieces of legislation such as the Southern Rhodesia Native Regulations of 1910 and the Native Affairs Act of 1927 gave NCs considerable control over Africans in the African reserves.
African government workers were among the many applicants for trading sites in the African reserves. Trading sites were attractive to Africans in government employment because entrepreneurship was perceived by some as an escape from colonial control and harassment which peasant agriculture and wage labor could not provide. Economically, entrepreneurship was also an attractive form of livelihood once retired from government jobs. As a result, African government workers were amongst those applying for trading sites between 1944 and 1955. Despite the interests of some African government workers for trading sites, some colonial officials within the NAD did not support civil servants venturing into trading. In any case, statutory measures prohibited government workers from taking part in business. NCs were particularly against African government workers such as Land Development Officers pursuing entrepreneurship. In 1953, for example, the NAD denied an African, identified as Fani, his trading lease application in Mubaira Reserve located about 90 km from Salisbury, the capital of colonial Zimbabwe. At the time, Fani was working as a Land Development Officer. Writing to the Secretary of Native Economic Development, the Provincial Native Commissioner stated that, “I do not support this application; I think he should be encouraged to stick to his government job which is also for the good of others.” In this way, NAD officials barred African government workers from resigning in order to take up trading if they perceived that this would affect their ability to reorganize the African reserves. Land Development Officers were critical in the NAD’s efforts at managing and controlling land resources in the African Reserves. American missionary Emory Delmont Alvord, and Director of African Agriculture, first used agricultural demonstrators and Land Development Officers during the interwar period, and they became indispensable to the implementation of the NLH Act. Writing on peasant cotton production in Gokwe, Pius Nyambara partly attributes the success of the crop and the emergence of Master African farmers in Gokwe to the activities of the agricultural demonstrators. Indeed, agricultural demonstrators became the target of attack in African opposition to the NLH Act. As such, it is not surprising that NCs refused to even consider awarding trading sites to agricultural demonstrators.

The NAD awarded or denied trading sites depending on whether the site advanced the colonial state’s reorganization of African agriculture. This created conflicting interpretations of policy on whether African government workers should take part in trade. Mandiwana, of the British South Africa Police, had his application for a butchery trading site in the district of Fort Victoria accepted by the NC after the Cattle Sales Permit Committee “had granted him a cattle quota of six head per month” despite that he was a police officer. This ambiguity in policy is explained by the high degree of
discretion that NCs sometimes exercised. This discretion was often influenced by colonial patronage, and Mandiwana’s application came with a good recommendation from the Officer in Command for Gwelo, Major Streator who “testified to his character.” In the context of the colonial state’s efforts at destocking, butcher’s licenses were more accessible compared to other license types such as for a general dealer store because of the role they played in the culling of African cattle. Explaining the importance of colonial destocking, Allison Shutt has observed that destocking was a central “feature of native affairs policy.” This ambiguity across districts and NAD officials both impeded and enabled the growth of African entrepreneurship. While these colonial demands restricted the number of African entrepreneurs, some traders were able to take advantage these measures to gain foothold in commerce in the African reserves.

Officials of the NAD not only used trading sites to advance their centralization goals but also to coerce Africans into cooperating with colonial destocking. For example, in 1948 the NC for Fort Victoria used threats to coerce Nyevera of Zimuto Reserve to follow the colony’s destocking regulations. Destocking meant reducing the number of cattle to meet the carrying capacity of the area; it was central to colonial management of the African reserves during the colonial period. However, it was in 1945 that the colonial state enacted a five-year destocking plan that allowed for the coercive culling of African owned cattle in the African reserves. Under these regulations, Michael Drinkwater notes, “Stock owners were informed that their herds would have to be reduced to nine animals in order to meet the destocking requirements.” Nyevera owned a large herd of cattle, which he was refusing to destock. As the NC pointed out,

In view of this fact, I would like to suggest that the attached approval of the lease of an eating house in Zimuto reserve be withdrawn . . . I think the cancellation of the offer will induce others to carry out instructions promptly. I have taken other measures to deal with the rest of the delinquents.

As the above example from Fort Victoria district shows, reasons used by colonial officials to disrupt African enterprises were as varied as they were many.

