

Reassessing the Significance of Firearms in Central Africa: The Case of North-Western Zambia to the 1920s¹

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ABSTRACT: Based on a close examination of European travelogues and the evidence produced in the wake of the formulation of colonial gun policies, this article contends that the significance of firearms in Central Africa in the nineteenth and early twentieth century has been unduly played down in the existing literature. The first substantive section of the paper charts the movement of the gun frontier in nineteenth-century North-Western Zambia. It foregrounds the new technology's economic and military applications, the means through which North-Western Zambians overcame some at least of its limitations and the plurality of innovative social roles they attributed to it. Successive sections centre on the pervasiveness of gun running in the early twentieth century and the implementation and profound social consequences of gun control laws.

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KEYWORDS: Central Africa, Zambia, Angola, history of technology, firearms, trade, warfare, hunting, smuggling, gun laws.

Introduction

The first professional historians of pre-colonial sub-Saharan Africa thought a good deal about the impact of imported guns.² Insofar as Central Africa is concerned, the consensus formed in these pioneering years was that the role of firearms in determining military and political outcomes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had probably been less significant than previously assumed. The most important statement to this effect was put forward by Andrew Roberts in a 1971 article that cautioned against attributing to firearms alone the general increase in violence that accompanied the westward advancement of the frontier of merchant capitalism and the long-distance trade in slaves and ivory. Having only become common in North-Eastern Zambia from the 1880s, firearms – Roberts argued – could not have influenced decisively earlier Bemba territorial expansion or altered in any profound way their military tactics based on shock attacks by swarms of spearmen. And even when the Bemba did acquire firearms in considerable quantities, the inferior quality of the muskets at their disposal militated against such weapons making a substantial contribution to elephant hunting or to Bemba resistance against better armed European forces.³

² See, especially, the articles published in two special issues (2 and 4) of the *Journal of African History*, 12 (1971).

³ A.D. Roberts, 'Firearms in North-Eastern Zambia before 1900', *Transafrican Journal of History*, 1 (1971).

Commendable for steering clear of crude technological determinism, and appealing also to scholars bent on exploding racist assumptions about Africa's pre-colonial 'heart of darkness', these conclusions have stood the test of time and have been by and large corroborated by more recent studies of neighbouring areas and peoples. Joseph Miller, in particular, viewed the 'unreliability' of imported weapons – only a 'small percentage' of which 'survived the first few attempts to fire them' – as one of the principal causes of the continuity in military hardware and organization that characterized the Angolan interior in the eighteenth century.⁴ In a similar vein, Achim von Oppen's study of the pre-colonial economy of the upper Zambesi and Kasai region in the nineteenth century presents the 'remarkably poor' performance and 'very limited durability' of the *lazarinas*, the often untested flintlock muzzle-loaders that dominated the Ovimbundu-run trade between the Bihé plateau and the Zambesi headwaters, as indications that neither the reported disappearance of elephants in the area from ca. 1850 nor the depletion of game in general can be ascribed with any certainty to the spread of guns.⁵

My starting point is that an emphasis on the technical shortcomings of the new weapons of destruction, and on the endurance of African military and hunting traditions vis-à-vis exogenous innovation, is hard to reconcile with Central Africa's unquenchable

⁴ J.C. Miller, *Way of Death* (Madison, 1988), 87-8.

⁵ A. von Oppen, *Terms of Trade and Terms of Trust* (Munich and Hamburg n.d. [but 1993?]), 169-73. Initially produced in the late eighteenth century by the Portuguese manufacturer Lázaro Lazarino of Braga, by the middle of the following century, the bulk of the muskets imported into Angola consisted of Belgian and other northern European imitations. *Ibid.*, 170, n. 69, and I. de Castro Henriques, 'Armas de fogo em Angola no século XIX: uma interpretação', in *Actas de I Reunião Internacional de História de Africa* (Lisbon, 1989), 425, n. 44.

demand for European guns from the eighteenth century onwards and the fact that, as Miller himself is aware, firearms always constituted ‘the “very soul of commerce” in the exchange of people for goods with the Europeans.’⁶ If firearms had really been invariably inefficient, and therefore of only marginal economic and military significance, then it is not at all clear why the majority of Central Africans – whose ‘political economy of rights over people’ could just as easily have been energized by exchanges of other foreign wares – consistently insisted on obtaining them throughout the era of the long-distance trade. This article’s main objective is to confront this unresolved contradiction by taking a fresh look at a range of fairly well-known, but rarely comprehensively cross-examined, nineteenth-century sources.

To be sure, as has long been recognized, European travelogues are not free from problems. Coloured by the ‘racial, cultural and political shortcomings of their writers’, they are often myopic and Eurocentric in both tone and content.⁷ Nineteenth-century travel records tell us less than we would like to know – and what they tell us should not always be taken at face value. Yet, given the narrowly political perspective of formal oral traditions and the questionable reliability of focused oral interviews centring on so early a period, explorers’ diaries remain indispensable in providing data of a socio-economic nature.⁸ Moreover, the travellers’ interest in military affairs, in general, and

⁶ Miller, *Way of Death*, 93.

⁷ R.C. Bridges, ‘Nineteenth-Century East African Travel Records’, in B. Heintze and A. Jones (eds.), *European Sources for Sub-Saharan Africa before 1900* (Stuttgart, 1987), 179 (special issue of *Paideuma*, 33).

⁸ Consider, e.g., the central position occupied by these sources in Stephen Rockel’s recent social history of portage in eastern Africa – *Carriers of Culture* (Portsmouth, NH, 2006) – and, to a lesser extent, in

guns, in particular, was not infrequently magnified by their backgrounds and, especially, by the hazardous circumstances in which they operated.

When associated with the evidence produced in the wake of the formulation of colonial gun laws, the systematic study of European pre-colonial travelogues indicates that the importance of firearms in Central Africa in the nineteenth and early twentieth century has been unduly underrated in the specialist literature. For if they are examined through the perspectives of Science and Technology Studies, both sets of sources throw light on processes of technological appropriation that enabled Central Africans to minimize the deficiencies of imported weapons, using them profitably for both hunting and military purposes, and to infuse them with innovative social functions which were no less meaningful for being often at variance with those for which the weapons had originally been devised in their European settings. In reassessing the historical significance of guns in Central Africa, in other words, what Clapperton Mavhunga calls the specific ‘roles that Africans gave to firearms in contexts internal to their circumstances’ need to be explored alongside more predictable patterns of gun usage.⁹ By so doing, this essay contends that the enthusiasm with which most North-Western Zambians responded to the advent of firearms from ca. 1800 was a consequence of both the adaptable nature of the new technology and the extent to which different groups

the Isaacmans’s study of the Chikunda communities of the lower Zambesi valley: *Slavery and Beyond* (Portsmouth, NH, 2004).

⁹ C. Mavhunga, ‘Firearms Diffusion, Exotic and Indigenous Knowledge Systems in the Lowveld Frontier, South Eastern Zimbabwe, 1870-1920’, *Comparative Technology Transfer and Society*, 1 (2003), 204. Another recent application to African history of some of the insights of Science and Technology Studies is W.K. Storey, *Guns, Race, and Power in Colonial South Africa* (Cambridge, 2008).

imbued it with different social meanings related to pre-existing interests and political structures.

This article is subdivided into three sections. I begin by charting the nineteenth-century expansion of the gun frontier in what would become colonial North-Western Rhodesia and the variegated processes of technological appropriation that underlay it.¹⁰ The second section focuses on the early years of colonial rule; it foregrounds the survival of pre-colonial patterns of trade well into the twentieth century and the extent to which such continuities broadened and consolidated earlier forms of gun usage. Although colonial authorities had long posited a causal link between the ubiquity of firearms and the imperfect administrative normalization of substantial portions of North-Western Rhodesian territory, it was only in the early 1920s that they finally managed comprehensively to regulate African gun ownership and exchange. The implementation and far-reaching social consequences of this long-delayed policy form the subject of the article's last section.

