



Drought, ecological crisis and famine in late nineteenth century south-eastern Africa

Kathleen Pribyl (1,2), David J. Nash (1,3), Jørgen Klein (4), and Georgina H. Endfield (5)

(1) School of Environment and Technology, University of Brighton, Brighton BN2 4GJ, UK (k.pribyl@uea.ac.uk), (2) Climatic Research Unit, University of East Anglia, Norwich, NR4 7TJ, UK, (3) School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, Private Bag 3, Wits 2050, South Africa, (4) Department of Social Sciences, Hedmark University College, 2318 Hamar, Norway, (5) School of Geography, University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham NG7 2RD, UK

In the second half of the 1890s a drought-driven ecological crisis took hold in the region of modern-day Botswana, Zimbabwe and northern, central and eastern South Africa. A number of years of very late rainy seasons had severe repercussions for the rain-fed agriculture. Sowing was delayed and the young crops suffered from below average summer rainfall levels. Drawing on a wide variety of documentary sources – administrative records, writings by members of missionary societies and local newspapers – this paper outlines how the drought drove the ecological crisis and aggravated a locust infestation and the cattle plague (rinderpest). Whereas the locusts found better breeding conditions in areas that were normally too humid for them, the drought also facilitated the spread of rinderpest by reducing the number of watering holes and by forcing the cattle into an immunodepressed state due to malnutrition. The locusts contributed to the loss of grain crops, and the rinderpest decimated cattle herds by more than 90 per cent in areas where the disease coincided with the drought. As agriculture as well as the pastoral sector were hit hard, famine conditions developed in the interior of the region.