In addition to destocking, the NAD also desired to create a market for African grains in the African reserves. The success of centralization and the NLH Act hinged on the creation of profitable African agriculture hence the importance of marketing African crops. Apart from the CNC, other departments within the NAD, such as the Native Reserves Trust Fund (NRTF) and the Department of Native Economic Development, objected to the arbitrary rulings of NCs. These other arms of the NAD often had conflicting interests with those of the NCs. For example, they were more interested in the
revenues from leases and, in the case of the Native Trade and Production Board (NTPB), with the marketing of peasant agricultural produce. The NTPB came into existence towards the end of the 1950s as a recommendation of the 1944 Godlonton Commission and was tasked with the marketing of African agricultural commodities.

Conflict within the NAD over African administration was harmful to African interests. Arthur Pendered, the leading advocate for African agricultural and land reform after the Second World War and head of the NTPB, favored established retailers with the ability to market African grains. In the Urungwe District, he objected to the NC, who preferred African traders to Indian or white traders. Writing to the CNC, Pendered pitched for an Indian firm, Patel Bros, which he felt would better serve the district than “native storekeepers” whose “stocks of goods are small and uninteresting” and “buy no grain, which is the only commodity the inhabitants have to sell,” while “the Indian traders in the reserve traded 4500 bags of grain in 1948 which would not otherwise have come on to the market.” Pendered, in a communiqué to the CNC in 1949, informs that “the ANC held a meeting with Chief Chanetsa and his people to ascertain their views on the application. He states that Chanetsa and the great majority are in favor of granting the lease.” Patel Bros obtained the trading site even though the area in question already had more than four African businesses. Of course, the state’s interests in marketing African grain had ulterior motives. One of the stated objectives of the centralization of African agriculture was the creation of “economically viable” individual farming units in the African reserves and efficient marketing of African grain would help achieve this goal. The colonial state’s efforts to improve farming in the African reserves was self-serving. The objective was to resettle Africans evicted from unalienated land into the African reserves at the back of increased settler demand for land during the post Second World War period.

**White Traders, Trading Sites, and the Reorganization of African Agriculture**

On the surface, the policy that influenced the issuing of trading sites in the African reserves was separate development. The CNC and some NCs often pointed to this policy when supporting African traders over white and Indian applicants for trading sites. In some cases, NCs extended the meaning of separate development to mean that only those Africans indigenous to that district were entitled to trading sites. However, this policy did not always hold, and white/Indian traders remained visible in the African reserves and in competition with African entrepreneurs. After the Second World War,
the big trading firms such as the African Trading Stores (ATS) and N. Richards started to consolidate their interests in the African reserves. When justifying the presence of these big non-African firms, NCs often cited the ability of white enterprises to buy African grain in line with NAD’s efforts at reorganizing African agriculture. Overall, this negatively affected African entrepreneurs interested in business during this period.

The competition for trading sites between Africans and white/Indian traders was often so intense that NCs had to resort to the policy of separate development in deciding who got the opportunity to trade. In 1944, the ANC for Wedza refused to recommend John Frost’s license application in preference to Bofo, an African. The NC for Marandellas described Frost as “of the poor white type or colored” expressing his anxieties of having a person of his “class in a reserve.” Barry Kosmin and Ibbo Mandaza discuss, in separate studies, some of the reasons for the colonial state’s “anxieties” with European minority groups. It is within this context that the NC for Wedza’s apprehension with Frost ought to be considered. More importantly, the NC waded into the all too familiar rhetoric of separate development pointing out that he “did not favor a European of this type” since “there are natives who are desirous of providing adequate trading facilities for the natives resident in the reserves.”

These decisions were replicated elsewhere, as the following example shows. In 1951 C. Bissett, the NC for Shangani, refused a trading site application by K. G. Mathieson, a white trader, explaining that “there is no room for European traders in this district.” In a letter to the PNC, he elucidated that the Africans in his district, led by Chief Madhlisibanda, had made a “unanimous” decision that Mathieson’s application must be refused because:

There were already nine stores in the reserve and Special Native Area owned and run by Europeans and that there was an increasing desire on the part of the natives to run their own stores and that because of the LAA, as amended, Natives were now being excluded from European area so should Europeans be excluded from land reserved for Natives.

However, this policy was not always strictly followed. The NAD still awarded trading sites to big white traders such as the ATS. In the case of the ATS, their ability to market African grains trumped the rhetoric of separate development. In any case, the impact of the policy of separate development did not help Africans. Other factors, discussed in the coming paragraphs, entailed that the benefits of separate development were far and few between.

