The Gendered Nature of the Economy on the Zambian Copperbelt and its Uneven Impact on the Development of Cultural Modernity

Mike Brodo

In the late 1920s, large-scale copper mining and consequent urban growth began in Northern Rhodesia (present-day Zambia), a region which would become known as the Zambian Copperbelt (Ferguson, 1999). The introduction of copper mining in the region quickly established itself as a symbol of modernity in a country that had previously been significantly tribalized, rural, and agricultural (Ferguson, 1999). While the functionality of copper mining is inherently modern (equipment, capital, etc.), the purpose of this paper is to investigate whether the introduction of the copper mining industry in present-day Zambia engendered the development of modernity in other aspects of workers' and their families' lives (Ferguson, 1999).

In his study of modernity on the Copperbelt, James Ferguson focuses on urbanization as the dominant strand of social change in Zambia and the Copperbelt as a locus for such a process (Ferguson, 1999). Though urbanization is a move toward Western-style industrial modernity, it is notable that this process of modernity had uneven effects on the development of modernity in other realms, exemplified by the emergence of class consciousness, industrial action, and class-based associations/unions, but a lack of nuclear family development, the focal dimensions of this paper.

According to Robert Bates, the emergence of class-based associations (i.e., unions) as a result of class consciousness constitutes a major stage in the transition to "the more complex and differentiated social structures that are characteristic of modern societies"; this form of modernity was achieved rapidly by African workers on the Copperbelt, who utilized industrial action and unionization to achieve substantial improvements in their pay and living conditions. (Bates, 1972: 280) (Larmer, 2007). In contrast, though the nuclear family structure serves as a "metonym for the modernity of the urban African," this cultural standard has yet to be achieved

on the Copperbelt (Ferguson, 1999: 175). Thus, as highlighted by Scott Taylor is his cultural overview of Zambia, tradition and modernity exist side by side in the country (Taylor, 2006). While scholars have investigated this uneven development of modernity separately, this paper juxtaposes the emergence of class consciousness, industrial action, and class-based associations/unions with the lack of development of the nuclear family as a cultural standard, arguing that the divergence is attributed to one key factor: the gendered (male-dominant and -dependent) nature of the Copperbelt's economy. By examining the anthropological implications of the male-dominated and -dependent Copperbelt economy, this paper takes up the research suggested by Miles Larmer, who wrote that "a detailed exploration of the gender relationships in mine townships and households would provide a significant additional contribution to our understanding of the importance of social dynamics to the history of the Copperbelt" (Larmer, 2007: 21).

In order to assess the development of class consciousness, industrial action, and class-based associations/unions on the Copperbelt as a result of the gendered economy, it is essential to highlight the characteristics of the significant movement of labor that defined the growth of the country's mining industry. At the inception of large-scale commercial copper mining in Northern Rhodesia, the region was sparsely populated and therefore mining companies had to resort to migrant labor to fill the necessary jobs (Guene, 2013). Though migrant labor was not unusual for the time (many Zambians were working in the extractive sector in the Congo, Southern Rhodesia, and South Africa), the competition stemming from the better working conditions in neighboring countries' industries forced the Northern Rhodesian copper companies to incentivize migrant labor, of which the primary incentive was to allow the mineworkers to

have wives on the Copperbelt.[1] While it is evident that some mineworkers brought their wives with them to the Copperbelt, the luring of single women to the region constitutes a much more significant impact, as the majority of subsequently married men contracted their (predominantly temporary) marriages once arriving in the mining township (Siwila, 2017) (Parpart, 1986) (Ferguson, 1999). Migration by single women was driven by the lack of freedom and control that women possessed at the time in both the matrilineal and patrilineal societies throughout the countryside; with men controlling institutions such as marriage and inheritance, single women sought the social and economic opportunities offered by the urbanizing Copperbelt (Parpart, 1988) (Chauncey, 1981). Thus, from the earliest years of the commercial copper mining industry in Northern Rhodesia, women moved to and lived in the mining compounds (Chauncey, 1981).

