

George Cobb Westbeeck: his life and times at the Zambezi 1871-1888, his interaction with the establishment of the Second Lozi Kingdom

by Lawrence Flint 2019

The degree to which George Westbeeck is relevant to Barotseland's history is an open question. Certainly, today, few Lozis would be able to say who Westbeeck was or what is his legacy today. Yet Westbeeck was pivotal in mediating the character and identity of both colonial and missionary influence in Barotseland during the latter part of the nineteenth century. He appears in the literature as a larger than life eccentric whose original purpose in Barotseland had to do with hunting, ivory and money but who became sufficiently seduced by the lifestyle he led there and the reputation and status that he commanded that the attraction of society and life amongst settler Europeans in South Africa or back home in England, gradually lost its appeal.

Much of the information available today on George Westbeeck and his life in Barotseland is gleaned from the remnants of his personal memoirs (which are only available for the last four years of his life),¹ and the copious notes and literary work of the Czech adventurer and naturalist, Emil Holub, whom Westbeeck assisted considerably, and other European travellers of the era. Various writers have quoted from these sources and offered their interpretation but much of the opinions expressed are speculation.

Westbeeck spent most of the last 17 years of his life based at Panadamatenga on the wagon route south from Kazungula, hunting and trading throughout Barotseland and Caprivi. Holub stayed at Sesheke and Pandamatenga in the 1870s and early 1880s and recorded life in the last capital of Litunga Sipopa who is said by some to have moved there in stages from the capital he founded in Lealui to be closer to the arrival point (at the confluence of the Chobe and Zambezi) of traders from the South

¹ Contained in E.C. Tabler (ed.), *Trade and Travel in Early Barotseland*, Chatto and Windus, London.

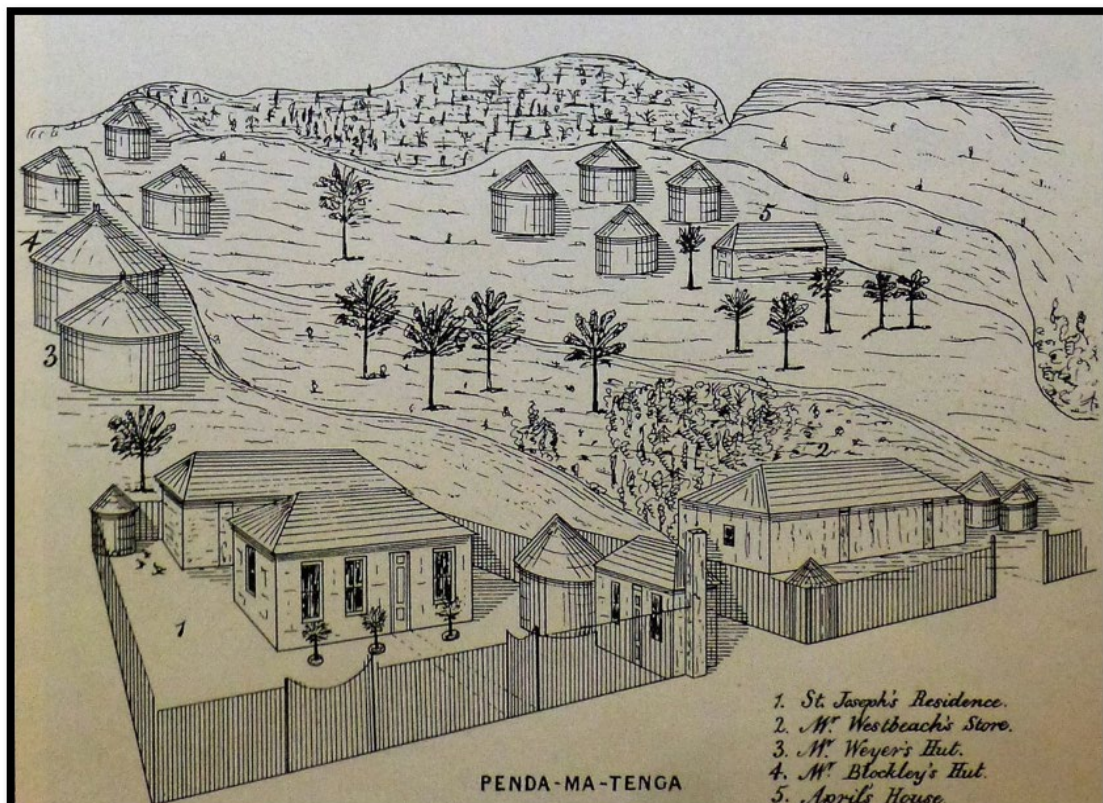


Figure 1. A plan of Pandamatenga Camp (Photograph held at the National Archives of Zimbabwe Harare)