Overtrading in the African reserves was a key concern among some NCs. The prescribed distance between two competing businesses was 15 miles, but sometimes NCs used their discretion to circumvent this regulation. While
the rule on overtrading affected traders across racial lines, it tended to affect African entrepreneurs more. When deciding trading site applications, NCs often thought in terms of its overall colonial policy in the African reserves and not African entrepreneurs. Consequently, they opted for traders with abundant stock and capital who were often white, Indian, or large European firms like the ATS. The NC for Bikita, also tried to control overtrading in his district. Among some of the reasons he raised to turn down Woyo’s license application, was that the area he wanted to set up a business in already had a “good and well-established trader.”52 In Mubaira Township, C. A. Hinde, the NC for Hartley, refused Fani’s license because the township already had “ample trading facilities.”53 Hartley’s refusal of Fani’s application on the grounds of overtrading was not justified. The reality, as demonstrated above, was that Fani was a Land Development Officer and was needed by the NAD in its reorganization of the African reserves. Because of the rule on overtrading, African entrepreneurs found it difficult to compete against the established white and Indian traders; these rules were essentially invoked in order to ensure that broader colonial aims could be achieved, in spite of the rhetoric of separate development.

White traders took advantage of the state’s reorganization of the African agriculture programme to claim trading space in the African reserves. Consequently, they were bullish, and did not tolerate any African competition as happened in Bikita. G. Hughes, a butcher, threatened to close his business if the NC gave a trading site for a butchery to an African. The NC explained to the PNC, Southern Mashonaland, that Hughes was adamant that if “a butchery starts here, he will close down his own.” The NC for Bikita rightly identified Hughes’ antics as bluffing, explaining that he had “the impression that” Hughes “rather objects to the competition” from Budaza. However, the NC went on to deny Budaza’s application worrying that “should it then be found that Budaza is not capable (in view of the latter’s inexperience, a likely event) a very awkward situation would arise.”54 The colonial state’s destocking programme was sufficiently important that white traders with butcher’s licenses were given preference. Settlers were the main beneficiaries of destocking through buying cheap African cattle. Shutt observes that “all the cattle culled in Victoria and Gutu thus went to the Liebigs factory in West Nicholson, which specialized in scrub cattle.”55 In addition to large concerns such as Liebigs, white traders with butchery licenses also took advantage of colonial destocking of cattle in the African reserves.

In addition to the NAD’s preference for individual white and Indian traders such as the Patel Bros, the post Second World War was also characterized by a consolidation of white business interests in the African reserves. This is because the white traders served the colonial state’s interests by buying
African grain and cattle. The success of the NLH Act hinged on the success of African agriculture. In 1945, N. Richards, a white trader with interests in the Fort Victoria District with a substantial capital of £9,000, started the process of expanding his business interests into other African reserves. By 1949, the ATS reported to its shareholders that it had expanded with “four trading stores in the Gutu District, and five stores in the Mtoko, Murehwa and Bindura District.” The ATS also couched its language in the policy of separate development and allowed Africans the opportunity to buy shares in the business. More importantly, the company also appropriated the colonial language of patronage and, in its correspondence with the NAD, talked of protecting African traders from competition from white traders by training Africans in business skills and eventually surrendering the business to Africans at a time when they were ready.

In the areas that the ATS set up shop, they helped African traders in applying for leases and supplied them with goods. Citing overtrading and unhealthy competition, the ATS urged the NAD against the allocation of leases to more white traders, arguing that this was detrimental to African traders who would be unable to compete. In the Chikwizo Reserve of Mtoko District, the ATS protested the award of a lease site to W. J. Lowry of the Mtoko Trading Store in 1950. Tracy, the Managing Director of the ATS, argued that the Mtoko Trading Stores would result in overtrading in the area already adequately catered for by their stores. In addition, the ATS pointed to the colonial policy that stated, “European trading stores in Native Reserves and Areas should not be in excess of what is required to stiffen trade carried by Africans” and that the “lease given to the Mtoko Trading Stores would militate against the possible success of African traders who might start-up small shops there.”

