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**Contract Labour System and Farm Labourers' Experiences
in Pre-Independent Namibia: Historical Reflections,
Perspectives and Lessons**

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Contract Labour System and Farm Labourers' Experiences in Pre-Independent Namibia: Historical Reflections, Perspectives and Lessons

Kletus Likuwa

Introduction

Contract labourers from Namibia came only from former Ovamboland and the Kavango area and although there were farm labourers from other Namibian ethnic groups, they were not contracted.¹ Many of the farms where labourers got contracted were mainly owned by German settlers and Afrikaners who engaged mainly in farming with livestock such as sheep, goats and cattle. Labour migration from Kavango during the German occupation period was low and totalled only 122 men from 1910 to 1913.² This is in contrast to Ovamboland, which recorded 9295 labourers in 1911, 6076 in 1912 and 12025 in 1913.³ The table below, while not a comprehensive statistical compilation, shows the extent of the disparity in migration from the Kavango and Ovamboland during the South Africa period for the years of the 1920s, the 1940s and 1950s.

Year	Kavangoland	Ovamboland
1924	346	3273
1925	243	3269
1926	355	4033
1941	639	4060
1942	351	3137
1943	539	6659
1959	1033	14960

Figure 1: SWANLA recruitments compiled from 'The annual report of SWA Administrator of 1938-40 on labour recruitments from Kavango' (AKA 552, N1/15/6-2), 'The Union of South Africa report on labour recruitments' (JX0220, 1924, 1925 & 1926), 'Labour recruitments 1938-1940' (AKA 552, N1/15/ 6-2) and from SWAA 1/1/46, A521/26 (v.5).

- 1 I thank the Carl Schlettwein foundation of Basel, Switzerland, for the financial support for my PhD studies at the University of the Western Cape. I am extremely grateful to Professor Uma Dhupelia Mesthrie, my academic supervisor at UWC, for her guidance and support. I also thank the Dean of the Research Office of UWC for granting me a writing fellowship funding.
- 2 A. Eckl, 'Konfrontation und Kooperation am Kavango (Nord Namibia) von 1891 bis 1921' (PhD thesis, University of Cologne, 2004), p. 120.
- 3 See M.J. Oliviers 'Inboorlingheid en administrasie in die mandaat gebied van Suid Wes-Afrika' (PhD thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 1961), p. 253.

This trend continued for the whole period of the contract system and by 1971 it was reported that there were 43000 contract labourers in Namibia of which only 3000 were from the Kavango and the rest were from Ovamboland.⁴ The statistics for labour migration indicates that the response to labour migration in the Kavango was not the same as in Ovamboland and there was never the same value attached to contract labour migration.⁵ However the table indicates that recruitment by SWANLA (1943-1972) was better than its predecessor NLO (1925-1942). The number of contract workers in Namibia supplied to the farming sector exceeded the number to the mines for the first time in 1934 and remained so during most of the 1940s.⁶ This occurred because after 1948, SWANLA adopted a compelling strategy to be able to meet the demands for farm labour by making it compulsory for all new recruits to spend at least one contract as a farm worker before they would be able to travel to the mines.⁷

This paper centrally uses the recorded oral interviews of former contract labourers from the Kavango in northeast Namibia, supplemented with archival sources from the National Archives of Namibia (NAN) and written sources to reflect on the experiences of farm labourers under the contract labour system during the South African colonial period. The paper explores journeys to and from the farms, the living and farm work experiences and farm workers' perception of their experiences under the contract labour system. The aim is to provide a historical basis to extract lessons to understand the current challenges presented by farm labour practices in postcolonial Namibia where the plights of farm workers remains a pertinent and persistent labour issue. The paper points that the paradigm of exploitation, suppression and entrapment under the contract labour system remain dominant in the narratives of former farm labourers. Furthermore, many farm labourers viewed their mistreatment under the contract labour system as colonial exploitation at its worst as the wages were too low. Although many of them extended their contracts in the hope to accumulate more money to improve their social and economic conditions, this remained an everlasting hope and a permanent failure.

