

**MEMORY AS CONTESTED TERRAIN:  
HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CHALLENGES IN THE  
HISTORIAN'S QUEST FOR "OBJECTIVITY":  
A CASE STUDY OF EPWORTH MISSION.**

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*Abstract*

The quest for "objectivity" is central to the historian's craft even if its attainment may be tenuous. In this article we highlight some of the historiographical challenges that the historian faces in attempting to craft an "objective history" by incorporating perspectives that have previously been ignored. We focus particularly on the history of Epworth mission, a mission centre whose history has been written mostly from documented mission sources at the expense of oral sources reflecting perspectives of the African members of the mission.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Although much has already been written on and about the history of Epworth mission, most of the works have not ventured beyond the confines of "missionary historiography". The genre dubbed "missionary historiography" approaches Church History from the lenses of the missionary at the expense of the communities that are the target of evangelisation. This historiographic genre has become the bane of the history of African Christianity due to its ideological parochialism and disdain for indigenous non-European cultures (Kalu 1988:15). In this article, we revisit the history of Epworth mission, one of the earliest Methodist missions in Zimbabwe, in the light of new oral sources that have been made available to historians by the Archives of Oral History (AOH) through the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ). These archives consist of a collection of interviews carried out from the late seventies to the early eighties as part of a project whose aim and purpose was to augment written sources on the history of Zimbabwe from the pre-colonial

times. Hence, this article attempts to bring to the fore the voices of African converts and tenants born and brought up at Epworth mission, with a view to crafting a more objective history of some key aspects of Epworth mission. Of particular interest are questions pertaining to the identity and conversion of Chiremba as well as to land ownership. In this article an attempt will be made to use the new oral sources made available to historians by the Oral History Archives in the national archives of Zimbabwe, to interrogate, support or corroborate already existing written sources.

## 2 CHIREMBA'S ORIGINS AND IDENTITY

One of the many issues that historians have grappled with is the identity of Chiremba, the man who welcomed missionaries to the Chihota-Seke chiefdom. Related to the question of this man's identity is the associated question as to the motives for his conversion to Christianity. In the light of new oral sources at our disposal, it is incumbent on us to revisit the issue.

### 2.1 Chiremba as an alien to the Chihota-Seke chiefdom

The first theory that we consider in this article is based on Thorpe's book *Limpopo to Zambesi* (1951). The theory is based on the diary of Reverend Harry Buckley, one of the longest serving superintendents of Epworth mission (Thorpe 1951:56-57). It says that Chiremba had settled in the Chihota chiefdom not long before 1890 when the settlers under the British South Africa Company (BSAC) colonised Mashonaland. Thorpe describes Chiremba as "a wandering witchdoctor" who was "persuaded to settle down at the kraal of chief Chirimba" seven miles east of the site where Salisbury (now Harare) was later to be founded. He further claims that Chiremba "was on his way with five wives, his children and his dependants, from Mbiri (now Wedza) to chief Zvimba ... but Chirimba was anxious to have near him a witchdoctor of Chiremba's reputation and skill". In response to chief Chirimba's invitation, Chiremba decided to set up a village "among the fantastic granite rocks" that Zimbabweans have fondly named the Epworth balancing rocks due to the fact that Epworth mission was later established there. The closeness of the two names Chiremba and Chirimba is, to say the least, astounding, and leaves the reader confused as to who the author's protagonist is. Is it Chiremba the "witch-doctor" or Chirimba the chief (Thorpe 1951:60)?

Thorpe goes to argue that, “It was to this place, this haunt of superstition and ignorance and fear that Isaac Shimmin came to one day” (Thorpe 1951:57). Reverend Shimmin was the first Methodist missionary to Mashonaland, having been sent there by the Transvaal District of the Methodist church in 1891. He was accompanied by the Chairman of the Transvaal District, Reverend Owen Watkins who successfully negotiated with Cecil John Rhodes and his top officials for three mission farms in Mashonaland measuring 3 000 acres each (Thorpe 1951:45-47). One such farm, which Isaac Shimmin marked out, incorporated Chiremba’s village. It was on this farm that Shimmin set up a mission that he named Epworth in memory of John Wesley’s home county in England (Thorpe 1951:57). According to Zvobgo (1991) Reverend Shimmin considered the acquisition of this farm of great importance. “The principal importance of this farm lies in its proximity to town. What Kilnerton is to Pretoria I expect Epworth will be to Salisbury” (Zvobgo 1991:24).