The responsibility of housing, welfare, and food provisioning in the compounds was vested in the companies since the colonial state failed to carry out legitimate functions in the mining regions, meaning that any grievances about the lack or poor quality of such services were directed toward the mining companies and not the state, setting up the eventual development of industrial action (Butler, 2007) (Parpart, 1983). However, though the mining companies evidently preferred to keep women on the Copperbelt as an incentive to recruit labor and due to their presence's consequent impact on increased labor productivity, the companies kept their housing, welfare, and food provisioning for women at an insufficient level (Chauncey, 1981). Such deficiencies, especially in food rations, forced women (even married ones) to work informally in order to sustain themselves (Chauncey, 1981). This informal work took the form of beer brewing, gardening, and domestic/sexual services, all traditional activities that women undertook in rural areas before migrating to the Copperbelt (Chauncey, 1981). Beer brewing was

[1] At any given time in the Copperbelt's history, mineworkers were at least 99% male. During the colonial period, this ratio approached 100% male.

the most profitable of these economic activities, with some women who brewed regularly earning more income per month than their mineworker husbands (Chauncey, 1981). Gardening was also significantly economically beneficial to women as they could not only grow food for themselves, but could also sell produce to other compound residents and the companies to generate income (Chauncey, 1981). Such a flirtation with economic independence reduced female dependence on men in the area, posing a threat to the companies who sought to reap the benefits of women who married and maintained their mineworker husbands (Chauncey, 1981).

In response to this reduced dependency, companies began to restrict women's economic activities. Private beer brewing was banned in favor of company-run beer halls, thus cutting off the most lucrative source of female income (Chauncey, 1981). Though the profits of the beer halls were used for welfare activities, women could only benefit from them if they were married, limiting the economic independence that allowed many single women to live on the Copperbelt (Parpart, 1986). In addition, by 1935 the mine companies had also restricted the compound markets for selling produce to only married women, further placing women's economic survival on the Copperbelt in the hands of mine-working men (Chauncey, 1981) (Parpart, 1988). Even for the married women who could still sell their produce in the compound markets, their earnings were still controlled by their husbands, meaning that by 1935, unless achieved illicitly, the economic independence of women was entirely cut off (Chauncey, 1981). Yet, even as companies cut off these female sources of income, they still provided inadequate housing, minimal family rations, and limited welfare services such as medical facilities, forcing men to stretch their wages if they sought to accommodate highly sought-after women (Parpart, 1986).

Though economically disadvantaged, women on the Copperbelt possessed an enormous demographic advantage that provided them with crucial leverage over men, and subsequently led

to the introduction of industrial action on the Copperbelt (Chauncey, 1981). For the male mineworkers, married status came with significant benefits: a sexual partner, domestic services, and status. As a result, securing a marriage became a competition for men on the Copperbelt; with the sex ratio in the mid-1930's hovering around two men for every woman, such an accomplishment was no easy feat, and succeeding came at a serious economic cost. Because of their relatively small numbers and highly desired status, women could negotiate marriage contracts with potential husbands in ways that were inconceivable in the rural areas (Chauncey, 1981). The loose definition of marriage on the Copperbelt only exacerbated the contractual economic nature of such partnerships; a woman only had to live with a man for a week and cook his food in order to be considered his wife (Parpart, 1986). Such a dynamic allowed temporary marital alliances to flourish, benefiting both women, who sought economic and welfare resources, and men, who sought the aforementioned benefits associated with married life. Due to their demographic advantage, women moved from man to man when it suited their economic interests, forcing men to essentially hand over all of their earnings and provide the highest living standards possible or risk losing their wives to other mineworkers (Parpart, 1986) (Parpart, 1994) (Parpart, 1983). With independent female income sources cut off, the provision of wages and higher living standards that defined the competition for wives depended entirely on resources controlled by the economic monopoly of the mining companies, setting off an industrial faceoff that would propel the mineworkers into class consciousness and industrial action (Gier & Mercier, 2006).

In 1935, the influence of women and the gendered nature of the Copperbelt economy were manifested in the mineworkers' demands in the first ever Black workers' strike to occur in the region (Parpart, 1986). The immediate cause for the strike stems from a tax hike that targeted

the growing urban population, creating disproportionately higher taxes for urban residents in comparison to rural inhabitants as part of a colonial government political scheme to discourage permanent urbanization (Butler, 2007). Because the tax hike further restricted the disposable income of the mineworkers, it set off a large-scale strike that demanded higher pay and better amenities from the mining companies (Butler, 2007). Married miners, already stretching their wages and rations, complained that they could not pay the new tax and still feed and clothe their wives and families if wages and rations were not significantly increased (Parpart, 1986) (Parpart, 1983). In addition, while not directly affected by the tax hike since services were entirely provided by the companies (i.e., not paid for with wages), married mineworkers demanded better housing and health care for their dependents (Parpart, 1986). All of these mineworkers' demands were driven by the competition for women in the mine compounds and the understanding that unsatisfied wives would leave for more generous partners (Parpart, 1986). Making matters worse for the mineworkers, the recently urbanized women not only sought the basic necessities that stemmed from the gendered restriction on income, but they also acquired tastes for European goods, such as clothing and utensils, that placed additional economic strain on men's wages (Parpart, 1986) (Parpart, 1983).