The Gun Frontier in the Nineteenth Century

The appearance of the gun along the present-day border between Zambia and Angola was inscribed in the broader processes of violent socio-economic change occurring in the area from the late eighteenth century. The advancing frontier of the Angolan slave

¹⁰ North-Western Rhodesia (or, to use the diction of the 1899 Order in Council, 'Barotziland–North-Western Rhodesia') was governed by the British South Africa Company and placed under the supervision of the British High Commissioner for South Africa. It formed a distinctive administrative unit between the late 1890s and 1911, the year in which it was amalgamated with another BSAC-run territory, North-Eastern Rhodesia.

trade – driven mainly by Afro-Portuguese and Ovimbundu entrepreneurs (locally known as ‘Mambari’) – ushered in both new dangers and opportunities for both the small- and large-scale societies located on the southern periphery of what Jan Vansina has felicitously called the ‘Lunda commonwealth’.¹¹ Further geopolitical transformations owed less to the peripheral workings of merchant capitalism than to the northern manifestations of the demographic dislocations of the South African ‘Mfecane’. The most dramatic population movement to affect the region under discussion was that which led a group of Sotho-speaking migrants, the Kololo, to overrun the area’s most populous and complex polity, the Luyana or Lozi kingdom of the upper Zambezi floodplain and surrounding districts, in the early 1840s. It is to this latter area that we first turn in our attempt to chart the movement of the gun frontier through North-Western Zambia in the course of the nineteenth century.

Slow beginnings in Barotseland

Unlike Walima Kalusa, who has recently described Barotseland and the Caprivi Strip under the Kololo as awash with guns,¹² I view Livingstone and Silva Porto’s overall paucity of references to modern weapons in the area, the ‘immense’ number of

¹¹ J. Vansina, ‘It Never Happened: Kinguri’s Exodus and Its Consequences’, *History in Africa*, 25 (1998), 387.

¹² W.T. Kalusa, ‘Elders, Young Men, and David Livingstone’s “Civilizing Mission”: Revisiting the Disintegration of the Kololo Kingdom, 1851-1864’, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 42 (2009), 67-8.

elephants and other game near both Linyati and Sesheke and in the floodplain,¹³ the weapons' abnormally high prices,¹⁴ and the attested poor marksmanship of the Kololo as indications that firearms were still rare in Barotseland in the 1850s.¹⁵ A few Kololo royals had some 'wretched' guns which they 'wretchedly used',¹⁶ and king Sekeletu's opponent, Mpepe, the governor of Naliele, was given 'a small cannon' – or 'a large blunderbuss to be mounted as a cannon' – by Silva Porto in 1853.¹⁷ But stabbing and throwing spears and shields made of hides remained the dominant Kololo weapons throughout the decade – as is also borne out by the facility with which the trader Chapman conned Ponwane, 'the headman of Linyati', and other Kololo grandees in 1853. Having been asked to repair some guns, he took advantage of their 'ignorance' of modern arms, 'selected 5 of the easiest and repaired them for a tusk worth £15, at which rate [he] pocketed [his] pride.'¹⁸ It was this same ignorance on the part of the Kololo that apparently prompted the Tawana chief Letsholathebe to challenge Sekeletu's authority by appropriating some of the latter's ivory. Having recently acquired guns,

¹³ D. Livingstone (ed. I. Shapera), *Livingstone's Private Journals, 1851-1853* (London, 1960), 194, 215, 237. See also *idem* (ed. I. Shapera), *Livingstone's African Journal, 1853-1856* (London, 1963), II, 294; and A.F. da Silva Porto, *Viagens e Apontamentos de um Portuense em África* (Lisbon, 1942), 121, 150.

¹⁴ D. Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa* (New York, 1858), 106, 209.

¹⁵ For comments on Kololo marksmanship, see *ibid.*, 228, 279-80. Having repeatedly been asked for 'gun medicine', Livingstone eventually volunteered to teach the Kololo paramount, Sekeletu, how to shoot. *Private Journals*, 143, 147.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 232 and Livingstone, *Missionary Travels*, 235-36.

¹⁸ J. Chapman (ed. E.C. Tabler), *Travels in the Interior of South Africa, 1849-1863* (Cape Town, 1971; 1st ed., London, 1868), I, 116, 114.

Livingstone explained, Letsholathebe now considered himself ‘more than a match’ for the less well armed Kololo.¹⁹

To say that firearms were scarce in mid-nineteenth-century Barotseland is not to say that the Kololo resisted their introduction. The opposite, in fact, was true, for the conquerors of the Lozi were clearly keen on European weapons, the destructive potential of which they had experienced at the hands of Griqua musketeers at the start of their northward migration in the 1820s, and which they expected to use to contain the threat posed by Mzilikazi’s Ndebele.²⁰ It is clearly significant that when he first met Livingstone’s party in 1851, Sebitwane, Sekeletu’s father and predecessor, was convinced that ‘our teaching was chiefly the art of shooting [...], and that by our giving him guns he would thereby procure peace [...]’.²¹ Thus, the fact that Barotseland remained lightly armed until at least the early 1860s ought not to be ascribed to cultural opposition to military innovation on the part of assegai-wielding warriors. More simply, it was the result of the area’s comparatively late incorporation in Ovimbundu and Afro-Portugese trading networks. This, in turn, was a consequence of the very specific requirements of the upper Zambesi floodplain’s political economy. The internal need for slaves for agricultural purposes and public works had led the last pre-Kololo Lozi king, Mulambwa Santulu, to shut his country to Mambari slave and gun traders in the early nineteenth century.²² It was only after the death of Mulambwa, the civil war that

¹⁹ Livingstone, *Missionary Travels*, 217.

²⁰ D. and C. Livingstone, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Zambezi and Its Tributaries* (London, 1865), 292; A.D. Roberts, *A History of Zambia* (London, 1976), 127; M. Mainga, *Bulozi under the Luyana Kings* (London, 1973), 84.

²¹ Livingstone, *Private Journals*, 16-7.

²² *Ibid.*, 203, and Livingstone, *Missionary Travels*, 105-06.

followed it and the related Kololo conquest in the 1840s that Angolan traders returned in force to Barotseland, whose new rulers were now ready to export some war captives and, more importantly, ivory to the Ovimbundu plateau and, thence, the west coast. The ideal conditions faced by Silva Porto in early-1850s Buluzi, where ivory was cheap and plentiful and foreign wares scarce and expensive, prove that the long-distance trade was still in a relatively embryonic stage,²³ and that the Kololo, for all their eagerness to experiment with foreign imports, had not yet managed to bridge the technological gap that separated them from some of their neighbours.

Guns and Luvale men

Spurned by the Lozi in the early part of the nineteenth century, Angolan traders had found more willing partners around the headwaters of the Zambesi. The first recorded trading visit to the Luvale ('Lovar'), then living mainly along the middle Luena river, took place in 1794-1795. At the time, the people of *Kakenge*²⁴ ('Caquinga') and *Chinyama* ('Quinhama') were already said to be 'warlike' (*'muito inclinados a Guerra'*), but still only armed with 'bows and arrows, spears and knives, and wooden shields.'²⁵ They, confirmed a coeval anonymous report, had no firearms, 'because they

²³ M.E. Madeira Santos, 'Introdução (Trajectória do Comércio do Bié)', in *idem* (ed.), *Viagens e Apontamentos de um Portuense em África* (Coimbra, 1986), I, 114-17.

²⁴ Hereditary titles are written throughout in italics. I use standard characters only when the title in question is accompanied by the personal name of its holder, or when the context makes it plain that I am alluding to one particular, if unnamed, individual incumbent.

²⁵ A. da Silva Teixeira and J. da Silva Costa, 'Relação da viagem [...]', *Arquivos de Angola*, I (1935); von Oppen, *Terms of Trade*, 176.