Journey to the Recruiting Depot

The colonial administration aimed to maximise profit from black Namibians' labour power and therefore put control measures and infrastructures in place to ensure that contract labourers from the Kavango were delivered to their work destinations in the police zone.⁸ In the early South African colonial period, migration was under the escort of the visiting colonial of-

4 J. Kane-Berman, *Contract labour in South West Africa* (Johannesburg, South African Institute of Race Relations, 1972), p. 5.

5 M.J. Olivier, 'Inboorlingbeleid', p. 253.

6 J. Silvester, 'Black Pastoralists, White Farmers: the dynamics of land dispossession and recruitment in southern Namibia' (PhD thesis, London, 1993), p. 335.

7 *Ibid.*

8 Police zone refers to the central and southern parts of Namibia where white owned commercial farms were situated and where police control was strictly enforced.

officials and later through labour escorts and eventually through organized recruiting agencies. The journey to the work destination was a tightly controlled process and an overt control over labourers. All their personal and family details, for example, were recorded at Rundu and reproduced and kept in the recruiting centre at Grootfontein. Apart from the D.P. disease control, the labourers were also inspected for security purposes at the police border posts of Nurugas and Tsintabis, which were entry points to the police zone from the Kavango. After 1936 when the office of the Native Commissioner operated from Rundu, all new labour recruits began to report at his office. The contract labourers slept at a labour compound that consisted of thatched roof houses and was situated near the river side but in the late 1950s another compound was constructed further away from the river with permanent brick structures. The compounding of contract labourers at Rundu ensured that the administration had an easily available pool from which to extract labourers who passed the medical testing process.

A contract labourer was first examined in Rundu and then in Grootfontein⁹ and this medical procedure degraded and embarrassed contract labourers. While in Rundu, labourers were stripped naked and taken to a hall surrounded by a short wall made of reeds near the SWANLA shop to be medically examined. Afterwards they proceeded to the hospital to what they called the ‘wahahe- sera’ (don’t breathe) machines to test if they had tuberculosis (TB).¹⁰ They called the x-ray machines the ‘don’t breathe’ machines because labourers were usually asked to breathe in and hold their breath for several seconds while an x-ray was taken. The medical testing process therefore displayed lack of respect for the humanity of the labourers. The tagging with a metal alphabetic tag around the hand ensured that labourers were aware of their job categories before they left Rundu. The B symbol indicated that labourers were fit for heavy farm work such as extensive milking, dam building, herding of large flocks of sheep or goats while the C symbol was given to labourers who were fit for light farm work such as milking a few cows, herding small flocks of sheep, goats and other light herd work.¹¹ The provision of symbols to labourers at Rundu was for classification purposes only and the labourers still were at a loss as to what employer they would be assigned to and to which work destination they would be sent to.

Contract labourers were exposed to personal hardship and danger during the journey. For example, in the earlier periods, they carried their load of goods on their shoulders and had to provide for their own meals and were also hampered by Bushmen attacks and thirst.¹² Transport was introduced by NLO from Kavango to the south only in 1938 and Mr Gaerdes Kemp (locally known as Kemba) was appointed to transport contract labourers and to run the only NLO shop at Rundu. The lorries that transported migrant labourers followed the road from Rundu via

9 See SWANLA Manager of Grootfontein to the Chief Native Commissioner in Windhoek ‘Medical examinations of recruits at Runtu’ (SWAA 2426, A521/10, 8 April 1953).

10 See interview with Bernhard Lipayi Linyando, Ndiyona, 27 July 2009.

11 The Native Commissioner to District surgeon of Runtu, ‘Classification of recruits, SWANLA and WENELA’ (NAR 1/1/55, 13/1/1, 28 March 1947).