Recognizing their common grievances and desire to maintain their wives, married men developed a class consciousness that quickly put them at the forefront of industrial action, first manifested in the 1935 strike. While women continued to move from husband to husband according to relative comparisons in economic benefits, higher wages and better provisioning raised living standards across the board, and thus women recognized that their participation in the strike was crucial as well (Parpart, 1986). Thus, the evidence that married mineworkers and women in the 1935 strike couched their demands in terms of marital/familial needs and

expectations demonstrates that the gendered nature of the Copperbelt economy, with income monopolized by men and their employers, led to the development of class consciousness and industrial action, an identified form of modernity (Parpart, 1986) (Bates, 1971).

Beyond contributing to the development of class consciousness and industrial action, the 1935 strike lit the spark for the consequent development of formalized class-based associations (i.e., unions) that Robert Bates identified as a quintessential centerpiece of a modernizing society (Bates, 1972). The next major strike of Black mineworkers on the Copperbelt occurred in 1940. As in 1935, women and marital issues were at the forefront of this strike (Parpart, 1986). A compound official hitting a woman who complained about her food ration allotment constituted the immediate cause of the protest (Parpart, 1986). Such an event further spurred the class consciousness of the mineworkers and the Copperbelt women, leading them to again protest the inadequate wages, food, and housing provided by the mining companies (Parpart, 1986). Just as in 1935, the strikers' demands reflected frustrations with the inability to support married and family life in the mine compounds and—since the introduction of missionaries and their lifestyle classes the year prior—the rising expectations of women who sought to live as Europeans did (Parpart, 1986) (Parpart, 1983). One missionary from the United Mission on the Copperbelt (UMCB) even attested that the failure of mineworkers to satisfy the wants of women led to the strike (Parpart, 1986).

By 1948, the growing class consciousness and experience with industrial action resulted in the formation of the African Mineworkers Union, the first Black union on the Copperbelt (Parpart, 1986). Women played a significant role in the formation of the union, while married men constituted the majority—as well as the most vocal—of its members (Parpart, 1986) (Parpart, 1983). As highlighted earlier, this demographic composition of the union was driven by

married men seeking increased economic benefits from their monopolistic employers and women trying to raise mineworkers' ability to economically provide for them across the board since women were constrained by the gendered nature of the Copperbelt economy.

As the demographic ratio evened out toward the end of the colonial period, women increasingly recognized the need to assist with industrial action in conjunction with their husbands on whom they were dependent (Parpart, 1986). For example, as the color bar [2] became the leading industrial issue on the Copperbelt in the 1950s, Black women undertook actions to maintain the bargaining power of the union, such as harassing Black clerks who formed their own union as they received higher-level and higher-paying jobs, albeit still at lower wages than the most poorly compensated European workers (Larmer, 2007). After independence, especially during the period in which mines were nationalized (1969-1997) and industrial action by mineworkers deemed illegal in accordance with the national interest, women—who could not be fired from jobs they did not have and who the nationalized mining company wanted to keep on the compounds due to productivity benefits—took striking into their own hands (Larmer, 2007). In 1981, Copperbelt women were at the forefront of the mealie meal strike, demanding better food rationing and even threatening mineworkers who attempted to go to work during the strike (Larmer, 2007). It is thus evident that beginning in the first decade of commercial copper mining in Northern Rhodesia and continuing into post-independence Zambia, the gendered nature of the Copperbelt economy that made women economically dependent on exclusively-male mineworkers engendered and sustained an increasingly growing class consciousness, use of industrial action, and the establishment of formalized class-based associations/unions that constitute a development of modernity. However, while such gender-economic elements led to

[2] "A 'colour bar' is any system, whether officially inshrined in the law or unofficially by rigidly accepted practice, which restricts who may be employed in categories of jobs on the basis of skin colour." (Mills)

the establishment of modernity in the realm of class and labor relations, the same elements not only failed to produce modernity in the realm of nuclear family structures, but actively prohibited its development.