Westbeech's relationship with Barotseland and Lozi royalty commenced in the era of the restoration, specifically with Sipopa who assumed the Kingship after having been nominated by Njekwa, the leader of the overthrow of the Sotho, who in turn became Sipopa's Ngambela after the latter came to power. Westbeech arrived, like the Paris missionaries who were to follow in his wake, from South Africa via the Matabele in present-day Western Zimbabwe. He was not the first British trader to access Barotseland from the south after the departure of Livingstone but he was the first to be welcomed formally and, in his dealings, was to have the most lasting impact.

In the two decades or so between Livingstone's first confirmed encounter with Sibituane and Westbeech's arrival at the confluence of the Chobe and Zambezi around 1871, several traders and adventurers made it to the Upper Zambezi and to the courts of the Makololo and Sipopa. Many of these came from the west. These were the 'Mambari' traders, largely Ovimbundu and mixed race, often trading as middlemen for the Portuguese at the coast (occasional pure Europeans such as the Hungarian Laszlo Magyar, and the Portuguese Silva Porto and Serpa Pinto came to Barotseland from Angola).

Others were British and Dutch adventurer-traders who came from the south but, were generally not well received. Tabler suggests that this was due to fear and suspicion in Barotseland that the Matabele could somehow take advantage of any access given to traders from the south.² Maybe it was also because the prices of the Mambari trade goods were, initially at least, considerably lower than those of traders from the south, due to reduced overheads related to distance from the coast and the absence of bureaucratic barriers on the route from the west coast. Perhaps it was also due to the inability of white traders from the south to instil much confidence in the Makololo-Lozi chiefs they came across. This, in turn, may have been due to a heightened sense of racial arrogance on the part of white traders originating from the Cape, compared to their Portuguese counterparts who intermarried with local women.

² E.C. Tabler (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 4.

George Westbeech, however, succeeded where others had failed and achieved considerable influence in Barotseland in the post-Makololo period, particularly with the Lozi Kings, Sipopa and Lewanika. In Barotseland he was known as 'Joros' or 'Georos Umutunta' meaning 'Great George', Georos being as close as Lozis could get to pronouncing the name George.³ His influence, like that of Livingstone, was also instrumental in the ability of later interlocutors of British influence to gain a foothold in Barotseland. That influence was premised on Westbeech's preparedness to locate and base himself in the region, to learn local languages and to act as an "honest broker" between locally competing forces. Perhaps the goods brought by the English from the south were also of better quality than those originating with the Portuguese, particularly where guns were concerned. In essence, Westbeech built up relationships of trust, respect and friendship with local chiefs and Kings, particularly the Matabele, the latter being equally valuable to the Lozi elites as trade. In addition, Westbeech was judged to be a fair man, who traded honestly and did not ask for slaves.

This is not to say that slaves were not traded in Barotseland in the aftermath of Makololo rule, it is clear from Holub's accounts that they were. Yet the legacy of slaves being more valued in local productivity persisted from pre-Makololo days and it is clear that there was a feeling that trading a commodity like ivory, which quickly came to assume enormous value in the Lozi economy, for the luxury wares of the approaching European world economy was a more prudent and preferable mode of commerce. Westbeech was to be the standard bearer of this preferred mode of commerce. He was also a man of gregarious tastes, whose character and reputation spread far and wide. He is recorded as enjoying the company of local mistresses up and down the Zambezi between Sesheke and Lealui and also of the 'demon drink', both of which appalled European missionaries who, with the exception of Frederick Arnot, some of whom, like the Frenchman, Coillard, said as little about Westbeech in their records as possible,

³ R. Sampson, *The man with a Toothbrush in his Hat...*, p. 32. The present writer found that the name Westbeech is hardly known amongst Lozi historians today whereas the nomenclature 'Joros' immediately receives recognition amongst elders at royal centres in Lealui and Mwandu (Sesheke).

despite their dependence on him for access to Barotseland. Yet he was seen as a humane and friendly man by both black and white, who would help virtually anyone in need, despite any reservations he might hold about them. The nature of Westbeech's success is worthy of some analysis.

