

6 *Colonialism and the Development of the Contract Labour System in Kavango*¹

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Introduction

The contract labour system in Namibia was a colonial invention and needs to be explored in the context of colonial historiography. Many scholars have written on the contract labour system in Namibia. However, while there is a general understanding of the system, the Kavango as a supplier of contract labour is neglected, as the historiography has largely focused on the supply of labour from the region that was labelled 'Ovamboland' (Clarence-Smith and Moorsom, 1977; Cronje and Cronje, 1979; Hishongwa, 1992; Kane Berman, 1972; McKittrick, 1998; Moorsom, 1989; Cooper, 2001). However, the area known today as the regions of Kavango East and Kavango West has a significant role in the history of migrant labour in Namibia and there is an opportunity to reassess the system using a different regional context.

Although labour recruitment in the Kavango had been on-going prior to 1925, it was unorganised with limited numbers of recruits collected by colonial officials, and it was only after 1925 that the South African administration finally managed to formalise labour recruitment. The formalisation of the contract labour system in the Kavango occurred with the formation of the Northern Labour Organisation (NLO) and Southern Labour Organisation (SLO) in 1925. These were later amalgamated into the South West Africa Native Labour Association (SWANLA) which recruited labourers from the Kavango and Ovambo in the early 1940s until the collapse of the contract labour system in 1972.

Using qualitative research methods to gather and analyse data, this paper employs oral interviews, archival and written sources to explain the encounters of the Kavango population with colonialism and asks why both German (1885-1915) and South African (1915-1989) colonial authorities needed labourers from Kavango, and what strategies the colonial administration used to extract labour. It explains why, despite the creation of a market for consumption of European goods in Kavango, fewer men went for contract work during the German colonial period than during the South African colonial period. Understanding the impact of colonialism on these communities provides the necessary background to explain the challenges colonial authorities faced with regard

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to extracting labour from the Kavango for the colonial economy. The chapter underlines the importance of colonialism in the development of the contract labour system in the Kavango.

Colonialism in Kavango

Colonialism in Kavango, as in the rest of Namibia, did not begin with the German conquest of the country in 1885 but with the earlier activities of European travellers, hunters, traders and missionaries who paved the way for that conquest. Kavango encountered the first wave of colonialists in the form of European and American explorers, hunters and traders who had penetrated the area by the early 1850s.² By the time Germany claimed Namibia as a colony in 1884, European and American hunters and traders, therefore, had a long history of exploiting and destroying the natural resources, the wild life and the social and political lives of the communities of the Kavango. The introduction of European goods in the Kavango by European traders laid the foundation for a new western economic lifestyle among the Kavango as the European goods became the same type of goods men from the Kavango aspired to acquire during the contract labour system period.

In spite of the creation of the new colony of 'German South West Africa', the presence of the German imperial authorities in the Kavango was limited to visits by a handful of colonial officials to the area. Curt von François was the first official of the German administration in Namibia to explore the Kavango in 1891.³ The German authorities faced infrastructural problems due to the lack of proper roads to travel to the Kavango, as well as the resistance of the local population, who were reluctant to accept a permanent colonial administration in their area. It might be argued that in most parts of Namibia, the nature of colonial control was first, European hunters and traders who introduced market capitalism that resulted in the economic control of the local population, while missionaries pacified the local inhabitants and undermined existing cultural and spiritual systems, with the final phase of colonialism being the permanent military occupation of an area by the German authorities. In the case of the Kavango, although European hunters and traders had attempted the first stages of economic exploitation, the arrival, acceptance and establishment of missionaries proved difficult. The people rejected the evangelists from Botswana many times, for example in 1883, King Diyeve of the Hambukushu refused to allow them to enter his territory (Magadla and Voltz, 2006, p. 65). As early as 1896, the German colonial authorities urged the Catholic Church to expand their mission establishment to the Kavango and support their endeavours.⁴

2 Records of traders to the region include Johan August Wahlberg who visited the Kavango around 1855 and Charles Andersson who was trading in the region in 1859.

3 Other prominent German colonial figures who 'explored' the Kavango included Lieutenant Otto Eggers (1899), Paul Jodka and Dr Gerber (1902), Richard Volkmann (1903), Captain Victor Franke (1906), Streiwolf (1906), Seiner (1908), Schultze (1908), Zawada (1909), Fischer (1909), von Heydebreck (1911) and von Zastrow (1911).

4 S. Shiremo (2005), 'The Role of Kavango Kings in the anti-colonial resistance: 1903 the year of unity and resistance'. Unpublished paper presented at a conference at Rundu College of Education.