[did] not know how to use them.’²⁶ The situation, however, evolved rapidly, with gun imports increasing in direct proportion to slave and, from the 1830s, ivory and beeswax exports. By the early 1850s, the Luvale, not unlike their western neighbours, the Chokwe, had accumulated ‘many guns’,²⁷ and they were among the most important suppliers of slaves to Angola.²⁸ The then Kakenge boasted a long connection with Mambari traders, by whom, however, he was feared, for he and other ‘wild Luvale’ (*wilden Ka-lóbar-Völkern*) were not averse to attacking passing caravans with their weapons.²⁹

Numbers, however, tell only part of the story. What really matters are the uses to which the Luvale put their abundant muskets and the ways in which the latter interacted with pre-existing socio-economic structures and gender identities. The relationship between hunting and the spread of firearms among the Luvale was probably complex and dialectical: if well-developed autochthonous hunting traditions are very likely to have facilitated the rapid adoption of guns, firearms themselves must have transformed and strengthened such traditions. Technological considerations are significant, too. In comparison with the later breech-loaders, ‘the old muzzle-loaders’, Storey has recently argued with reference to South Africa, constituted an ‘adaptable and “flexible” technology’.³⁰ Since muskets were typically made from wrought iron (as opposed to steel), pre-existing iron-working skills – as the record clearly bears out for the Luvale’s

²⁶ ‘Derrota de Benguella para o sertão’, in A. de Albuquerque Felner (ed.), *Angola* (Lisbon, 1940), II, 25.

²⁷ Livingstone, *African Journal*, II, 270; *Private Journals*, 42.

²⁸ von Oppen, *Terms of Trade*, 59-60.

²⁹ L. Magyar, ‘Ladislaus Magyar’s Erforschung von Inner-Afrika’, *Petermann’s Geographische Mitteilungen*, 6 (1860), 233.

³⁰ Storey, *Guns*, 140.

immediate neighbours, the Chokwe³¹ – could be so refined as to greatly prolong the lifespan of a damaged weapon and/or to keep a defective one in serviceable order. While gun-flints were manufactured locally,³² single-shot muzzle-loaders could also be loaded with most kinds of home-made ammunition and easily used in association with earlier hunting equipments. When all these factors are borne in mind – and due allowance is made for the patrimony of shooting skills that the Luvale are likely to have accumulated through sheer practice – it is easier to understand why the *lazarinas* became a crucial tool of production around the headwaters of the Zambesi – one whose extensive deployment would have a significant environmental impact.

To be sure, when describing the situation obtaining among the Lunda of *Shinde*, the Luvale antagonists, Livingstone asserted that ‘their bows and arrows [had] been nearly as efficacious in clearing the country of game as firearms’.³³ Yet he remained convinced that guns did give Luvale hunters a distinctive advantage over the less well-armed Lunda. In comparison with the Luvale, who ‘enjoy[ed] the privilege of hunting on both sides’ of the upper Zambesi, the ‘Balonda [were] able to do little’ – he remarked in July 1855, when he also noted that the Lunda-controlled left bank was still richer in game than the right one, which had been ‘much hunted by the Balobale who have guns’.³⁴ Without being dismissive of traditional elephant hunting techniques, the skills demanded by which he had had the chance to admire in Linyati,³⁵ Livingstone

³¹ J.C. Miller, ‘Cokwe Trade and Conquest’, in R. Gray and D. Birmingham (eds.), *Pre-Colonial African Trade* (London, 1970), 176; von Oppen, *Terms of Trade*, 173.

³² D.W. Phillipson, ‘Gun-Flint Manufacture in North-Western Zambia’, *Antiquity*, 43 (1969).

³³ Livingstone, *African Journal*, I, 45.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 270, 271-72.

³⁵ See, e.g., Livingstone, *Missionary Travels*, 211.

was also in no doubt as to the ultimate consequences of the diffusion of firearms for elephant herds. The Kololo had only just begun to hunt elephants with guns, he wrote in 1853; if they continued, ‘very soon none will appear in this part of the country. They retire before the gun sooner than any other animal.’³⁶ Indeed, environmental degeneration was rapid among the gun-rich Luvale, for it was at about this time that the middle Luena seems to have exhausted its ivory supplies. Thereafter, whatever little ivory the Luvale continued to export alongside slaves and beeswax came mainly from newly conquered Lunda territory.³⁷

Hunting and warfare have been described as ‘intimately connected’ activities, not least because ‘the hunt is often the training ground for war’ and ‘shooting skills that developed in one setting could be transferred to the other.’³⁸ Livingstone might well have subscribed to this view, for, *contra* much recent scholarly literature, he never questioned the military significance of firearms, going so far as theorizing that, by making local conflicts ‘more terrible’, and by reducing the gap between ‘the strong and the brave’, on the one hand, and ‘the weak & cautious’, on the other, guns would work towards reducing the incidence of war in Central Africa.³⁹ The available written sources do not permit to gauge the extent to which the *lazarinas* affected Luvale tactics and organization. On the basis of oral evidence alone, Papstein concluded that warfare on the upper Zambesi remained the affair of small bands of marauders bent on taking the

³⁶ Livingstone, *Private Journals*, 245.

³⁷ Magyar, ‘Ladislau Magyar’s Erforschung’, 234; Madeira Santos, ‘Introdução’, 83.

³⁸ Storey, *Guns*, 78.

³⁹ Livingstone, *Private Journals*, 177. In the much the same vein, Chapman called the gun a ‘potent peacemaker’ in the early 1860s; *Travels*, II, 149. This, of course, was not an unusual idea among European liberals before WWI.

enemy by surprise. But even if one accepts this hypothesis (and the unsubstantiated contention that the gun was more often used in war ‘as a blunderbuss rather than as a precision instrument’⁴⁰), there is no doubt that the wide availability of firearms increased Luvale military potential. This is borne out by their reported ability to repel a Kololo party in the 1840s,⁴¹ and, especially, by their successes during the nineteenth-century phase of the so-called Wars of Ulamba, in the course of which gun-wielding Luvale slave raiders attacked – and gradually encroached upon – the territories of the Lunda of *Shinde* to the east of the Luena and the southern Lunda of *Katema*, *Kapenda* and others to the north-east.⁴² By the time of Livingstone’s passage in the 1850s, the Lunda of *Shinde* had been in touch with Ovimbundu traders for almost as long as their Luvale enemies.⁴³ Yet, for reasons that remain unclear, they had been less successful in modernizing their armament, and their best responses to Luvale aggression were to beef up their ranks by absorbing fleeing Luvale refugees and to strengthen the defences around their villages and even individual households.⁴⁴

By ca. 1870, guns had fully permeated Luvale society, changing it and being changed by it. In 1875, the small party of armed Luvale hunters whom Cameron met to the north of Nana Kandundu, the *Nyakatoros*’ new capital in former Lunda territory,

⁴⁰ R.J. Papstein, ‘The Upper Zambezi: A History of the Luvale People, 1000-1900’, PhD thesis, UCLA, 1978, 171-72.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 191-92.

⁴² Direct witnesses of the last stages of Luvale expansion include V. L. Cameron, *Across Africa* (London, 1885; 1st ed., 1877), 406; F.S. Arnot, *Garenganze* (London, 1968; 1st ed., 1889), 159, 161, 165, 248; and D. Crawford, in F.S. Arnot, *Bihé and Garenganze* (London, 1893), 45-6, 51.