## **2.2 The perspective of oral sources in respect of Chiremba’s origins and identity**

Oral sources in the archives of Oral History at the National archives of Zimbabwe, however present a version different from the one proffered by Thorpe. Chiremba’s grandson, Isaac Muzambwa avers that his grandfather, Chiremba was “of the Chihota clan ... the original inhabitants of Epworth”. However, he confirms what written sources say regarding his healing profession and polygynous marriage. He also argues that he was the first chief in Chihota chieftdom to accept missionaries (AOH/72:41-47).

## **2.3 Emerging issues**

It is clear that the two perspectives above present interesting convergence on the aspects that are fundamental to our understanding of the significance of Chiremba in Zimbabwe’s Christian historiography. Of critical importance to our understanding of Chiremba’s identity are the following facts: that he was a traditional healer of renown, in charge of not only a village built among the balancing rocks in Chihota communal lands but also a polygamous family that consisted of his children and other dependants. Furthermore, it is critical to note that the colonial settlers and the Methodist missionaries found Chiremba and the people that he was leader of already in place in Chihota-Seke communal lands.

There are interesting divergences, however, on the identity of Chiremba. Of singular note is Thorpe's view that Chiremba was not indigenous to the Chihota-Seke people, but was an alien who was invited by the chief of the Chihota people because of his divining skills. If we go by this source, the natural inference to make is that Chiremba could not have been a chief as some sources claim (Andrews 1935:87; Hallencreutz 1998:35). At best he could have been appointed headman over the community that consisted mainly of his polygynous family and dependants. His newly acquired status may have been a subject of misunderstanding by missionaries who in their writings mistook him for a chief. This reconstruction of history is supported by John Weller and Jane Linden (1984:83) who refer to Chiremba as a "headman". This appears to be a more accurate description of Chiremba's status in the Chihota chieftaincy. However, the version that relegates Chiremba to the status of an alien appears only in Thorpe (1951:56-57) who, as mentioned earlier, got it from Reverend Buckley. Since there is no written source predating Thorpe on the matter, it is plausible to conjecture that Reverend Buckley got it from someone high up in the Chihota officialdom, and not from a descendant of Chiremba. What further compounds the issue, however, is the fact that Oral History sources compiled by the National Archives of Zimbabwe also contradict each other on Chiremba's status. For instance, Aaron Jacha, interviewed in 1977 refers to him as "chief" (AOH/14) while James Tutani refers to him as "headman" Chiremba (AOH/15). Similarly, Isaac Muzambwa, Chiremba's grandson, who later became headman of Epworth mission, interviewed in the early 1980s, avers that Chiremba was of the Chihota clan, the original inhabitants of the land where Epworth was founded (AOH/72:44-47). This version leaves room for the possibility that Chiremba may have been a chief. While the different views on the past created by the sources cited above indeed raise the spectre of memory as contested terrain, it further raises another point in this case study. Apart from the historiographical complications that the available evidence offers, there is also the question whether the missiological significance given to the conversion of Chiremba (if he was a mere headman) was not exaggerated. We turn to this point in the next section.

### **3 CHIREMBA'S CONVERSION**

Hallencreutz, (1998:30) and Zvobgo (1992:2), among other scholars, refer to Reverend Isaac Shimmin and Reverend John White as the missionaries who interacted closely with Chiremba and his people. Thorpe (1951:57) in particular argues that Reverend Shimmin made

several visits to Chiremba's kraal in an attempt to influence him to accept an evangelist to his village. Chiremba, however, spurned the missionary's efforts. Thorpe attributes Chiremba's resistance to evangelisation to what he calls the "haunt of superstition and ignorance and fear" (Thorpe 1951:57).