12 See interview with Shikiri waNkayira, Ndongalinena, 8 August 2009.

Karukuvisa–Tsintsabis to Grootfontein. This was a deep sandy road, which slowed down the speed of the lorries and made the journey to the recruiting depot very long and tiring.¹³

A key image constructed by contract labourers about recruitment at the Grootfontein recruiting depot is that of sale or purchase. The needy white men (employers) placed an order for their required number of people at SWANLA at a fee that went to the colonial administration's coffers and this practice was seen as a sale. As one labourer indicated:

It was in Grootfontein where we got bought. What else do you reason was contract work all about? The white people use to send money to their friends to look and find some people for them. So, money was given to those in offices and when we arrived there we were told, 'o.k. this one needs this number of people'. The money with which we were purchased went to the administration. That is how it was.¹⁴

Since labourers already knew what job category they have been assigned to in Rundu, their objection at Grootfontein was not against the type of employment but rather against the area of employment or a particular employer.¹⁵ After a labourer was given an employer or destination of work he was provided with a blanket, a long-sleeved shirt and a short-sleeved one (regardless of the size of the labourers), some bread and two cans of jam. The quantity of the goods labourers received depended on the length of the journey. As one interviewee said: 'The number of loafs of bread you were given depended on the distance of travel and if you were, for instance, going to Walvis Bay you got three loafs of bread with two tins of jam'.¹⁶

Each labourer was provided with a train ticket attached to a permit of employment form, which indicated their names, the name of the area where they went to work and that of the employer. Contract labourers travelled by coal trains, the 'kataghura' (the cutter/breaker), to their various work destinations but dreaded them because these were usually used for cattle transport and thus labourers felt degraded in their humanity.¹⁷ The taking away of the personal documents of contract labourers, which they received back from employers only after the contract period had expired, ensured that labourers could not travel elsewhere without the permit of the master and could not change work (unless he broke the contract and left without his papers).¹⁸

Farm Living and Working Conditions

Contract labourers on farms faced poor sleeping arrangements that resulted in inadequate sleep.¹⁹ Labourers usually slept in small rounded houses called 'pondoks' that were usually situated in the backyard of the main house of the farm. The number of labourers per pondok depended on the availability of pondoks and it could range from one to five labourers per pondok.

13 See interview with Ndumba Shirengumuke, Hoha, 2009.

14 Ndumba Shirengumuke, Rucara village, 3 July 2009.

15 See interview with Linyando Bernhard Lipayi, (born 1936), Ndiyona village, 27 July 2009.

16 See interview with Bernhard Limbangu Shampapi, Rucara, 2009.

17 See V. H. Ndadi, *Breaking contract: the story of Helao Vinnia Ndadi* (Windhoek, AACRLS, 2009), p. 18.

18 See interview with Bernhard Lipayi Linyando, Ndiyona, 27 July 2009.

19 See interview with Tuhemwe Shevekwa, Sharughanda, 2009.

Some pondoks were old with leaking roofs and cracked walls and were usually not fumigated and became the breeding ground for 'ntjanya' (bugs) which tormented the labourers during their sleep, a situation which got worse when it rained.²⁰ The labourers could also be assigned any available structure such as a storage room for accommodation. This was the case for Shindimba Shihungu during his first contract to Outjo farms in the 1950s.²¹

When a new labourer arrived on a farm, they familiarised themselves with their new places and determined how they would fit in by inquiring from other labourers about life on a farm. Since Kavango labourers usually worked with labourers from other ethnic groups they established friendships across ethnic lines and usually learned Otjiherero, the Damara language and Oshikwanyama as a lingua franca. The Kavango labourers could easily learn these other Bantu languages as they could relate them to many similar words in their own language. As Shindimba Shihungu indicated:

A Damara came to me and said 'let us go and look for the cattle'. I said 'o.k. let us go'. He spoke in Otjiherero. I understood the word 'let us go' and the word 'look for the cattle' sounded like in our language. So then we left to look for the cattle.²²