⁴³ Livingstone, *African Journal*, I, 55, 56.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 45, II, 264.

were very intrigued by the explorer's breech-loading rifle. But even though they examined it 'with much admiration', 'they did not consider it sufficiently long, their own weapons being lengthy Portuguese flint-locks.' It took a practical demonstration of the rifle's penetrative power and accuracy to dispel the hunters' knowing scepticism⁴⁵ – one that distinguished them sharply from the gun-poor Kololo, who, as we have seen, placed a blind trust in Chapman and other foreign 'experts' in the new technology. Not only did the Luvale continue to pose a threat to Mambari caravans and other travellers plying the increasingly important trade route between Angola and Katanga,⁴⁶ but their gun-driven prowess in hunting and warfare also nurtured a strong, gendered martial ethos. This was much in evidence in 1895, at the time of Coillard's visit to Kakenge, then living very close to the spot where Livingstone's Shinde had resided some forty years earlier. On the day that preceded his first meeting with the chief, the missionary and his Lozi escort were made the target of repeated hostile demonstrations on the part of 'young men all armed with guns'. After a tense night punctuated by war dances and continuous discharges of firearms, Coillard was finally brought to the presence of Kakenge. 'The place was full of men, decked in their war-paint, and surrounded by bundles of guns.' The menacing atmosphere eased a little on the following day, but Kakenge still warned Coillard not to "take the Balubale for women."⁴⁷ The link between guns and masculinity among Luvale hunters and raiders was confirmed a few years after Coillard's passage, when a British official explicitly reported that it was

⁴⁵ Cameron, *Across Africa*, 405-06; von Oppen, *Terms of Trade*, 172.

⁴⁶ Cameron, *Across Africa*, p. 407; Arnot, *Garenganze*, 249; and Crawford in Arnot, *Bihé and Garenganze*, 39.

⁴⁷ F. Coillard, *On the Threshold of Central Africa* (London, 1971; 1st ed., 1897), 610-15.

‘unusual and so rare an occurrence to see a man without a gun [at Kakenge’s], as it [was] to encounter a woman without her infant.’⁴⁸

Guns and royal power among the Lozi

As the Luvale consolidated their gun-centred social system, Barotseland, free from Kololo overrule since 1864, was undergoing a dramatic transformation. By means of enhanced contacts with ivory traders and hunters from the west and the south, Sipopa, the restored Lozi *Litunga*, had embarked on a programme of accelerated military overhaul with a view to consolidating his still fragile internal position.⁴⁹ By the mid-1870s, Barotseland’s firepower had increased exponentially. Having spent several months in Sesheke in 1875, the Czech explorer Holub hazarded an estimate of ‘the number of guns that had been introduced into the country from the south and west’ over the course of the previous few years. This – he believed – ‘amounted to 500 flint muskets, 1,500 ordinary percussion muskets, eighty percussion elephant-guns, 150 rifles, thirty double-barrelled guns of various sorts, ten breech-loaders, and three revolvers.’⁵⁰ Thanks also to the more advanced and specialized firearms that the southern traders were importing into the country alongside older models, the Lozi, unlike the Kololo, were now routinely hunting elephant with guns, though they still

⁴⁸ Harding to S. Admin., 27 March 1900, NAZ, NW/HC4/2/1, VI.

⁴⁹ Silva Porto travelled to Buluzi on an almost yearly basis between 1863 and 1869 (Madeira Santos, ‘Introdução’, 149). After a first visit to Barotseland in 1871, the Englishman George Westbeeck inaugurated a trading station at Pandamatenga, some sixty miles to the south of the Victoria Falls, and rapidly became the ‘most influential European’ in the area. G. Prins, *The Hidden Hippopotamus* (Cambridge, 1980), 174.

⁵⁰ E. Holub, *Seven Years in South Africa* (London, 1881), II, 174, 217, 341-42.

used them in tandem with locally-produced iron ‘elephant assegai[s]’.⁵¹ During the great hunt of 1875, as many as ‘10,000 shots’ were said to have been fired in the general mêlée that followed Sipopa’s ill-timed first shot.⁵² Before long the fauna of Barotseland – just like that of the Luvale heartland a few decades earlier – began to show signs of exhaustion.⁵³ By the mid-1880s, Lubosi Lewanika, the Lozi king since 1878, was clearly concerned by the environmental consequences of the widespread adoption of firearms in hunting. It was probably for this reason that, in 1886, he forbade the use of guns during the annual royal hunt.⁵⁴

Lozi rulers drew on a tradition of political and economic centralization that set them apart from the more fragmented Luvale chieftainships to the north. It is therefore not surprising that, unlike the latter, the former always did their best to exert a close control over the kingdom’s external trade and the movement of firearms that came in its wake. Not only did Sipopa resolve to spend most of his time in Sesheke, to the south of the floodplain proper, with a view to being closer to Westbeeck and other traders from the south,⁵⁵ but his monopolistic ambitions also led him to forbid most kinds of exchanges between his subjects and visiting merchants.⁵⁶ Ivory, which Sipopa accumulated through the payment of tribute or by sponsoring the activities of hunters,

⁵¹ Ibid., II, 339-40.

⁵² Ibid., II, 244-45, 256-57.

⁵³ E. Holub, *Emil Holub’s Travels North of the Zambezi, 1885-6* (Lusaka, 1975; 1st ed., Vienna, 1890), 272-73.

⁵⁴ G. Westbeeck, ‘The Diary of George Westbeeck’, in E.C. Tabler (ed.), *Trade and Travel in Early Barotseland* (London, 1963), 92.

⁵⁵ Holub, *Seven Years*, II, 134; Arnot, *Garenganze*, 90.

⁵⁶ See, e.g., Holub, *Seven Years*, II, 125.

was considered ‘crown-property, and it [was] a capital offence for anyone to carry on any transactions with regards to [it] on his own account.’⁵⁷ The trade in guns was another exclusive royal prerogative.⁵⁸ Distribution, too, was closely monitored. Unlike other products, Holub was told, firearms were never permanently given away by Sipopa, but only ‘lent’ to hunters, chiefs and subjects with the proviso that they could ‘be recalled at any moment at the royal pleasure.’⁵⁹ So prominent were firearms in the entourage of Sipopa that the same eyewitness was led to believe that the second most important ‘officer of state’ in the Lozi kingdom was ‘Masangu’, the ‘governor of the arsenal’, whose principal responsibility was the ‘supervision of the ammunition and guns distributed to the vassals’. ‘He was likewise superintendent of all the native smiths. I found him employed in repairing a gun, for which he was using hammers, chisels, pincers, and bellows, all of his own making, and of the most perfect construction that I had yet seen in South Africa.’⁶⁰ This competence, of course, was a recent development in Barotseland, and it attests powerfully, not only to the increasingly significant role of firearms in the region’s political and economic life, but also to the effectiveness with which Central Africans were learning to overcome some of the new technology’s limitations by honing pre-existing iron-working skills. There is, indeed, some evidence that Sipopa was closely associated with firearms in the minds of his people: when the king was ousted in 1876, one of the rebels’ first actions was to throw ‘the great bulk’ of his guns into the Zambesi.⁶¹

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 146-47, 142.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 200.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, II, 142, 160.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, II, 228, 238.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, II, 341-42.

Lubosi Lewanika, who wrested the kingship from Mwanawina, Sipopa's successor, in 1878, started off with comparatively few guns, as evidenced by his attempt to requisition all the arms and powder in the possession of Serpa Pinto, who visited the royal capital of Lealui in August-September of the same year.⁶² However, by the time he raided the cattle-rich Mashukulumbwe or Ila in 1882, Lewanika had certainly obtained some guns, for the exploits of the ““weapon with the lightning”” made a huge impression on its victims.⁶³ Lewanika's trading policies mirrored Sipopa's. In June 1886, Holub, on his second trip to the north of the Zambesi, became acquainted with 'Liomba', the 'trade minister' whom Lewanika had sent to intercept Westbeeche at the Kazungula ferry and make 'all the purchases for the royal household as well as to purchase all arms for the empire on the king's account'.⁶⁴ A few months later, Watson, one of Westbeeche's partners, bought some ivory from the headman of Sesheke. Both parties were aware of committing 'a capital crime [...] since all ivory is private property of the king, which he uses, in turn, to buy arms and ammunition for all his subjects.'⁶⁵ And firearms Lewanika did continue to buy throughout the late 1880s, for Coillard was 'astonished' by the number of guns available to the Lozi at the time of their second raid against the gun-poor Ila early in 1888. Even though he thought the assegai was 'still the national weapon', the missionary could not help noticing that the Lozi now had arms of 'every calibre. To be sure, they are not the most modern pattern; the majority are flint-

⁶² A.A. de Serpa Pinto, *How I Crossed Africa* (San Francisco, 1881), 193.