Oral interviews given by Chiremba's daughter and grandson confirm that, while Chiremba cultivated an amicable relationship with Reverend Shimmin, he refused to accept an evangelist or to have a school in his kraal. According to Muzambwa, the reason for such resistance was not far to see: Shimmin's condemnation of polygyny and beer drinking elicited Chiremba's resentment. However, it was not only Chiremba who was disturbed by the missionary's views. Other elders also defended polygyny arguing that (AOH/72, 42);

... a woman is the most important thing, how can a man have one wife? The importance of a man is based on the number of wives that he has; it can be three, four or five".

Rejection by Shona chiefs, including Chiremba, dampened the spirit of Michael Bowen (Mboweni?) a northern Sotho evangelist who had accompanied Shimmin and Owen Watkins to Mashonaland in late 1891. As a result, he returned to South Africa only a few months after arrival in the country (Thorpe 1951:54). However, Chiremba developed a change of heart towards missionaries following the arrival of John White in Mashonaland. Andrews (1935: 89) argues that Chiremba "took a liking to John from the first". Consequently, a friendship developed between the two thus inclining Chiremba to accept Josiah Ramushu, another northern Sotho evangelist from Transvaal, into the village. According to Thorpe (1951:58), Ramushu won the respect and affection of the people of Chiremba's village in a very short time. "Chiremba built him a house; he started services under a tree, and later a small church was built. He gathered a number of children round him and established a school."

Zvobgo (1992:29-30) adds that members of Chiremba's village were impressed mostly by Ramushu's "homely conversation, simple illustration, and above all, lively and attractive singing". Oral sources in the Archives of Oral History in the National Archives of Zimbabwe highlight singing and marching as having been a daily routine in Ramushu's school. The school became a singular source of attraction to the village elders who spent a good part of their time "gazing and enjoying their children's activities"

(AOH/72:49). One thing seems to have led to another. Women, including Chiremba's wives, were Ramushu's next target. The latter began to attend church services with the evangelist. However, the men, including Chiremba kept a safe distance from Ramushu's church services. Interestingly, though, Chiremba only attended the church whenever John White led the service (AOH/72:49). Ramushu, a much younger black man and an alien to Mashonaland, was apparently viewed as a threat to Chiremba's stature, considering his association with the white missionaries and the new knowledge that he was bringing to the Shona. Chiremba would not play second fiddle to this young man, hence in relating to him, he made sure that he kept him at arms length.

Both oral and written sources concur that, in spite of the interest shown by the children and women in Ramushu's work, there were no baptisms administered before 1896 when the Shona rose up against the BSAC administration. What is clear, however, is that important bridgeheads had already been made between the Methodist mission and the people of Chiremba village.

#### 4 THE EFFECTS OF THE SHONA UPRISINGS (CHIMURENGA) ON THE RELATIONS BETWEEN METHODIST MISSIONARIES AND CHIREMBA'S PEOPLE

Ranger's *corpus magnum Revolt in Southern Rhodesia, 1896-7* (1967) has remained the authoritative source on the First Chimurenga uprising. For this reason, we will not revisit the reasons for the uprisings. Suffice it to say, however, that the epicentre of the uprisings in Mashonaland, Mashayan'ombe in Mhondoro, was not far from Chihota-Seke region where Chiremba's village was located. Small wonder therefore that Chiremba's village found itself caught up in the web of the uprisings. So was evangelist Ramushu. The eruption of the uprisings in Mashonaland apparently had a direct impact on Chiremba's village to the extent that its members, or at least some, including Chiremba and his close family members, were forced to seek protection from the BSAC police, alongside the white settlers who sought refuge in a laager in Salisbury. There are, however, contradicting versions of the developments that resulted in Chiremba seeking sanctuary under the auspices of the BSAC police.