At the farm the farmer had the final say and allocated any work to the labourers, sometimes in contrast to the contract agreement. This meant that a labourer who was contracted to work in the kitchen could end up working as a herd boy. Since some labourers had preconceived ideas about what they would do on the farm, their new condition of labour was therefore a shock. Matamu, who left for his first contract after 1936 and worked at a farm in Okahandja thought, for instance, that he would do light work because he was a minor.²³ Contract labourers' preconceived ideas about the nature of work turned out to be different from what they experienced at home. At home, for instance, a young man learned by practical examples from the elders while on the farms he was instructed and at times compelled to work. At home, the men visited neighbours with no limits of what time to return home or else sat around 'shinyanga' (the social gathering place around the fire in the evening) to discuss their experiences of the day and plans for the next day. However, on farms visiting days were only on Sundays and workers only visited friends at the various camp sites situated within the same farm. Unlike at home where cooking was the women's responsibility, contract labourers on farms had to cook for themselves. Labourers on farms also had to work in the kitchen to help the mistress cook for their master.

The space of the kitchen on the farm, unlike at home, became central to labourers and those who worked there felt closer to farm authority in the sense that they developed a closer relationship with the mistress (this was the farmer's wife who was also referred to as the 'Misis'). Although working in the kitchen was highly regarded among labourers, it at times con-

20 *Ibid.*

21 See interview with Shindimba Shihungu, Ndiyona, 2009.

22 *Ibid.*

23 See interview with Matamu, (born +-1919), Rundu town, 12 July 2009.

tained problems as labourers felt the authority more directly. Labourers point out that although some farmers were likely not to bring trouble on them, it was mostly their wives who incited them to do so. The 'Missis' usually reported every mistake of the labourer to her husband and expected him to deal with the respective labourer. The short temper of the 'Missis' lingers on in the memory of some contract labourers. The prominence of this memory of the 'Missis' reflects on the gender roles in the Kavango region in which women were expected to be submissive to their men and listen to their commands. Therefore Kavango farm labourers might have found it more difficult and traumatic to be shouted at by a woman. The constant reporting of a labourer by the 'Missis' left him open to acts of victimisation from his master. The central issue that usually made the 'Missis' in the kitchen angry was when a labourer broke a cup or a plate or spilt anything on the floor and her anger was aggravated when the labourer dared to speak back. In their narrations of experiences in the kitchen, some interviewees are careful to represent themselves differently in contrast to other labourers who got into trouble. Shirengumuke is a case example:

When I finally entered the kitchen I was never beaten. Even when she got angry she would come and just stand. At times when one was holding something and then it slipped from your hands and broke down, hey! She would come with force and say 'you broke my cup I am going to beat you'. And then I would respond 'just beat me, have I not told you before that I did not come on contract to work in a kitchen? I came for milking cows but then you said, no, just hang up with milking and come in here until such a time that we find someone for the kitchen, I was not the one who chose this'. After that then she would stand and stand until she gives up and goes away. When she was standing in anger, I would be silent, busy doing my work; she would also just stand there until she turns and goes away. This was unlike the case with my friend who spoke back when she spoke that was why they could not understand each other.²⁴

His strategy was to be quiet while his friend spoke back and angered the 'Missis' further. Some labourers, therefore, developed a survival strategy by being silent whenever abusive words were showered upon them. These were acts of agency. Being silent though could also be related to the earlier traditional education that children received from their parents to never respond negatively to an elder or anyone senior.²⁵

Labourers had to cover the costs of supplies for their utensils such as a plate, a pot and a cup themselves. The costs for these items, which they received from their master, were later deducted from their wages. At the end of each week the master also provided supplies of food. They usually received tobacco, salt, sugar and maize meal, beans and soup while meat was only given occasionally.