⁶³ Holub, *Emil Holub's Travels*, 205. For the date of Lewanika's first raid against the Ila, see Westbeeche to Arnot, Lealui, 5 Oct. 1882, in Arnot, *Garenganze*, 62.

⁶⁴ Holub, *Emil Holub's Travels*, 9.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 279.

lock. Never mind, they are *guns*! And to a Morotsi the name alone is magic.’⁶⁶ Lewanika’s enduring interest in guns – which the Lozi were now undoubtedly employing in warfare, alongside hunting – is also attested by Selous, who, in September 1888, offered the king ‘a very good hammerless shot gun’,⁶⁷ and by the nature of the presents given to him by concession-seekers Ware and Lochner in 1889 and 1890, respectively. Invariably, these included considerable quantities of Martini-Henry rifles and ammunitions.⁶⁸

Barotseland’s centralized political system and monarchical tradition shaped the social role attributed to firearms in the region. As pointed out above, the Lozi kings’ manifest monopolistic tendencies found no equivalent among the Luvale, where political and economic power was, as Coillard put it, much more ‘diffused’.⁶⁹ It follows that, on the headwaters of the Zambesi, ordinary villagers participated earnestly in the market economy as epitomized by Ovimbundu and Afro-Portuguese caravans, and that the trade’s by-products, including firearms, spread well beyond the chiefly strata.⁷⁰ In Barotseland, conversely, access to firearms, powder and ammunitions seems always to have been closely dependent on the *Litungas*’ patronage. Thus, it probably makes sense to describe gun use among the Lozi as being more elitist than among the Luvale. Among the Lozi, to put it differently, firearms were less an attribute of masculinity than a means of political centralization and a symbol of high birth or proximity to the royal court. In Barotseland, as a Marxist historian once argued, firearms served mainly to

⁶⁶ Coillard, *Threshold*, 300.

⁶⁷ F.C. Selous, *Travel and Adventure in South-East Africa* (London, 1893), 252.

⁶⁸ Coillard, *Threshold*, 356, 387; Mainga, *Bulozi*, 176; and Prins, *Hidden Hippopotamus*, 220.

⁶⁹ Coillard, *Threshold*, 604.

⁷⁰ See, e.g., von Oppen, *Terms of Trade*, 244, 354.

strengthen the ‘coercive apparatus’ of the landowning aristocracy⁷¹; among the Luvale, they were the common man’s weapons of choice and a critical component of his social identity.

A Kaonde currency

While the cattle-keeping Ila of the middle Kafue river remained lightly armed until the end of the century, other groups on the furthest reaches of Mambari commercial penetration responded more readily to the new opportunities for investing in military modernization. This was a particularly attractive option for people, such as the Kaonde of present-day Solwezi and Kasempa districts, whose livelihoods had long depended to a considerable extent on hunting.⁷² Near the modern Congolese border, the aggressiveness of Msiri’s Yeke must have also contributed to accelerating the process of Kaonde rearmament.⁷³ The traditions or reminiscences recorded by Melland in the early 1920s certainly suggest that some guns were being used in warfare among the Kaonde of *Kapijimpanga* and the neighbouring Lamba of *Mulonga* and *Kalilele* in the latter part of the nineteenth century.⁷⁴ The evidence is more detailed for southern Kaonde groups. Around present-day Kasempa, firearms were relatively uncommon until the late 1870s. In 1878 or 1880, when he killed his cousin Kabambala to assume the dignity of Kasempa, Jipumpu is said to have had ‘only one muzzle loader’ at his

⁷¹ W.G. Clarence-Smith, ‘Slaves, Commoners and Landlords in Buluzi, c. 1875 to 1906’, *Journal of African History*, 20 (1979), 227.

⁷² F.H. Melland, *In Witch-Bound Africa* (London, 1967; 1st ed., 1923), chapter 22.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 44, 273, 274, 275; H. Legros, *Chasseurs d’ivoire* (Brussels, 1996), 92.

⁷⁴ Melland, *Witch-Bound Africa*, 273-77.

disposal.⁷⁵ However, thanks to both his temporary alliance with Yeke raiders and partnership with Mambari traders, Jipumpu – who is also remembered as a great elephant hunter – must have been able to beef up his arsenal quickly and effectively. For between the 1880s and the 1890s he became a minor regional warlord in his own right, raiding some Ila communities for slaves, expelling the Nkoya leader Mwene Kahare from his capital, and even defeating a large expedition sent by Lewanika in ca. 1897 to support Jipumpu's rival, the fellow Kaonde chief Mubambe Mushima.⁷⁶ Jipumpu's great victory owed something both to the fact that most of his men were now 'armed with muzzle loaders' and to the impregnable nature of his stronghold on Kamusongolwa's hill, a high 'kopje [...] well provided with good deep caves where most of the people could entirely hide themselves from being shot.'⁷⁷

It was from about this time that the Kaonde – among whom cattle, the key form of transferable wealth in the territories to the south and west, could not thrive on account of the presence of the tsetse fly – began to conceive of muzzle-loaders 'as a form of currency [...], serving most of the purposes [...] for which other natives use[d] cattle or slaves.'⁷⁸ Gradually, 'all transactions regarding wives, inheritance, succession, compensation, illness, deaths, burials, and initiation ceremonies' came to entail 'the loaning or passing of guns and powder.'⁷⁹ It is not clear whether, in using firearms as

⁷⁵ S.J. Chibanza, 'Formation of the Kasempa Chieftainship', in *idem*, *Central Bantu Historical Texts I* (Lusaka, 1961), 52, 49

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 56, 58, 59, 62; W. van Binsbergen, *Tears of Rain* (London and New York, 1992), 155; Copeman to SNA, 15 Jan. 1906, NAZ, KDE 2/36/1.

⁷⁷ Chibanza, 'Formation', 63, 59.

⁷⁸ Hall to SNA, 23 Jan. 1923, NAZ, NR/B1/2/368.

⁷⁹ Parsons to Hall, 23 Jan. 1923, NAZ, NR/B1/2/368.

standards of value for social payments and even everyday transactions, the Kaonde were inaugurating an entirely novel system or modernizing an earlier tradition of regulated exchanges of hunting weapons. What is certain, however, is that such practice explains the extraordinary extent to which the muzzle-loader embedded itself in the Kaonde social structure and culture.

Gun Running in the Early Twentieth Century

Colonial rule and gun control laws went hand-in-hand in most localities. Not so in North-Western Rhodesia, where the unlicensed importation of guns, powder and ammunitions was forbidden in 1901,⁸⁰ but where ownership of firearms by Africans remained initially unregulated, since the whole of the country was ‘by a fiction [...] treated as having been under the suzerainty of and acquired by treaty with Lewanika. Consequently the natives of that portion of Northern Rhodesia have benefited in that they have been able to obtain firearms without much difficulty.’⁸¹ Early local experiments in voluntary registration of guns did take place in select North-Western Rhodesian localities, such as the Batoka district from 1903.⁸² But these uncoordinated initiatives did not amount to a coherent effort at gun licensing or, even less, to an attempt at enforcing such near universal African disarmament as that brought about by

⁸⁰ See Proclamation no. 18 of 1901, in *Cape of Good Hope Government Gazette*, 10 Sept. 1901.

⁸¹ Macdonnel to Secretary to the Administrator (Northern Rhodesia), 20 June 1912, NAZ, NR/B1/2/368.