Andrews (1935:44) presents us with one version that claims that “the people at the kraal (i.e. Chiremba’s) ... who had come into closest touch with John White, were getting restive. John went out to them and they asked him to be their spokesman on their behalf with the Government, so that they might be allowed to stay near the laager, outside the town of Salisbury, under protection. John promised them this, and kept his word”. The second version comes from Weller and Linden (1984:83) who contend that, “the small community at Epworth mission, under headman Chiremba, remained loyal to the missionaries, and accompanied them into laager at Harare”. In an attempt to explain the reason/s why Chiremba and his villagers needed the protection of the settler government, Weller and Linden (1984:83) offer the following explanation:

The reason for their loyalty *was possibly* (my emphasis) that Chiremba was not the traditional headman of the community, but had usurped the position after the Europeans had arrived. He *may* have thought that his position was only secure if the Europeans retained their authority. Some months later, when the laager was disbanded, and the Mashonaland Field Force was counter-attacking the rebel strongholds, some of the Epworth men acted as guides, and assisted the Europeans in tracking down the caves and fortified kopjes where the rebels were based. Many of the fortresses were blown up with considerable loss of life.

Although Weller and Linden’s attempt to explain Chiremba’s association with the settlers during the Chimurenga sounds lame and conjectural, it further raises, but does not corroborate, the theory and spectre that Chiremba was an alien in the Chihota-Seke chiefdom and may have usurped the position of chief or headman between 1890, when the white settlers arrived in Mashonaland, and in 1896, when the Shona staged an uprising against the settler administration. This question has not, however, been given serious consideration in any scholarly engagement apart from the scant information that we have quoted above.

Apart from the two versions highlighted above, there is however a third version that has not been explored by scholars of Zimbabwean history, with the exception of Hallencreutz (1998:35-36). This version comes from the descendants of Chiremba, and is deposited in the Oral History Archives in the National archives of Zimbabwe (AOH/72, 53). The version

claims that when the Chimurenga spread to the Chihota-Seke chiefdom, divisions emerged among the villagers of Chiremba over the question of whether or not to kill evangelist Josiah Ramushu. Apparently, two camps had emerged, one that was traditional and radical, in favour of executing Ramushu and his settler handlers, and the other that was moderate and in favour of sparing the life of the evangelist. Chiremba identified with the latter group and therefore secured an escape for Josiah Ramushu to Salisbury. This decision infuriated the traditionalist and radical party who considered Chiremba a traitor. Henceforth, Chiremba was a marked man targeted to die.

When Ramushu got to Salisbury, he informed John White about the danger that Chiremba and the moderate party faced at the hands of the traditionalist party. White approached the Commandant of the BSAP who in turn sent an armed police force to escort Chiremba and his dependants to Salisbury.

The version from Chiremba's grandson, Isaac Muzambwa, does more than just add another perspective the complex history of Chiremba and the original inhabitants of Epworth. Instead, it takes the focus away from Chiremba and the missionaries. It however brings in the wider social and political context around Epworth mission. Furthermore, it sets the scene for a better understanding of the relations between Chiremba and the mission enterprise in the period after the Shona uprisings (First Chimurenga).

#### **4.1 Mission work at Epworth in the aftermath of the uprisings**

As the threat of the uprisings waxed and waned, Chiremba and his dependants left Salisbury and set up camp among the Chinanga hills, later named Graniteside. This settlement was most likely favoured because of its security features and its proximity to Salisbury town and the African township. In other words, Chiremba saw the need for a provisional settlement where he could weigh his options before getting back home. After some time Chiremba and his dependants went back to Chihota (Thorpe 1951:62).

As fate would have it, when Chiremba and his dependants went back home, their status had suddenly changed from hosts to guests of the missionaries. John White was now their protector since the beginning of the Shona uprisings. Both oral and written evidence testify to the fact that



John White came to the rescue of Chiremba and his dependants in a conflict with the settler police during their stay in Salisbury. While Andrews (1935:45) is rather laconic in explaining what really caused Chiremba's people to believe that "they might be massacred by the Europeans", oral tradition provides more detail and makes John White a veritable legend (OH/72:52-54). From this time on, Chiremba and his dependants were eternally grateful to Baba White. Hence, when they went back home, they were no longer masters of their destiny but dependants of the missionaries on the latter's farm. Officially, they were now tenants on Epworth mission farm. Thus, through White's benevolence, the Christian missionaries colluded with colonial settlers to deprive African people of the land, which was their basic means of production.