Although there were exceptions farm employers were generally regarded by labourers to be cruel. The oral narratives indicate examples of physical abuse of contract labourers who got beaten for failing to greet the 'baas' as he passed by and were kicked in the buttocks by the mistress as they pushed the car of their master to start the engine. They were also beaten for

24 Shirengumuke, Hoha, 2009.

25 See interview with Kamenye Likuwa, Kangweru village, 2009.

beating a calf during the milking process, for the death of livestock and the negligence of work by a fellow labourer, for not being able to operate water pump machines and for speaking out as the farmer speaks. In some cases the farmer called the police to come and beat up his contract labourers for what he believed was a cheeky and disrespectful attitude of contract labourers towards him.²⁶ The worst that could happen to a farm contract labourer was to be killed and contract labourers believed that those labourers who disappeared under mysterious circumstances without a trace were in fact killed by the farmer.²⁷ The farmer could get away with the crime by reporting to the police that his labourers had absconded from work. It was useless for labourers to lay complaints against the farmers' mistreatment as labourers were always sure to be found guilty and served with harsh punishments afterwards. The continued mistreatment of farm labourers with no legal recourse to their problems usually made some labourers wish they had never come on contract work and it led to their desertions from farms. This was, however, a dangerous decision as a labourer was legally breaking contract and could be imprisoned. The estimated number of desertions from farms within the Police Zone over a period of twelve months ending in 1947 was over 600 and at the end of this period 297 arrests had been made within the Police Zone and 21 beyond, but 282 of those who had escaped remained free.²⁸ Labourers who were caught while escaping were beaten up by the police before being returned to their former masters but in cases where the old master was no longer interested in such labourers, they were usually deported back to the Kavango so as to be eligible for re-contracting.²⁹

There were exceptional cases where farmers displayed kindness to some labourers but this selective favouritism usually created tension, suspicion and conflicts among labourers. The tension and conflict was usually between the long-serving labourers and the newcomers. What created discontent at times was when a newcomer was placed in charge over the long-serving labourers or was favoured above them in other aspects. Such discontent led to suspicions on the new labourer which put him in a vulnerable position, sometimes to a point where he felt his life threatened and where the only solution was to leave the farm. This was Tuhemwe's experience in 1970:

At that farm where I worked, I was the only person from Kavango and the only minor; all of them were from Ovamboland. Then the white madam liked me greatly so that whenever she went shopping, I was always taken along in her car. I use to be paid R6.00 a month while others got R.4.00 or R.5.00 and this is what made them to question why I the new comer was getting R6.00 than them who have been there longer. Since then tension began to build up between me and my friends. They were complaining that why was it so that despite the fact that they were the first one to work on the farm, the white madam did not take one of them to do the work that I was doing? And why is it that every time she went shopping she would only pick me to go with her? So, that was the way it continued to be and every time she went out she took me along

26 See interview with Tuhemwe Shevekwa, Sharughanda, 2009.

27 *Ibid.*

28 Silvester, 'Black Pastoralists, White Farmers', p. 350.

29 See D.K. Ausiku, 'My own stories: is this God's work or Satan's scheme?' (Unpublished manuscript, Canada, copy right no. ISBN 0-1038934, 10 November 2005), p. 34.

until later I also began to notice that my friends were really not happy. It was then that a thought began to develop in my mind that perhaps one day my friends would be tempted to do something bad to me, I really began to panic, I got scared. Finally my days for end of contract were nearing and the twelve months were soon over. But then the master asked me not to go back but to add additional months but I refused. But I did not tell them the truth about why I feared staying.³⁰

It was an invitation of problems for a labourer to be loved and favoured above others as this usually led to suspicion and envy from fellow labourers and put his life at risk. The suspicion by other labourers towards a favoured labourer indicates their demand for equal treatment from the farmer.