The NC for Mtoko District, Morris, the Provincial Native Commissioner, and the Assistant Marketing Officer (AMO) of the Native Production and Marketing Board (NPMB) saw through the African Trading Stores’ feigned concern for African entrepreneurs. In a letter to the CNC, the AMO stated that he had discussed the matter with the NC for Mtoko and had gathered this as “another case where African Stores, like other traders, do not like competition, and now they are put forward the theory that the granting of this site will prejudice native trading in the area.” As highlighted earlier, the NC for Mtoko, like the NC for Bikita, McCabe, gave priority to the interests of the African residences of their districts while everything else was secondary. In this case, the interests of the NPMB, to find reasonable market prices for African grains, matched hand in glove with those of Morris. The colonial state had established the NPMB through the Native Production and Marketing Act of 1948 to raise funds for colonial conservation.
Critically, the case of the ATS during the early post Second World War offers an excellent example of how white traders sought to remain relevant in African areas within an environment of policy hostility. Importantly, the ATS shows the contradictions that existed between colonial policies on the one hand and their implementation on the other. The colonial state found itself conflicted between supporting African entrepreneurs on the one hand, and supporting outsider traders and trading companies who cared more for their market share. As the many examples presented here show, it was the latter proposition that carried the day.

African Responses

The responses of African traders to the colonial state were many and varied. As a result, some enterprising Africans were able to obtain trading sites and operate successfully. Their methods included taking advantage of colonial patronage and the ambiguity of trading site regulations in the African reserves. While some Africans obtained licenses by misrepresenting their experience, skills, the capital they had, or who they were, others tried to follow the law to the letter by complying with the application process. African responses involved elaborately handwritten applications, obtaining good recommendations from influential whites, and engaging the services of lawyers amongst other measures. Lawyers were also handy in contesting cases were NCs arbitrarily cancelled licenses. African traders used ideas about belonging as indigenes in the African reserves to claim trading sites. This involved the appropriation of the colonial policy on separate development to bar white traders from the African reserves. This is clearly evident in how the African councils were used by African councilors, collectively, to support African applicants for trading sites. Importantly, claims of belonging were also used by the African councils against other African applicants from outside the African reserve. Significantly, most African traders acted individually through the use of lawyers. This section shows that African entrepreneurs were not passive victims of the state’s policy ambiguity on commerce or the patronage that came with it. Instead, African traders were sophisticated participants who knew the regulations and took advantage of the ambiguity of trading site regulations.

Africans interested in business used the policy on separate development to back their claims for space in the African reserves. In 1951 Chief Madhlishibanda implored the NC for Shangani to refuse a European’s application for a store site. Bisset explained to the PNC that the people of Shangani Reserve “were unanimous that the application should be refused on the grounds that there were already nine stores in the reserve and Special Native Area owned...
and run by Europeans.”64 Invoking the LAA, the Africans of Shangani had expressed “an increasing desire on the part of the natives to run their own stores.”65 African Chiefs were often malleable and subject to NAD influence. As was often the case, NCs used them to legitimate their decisions against both African and European/Indian traders. However, African entrepreneurs could also use the office of the chief to push for their interests as the above case shows.

In the absence of any organized business formations for rural African traders during this period, Africans in business in the African reserves used local political institutions set up by the NAD to register their interests.66 This involved manipulating chiefs to obtain their favor. The African Councils came into being in 1937 with the purpose of giving Africans a role in matters affecting their community and governance. Writ large, writers on African rural politics have dismissed these colonial institutions as rubberstamp organizations meant to justify colonial control of African everyday lives.67 However, the experiences of African entrepreneurs who were councilors in the African Councils shows how Africans also used this colonial tool to their advantage.