Epworth mission provided homes to many people who were dispersed by the uprisings. Many of the tenants worked in Salisbury and saw Epworth farm as a convenient place for residential accommodation. Distinct family groups that settled at Epworth farm immediately following the uprisings include, "the Chiremba group, the Mutaiko group the Matendera group, the Mashonganyika group and the Dongo group" (OH/72:37). A small Tonga group from Binga also settled at the farm (Thorpe 1951:62). Conspicuous among the latter were the Lewanika family and Mafare Muzambwa who later married Chiremba's daughter. Mrs Maria Lewanika became one of the first converts of Epworth mission (Hallencreutz 1998:31).

By 1898, many residents of Epworth farm had converted to Christianity. Among them were Chiremba's wives, and Chiremba's eldest son, who was christened Jonas. The latter had been John White's wagon driver since 1894. Jonas assisted John White in translating the Gospel from Zulu to Shona. Furthermore, he became one of the earliest Shona evangelists in Zimbabwe (Weller 1984:83). As the 20<sup>th</sup> century dawned, Epworth mission became one of the few vibrant Christian settlements in Zimbabwe (Thorpe 1951:103).

The conversion of Chiremba finally came in 1898 and he was christened Isaac. Oral and written missionary sources present different perspectives as to the proximate causes and influences behind his conversion. Oral sources view Chiremba's son, Jonas, as the key inspiration behind his conversion (AOH/72:46). Andrews (1935:89-91) however, views John White as the inspiration behind the conversion. According to Thorpe

(1951:58) Chiremba's conversion was a great personal sacrifice considering his stature in traditional Shona society. Thorpe goes on to explain what his conversion meant in the following words:

It meant putting away his wives after making provision for them; it meant renouncing his craft as a witchdoctor, thus losing prestige and material gain; it meant giving up his reputation and putting away physical satisfactions so dear to the African; it meant walking humbly before his people as a convert ...

Oral sources present a different view, however. Isaac Muzambwa saw his grandfather's conversion as a form of social elevation rather than a sacrifice. Muzambwa argues that Chiremba was fascinated by the missionary's reading and writing skills and saw an opportunity for "the expansion of his activities as a diviner" (AOH/72:46). What the latter view implies, however, is the possibility that Chiremba did not abruptly stop his healing career following his baptism.

From the time of his conversion, Chiremba played a leading role in the Christian history of Epworth. He was appointed headman of all the Christian villages that John White organised on the mission farm. By virtue of his status as headman, he became the "foreman of the Epworth church building project from 1899 to 1900" (AOH/14:1-9). He became the natural guardian of the growing Methodist church membership at Epworth mission up to the time of his death in 1918.

## 5 THE LAND QUESTION AND THE EXPANSION OF EPWORTH MISSION

Earlier on we referred to the acquisition of the farmland on which Epworth mission was to be founded. In 1904 and 1908 two more farms were purchased. Altogether Epworth mission farm consisted of 9 162 acres (Ndhlela 1969:1: A proposal of the Methodist Church in Rhodesia for the future of the tenants of Epworth, in NAZ/MS 348/6; Smith 1928:61).

At the end of 1955 the Methodist Missionary Society sent a delegation consisting of Reverend T A Beetham, who was Field Secretary at the time, and Mr J W Hindley on a visit to the Rhodesia District. During their visit they were "much concerned about the need to find new capital for

schemes in the District, including Epworth for the benefit of ... African people” (Synod 1957:1 in NAZ/MS239/5/6/1).

As part of their recommendation to the District, the delegation “suggested that consideration should be given to the sale of part of the land at Epworth for this purpose”. Synod 1957 discussed the suggestion and appointed an Epworth Farms Development Scheme Committee “to investigate the possibilities and costs of development and to make suggestions as to the ways and means, approval being given for the sale of a farm, if necessary” (Synod 1957:1 in NAZ/MS239/5/6/1).

The Farms Development Scheme Committee was tasked to formulate policy which was to take into account three factors. These were;

- (a) that under the Land Apportionment Act there can be African tenants on Epworth, Glenwood and Adelaide only so long as those farms are owned by the Methodist Church, unless the Government acquires them;
- (b) that since under the same Act any alienation must be to persons other than Africans it is impossible to give the Africans anything more than a tenancy; and
- (c) that Synod has always recognised a special responsibility to the original tenants”  
(Synod 1957:1 in NAZ/MS239/5/6/1).