⁸² DC (Batoka), ‘A System for the Voluntary Registration of Native Guns’, encl. in *idem* to Coryndon, 22 June 1903, NAZ, NW/A3/30.

the unyielding North-Eastern Rhodesia's 'Fire-Arms Restricting Regulations (Natives and Asiatics)'.⁸³ Game laws were similarly skewed in favour of North-Western Rhodesian Africans. Whereas their North-Eastern Rhodesian peers had been expected to take out hunting licences from as early as 1900,⁸⁴ Africans comprised within the boundaries of North-Western Rhodesia were explicitly exempted from the stipulations of the first game preservation regulations to be issued in the country in 1905. Once more, this privilege was 'in accordance with the provisions of the Concession granted by King Lewanika Paramount Chief of the Barotse Nation to the British South Africa Company dated October 17th 1900'.⁸⁵

The absence of internal regulations concerning African gun ownership and hunting turned gun running from Portuguese West Africa into one of the defining features of the early colonial period in North-Western Rhodesia. A number of additional factors help explain the substantial proportions assumed by the phenomenon. While the demand for captive labour in Angola remained high long after the formal abolition of slavery,⁸⁶ Portuguese officials struggled to establish even the barest form of administrative control over the sprawling territory that made up the central and eastern regions of the colony.⁸⁷ They, moreover, were strongly suspected of having a stake in

⁸³ Government Notice no. 4 of 1901, in *British Central Africa Gazette*, 31 Jan. 1901.

⁸⁴ Government Notice no. 4 of 1900, in *British Central Africa Gazette*, 31 Dec. 1900, followed by Government Notice no. 9 of 1902, in *British Central Africa Gazette*, 31 Aug. 1902.

⁸⁵ Proclamation no. 1 of 1905, in *North-Eastern Rhodesia Government Gazette*, 29 Apr. 1905.

⁸⁶ See, e.g., Roberts, *History of Zambia*, 170.

⁸⁷ See, e.g., R. Pélissier, *Les guerres grises* (Orgeval, 1977), chapter 16.

the illicit trade,⁸⁸ which was also fuelled by the seemingly unrestricted importation and sale of gunpowder in the country under their charge.⁸⁹ Finally, Ovimbundu and Afro-Portuguese smuggling activities were greatly facilitated by both the extent of the frontier between Angola and North-Western Rhodesia and, especially, the uncertainty surrounding its definition until 1905, the year in which the King of Italy was requested to adjudicate the long-running boundary dispute between the British and Portuguese governments. This meant that throughout the early 1900s Mambari traders could continue to operate in North-Western Rhodesia safe in the knowledge that all that was required to avoid prosecution and/or the confiscation of their merchandise was to beat a quick retreat to such contested border areas as British patrols dared not encroach upon for fear of causing a diplomatic incident.⁹⁰

As in the nineteenth century, Barotseland's wealth remained a powerful magnet for Angolan traders, some of whom were reported to be buying cattle in Lealui in June 1900 in exchange for 'gunpowder, arms and calico'.⁹¹ Another 'large caravan [...] from Bihe' made its entry into Bulozzi a few days later, prompting the Acting British Resident to voice his 'apprehension' at 'the constant increase of the importation of arms and

⁸⁸ See, e.g., Gibbons to Director of Military Intelligence, 2 Oct. 1899, and Harding to Secretary (BSAC), 4 July 1900, both in NAZ, KDE 2/44/1-3.

⁸⁹ Harding to Secretary, 4 July 1900; H. Schomburgk, *Wild und wilde in herzen Afrikas* (Berlin, 1926; 1st ed., 1910), 187.

⁹⁰ See, e.g., DC (Lealui) to S. Admin., 4 Feb. 1904, and Ag. S. Admin. to Ag. DC (Lealui), 7 March 1904, both in NAZ, NW/A3/24/9. Cf. also L.H. Gann, 'The End of the Slave Trade in British Central Africa', *Rhodes-Livingstone Journal*, 16 (1954), 49.

⁹¹ Harding to Secretary (BSAC), 25 June 1900, NAZ, NW/A6/1/1.

ammunition from the West Coast to this country.’⁹² At first, the impact of the import regulations of 1901 was clearly negligible. In 1903, Lewanika – who still used the allocation of firearms and, especially, ammunitions as a means to bolster his position vis-à-vis an aristocracy who was bearing the brunt of the British South Africa Company’s steady encroachment upon many of its former prerogatives⁹³ – was able to persuade the administration to order as many as 4,000 Martini and other cartridges for distribution among his trusted *indunas*. The Company acceded to the king’s request, for it expected that this ‘very marked concession’ would ‘stop all illegal traffic in powder and cartridges.’⁹⁴ In fact, seemingly condoned by Lewanika,⁹⁵ gun smuggling remained common,⁹⁶ though the boundary award of 1905 finally equipped British officials to deal with it more effectively. The ‘half-caste’ trader Ferreira was one of the first traffickers to experience the fast-improving boundary-policing capacity of the BSAC in Barotseland. First expelled from the district when found in possession of ‘65 guns and a large supply of ammunition’ in July 1911, he had his stock (which included 25 flintlocks) confiscated and his large camp burned down when he was apprehended for a second time inside British territory a few months later.⁹⁷

⁹² Harding to Secretary, 4 July 1900.

⁹³ G.L. Caplan, *The Elites of Barotseland, 1878-1969* (London, 1970), chapter 4.

⁹⁴ Aitkens to Coryndon, 17 Mar. 1903, and S. Admin. to Aitkens, 14 Aug. 1903, both in NAZ, NW/A3/3/2.

⁹⁵ Aitkens to S. Admin., 7 Mar. 1906, NAZ, NW/A3/3/2.

⁹⁶ See, e.g., DC (‘Falls District’) to S. Admin., 4 Aug. 1903, NAZ, NW/A3/30; Aitkens to SNA, 24 Aug. 1905, NAZ, NW/A3/24/9.

⁹⁷ Thwaites to McKinnon, 27 Nov. 1911, encl. in Wallace to Gladstone, 7 Feb. 1912, NAZ, NR/HC1/3/1,

The gradual – and never entirely complete – closing down of Barotseland from 1905 did not pose insurmountable problems for Mambari gun runners, who were also very active in the still almost entirely unpoliced territory to north, where, of course, they boasted long-established trading links with the Luvale, whose aggressive militarism and masculinity they had contributed to beget over the course of the previous century. Among the Luvale of *Kakenge* and *Nyakatoro*, the slave trade was still thriving in ca. 1900, with ‘a gun or 40 or 80 yards of calico’ being ‘the purchase value of an adult slave.’⁹⁸ Rubber exports were also being paid in guns and gunpowder, which Lovale men bought ‘far more readily than ordinary trade goods’.⁹⁹ Undoubtedly many of these guns also found their way to the Luvale and Lunda inhabiting what would become the Balovale sub-district of Barotseland in 1907-1908. Writing some 45 years after the events, Native Commissioner Venning, the first official in charge of Balovale (present-day Zambezi), still remembered vividly the ‘large numbers of guns’ owned by ‘both the Malunda and Malovale’ and the troubles he faced in bringing illegal imports from Angola under control. Venning also claimed to have witnessed ‘the last slave raid’ to occur in the area.¹⁰⁰ This may have been so, but there is no doubt that Mambari gun runners remained a force to be reckoned with for some more years to come. A large trading outpost in a fortified Luvale village, for instance, was discovered in 1911. Venning’s successor surmised it must have been ‘established there quite a long time.’¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Gibbons to Director of Military Intelligence, 2 Oct. 1899.

⁹⁹ Harding to S. Admin., 27 Mar. 1900.

¹⁰⁰ J.H. Venning, ‘Early Days in Balovale’, *Northern Rhodesia Journal*, 2 (1955), 55, 57.