The minutes of African Council meetings offer examples of Africans claiming space to trade in the African reserves. In the Lower Gwelo African Reserve, African traders used their seats in the African Council not only to object to the unfair trade practices of Europeans but to keep them out as well. In 1951, D.C.M. Parkhurst, the NC for Lower Gwelo, clashed with the African members of his district’s African Council over the underhand trade practices of a European general dealer, A. Friend.68 At the meeting, an African referred to as Nyambi and “holder of a stock and dealers license” protested that “it was not fair that a European general dealer should be allowed to compete against native residents in the area who hold Stock and Produce Dealers Licenses.”69 Notwithstanding Parkhurst’s remonstrations, the African Council “voted 19 out of 23 in favor of this resolution.”70 Predictably, Parkhurst refused to endorse the overwhelming African vote against the European trader, maintaining that “I am in favor of such competitive trading because it is advantageous to the seller.”71 NCs consistently justified their actions in the name of protecting “the interests of native” farmers. This is hardly surprising given the colonial policy on the reorganization of African agriculture vis-a-vis the role that white traders played in the greater scheme of things. While the minutes of the Lower Gwelo African Council reaffirmed the haziness of colonial policy together with the perception that these councils were rubberstamping colonial institutions, they nonetheless also offer a glimpse into how Africans used these bodies to advance their interests.
The Belingwe East Reserve African Council articulated the interests of African traders effectively and with greater success than the Lower Gwelo African Council. In 1953, for instance, the NC for the Belingwe East Reserve, H. M. Fletcher, held the motion pushed by the African Council to block Crossley’s application for a general dealer store. These African councilors were successful at a time when NCs from other districts sacrificed the interests of African traders for the benefit of European traders such as the ATS. Equally important, the African Council also contested the NC and the Chief’s control of the license application process. At a meeting in 1948, Hamandishe, a vocal member of the African Council, asked the NC to give the councilors greater say in awarding trading sites, a role traditionally played by the Chief. In agreement, NC J. A. Pitout expressed that “chiefs should retain their authority in consenting to new leases in their area but that they should seek advice of councilors from their area.” In 1953, the African councilors went against their Chief, Negobe, who had given consent to a white trader to open a general dealership at Mataga. The councilors reversed the decision by the Chief, who had received “a present of a blanket, tea, and sugar” from Crossley, the European applicant. The councilors voted against the chief’s decision pointing out that the “six European stores in the Reserves were sufficient for the people’s needs.” Cases such as this were the exception and not the rule. In any case, white traders were already dominant in the Belingwe East reserve.

African traders without recourse to African councils acted individually by engaging the services of lawyers. Law firms engaged by Africans included Winterton, Holmes, and Hill; Stumbles and Atherstone; Danziger & Lardner-Burke; and P. C. Bowles. African traders used lawyers when applying for licenses, contesting lease refusal, in requesting to expand their businesses and when challenging the arbitrary actions of some NCs. African traders engaged lawyers not only as litigants but also as a way of speaking to the NAD. The latter choice enabled African entrepreneurs to offset some of the colonial patronage characteristic of the NAD. Instead of speaking over Africans, litigation forced NCs to speak directly to African entrepreneurs. Scholarship on Africans and the law in Southern Rhodesia has debated on the character of African legal consciousness through the framework of the concept of legal pluralism. While colonial authorities regarded Africans as ignorant of the law, George Karekwaivanane has shown how during the 1960s and 1970s Africans used colonial legal systems aimed at harassing and exploiting them to their own advantage. In addition, the pioneering works of Elizabeth Schmidt and Tapiwa Zimudzi have focused on African agency in the use of the law. This article builds upon this and shows how African traders used lawyers to engage the NAD over trading sites actively.
The trading site applications contain many cases of African traders engaging the services of lawyers. For example, Nira Kenneth Murefu, approached the NC for Hartley through his lawyers Stumbles and Atherstone over a transfer of business. Murefu had bought the business for “£110 of which £12 has already been paid as a deposit and £78 is held by us in trust.” Stumbles and Atherstone further added that “before we proceed to the other formalities of the transfer, we would be grateful if you would confirm that our client has been accepted by the Native Authorities in your area.”

A clear example of how African traders interacted with the NAD through lawyers is the case of an African trader identified as Tigere. Between 1951 and 1953, Tigere engaged with the NC for Hartley through his lawyers, Danziger & Lardner-Burke, over his African restaurant and general dealer store leases. Tigere’s interactions with the NAD through his lawyers included paying for his annual lease and license fees, and an application to expand his business. Between 1951 and 1952, Tigere’s lawyers engaged with the NC for Hartley over supposedly unpaid rentals. His lawyers insisted that their client did not have any dues owing. In a letter, they stated that “we do not understand your reference to the rent being due, as we have personally paid for Tigere the sum of £6 for two years” adding that “it is in order to avoid this difficulty in the past that he has gone to the expense of procedure of asking us to forward the cheques.” As evidenced by these two examples, African traders used lawyers in the everyday transaction of their businesses. It was through this formalistic legal parlance that some African entrepreneurs were able to speak at par with the NAD and avoid the patronizing language of NCs.