Tuhemwe's account that contract labourers in Namibia got paid different salaries at different times could be true considering that the recommended wages, given inflation, varied over time and within the various employment sectors. After the Second World War in 1945, the farm labour commission, for instance, recommended farm work wages as follows: the first four months at 8/-per month, the second four months at 9/-per month, the third four months at 10/-per month, the fourth four months at 12/-per month, the fifth four months at 13/-per month and the last four months at 14/-per month.³¹ By 1966, it was stated through an official publication that a contract worker with no previous experience working on commercial farms in central and southern Namibia started at R7.50 per month, raised to R8.25 per month after 12 months, to R9.00 six months thereafter, and to R9.75 another six month later.³² What matters more about the oral statements is not their factual truth or falseness but what meanings they provide about wages. Labourers' narratives indicate that wages were not fixed and while some got paid monthly, others got their wages only at the end of their contract. Others complained of not having been given their full pay and dismissed unfairly afterwards as was the case for Kativitji in 1929.³³ Others got as low as R.0.90c per month for the first eight months and then got R1.00 per month for the remaining two months as was the case for Ndumba Shirengumuke in the mid-1930s during his first contract at a farm in Gobabis. Others got R6.00 per month as was the case for Tuhemwe in 1970 at a farm in Grootfontein.

The general feeling of contract labourers was that the wages were low and many complained that the whites were tricking them out from their supposed wages.³⁴ In some cases, farm labourers worked for the whole contract period and received their pay only at the expiration of the contract usually after the farmer had deducted everything the labourers owed him.

30 Tuhemwe, Sharuwanda, 2009.

31 Circular minute from the office of the Administrator titled 'Farm labour commission' (Windhoek, NAN, SWAA 2412, A521/13/3, 30 August 1939).

32 G.M. Bauer, 'The labor movement and the prospect of democracy in Namibia' (PhD thesis, Wisconsin Madison, 1994), p. 49.

33 See, The Administrator, 'Returning labourers-complaints, Kativitji, pass No. 370/28' (SWAA 2397, file A521/2, 5 May 1928).

34 See for example the interview with Shikiri wa Nkayira, 2009.

Tuhemwe Shevekwa explains his 1970 experience:

What the mistress use to do is that whenever a labourer needed something from a shop she bought it for you and then at the end of contract work, all your credit were deducted and you were paid the remaining salary. I worked for twelve months without pay and it was only at the end of my contract that I was given twelve rand. May be it was different from my other friends on other farms, I will not know, but I tell you what I experienced. I saw my pay only at the end of my contract period.³⁵

With the little wages therefore, labourers could only afford to purchase goods in the police zone and usually arrived in the Kavango without a cent left. They felt that they were only making all the money for the whites and did not receive a fair share. Many contract labourers stayed longer on contract because it became difficult to save money or to spend more on their families because of the insufficient pay. But since labourers had no other choices, they continued to work on the farms and made the best use of the little wages. Shikiri waNkayira articulates his 1930s experiences explicitly:

You think we saw any kindness of high wages there? No! The kindness in high wages to which we are now impressed is that of today whereby people are now getting so much money, it was not the case in our times, no kidding! But nonetheless we never threw away the money, we use to be thankful and say let it just be this bad but we are still going back.³⁶

In general, therefore, many contract labourers were always short of money and although many extended their contracts in the hope to accumulate more, this remained only an everlasting hope as the continuous low pay made it difficult.

The practice by farmers of giving new European names to labourers for easy identification purposes was not limited to Namibia but extended to neighbouring countries such as South Africa and Mozambique. Harries, for example, has given some background to this practice in the mines and argued that “names that carried a specific meaning at home and provided their bearers with a temporal and spatial identity were met with incomprehension on the South African and Mozambique mines.”³⁷ Harries further indicate that “although one can ascribe the absurdity of these names to the practices of racist whites seeking to infantilize blacks and legitimate their exploitation, workers created a new situational social identity as mark of their passage through life that signified membership of a new and assertive community.”³⁸ Tuhemwe Shevekwa described his new name calling experience of 1970:

The white person use to call me Timo. To call me Tuhemwe was difficult for her. But at that time I was not yet baptized. They called me Timo as they could not manage to pronounce Tuhemwe. Since then they