The Farms Committee met many times with the tenants of the three farms. It gave “consideration to the need for improving conditions at Epworth, especially with regard to water supply, sanitation and roads, and the desirability for providing for a greater number of African tenants to be accommodated” (Synod 1957:1 in NAZ/MS239/5/6/1) However, the latter could only be done by way of residential tenancies, which in turn meant a reduction in cattle holdings on the farms. By 1955 a residential tenant was given half an acre for housing, and a further half an acre for a vegetable garden. Each beast, however, required ten acres for grazing (Synod 1957:1 in NAZ/MS239/5/6/1).

In its findings, the Committee established that there was need for new capital in the District, largely for African education. In particular, it established that Epworth mission sorely needed a training school for artisans, a secondary school and possibly other projects such as an old people’s home. After considering all options at its disposal, the Committee decided that it was “beyond the capacity of the Methodist

Church to establish an urban township of close settlement for Africans on the Epworth Estate for financial reasons” (Synod 1957:1 in NAZ/MS239/5/6/1).

Hence, in 1956 the Farm Council Committee approached the Government with a view to turning one of the three farms into an African township. Recognising the trend towards urbanisation, the Methodist Church invited the Southern Rhodesia Government to consider the establishment of an African township on Adelaide or Glenwood (farm). The Government turned down the overture arguing that the farms were not suitable for an African township due to their proximity to Salisbury and to the then Kentucky airport. In response, the mission authorities resolved to sell Glenwood farm on the open market in order to raise money to develop infrastructure as well as to improve services on the original Epworth farm where the majority of the tenants resided.

Although the intended sale of one farm was undoubtedly inspired by humanitarian intentions, and the noble cause of improving the standards of living on the mission, divergent interests among the tenants made negotiations very difficult. The Committee went ahead to serve notices of eviction to tenants at Chizungu, to facilitate the sale of Glenwood farm. Although the Committee did not serve tenants of Epworth farm with notices, it asked them to “cease from grazing cattle so as to release land” for incoming tenants from Chizungu.

The idea of the mission authorities was to transform Epworth farm into a residential mission settlement where residents did not rear any livestock. Hence, those tenants who wished to continue grazing were offered alternative accommodation at Marshall Hartley mission, two-hundred kilometres away (Synod 1957:2 in NAZ/MS239/5/6/1).

Within the Committee’s new policy, however, no reference was made to compensate the tenants who were required to quit their homes for Epworth farm or for Marshal Hartley mission. Hence the evictees were not only going to destroy their homes on Glenwood farm but were expected to build new ones on Epworth farm without any form of assistance from the mission authorities.

The tenants at both Epworth and Glenwood farm were seriously disturbed by the new policy. The policy made them vulnerable and uncertain of their future. They thus responded to the policy with anger and resistance. They

boycotted church services and for two consecutive Sundays assembled at the Domboramwari rock which was formerly the sacred venue for traditional Shona rituals. They also resisted paying their rent to the mission authorities, arguing that their security of tenure was not assured.

By 1955, there were two villages on Epworth farm, Maguta and Makomo, with 184 rent-paying tenants. There were two other villages, Chinamano and Zinyengere, with a further 120 rent-paying tenants. The boundary between Glenwood and Adelaide cut through the latter villages. Hence, some resettlement was going to be necessary if one farm was going to be sold (Buckley, "Future policy for Epworth Mission", NAZ/MS239/5/6/1 1958:2-3).

A group of fifty-nine tenants on Epworth farm, and a few others at Chizungu, were incensed by new policy. They argued that they had a legitimate claim and right to reside on the mission without disturbance from the mission authorities because they had contributed to the purchase of Glenwood farm at the time of its purchase. The mission authorities denied this claim, however. In an attempt to solve the conflict over ownership, the Methodist District leadership referred the matter to the London home office for verification. The latter perused all the missionary records available and wrote back to District office and to the mission authorities stating that the farms belonged to the Methodist Church Trust Society, and that their investigations had not unearthed any evidence that the tenants had contributed to the cost of any of the two farms.