¹⁰¹ Palmer to McKinnon, 31 Aug. 1911, encl. in McKinnon to Wallace, 3 Oct. 1911, NAZ, NR/HC1/3/1,

The trade in slaves and guns was also much in evidence in neighbouring Mwinilunga, where, again, no administrative work took place until the beginning of 1908, when the Balunda sub-district of Kasempa district was got off the ground by NC Bellis. Mambari dealers had certainly been at work in the area at the end of the nineteenth century,¹⁰² and they continued their frequent visits throughout the 1900s. In 1904, the then Kanongesha 'had seven or eight slaves for sale and was expecting the arrival of Mambari purchasers.'¹⁰³ Two years later, Copeman, the Kasempa District Commissioner, and an escort of Barotse Native Police travelled to within fifty miles of Mwinilunga with a view to intercepting 'certain Portuguese traders' who had been reported to be 'trading guns, powder and caps in return for slaves, ivory and rubber'. Three 'stores' were eventually located at Salimi's. A 'large quantity' of forbidden goods was discovered, while the 'many empty powder canisters which were found in the different stores and lying about the camps testified to the large trade which has been going on in this commodity.'¹⁰⁴

As has been argued above, the Kaonde of *Kasempa* had responded enthusiastically to the long-distance trade in the latter part of the nineteenth century, incorporating Mambari-imported guns into their hunting economy and recasting them as a form of transferable wealth. By 1901, their area was 'flooded with guns and

¹⁰² A. St. H. Gibbons, *Africa from South to North through Marotseland* (London and New York, 1904), II, 33, 38-9, 44.

¹⁰³ 'Extract from Mr. Carlisle's letter of September 2nd, 1904', encl. in Coryndon to Milner, 19 Nov. 1904, NAZ, NW/HC 1/2/14.

¹⁰⁴ E.A Copeman, 'Extract from report [...]', encl. in SNA to S. Admin., 23 Nov. 1906, NAZ, NW/A3/24/9.

ammunitions¹⁰⁵ – a state of affairs which prompted the Company to inaugurate a police post at ‘Fort Kasempa’ in 1902.¹⁰⁶ In the face of Mambari obduracy, however, the task of controlling the district proved far from straightforward. In 1903, Sub Inspector Macaulay intercepted and dispersed two Mambari caravans between Kasempa and the Congo Free State border.¹⁰⁷ It was probably on this occasion that he confiscated, *inter alia*, ‘about 50 guns’ and ‘100 bags of gunpowder’.¹⁰⁸ One more Mambari camp was surprised near the then Mushima’s village at about the same time. In this instance, only three guns were destroyed and 14 bags of gunpowder impounded.¹⁰⁹ One of the problems faced by local administrators in dealing with Angolan smugglers was that the ‘natives will give no information [as to] their whereabouts.’ This was scarcely surprising, given that the Mambari were the Kaonde principal suppliers of firearms and that, by now, ‘every native ha[d] a gun and a great many [...] two or three in their possession.’ It was these same guns, Macaulay surmised, that accounted for the considerable quantity of ivory still exported from the district and the presumed decrease in elephant populations.¹¹⁰

The 1922 Proclamation

¹⁰⁵ Harding to Foreign Secretary, 16 Jan. 1901, encl. in S. Admin. to IS, 30 Apr. 1901, NAZ, NW/HC1/2/1.

¹⁰⁶ Coryndon to Secretary (BSAC), 1 Mar. 1904, NAZ, NW/A2/2/2.

¹⁰⁷ Harding to IS, 16 May 1903, encl. in Coryndon to IS, 18 May 1903, NAZ, NW/HC1/2/6.

¹⁰⁸ Coryndon to Secretary, 1 Mar. 1904.

¹⁰⁹ [Macaulay?] to [S. Admin.?), ‘April’ 1903, NAZ, NW/IN2/1/11.

¹¹⁰ [F.C. Macaulay], ‘Report for Year 1902’, 14 Mar. 1903, NAZ, NW/IN2/1/11.

By the early 1910s, Angolan gun runners were everywhere on the retreat. However, from the point of view of struggling BSAC territorial officials, the damage had already been done. Supplementing the already substantial quantities of firearms that had entered North-Western Rhodesia in the course of the nineteenth century, the additional guns introduced into the country at the height of smuggling in the 1900s consolidated earlier forms of gun usage among Africans and enhanced their potential for resisting, if not colonial rule as a whole, at least the normative apparatus that came with it. Especially in the gun-rich and thinly occupied North-West, where the early years of colonial rule were punctuated by several episodes of gun-related violence involving both Africans and Europeans, local administrators came quickly to the conclusion that disarmament was an absolute pre-condition for asserting the authority of the colonial state and symbolizing that curtailment of African citizenship rights on which the edifice of European domination itself was predicated.¹¹¹

In 1912, the Kasempa DC, Hazell, sought an audience with Administrator Wallace in Livingstone, the capital of the newly unified Northern Rhodesia, to recommend the urgent need for the immediate disarmament of the district. Both the Lunda and the Kaonde of Kasempa, he submitted, ‘are far from being in a proper state of control, and [...] this has been brought about [...] by the fact of their ability through the possession of firearms to defy and resist authority.’¹¹² Wallace, however, thought that Hazell’s scheme – one which envisaged the detention of all chiefs ‘pending surrender of such guns and powder as they and their people possess’ and which would

¹¹¹ The relationship between gun legislation and ideas about citizenship in colonial South Africa is the central theme of Storey, *Guns*.

¹¹² Hazell to Wallace, 25 Mar. 1912, encl. in Wallace to Gladstone, 30 Mar. 1912, NAZ, NR/HC1/3/1, II

require the deployment of at least 400 police¹¹³ – would merely multiply the chances of armed confrontation by requesting the ‘natives [...] to decide without any warning whether or not to obey an order for disarmament on the spot’. He thus put forward a counter-proposal for the more gradual registration and licensing of firearms.¹¹⁴

In April of the same year, Wallace reiterated his views in a meeting with Gladstone, the High Commissioner for South Africa, in Cape Town.¹¹⁵ A comprehensive ‘Arms and Ammunition Proclamation’ to this effect was drafted. Informed by the belief that ‘the inhabitants of the Kasempa and Lunda Districts have beyond question far more guns than they ought to’, it gave local BSAC officials ‘full power of refusal of a licence’; the expectation was that ‘after the law comes into operation every native-owned rifle will become *prima facie* illegally owned unless a licence can be produced.’¹¹⁶ Though falling short of promoting complete African disarmament, the proclamation’s obvious objective, as pointed out by the Secretary for Native Affairs, was to ‘[hinder], in every legitimate way, the natives of this Territory from acquiring additional firearms and fresh supplies of ammunition’.¹¹⁷ However, the arrest of Sakutenuka, the district’s most notorious outlaw, in May 1912 and the desire not to antagonize local Africans meant the proclamation was cast aside, and the attempt

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Wallace to Gladstone, 30 Mar. 1912.

¹¹⁵ H.J. Gladstone, ‘Affairs in the Kasempa District – Northern Rhodesia’, 18 Apr. 1912, encl. in IS to Wallace, Cape Town, 20 Apr. 1912, NAZ, NR/HC1/3/1, II.

¹¹⁶ Macdonnel to Secretary to the Administrator, 20 June 1912.

¹¹⁷ SNA, ‘Notes on the Draft Arms and Ammunition Proclamation’, 2 July 1912, NAZ, NR/ B1/2/368.

to re-establish a modicum of order in the troubled north-western marches delegated to the Collective Punishment Proclamation.¹¹⁸

In 1914 the sale and exchange of modern rifles throughout Northern Rhodesia were made conditional upon obtaining the permission of the administration.¹¹⁹ But it was only the post-WWI Treaty of St. Germain for the Control of the Traffic in Arms that brought back to the fore the still unresolved question of the former North-Western Rhodesia's missing gun legislation. After a convoluted legal history that need not retain our attention, 'The Northern Rhodesia Firearms Restriction (Natives) Proclamation 1922' was finally gazetted in January 1923.¹²⁰ Its most important provision stipulated that 'no native shall be entitled to have or possess arms or ammunition in the Territory, unless by the written permission of the Administrator' or authorized district officials.¹²¹ Alongside 'permits to possess' – the concession of which was made dependent upon payment of a fee of sixpence from the beginning of 1924 – identically priced 'permits to transfer' were also introduced to regulate gun exchanges.¹²²

The debate that followed the issuing of the proclamation of 1922 shows that, with the disruptions of the early 1910s a full ten years behind them, local officials in the North-Western Province and elsewhere were now more willing than their predecessors had been to view firearms as more than just a threat to law and order (which they undoubtedly were) and to consider the multiple social uses to which muzzle-loaders had been put since their introduction in the region in the course of the nineteenth century.