As evidenced in the discussion of labor migration to the Copperbelt, men had significantly more social and economic control than women in the rural areas of Northern Rhodesia (Parpart, 1988). Such a cultural structure incentivized women on the Copperbelt to remain there and enjoy the increased freedom and economic opportunity provided by an urban lifestyle. In fact, the vast majority of women did not even visit or return home once moving to the Copperbelt (Parpart, 1986) (Parpart, 1983). However, as emphasized in the previous section, due to the male-dominated economy of the Copperbelt, women needed to engage in marital partnerships in order to sustain themselves (Parpart, 1986). Because of this, marriage represented a crucial economic tool and necessity for women. But, while Copperbelt women were economically dependent on their husbands, they were not the only ones. The extended kinship networks central to traditional Zambian society remained intact for men living on the Copperbelt, and thus these wage-earning mineworkers—earning more than any other sector in the country—became magnets for their rural kin who increasingly moved to the compounds for their associated economic benefits (Ferguson, 1999) (Bates, 1971). Given that women were able to break their extended kinship ties to the rural areas, what led to men maintaining them, even to the point of further stretching their income and resources to support extended family in the compounds?

Although the mining companies had an interest in supporting some level of stabilization in the compounds due to the related productivity benefits, they simultaneously did not want to pay for long-term settlement for entire families once mineworkers retired (Berger, 1974). Driven

additionally by the colonial government's fears of what urbanized Africans could mean for the continuation of the exploitative colonial system, the policy of stabilization without complete urbanization was established, stipulating that mineworkers had to periodically return to their rural homes, thereby maintaining connections with extended kin (Berger, 1983) (Parpart, 1994). In addition to returning home during one's career in the mines, mineworkers were also encouraged to retire to their rural villages, meaning that for men there was a reality of rural-urban circulation that allowed traditional kinship networks to remain (Berger, 1974) (Ferguson, 1999).

Due to this pattern of rural retirement, mineworkers recognized that they needed to maintain good relations with their extended kin in those areas in order to ensure a smooth transition back to rural life. Thus, mineworkers provided for their futures by providing for their extended kin during their careers on the Copperbelt (Berger, 1974). Such a future-oriented mindset is further evidenced by the rejection of pension schemes—by the majority of mineworkers originating from matrilineal societies—that paid one's wives and children rather than one's sister's children (Ferguson, 1999). The preference for extended kin receiving pensions over one's immediate family exemplifies that not only were mineworkers providing for extended kin that migrated to live in the Copperbelt compounds, but they were also making significant investments into their extended families that remained in their rural villages (Larmer, 2007).

As a result of the gendered nature of the Copperbelt economy that already made wives dependent on their husbands, these extended family relatives—both living on the Copperbelt and in the rural villages—placed a serious strain on the limited wages, rations, and accommodations given to the mineworkers (Berger, 1974). By having to provide for their extended kin, mineworkers were increasingly unable to economically sustain their wives as well, especially

when in addition to basic necessities, women desired expensive European goods (Ferguson, 1999). Such a situation led to numerous divorces; Copperbelt women, having no legal income-generating alternative to marriage, left husbands who were not able to provide for them (Ferguson, 1999).

In his 1999 study of modernity—and lack thereof—on the Zambian Copperbelt, James Ferguson argues that the vast majority of Copperbelt families have not come close to resembling the modern nuclear family model, neither in the colonial era nor in the present day (Ferguson, 1999). In fact, even in the late 1990s the proportion of classically nuclear households on the Copperbelt was less than ⅓ (Ferguson, 1999). This lack of development of the nuclear family model is evidenced in two ways. First, the mere existence of extended kin living with and being provided for by mineworkers on the Copperbelt clashes with the nuclear family ideal of solely living with and providing for one's wife and children. Second, the ubiquity of divorces and remarriages that stem from the aforementioned inability of mineworkers to provide for both their extended kin and their wives contradicts the nuclear family model that prizes having a long-term, conjugal couple rather than fleeting partnerships rooted in economic benefits. Though not covered in his cultural overview of Zambia, these two manifestations pertaining to marital relations explain why Scott Taylor wrote in 2006 that "in Zambia … there is a broader understanding of family, such that the notion of a nuclear family consisting of father, mother, and children is an alien concept" (Taylor, 2006: 107). Both of these aforementioned contradictions of the nuclear family model are rooted in the gendered economic dimension of the Copperbelt that restricted income to male mineworkers. In contrast to the impact of the Copperbelt's gendered economy on the spurring of class consciousness, introduction of industrial action, and thus the development of modernity, in the case of "the failure of the myth of the nuclear family," such

gender-economic dimensions created “a rupture not only with an ideologically conceived ‘normal family,’ but with an imagined modernity” (Ferguson, 1999: 177).