Both parties in the dispute appealed to memory of the past as their final court of appeal. Mission authorities appealed to the written documents left by John White while the African tenants appealed to the oral tradition associated with both Headman Chiremba and Baba White. Below we highlight the two forms of memory that dominated the discourse surrounding the ownership of Glenwood farm. Since this matter is at the core of this article, we quote in some detail the arguments that both sides used in the debate over the ownership of the farm.

On the one hand, Isaac Muzambwa's interview represents the view of the fifty-nine original tenants on Epworth mission. His version is based on oral tradition that was passed on from his grandfather, headman Chiremba. Muzambwa (AOH/72:62), argued:

White said, "Chiremba, the white man (next door) is going and he is looking for someone who can buy his farm. If you buy his farm you will not get crowded and you will multiply like you used to do in times past ..."

Chiremba answered, "You know that I will not refuse if you say if. You say so."

They asked the price of the land. White calculated it and each person was asked to pay four pounds since it cost 400 pounds. They gave the white man 200 pounds and he told them that the land was now theirs. They surveyed the area, the white man on horseback, and Chiremba on foot, for two days.

On the other hand, Reverend Harry Buckley's "Future policy for Epworth Mission" (1958 NAZ/MS239/5/6/1) represents an alternative view which was apparently not fully shared by the London office in respect of Glenwood farm. He wrote:

Glenwood was bought by the mission in 1904 by John White who obtained a loan from the Mission House (400 pounds). As he bought it without first obtaining permission he was reprimanded and then given the loan. This was paid back in 4 years by levies on the tenants who claim they paid four pounds per family. *This is probably correct. These payments of one pound per year over four years cannot be regarded as rents* (my emphasis). Annual rents were fixed later and were at the rate of five shillings per annum ... That John White's purpose in buying the farm was to have more land for the people under our care at Epworth is made clear by his speeches at Missionary meetings in England, and not as an investment. That he made this clear to tenants at that time is evident from the fact that he obtained 400 pounds from them in four years so as to pay back the loan from the Mission House. He stated in England, and I have no doubt that he said it at Epworth, that one reason for his action was that Africans could not hold land themselves in the vicinity of Epworth but the Mission could. I cannot in my own mind escape the conclusion that we hold this farm in trust.

Following extensive consultations with Reverend A W Heath, Superintendent of Epworth Circuit, various interest groups of tenants, and ministers stationed at Epworth Mission, a meeting was held on the 9<sup>th</sup> of November 1956 where official recognition was made that fifty-nine tenants had a rightful stake in the *enhanced value* (my emphasis) of the two farms that the mission had purchased. Although this was a huge victory for the long-standing tenants who had grown accustomed to the fact that Epworth was their home, the legal status of the two farms was not changed. Both farms would remain the property of the Methodist Mission Society for the furtherance of the Church's missionary work. However, the recognition that was granted resulted in the drawing of new tenancy terms for the fifty-nine tenants. Henceforth, the tenants were granted lifelong leases that also partially covered a descendant tenant. Furthermore, the Methodist synod guaranteed not to terminate the leases of every other tenant "for the ensuing ten years, provided he continues to live on Epworth and keeps the terms of the tenancy, and that the guarantee shall be renewable for further five-yearly periods at the discretion of Synod". As for cattle rearing on the mission, the Synod granted only seven men on Epworth farm, who were tenants in the very early days of the mission, the right to keep their cattle as long as they lived. The rest of the tenants on Epworth and Glenwood (Chizungu) would be subjected to annual leases in respect of cattle rearing (Synod 1957:3 in NAZ/MS239/5/6/1).

The decisions cited above were supported by a number of stakeholders who included, among others, the tenants' representative on the Farm Council Committee, Isaac Muzambwa, the Farm Council Committee, the ministers at Epworth mission, the Chairman of the District, the Superintendent of Epworth Circuit and the Secretary of the Epworth Farms Development Scheme Committee (Synod 1957:2-3 in NAZ/MS239/5/6/1). In spite of the broad-based support for the decisions, the majority of the tenants felt left in the lurch. Most of them stopped or skipped paying rents as a form of protest against the decisions taken by the authorities. They made representations to successive church synods in the attempt to bring about a favourable settlement to their plight (see tenants' letter to District Chairman, Reverend H J Lawrence, dated March 16, 1961). The following table illustrates the extent of rent boycotts that prevailed in 1957 (NAH/MS 239/5/6/2).