¹¹⁸ Proclamation no. 9 of 1912, in *Northern Rhodesia Government Gazette*, 1 Aug. 1912.

¹¹⁹ Proclamation no. 18 of 1914, in *Northern Rhodesia Government Gazette*, 29 Aug. 1914.

¹²⁰ Proclamation no. 21 of 1922, in *Northern Rhodesia Government Gazette*, 6 Jan. 1923.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, and SNA to All District Officials, 18 Jan. 1923, NAZ, NR/B1/2/368.

¹²² SNA to Hall, 18 June 1923, NAZ, ZA 1/9/51/2.

Practical troubles in implementing the law were anticipated in the Solwezi sub-district, where ‘ten Messengers, unable to read, will have to deal’ with as many as ‘about 4,000’ Kaonde gun owners, all of whom were wont to view firearms, not only as fundamental hunting tools, but also as an essential lubricant of social relationships. Hall, the Kasempa DC, thought that ample time should be given for registering the guns, since ‘wholesale confiscation’ was initially to be avoided not to ‘seriously antagonize nearly the whole population’.¹²³ In light of the ‘extraordinary’ ubiquity of muzzle-loaders among the Kaonde, Hall’s NC was even more pessimistic than his superior about the licensing exercise’s real prospects of success: ‘I can imagine that an *efficient* registration system in the Kasempa district might easily present a number of problems comparable (in a lesser degree of course) to an attempt to register the ownership and transfer of sovereigns or half-crowns in the United Kingdom’.¹²⁴

Gun-ownership in the Kasempa district – the same official pointed out – was ‘a matter requiring greater delicacy of treatment, probably, than in other districts.’¹²⁵ But misgivings were also expressed in Barotseland and Balovale. For instance, Yeta, Lewanika’s successor, and a number of his councillors, long accustomed to the privilege of ready access to firearms, questioned the need for permits to transfer. ‘When we shoot’, they explained to the Resident Magistrate,

we do not shoot for sport nor pleasure, but we do so for sustenance of life. It would, therefore, be difficult [...] to obtain permits every time when one wishes to send one of his family to go and shoot game and

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ NC (Kasempa) to Hall, 25 Jan. 1923, NAZ, NR/B1/2/368.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

ducks as many gun owners are old people and members of the Khotla [central council] and cannot always go out shooting as they have to attend to official business.¹²⁶

The adoption of strategies of evasion was foreboded in Balovale. Given that the majority of his messengers were illiterate, the sub-district's NC was certain that theoretically illegal temporary transfers of individual permits would become very common among Luvale men. '[I]f the owner of the gun hands over his permit to possess to the person whom he wishes to hunt for him the chances of being discovered would be slight.'¹²⁷

Despite all of these concerns, the new gun legislation was put into effect. While no violent opposition to registration manifested itself, discontent in Kasempa was clearly palpable during the law's 'difficult' first year.¹²⁸ It was probably not coincidental that it was in the course of 1923 that the district witnessed the first strong patrol by the Northern Rhodesia Police since the beginning of World War One. Having followed the course of the Lunga and combed the Jiwundu swamp near Solwezi, the police arrested a number of tax-defaulters and seized as many as one hundred unregistered guns.¹²⁹ The Kaonde – who clearly feared that registration would in due course be followed by the requisition of their most valuable possession – reacted by seeking to dodge the Proclamation's provisions. Much evasion also took place among

¹²⁶ Yeta et al. to Resident Magistrate (Barotseland), 31 Mar. 1923, encl. in Resident Magistrate to SNA, 4 Apr. 1923, NAZ, NR/B1/2/368.

¹²⁷ Bruce Miller to Resident Magistrate (Barotseland), 4 Sept. 1923, NAZ, ZA1/9/51/2.

¹²⁸ K.S. Kinross, Kasempa Sub-District: Annual Report for the Year Ending 31 March 1924, NAZ, ZA7/1/7/6.

¹²⁹ P. Hall, Kasempa District: Annual Report for the Year Ending 31 March 1924, NAZ, ZA7/1/7/6.

the Lunda of Balunda or Mwinilunga sub-district, where the registration exercise began in September 1923. After one year, permits to possess had been issued for 600 guns, but the DC was ‘pretty sure there [were] over 3,000 in that Sdt.’¹³⁰

Prosecutions and confiscations for failure to register and obtain the necessary licences began in earnest in the Kasempa district in the summer of 1924.¹³¹ This had the unintended immediate effect of bringing registration to a complete halt. Since ‘everyone found with an unregistered muzzle loader got two month I[mprisonment] [with] H[ard] L[abour] without the option of a fine and the gun was confiscated as well’, the ‘natives had no choice but to conceal unregistered guns’.¹³² After Hall’s successor reverted to ‘a more moderate course from the beginning of 1925, 669 new guns were registered’ and licensed. To be sure, the end of the exercise was still not in sight. Yet, the new DC commented, this was scarcely surprising. After all, it was ‘probably the ambition of every male native to own one or more of these guns’, and it was therefore ‘fairly certain that many thousands of them must now exist in N.W. Rhodesia.’ In ‘view of the deep suspicion with which most natives would at first regard any law which sought to control anything they highly prized’, the DC thought the ‘Firearms Proclamation ha[d] been carried out as efficiently as could be expected’ and was confident that, ‘provided no harsh or repressive measures [were] adopted [...] a fairly complete registration will in due course be effected.’¹³³

¹³⁰ Hall to Attorney-General, 21 Sept. 1924, NAZ, ZA 1/9/51/2.

¹³¹ SNA to Hall, 4 March 1924, and P. Hall, ‘Firearms Restriction Proclamation 21/1922: Supplementary Instructions’, encl. in Hall to SNA, 13 Mar. 1924, both in NAZ, ZA1/9/51/2.

¹³² Rennie to SNA, 22 Apr. 1926, ZA 1/9/51/2.

¹³³ Ibid.

Conclusion

Guns, this article has attempted to show, spread throughout the bulk of North-Western Zambia in the course of the nineteenth century. The enthusiasm with which the imported technology was taken up by the peoples of the region was in large measure the result of their ability successfully to deploy it for a variety of both predictable and innovative purposes. Guns had different meanings in different places, and the modalities of their appropriation were closely related to local socio-political circumstances. Among the Lozi after the Kololo interlude, guns played a central role as symbols of royal power and means of political centralization; among Luvale hunters and raiders, they became defining features of masculinity; among the Kaonde, firearms probably served both of the above purposes, while also being used as a polyvalent form of currency. However, throughout the region under discussion, guns never lost their original function of means of human destruction and material production, whose inherent shortcomings, the evidence suggests, Africans learnt to minimize by drawing creatively on the opportunities afforded by the accessible nature of the new technology. The initial weakness of the colonial administration meant that this internally differentiated process of technological adaptation continued during the early years of the twentieth century, being only brought to an end from 1922, when the hitherto unregulated right to possess and exchange guns was taken away from the peoples of North-Western Zambia.

The effects of the Proclamation of 1922 were compounded shortly thereafter by its logical sequel: the extension to the bulk of the former North-Western Rhodesia of such game laws as had governed African hunting in the eastern part of Northern

Rhodesia since the beginning of the century.¹³⁴ The phased imposition of ‘native hunting licences’ constituted another major external interference in the lives of communities who had relied on game meat as one of their primary sources of animal proteins for centuries. The colonial assault on unrestricted hunting and gun ownership in North-Western Rhodesia was a long time in the making. But when it did materialize, its consequences were momentous, for it marked the beginning of the end of a number of gun-based systems of economic and social relationships which had dominated large stretches of North-Western Zambia for several decades - systems that previous historians have largely underestimated.

¹³⁴ Ordinance no. 19 of 1925, in *Northern Rhodesia Government Gazette*, 13 June 1925.