Westbeech was born into the lower middle classes of England in Liverpool on 5th October 1844, the son of Joseph and Elizabeth Copp Westbeech and the grandson of Captain Joseph Westbeech, R.N. By the age of eight, George Westbeech had lost his mother, father, and only brother (there were no other children) as well as his grandfather to whom he had become attached. Brought up by his widowed grandmother, he was educated in local schools. He was a healthy child and known to have undertaken elementary education, but soon developed a wanderlust and, possibly influenced by the exploits of Livingstone, left England for Natal in 1862 at the age of seventeen, never to return.⁴ Few details exist of the means or motivations that Westbeech relied upon to promote his travels but it seems that shortly after landing in Natal, he moved on north to Matabeleland where he arrived in 1863 and met Mzilikaze and his son Lobengula, with whom Westbeech was to become a trusted confidant. From the age of 19 to his death at 44 years of age, Westbeech rarely left the region, trading and hunting mainly for ivory, in business with his partner, George Arthur Philips. Philips was known locally as 'Elephant Philips' due to his size and propensity for hearty behaviour and roaring laughter; to local people he was known as 'Vela Impi' or 'behold an army!'⁵ Philips, like Westbeech, was a 'larger than life' character who inspired respect among those he came across and could not be satisfied with life in European society. While partners however, Philips and Westbeech, with their strong personalities, were unable to stomach one another's company for very long. Thus, after hunting and trading in Matabeleland with Philips for almost a decade, Westbeech was to move on to the region north of the Zambezi, because he had heard that elephants were more

⁴ Sampson, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 18.

numerous there and because of competitive pressure from the south in the form of other European hunters and traders.

In 1871, during Sipopa's reign, Westbeech arrived at the confluence of the Chobe and Zambezi Rivers where, it seems, Sipopa, with many of his followers, came to meet him.⁶ Westbeech succeeded in endearing himself to the Lozi having also, remarkably, achieved the same with their enemies, the Matabele. Here, Westbeech, like Livingstone and like Moffat in Kuruman and Matabeleland became conceived of as a powerful agency, a member of a scarce and valued band of people, capable of mediation with other power sources, African and European. When he arrived at the Zambezi, Westbeech, like Livingstone and Moffat, and unlike other European interlopers who unsuccessfully attempted to trade with Barotseland during the same period, spoke the local languages (quickly learning Sesotho, Sindebele and Setswana),⁷ and had already proved himself capable of winning the confidence of other strong peoples in the region. In other words, his perceived value travelled before him and his usefulness as an intermediary both in trade and politics soon became apparent.

However, for reasons that are not altogether clear, when Westbeech first arrived, Sipopa simply wanted him to stay, regardless of his trading abilities; this being perhaps due to Westbeech's good offices with Mzilikaze and Lobengula of the Matabele.⁸ One reason could be that Westbeech was known to have good relations with the Matabele chiefs and might therefore be relied on to forestall possible Matabele raiding intentions. For Westbeech, the attraction was originally undoubtedly ivory and the potential to become rich but he quickly became accustomed to life among the Lozi and was reputed, as mentioned previously, to have innumerable Lozi mistresses dotted around

⁶ Sampson, *The Man with a toothbrush in his Hat...*, p. 30.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 17.

⁸ A view certainly espoused by Tabler in his 'Introduction' to E.C. Tabler (ed.) *Trade and Travel in Early Barotseland* (Chatto and Windus, London, 1963), p. 7.

Barotseland, something that outraged the Boer woman, At Zeerust on 1st June 1875 he married Cornelia Carolina GRONUM, daughter of A.J. Gronum, whom he married at Zeerust on 1st June 1875. She returned to her father's farm, Weltevrede (in the Zeerust district) from the honeymoon journey to the Zambezi by 22nd November 1875. Westbeech passed a good part of 1876 in the Transvaal. He started for the Zambezi in November 1876, and he was at Tati by the end of that month and at Bulawayo in early December. His wife followed him with the cook Jean Goslin, and she perhaps overtook him on the road, for she was with him at the Zambezi at the beginning of 1877. She had fever badly there during January and February and she, Goslin and others started south again in September 1877. The marriage was to be a short-lived union that fell apart in acrimony in 1878.⁹ By this time, however, Westbeech was reported by the adventurer and hunter F.C. Selous to be '...no longer a white man, but had become to all intents and purposes an African'.¹⁰ Westbeech was to become the main purchaser as well as hunter of Lozi ivory, much in the manner that Livingstone had dreamt of and recommended to the Makololo. Such was the devastating cull of elephants north of the Zambezi during Westbeech's time there that, by the time of his death in 1888, the trade in ivory in this region had already become unprofitable due to scarcity and the remoteness of remaining elephants. This aspect of Livingstone's legacy has been overlooked to date. Presumably, Livingstone never foresaw the destruction of the local fauna as a result of his advice.