African Traders also used lawyers when protesting the arbitrary actions of NCs. The NC for Sinoia received a reprimand from the CNC after he arbitrarily closed Makati’s business because he had “received numerous reports to the unhygienic condition of Makati’s butcher shop.” This was after Mataki had sought relief from the CNC through his lawyer, P. C. Bowles. Writing to the CNC in a strongly worded letter, Bowles stated that “this action would appear to be somewhat arbitrary, and I am not aware of any authority entitling the NC to take such action.” As these examples show, using legal representatives allowed African traders to question the authority of the NAD and some of the patronage that came with it.

In a sign that some NCs did not take the use of lawyers by African traders lightly, Tigere had his license application, lodged through his lawyers, to expand his business by adding a general dealer store to his African restaurant rejected by the NC for Hartley. The NC wrote to Danziger & Lardner-Burke, informing them that “I should be glad if you would inform Tigere that I am not prepared to recommend that he be allowed to operate two businesses.” Barely two weeks had passed when he wrote again to Tigere’s lawyers telling...
them that he had given their client the go-ahead to expand his business “after seeing Tigere personally.” In her work on racial etiquette in Southern Rhodesia, Shutt informs that NCs were very attentive to how Africans related to them. Drawing from Shutt’s work, Tigere’s continued use of solicitors in his communication with the NC for Hartley may have been read as a direct challenge of the authority of the NC over Africans.

While some Africans took advantage of African Councils and lawyers to create space for themselves in business, others used clandestine methods to obtain trading sites. For example, some African traders found people to write application letters for them and used fronts in applying for trading sites. During the 1940s, a store site in the Shangani Reserve near the NCs office became a site of struggle, which best exemplifies how some Africans were able to beat the system to their advantage. The general dealer store was the subject of interest from three European women, three African traders, a colored trader, the chief, and the NC for Nkai. The store’s location near the NC’s office made it a very lucrative business that generated interest from the entrepreneurs mentioned above. At the center of this struggle was an African trader, identified in the NAD correspondence as Yona. Yona’s approach epitomizes some of the strategies that Africans used to obtain and retain trading sites.

Yona took over the store from Mrs. Cahill in 1941 and lost the store after spending 18 months in prison for a criminal conviction for receiving stolen property. Having lost his store because of the criminal conviction, Yona still managed to find means of retaining the business. He successfully used his relatives, Samson Mabuko and Kefasi, to reapply for the same trading site. Although the NC had expressed reservations over the two new applicants on account of Mabuko’s criminal conviction, the CNC awarded them the license because Mabuko was a veteran of the Second World War. Yona here displayed an understanding of the thinking of the NAD: soon after the war, the Department’s policy showed a clear preference for African ex-servicemen, and therefore, the choice of Mabuko was not random. Later, when there was a fallout between the three “partners,” which involved litigation and a dissolving of the business, Yona engaged Frank Robert Berman, “a well-dressed man of a prosperous appearance” who, as the NC explained to the PNC, “arrived here in a large car.” In his application for the trading site, Frank Robert Berman said he would employ Mabuko as his storekeeper. Besides, the NC wrote to the PNC stating that Berman “seems on a friendly basis with the present owner Yona. In view of what has happened in the past I must suspect any transaction in which Yona is involved.” Although this last attempt by Yona to retain the store through Berman failed, it showed the lengths to which some Africans went to obtain and keep trading sites.
Conclusion

By employing empirical evidence, this article demonstrated the ways in which the colonial state systematically undermined African traders in the African reserves through the manipulation of trading sites. In conversation with the literature on the reorganization of African agriculture during the 1940s and 1950s, it showed how trading sites became intertwined in colonial efforts to destock and market African agricultural commodities. In this way, African traders failed to win trading sites in comparison with the heavily capitalized white traders who could advance the colonial state’s interests in the reorganization of African agriculture. Consequently, the article added to, and challenged, the work by Volker Wild by showing the ways in which African traders were disadvantaged at the expense of white traders. In the end, white traders consolidated their position in the African reserves whilst African traders became even more marginalized.

On their part, African traders contested the arbitrary and coercive approach of the NAD in the awarding of trading sites. Colonial institutions such as the African Councils became key in that endeavor. Importantly, African traders showed their resourcefulness as litigants against the NAD in the awarding of trading sites. Overall, the article contributed to our appreciation of the 1940s and the 1950s decades by showing how trading sites also played an important role in the reorganization of the African reserves. Crucially, the article added to the historiography on African entrepreneurship by accounting for the marginalization of African traders in the post Second World War period, while also showing the way in which African entrepreneurs, nonetheless, engaged with the legal frameworks of the colonial era in order to seek to advance their own interests.