Village	Number of tenants	Paid up	Partially paid up	Not paid
Maguta	107	18	15	68
Makomo	57	16	6	35
Chinamano	41	10	2	29
Zinyengere	56	20	10	26
<b>Total</b>	<b>225</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>158</b>

In his analysis of the situation at the mission, Reverend Harry Buckley, the Superintendent of Epworth Mission, divided the rent defaulters into three categories. The first group, he argued, consisted of those who did not know when they were going to be driven off the farm: “they felt they should keep their money to find new homes”. Secondly, there were those who could not pay the new rates which were increased after the disturbances of 1956. Lastly, there those tenants who never really regarded Epworth as their home. The latter merely took advantage of the disturbances at the mission and stopped paying their rents.

Although the Mission authorities were aware that there were some undesirable elements among the tenants, they faced the dilemma of whether to expel them from or to keep them at the mission. This dilemma is illustrated in Reverend Buckley’s contributions to the formulation of a future policy for Epworth Mission. He wrote (Buckley 1958:2 NAZ/MS 239/5/6/1 “Future policy for Epworth Mission”):

... there are many undesirable tenants we could do without and they need shifting. At the same time we must remember they are our field for evangelism and instruction. Christ died for the ungodly and God’s goodness is towards the unjust as well as towards the just. It is easier to say “Kick a man out” than to win him.

While some voluntarily left Epworth for Marshal Hartley at Chibero where they were assured of grazing land, many remained at Epworth and regularly renewed their leases right up to the time when the three farms were handed over to the Zimbabwean Government in 1981. Before then no lasting settlement had been reached regarding the land question and questions regarding tenants’ tenure.



## 6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The discussion above has serious methodological and historiographical implications, some of which we explore below.

Firstly, it is appropriate to note that the use of both oral and written sources is definitely a rewarding historiographic exercise which can yield a more balanced and objective history than a servile dependence on the written sources. This particular case study has demonstrated that dependence on missionary documents such as letters by I Shimmin, John White, Harry Buckley, among others, and missionary documents kept at the London home office, would not result in a balanced and objective history of Epworth mission. Indeed, a history of Epworth mission that is devoid of the nuanced oral histories of the African tenants would only be telling half the story. Its one-sidedness becomes more poignant in the light of the historical gaps and amnesia characterised by official mission records on a number of aspects discussed above.

Secondly, the use of oral memories from various players spread across a long period of time in the history of Epworth mission offers a huge challenge to the historian. By this we do not mean that memory based on the written word is less of a challenge. On the contrary, the fact of the matter is that, due to its Enlightenment roots, modern history has created a false dichotomy between documented sources and oral sources. Indeed memory in whatever form assumes the character of contested terrain requiring careful navigation and sharp discernment from the historian.

Thirdly, orally transmitted memories of the past are prone to fluidity and eventual loss due to factors such as mobility, morbidity and death of the repositories of local histories. The case study under examination, however, amply illustrates that families and communities have a capacity to preserve and transmit their histories for generations endlessly. Memories of the past have a capacity to become a major source of cohesion within the family and community as members struggle with existential questions of identity and self-definition amidst changing times.

Fourthly, and lastly, peoples' memories of the past can be a robust and conscious process of knowledge production for future generations. They do not only have to do with power and truth: they are as much a product of a people's world view. As regards the question of truth, the historian must equally be conscious that truth can be multi-faceted. For this reason,

Mamdani (2000:177) contends that there are two forms of truth: truth that brings unresolved tensions to light, and truth that “obscures, hides, veils, and masks the unpleasant face of reality”.

Without trying to romanticise or glamorise the oral history methodology, the article has illustrated that weaving stories and memories of ordinary African tenants at Epworth mission farms into the weft of recorded missionary sources has indeed opened up new horizons to our understanding of the history of the mission.

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