By the end of the 1870s, Westbeech was spending longer and longer periods in the Zambezi Valley without going south, like Livingstone before him, clearly finding this preferable to life amongst his peers in South Africa. Westbeech had time to observe and reflect on the capacity and wealth of Buluzi, a land free of the dreaded tsetse fly which decimated all hooved animals. Holub mentions Westbeech's description of the

⁹ ...and which, according to Sampson, *The Man with a toothbrush in his Hat...*, op. cit., p. 69, she was to complain about for forty years afterwards!

¹⁰ Quoted in Sampson, *The Man with a toothbrush in his Hat...*, op. cit., p. 69.

superiority of the cattle of the Bulozhi area as compared to those of Sesheke in 1873.¹¹ Also like Livingstone and unlike most Europeans, he had been able to withstand the ravages of fever and had settled at Pandamatenga, thirty-seven miles south of Kazungula on the Zambezi in present-day Botswana, which he made his base.¹² Significantly, Pandamatenga was then considered by Schultz and Hammar as being in 'the Barotse country',¹³ although Sampson says it was in a kind of 'no man's land' at the periphery of both Lozi and Matabele influence.¹⁴



Figure 1. Some of Westbeeche's buildings at Pandamatenga camp (Photograph held at the National Archives of Zimbabwe, Harare)

Westbeeche created such an impression in the region that, on a visit to his base camp in 1884, Schulz and Hammar referred to: 'George Westbeeche, who is a chief here, established by both the Barotzi and the Matabele...'.¹⁵ The visitors were amazed that, at a moment's notice, Westbeeche could summon and receive ninety bearers to assist them with their passage from a chief located one hundred and sixty miles away.¹⁶

In fact, Westbeeche behaved like, and was treated as an Induna or local chief (the Induna of Pandamatenga), and was often called upon to adjudicate in local disputes, his advice and decisions being much respected, not least as he was known to have the ear of

successive Litungas. For a time at least, there was something in the way that Sipopa looked upon Westbeeche which is reminiscent of the way that Sibituane and Sekeletu looked upon Livingstone although it is clear that Westbeeche brought no spiritual message with him. Westbeeche's penchant for promoting Anglophone (British) influences that would also promote development in Barotseland were to have far-reaching impacts on the political future of the region although the name of Westbeeche is today remembered hardly at all.

¹¹ Holub, E. *A Cultural Survey of the Lozi-Mbunda Kingdom in South-Central Africa*, (edited by the Royal Imperial Geographical Society, Vienna, 1879) p. 121.

¹² L. Holy in introduction to L. Holy (ed.) *Emil Holub's Travels North of the Zambezi 1885-6*, (Manchester University Press, Manchester for the University of Zambia) a translation by C. Johns of part of the second volume of E. Holub *Von der Capstadt ins Land der Maschukulumbe...* op.cit.

¹³ Clay, op. cit., p.16.

¹⁴ Sampson, op. cit., p. 19.

¹⁵ A. Schultz and A. Hammar, *The New Africa: A Journey up the Chobe and down the Okavango Rivers – A Record of Exploration and Sport* (William Heinemann, London, 1897), p. 43.

¹⁶ Ibid.

The time that Westbeeche spent with Sipopa in 1871 then, was the beginning of an intimate and mutually remunerative relationship between the two, which was subsequently continued by Lubosi-Lewanika after his accession to the kingship, a relationship that was only really brought to a close by the increasing scarcity of ivory and Westbeeche's declining health. Put simply, Sipopa and Lewanika appeared to like Westbeeche and certainly trusted him, and, from the Czech explorer Holub's account, came to rely on their English friend for information, advice and trade.¹⁷ Lewanika set great store by Westbeeche's advice while not trusting him to the same degree over the Kingdom's declining ivory resources. Coillard's niece, Christine Mackintosh, in 1907, paid Westbeeche a significant if somewhat rueful tribute by narrating,

*'The missionaries were plundered at every turn. Even the traders (always excepting Westbeeche) were demoralised by the state of affairs.' '...the name of Westbeeche must never be forgotten as one of those who first inspired the Barotsi with confidence in white men and in the English.'*¹⁸

¹⁷ Holub, *Seven Years in South Africa...* II, op. cit., pp. 284-285.

¹⁸ C. W. Mackintosh, *Coillard of the Zambesi...*, (T. Fisher Unwin, London, 1907), p. 321 and 327.