35 Tuhemwe Shevekwa, 2009.

36 Shikiri waNkayira, 2009.

37 P. Harries, *Work culture and identity: migrant labourers in Mozambique and South Africa, c.1860-1910* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 1994), p. 60.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

called me Timo to imply Tuhemwe (Tuhemwe laughs). I also use to respond to it because I got too tired of correcting them and so I said to myself I will just respond to the name.³⁹

Harries' interpretation where the contract labourers derived pride and constructed a new way of looking at the world through their given European names does not apply to the case of the Kavango. Here, they thought of it as an inability of their employers to pronounce their African names. Contract labourers were unhappy as the European names were imposed on them and although they continued to use them it was against their will and was simply a means to relate more easily to their employers and as a pass around the police zone. The contract labourers also gave new names to the farmers but unlike the farmers who informed the labourers of their new names the labourers dared not do the same. These names were usually laden with negative connotations and could make their masters furious and only lead to severe punishment all of which speaks to the politics of power relations between the labourers and employers at that time. Farm labourers usually gave farmers African names to describe physical features such as 'kapunda' (stomach) for one who had a huge stomach or 'katwekatoka' (white head) for one who had grey hair. The names also described the behavior of the employers such as 'Shimbungu' (hyena), which was given to Harold Eedes because contract labourers believed he was cruel. The practice of name-calling among the Kavango people was that a name given to a person could be related to either an event during birth or the physical appearance of the person. African names that were given to employers, therefore, were related to the characteristics or physical appearance of the employer and were always meaningful. Most of these names were also loaded with humour and, therefore, name-calling could be viewed as a therapy that helped the labourers come to terms with the mistreatment they endured from the employers.

The duration of contract farm labour changed over time but it was never less than six months. Based on the recommendations of the farm labour commission in the 1940s, the duration was extended to two years at one stretch.⁴⁰ Despite these changes some labourers stayed longer than usual and in some cases married and settled permanently in the police zone. Such labourers became known as 'mbwiti', which is a person who stays away for long and does not like to return home regardless of whether he/she has the intention of returning home one day. It was, however, the policy of the colonial administration that the contract labour system should not lead to detribalisation and as such the influx population laws ensured that contract labourers returned after the contract labour period expired. Proclamation No. 29 of 1935 dealt with the control of the Extra Territorial and Northern Natives, which included the Angolan, Zambian, Ovambo and Kavango contract labourers.⁴¹ Under this proclamation all contract labourers had

39 Tuhemwe Shevekwa, sharughanda, 30 July 2009.

40 D.D. Forsyth, 'Recommendations of farm labour commission' (Windhoek, NAN, NAT 1/1/54, S/U14, file 13, 26 February 1940).

41 'Circular on Control of Extra-Territorial and Northern Natives' (Windhoek, NAN, NAT 1/1/54, S/U-20, file 25, 8 January 1936).

to be repatriated at the expiration of the of contract and the police on patrols ensured that all contract labourers produced their non-expired employment permits or passes.⁴²

The end of contract was usually referred to as ‘kukutuka’ (to be set free from) and it was indeed regarded by labourers as the temporary end of their bondage to contract work at least until their next contract. When the contracts had expired, labourers were given back their pass permit to return to the Kavango and were eligible to reapply for another labour contract. In cases where the former employer still needed the service of a labourer he had to go to the office of the commissioner or magistrate for a re-contracting for a labourer and had to pay the recruiting fee but this only materialised if the labourer was interested and agreed to be re-contracted to the same employer. Many contract labourers returned to contract work more than once although possibly to different employers or employment and some like Ludwig Kudumo Kamenye were engaged in contract labour for a consecutive eight years.⁴³ The question of adding more months to a contract after the expiry of a previous contract was possible but Silvester shows, however, that migrant farm workers seldom renewed their contract on a farm or returned to the same farm twice.⁴⁴ The oral narratives indicate that although re-contract to a cruel employer after the expiration of the contract was highly unlikely, it was not wise for a labourer to divulge the truth to his master of his unwillingness to return as this only put him into more trouble. Instead the labourer gave false reasons or simply falsely promised their employers that they would return after a break.⁴⁵