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Notes


4. Southern Rhodesia appointed an American Missionary, Emory Delmont Alvord, as Director of Native Agriculture in 1926. He stayed in that role until 1950.


7. African reserves were set aside for African settlement during the colonial period. The first African reserves were created in 1898 and legalized by the 1930 Land Apportionment Act.


10. Wild, Profit not for Profit’s Sake, 50.


12. The bureaucracy of the Native Affairs Department was made up of Provincial Native Commissioners, Assistant Native Commissioners and Native Commissioners who presided over Africans. These officials in turn reported to the Chief Native Commissioner. For more on the inner workings of the Native Affairs Department and its officials see J. Alexander, The Unsettled Land: State-Making and the Politics of Land in Zimbabwe 1893–2003 (Harare: Weaver Press, 2006).


20. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
24. NC Bikita to the Assistant Native Commissioner (hereafter ANC), Southern Mashonaland, 11 March 1948, NAZ: Leasing of Sites—Bikita: S2400/3803.
27. ANC to the NC Mazowe District, 21 August 1947, NAZ: Leasing of Sites—Bindura: S2400/S3804.
30. Ibid.
33. NC Fort Victoria to the PNC, 18 October 1952, NAZ: CNC—Trade Leases, Application for Butchery Site: Mandiwana: S3156/3/2.
34. Ibid.
41. NC Fort Victoria to the PNC, Southern Mashonaland, 27 July 1949, NAZ: Leasing of Sites—Fort Victoria S2400/3765.
42. A. Pendered, Marketing Officer of the Native Trade and Production Branch (hereafter NTPB) to the CNC, 18 January 1949, NAZ: Leasing of Sites—Uzungwe: S2400/3767.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. NC Marandellas to the CNC, 21 June 1948, NAZ: Leasing of Sites—Wedza: S2400/3761.
47. ANC Wedza to NC Marandellas, 3 July 1948, NAZ: Leasing of Sites—Wedza: S2400/3761.
49. ANC Wedza to NC Marandellas, 3 July 1948, NAZ: Leasing of Sites—Wedza: S2400/3761.
50. NC Shangani to PNC Matabeleland, 24 January 1951, NAZ: Leasing of Sites—Shangani: S2400/3766.
51. Ibid.
52. NC Bikita to PNC, 11 November 1945, NAZ: Leasing of Sites—Bikita: S2400/3803.
53. NC Hartley to F. Howe-Fly, 8 October 1953, NAZ: Native Reserves—Lease of Sites S1033/05.
54. NC, Bikita to PNC Southern Mashonaland, 13 June 1949, NAZ: Leasing of Sites—Bikita: S2400/3803.
56. Winterton, Holmes and Hill to the Minister of Finance, 4 December 1945, NAZ: Leasing of Sites—Fort Victoria: S2400/3765.
61. Ibid.
63. NC Shangani to the PNC Matabeleland, 24 January 1951, NAZ: Leasing of Sites—Shangani: S2400/3766.
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid.


69. Ibid.

70. Ibid.


75. Ibid.


77. Ibid, 3.


80. Ibid.


84. CNC to P. C. Bowles, 16 September 1947, NAZ: Leasing of Sites—Sinoia: S2400/3758.


88. Shutt, “The Natives are getting out of Hand.”
89. NC Shangani to the PNC Matebeleland, 25 May 1948, NAZ: Leasing of Sites—Shangani: S2400/3766.
90. CNC to the PNC Matebeleland, 28 February 1948, NAZ: Leasing of Sites—Shangani: S2400/3766.
91. Ibid.
92. NC Shangani to PNC Matabeleland, 20 June 1947, NAZ: Leasing of Sites—Shangani: S2400/3766.
93. NAZ, S3292/56/4/1, Circular on the Rehabilitation Benefits Applicable to African Servicemen on their Discharge from the Armed Forces, Southern Rhodesia, c1948.
94. NC Shangani to the PNC Matebeleland, 27 October 1947, NAZ: Leasing of Sites—Shangani: S2400/3766.
95. NC Shangani to the PNC, Matebeleland, 29 December 1947, NAZ: Leasing of Sites—Shangani: S2400/3766.
96. Phimister, “Rethinking the Reserves,” 225.