

The Rozvi State

Origins of the Rozvi State

Changamire Dombo I, the leader of the Rozvi was a man of considerable military talent and an administrative genius.

With this military ability Dombo was able to defeat the Portuguese at the battle of Maungwe. Changamire's first capital was at Tsindi ruins near Marondera and Macheke.

He moved over to Butwa (sometimes spelled Butua) and established his capital at Manyanga. The Rozvi eventually became too powerful for everyone hence their name which means "the robbers"/"raiders"/"marauders."

Reasons for the rise of the Rozvi State Changamire Dombo was a descendant of the Mutapa and he initially established his kingdom in the interior with his capital at Tsindi near Marondera.

He defeated the Portuguese who tried to grab more land and power further inland to Mbire and Guruuswa near Butwa between 1684 and 1695

The rise of Dombo was a result of civil war in the Torwa state of which he was a citizen. It is possible that he came from a family with special religious or military duties.

He may have grown rich and powerful through keeping cattle.

He is said to have had special powers like, he could make rain or make soldiers brave or change the color of cattle showing that he was a charismatic leader.

The Portuguese thought he was a magician or wizard because of the many tricks he showed in battle. His soldiers formed a half circle around their enemies.

They used many kinds of weapons including bows, arrows, assegais, spears, wooden clubs and shields.

The Rozvi received guns as tribute from the Portuguese thus most high officials had guns and knew how to use them.

The Rozvi Economy

Tribute

The King received tribute from the chiefs in the region. These included cloth, beads, hoes, axes, gold, ivory, cattle, skins, grain, tobacco and salt.

Trade

They practiced internal trade with the locals and external trade with the Portuguese. The Portuguese were not allowed to advance too far into the interior of the country. African traders called Vashambadzi moved across the country and acted as middlemen between the Rozvi and Portuguese. The traders paid taxes as they moved from village to village with their goods. There were no special market days or market places except on the borders where the Portuguese arrived.

Agriculture

The Rozvi depended much on the subsistence farming and other agricultural activities. Each family was expected to grow enough food to feed himself. The Portuguese wrote about a flat and beautiful plain bearing rice, pumpkins, watermelons, beans and other vegetables. Their main tools were the axe and the hoe. Axes were used to clear the trees while hoes were used to

till the land, plant seeds and for weeding. People shifted to new pieces of land after a few years and started the process all over again i.e. they practiced shifting cultivation. The royal family benefited from the labour of its subjects under a system called Zunde ramambo. These subjects would prepare the chief's land, plant, weed and harvest the crops which were stored at the chief's compound. The land was communally owned with the chief as its custodian. Every adult was entitled to a piece of land. The Rozvi community was also pastoral rearing goats, sheep and cattle. These were a source of both wealth and conflict between tribes who raided each other. Important people and chiefs owned cattle.

Hunting

The Rozvi were also a hunting society. The spear, bow and arrow, wooden staff and axe were important hunting tools. Pits and nets made of twisted bark were also used to trap animals. People hunted in teams which sometimes went out for weeks and dried the meat as a form of preservation in the jungle and later bring it back to their homes. The King was also a custodian of the animals therefore half the tusks of elephants killed were surrendered to him. The hooves of these elephants were given to the chief and they were used as stools. Pangolins were royal game and were surrendered to the chiefs. The ivory was exchanged for guns.

Mining

The Rozvi were a mining community. All gold and precious minerals were surrendered to the chief. The chief would reward the miner surrendering the minerals to him. The King distributed most of what he received to the members in his lineage and other chiefs. All chiefs paid annual tribute as a sign of loyalty. In rituals districts made their contributions and the remaining items after the ritual would be distributed among the members of the king's family.

Political Organisation of the Rozvi State

It began with the hut, then the family head, the neighborhood head (headman), village, region, sub-chief and chiefdom.

At the top is the chief and then the king and his court.

The King ruled with the help of a council called Dare.

Members of the council included priests, military leaders and provincial governors.

Some of the King's wives played a role at the court and some of the son in laws had special duties.

The King was a figure of great respect and loyalty.

He was the distributor of land and the holder of other properties in trust of the state: prisoners of war, cattle taken from people accused of various crimes are examples of said property.

The king was the head of the legal system.

He had the power to call up the army and declare war.

He could also summon communal labour.

The king had claims to game, elephant taxes and other taxes from the state.

Religious organisation

The mambo's rituals surrounded relations with ancestors.

The king was the religious leader as well in addition to being the political and legal leader. He communicated with God through the ancestors.

The priests of Mwari served at a shrine (Mabweaziva) and they were very powerful.

They carried messages telling the people to obey the king as instructed by the ancestors. The priests had agents called Vanyai who spread the word of Mwari throughout the provinces. They acted as an intelligence network, bringing information from the provinces. The power of the priests of Mwari strengthened the role of the mambo and also limited his powers.

The fall of the Rozvi state

The Rozvi had great mineral wealth and controlled external trade.

The Rozvi leaders understood the weaknesses and divisions of the Portuguese and exploited them by making policies that made them dependent on the Rozvi for example forcing them to use middlemen (vashambadzi).

The Portuguese tried to gain the land and mineral wealth of the Rozvi for a long time without any success.

The Rozvi were finally defeated by Zwangendaba with little resistance around 1690. The royal house scattered to other parts of the country.

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As the remaining Rozvi were just starting to recover when Mzilikazi and the Ndebele arrived and attacked Butwa.

The Shangaani also raided the Rozvi in the Chipinge area as the Rozvi started to collapse.

The Rozvi empire now remained only in Mashonaland but there finally defeated by the British South African Company settlers.

Thus external forces contributed largely to the fall of the Rozvi state.

The fall of the Rozvi state can also be attributed to their political system which only served to enrich the royal family at the expense of ordinary people.

As a result the state lost the support of its people. The hatred was worsened by the habitual pillaging done by the Rozvi army.

The Rozvi were also loosely administered without any central power source which made disintegration easier.

It can thus also be argued that the state alienated its own people leading to its decline and fall.