Farm labourers believed that the contract labour system was an example of colonial exploitation at its worst because they suffered extreme mistreatment as non-persons from employers.⁴⁶ Kapinga Muhero, who went on his first contract in Namibia in the 1960s, asserts that although contract labour system was the only means to acquire money, one received nothing good out of it and he compares engaging in contract labour system to a local parable of gathering wild fruits. He explains:

I see contract work like the issue of collecting wild fruit. When your fellows are gone to look for wild fruit in the jungle then you too begin to question why you must stay. You then decide that you also have to go there regardless of whether you will die there or survive. Those things [contract labour] was all about sacrificing and suffering and making up one’s mind and being aware that whether one dies there or returns alive was up to God to know. There were no benefits there.⁴⁷

The ‘wild fruit collection’ parable among the Kavango ethnic groups is usually interpreted as follows: people may take a long journey under great hardships to the dangerous jungle and col-

42 *Ibid.*

43 See interview with Ludwig Kudumo Kamenye, Kangweru, 13 August 2009.

44 Silvester, ‘Black pastoralists, White Farmers’, p. 345.

45 See for example the extensive interview with NdumbaShirengumuke, Rucara, 3 July 2009.

46 See interview with Tuhemwe Shevekwa, Sharughanda, 30 July 2009.

47 Kapinga Muhero, Kamutjonga village, 19 August 2009.

lect the wild fruits but once such wild fruits are collected they only last for a day and still leave families in the same hardship as before and yet one has to make repeated journeys to the jungle for more needed but yet non-lasting wild fruits. Herein is again the image of entrapment for labourers contracted to work on farms.

Conclusion

The paradigm of exploitation, suppression and entrapment under the contract labour system remain dominant in the narratives of former farm labourers. Although there were benefits, these were small and non-lasting and not worth the exploitations and the sufferings they had to endure. Many farm labourers viewed their mistreatment under the contract labour system as colonial exploitation at its worst as the wages were too low and although many of them extended their contracts in the hope to accumulate more to improve their social and economic conditions, this remained an everlasting hope and a permanent failure.

Lessons and the Way forward for Postcolonial Namibia

Control and oppression and exploitation (poor sleeping arrangements, low or no wages, unfair dismissals, no legal recourse to labourers' problems) are common features of farm work experience. Labourers are exposed to personal hardship and danger during the journey to and from farm work destination.

The treatment received by farm labourers is degrading to their humanity. Despite all sufferings, labourers are careful to represent themselves differently in contrast to other labourers who get into trouble and being silent has become a survival strategy on the farms. There are but small rewards in farm work but these rewards are non-lasting. Long stay at farm work impact negatively on marriages and leads to alienation of families and to one's area of origin. Farm labourers view engaging in farm work as a defeating activity that traps them in a cycle of hardship and poverty as their dreams, hopes and aspirations of accumulating wealth to address their social and economic hardship remains an everlasting hope and a permanent failure.

As a way forward, there is a need to strengthen labour policies and the monitoring of implementation of such policies so that farm labourers are protected from exploitation and suppression inherent in farm work. There is a need to constantly monitor the situation of farm workers. Since many farm labourers's dependents live far away from their workplace, there is a need to help farm labourers maintain contact with their families for family support purposes so that negative family impacts on women and children are mitigated. There is a need to address the root causes for physical and psychological abuses of farm workers and improve worker/ employer relations. There is a need for Unions and stakeholders to increase efforts to listen to the voices of farm labourers who should be encouraged to speak without any fears of reprisals from employers. There is a need to improve wages and remuneration for farm workers so

that many would feel that their engagement into farm work is not a defeating activity but that it helps to address their aspiration of accumulating wealth and addressing their family's social and economic hardships.

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