Ever since mining companies’ placement of restrictions on women’s independent sources of income engendered a male-dominant and -dependent economic structure on the Copperbelt, familial relations have become the source of micropolitical and microeconomic contestations between male mineworkers and the other inhabitants of the Copperbelt (e.g., wives, extended family) who make claims on their earning power (Ferguson, 1999). The social and cultural dynamics resulting from such a gender-economic structure had uneven effects on the development of modernity. While the recognition of class consciousness, use of industrial action, and the establishment of formalized class-based associations/unions constitute an achievement of modern cultural forms, the continued lack of a nuclear family norm represents the maintenance of some traditional forms of societal life, and thus a contradiction of modernity. This remarkable contrast emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary examination of unique anthropological realities; though previous scholars have examined many of the phenomena in this paper through the lens of politics (see Bates, 1971; Butler, 2007; Larmer, 2007), economics/class (see Berger, 1974; Larmer, 2007), gender (see Chauncey, 1981; Parpart, 1983; Parpart, 1986; Parpart, 1988; Parpart, 1994), and modernity (see Ferguson, 1999), being able to identify why one form of cultural modernity developed and another did not requires analyzing how various disciplines interacted with each other since reality does not stem from a single impetus, but rather the multifaceted nature of social and cultural interactions.

References Cited

Bates, Robert H. “Trade Union Membership in the Coppermines of Zambia: A Test of Some Hypotheses.” *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, vol. 20, no. 2, Jan. 1972, pp. 280–298.

Bates, Robert H. *Unions, Parties, and Political Development: A Study of Mineworkers in Zambia*. Yale University Press, 1971.

Berger, Elena L. *Labour, Race, and Colonial Rule: The Copperbelt from 1924 to Independence*. Clarendon Press, 1974.

Butler, L.J. *Copper Empire: Mining and the Colonial State in Northern Rhodesia, c. 1930-1964*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Chauncey, George. “The Locus of Reproduction: Women's Labour in the Zambian Copperbelt, 1927- 1953.” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, Apr. 1981, pp. 135–164.

Ferguson, James. *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt*. University of California Press, 1999.

Gier, Jaclyn J., and Laurie Mercier. “Gender, Mining Communities, and Labor Protests, 1900–1960.” *Mining Women: Gender in the Development of a Global Industry, 1670 to 2005*, edited by Jaclyn J. Gier and Laurie Mercier, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, NY, 2006, pp. 171–180.

Guene, Enid. “Copper ’s Corollaries: Trade and Labour Migration in the Copperbelt (1910-1940).” *Zambia Social Science Journal*, vol. 4, no. 1, Apr. 2013.

Larmer, Miles. *Mineworkers in Zambia: Labour and Political Change in Post-Colonial Africa*. Tauris Academic Studies, 2007.

Mills, Wallace G. “White Settlers in British Colonies.” *History 317*, Saint Mary's University, smu-facweb.smu.ca/~wmills/course317/7White_Settlers.html.

Parpart, Jane L. *Labor and Capital on the African Copperbelt*. Temple University Press, 1983.

Parpart, Jane L. “Sexuality and Power on the Zambian Copperbelt, 1926-1964.” *Patriarchy and Class: African Women in the Home and the Workforce*, edited by Sharon B. Stichter and Jane L. Parpart, Routledge, New York, NY, 1988, pp. 115–138.

Parpart, Jane L. “The Household and the Mine Shaft: Gender and Class Struggles on the Zambian Copperbelt, 1926-1964.” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1, Oct. 1986, pp. 36–56.

Parpart, Jane L. “‘Where Is Your Mother?": Gender, Urban Marriage, and Colonial Discourse on the Zambian Copperbelt, 1924-1945.” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1994, pp. 241–271.

Siwila, Lilian Cheelo. “Reconstructing the Distorted Image of Women as Reproductive Labour on the Copperbelt Mines in Zambia (1920-1954).” *Journal for the Study of Religion*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2017, pp. 75–89.

Taylor, Scott D. *Culture and Customs of Zambia*. Greenwood Press, 2006.