

## **OKAHOLO: CONTRACT LABOUR SYSTEM AND LESSONS FOR POST COLONIAL NAMIBIA**

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### **Abstract**

This paper looks at the origins and effects of a repressive contract labour system, as experienced by the Kavango and Ovambo contract labourers.<sup>1</sup> It also investigates the initial contact with European traders and later employers in the Police Zone, which produced a marked effect on the Ovambo and the Kavango lives. This paper analyses the contract labourers' distinct position in the political economy of colonial Namibia, under firstly Germany and later South African rule, and their specific economic, social and living conditions. These aspects are relevant when exploring the exploitation and attempts at totalitarian control by the colonial administration that nurtured class consciousness and political militancy. The exploitative and repressive conditions entrenched in the contract labour system persisted since the inception of Kavango and Ovambo labour migration to the south in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and were factors in their growing political consciousness in the early 1970s. Contract labourers were denied any rights outside their sending areas, enforced by pass and contract laws which put total control over job allocation, residence and mobility in the hands of colonial officials. This paper concludes by highlighting the lasting legacies of the colonial contract labour system in post-colonial Namibia.

### **Introduction**

The systematic official organization of the contract labour system in Namibia took root in the early 1920s and only ended in 1971, after which recruitment was taken over by labour bureaus in the respective homelands of Ovambo and Kavango under new labour agreements. Contract labour was a system in which labourers were recruited to work in the central and southern part of Namibia usually for six to eighteen months. Under this system, any men above the age of sixteen years and mature enough to work and without any disabilities could be recruited. Once recruited, the labourer had no right to decide the type of employment or to negotiate the salary. The recruiting agency effectively sold the contract labourers to various employers and the labourers were expected not to break the contract. Bhagavan (1986) noted that the contract labour system was viewed as a euphemism for modern slavery as the settlers obliged the colonial

authorities to supply them with African labour but did not in return feel any obligations for the welfare of labourers. Various historians have written on contract labour system in Namibia and have analysed the origins of the institutionalized structure of labour exploitation, central to colonial power and profit (see Clarence-Smith & Moorsom 1975; Katjavivi 1988; Emmett 1999; Stals 1967). The literature highlights the protracted processes of economic incorporation of northern societies into capitalist structures and relations on the creation of a semi-proletariat<sup>2</sup> and the colonial state's control through indirect rule. This paper uses archival and written sources and oral narratives derived from both Ovambo and the Kavango contract labourers to blend their experiences under the contract labour system and its impacts on them and their families.

### **Mercantilism: European Hunters, Traders, and Slave Trade**

The advent of European hunters and traders, the Vimballi<sup>3</sup> and the Arab slave traders transformed the social and economic lives of the Kavango and Ovambo communities by nurturing a demand for European goods and also laid the foundation for the peoples' involvement in the contract labour system. Moorsom (1997: 24) noted that the introduction of fire-arms became a necessity to the ruling groups who benefited most by using it to expand their political power through small-scale inter-group raiding, seizure of cattle and people who were ransomed or incorporated into lineages as debt slaves. In the case of Ovambo, labour recruitment and migration is sometimes linked to pre-colonial kings' exaction of *Okasava*. *Okasava* was a form of taxation in which men were expected by the King to pay tribute to the Ovambo traditional leaders. In the Kwanyama kingdom, for example, there was an intensification of internal taxation *okasava* to meet the shortfall of cattle for export in the 1880s (Clarence-Smith and Moorsom 1975: 365-381).

In the Kavango, the royals accompanied raiding parties with the aim to acquire the looted goods and slaves to swell their palaces for sale to the advancing Vimballi slave traders. Gibbons (1901) pointed to these raids by the Kavango groups on the Mbunda people through his recorded observations. Furthermore, Rey (1932) claims that there was also the presence of Arab slave traders among the Hambukushu of Kavango from early times.

It is important to look at the contract labour system by focusing on the contract workers' distinct position in the political economy of colonial Namibia. The German administration put more efforts in the mineral exploitation of Namibia and therefore needed to divert the local people from local trades to working for the colonial economy. Kohler (1958) observes that during the early period of the German conquest of Namibia, minerals were also discovered in Namibia and these led to the development of infrastructure which required lots of local labour. The increase in white farm settlers in the police zone after 1908 also increased the need for contract labourers. A labour shortage occurred after the 1904-1907 Nama/Damara and Herero people against the German administration and the Kavango and Ovambo were urgently recruited as contract labourers (Stals 1967: 190-194).

Hayes (1992: 148) argues that the crucial aspect of Labour recruitment was the interaction of the colonial administration with local mechanisms of control such as Kings. Hayes further argues that during the German regime in 1905 officials visited Ovambo kings to negotiate labour agreements and kings were pressed by hardships to co-operate in labour recruitment in order to earn money (1992:156). Beris (1996: 215) states that in 1902, Dr. Gerber attempted to reach agreements with the Kavango kings to encourage men to report for contract labour, but this was futile as Kavango kings did not sign the agreement. Chiefs became an important influence on labour supply in Namibia (Stals 1991) and the approach of the South African administration was that of co-option of the traditional leadership and indirect rule<sup>4</sup> and thus remunerated kings continued to send labourers in small numbers and these were distributed to mines and farms.<sup>5</sup>

Since the 1920s, Kavango kings who had been resistant to colonial domination died and the colonial administration replaced them with obliging ones who could be deposed by the Native Commissioner at any time as per proclamation No. 15 of 1928 which dealt with installing and deposing of chiefs.<sup>6</sup> In Ovambo, only half of the kingdoms still had kings in 1948 (Tuupainen 1970:12). The contribution of headmen and chiefs more broadly starting 1917, was principally collaborationist. Moorsom (as cited in Emmett 1999: 173-174) suggests that "...of the utmost importance to the maintenance of the migrant labour system" and the South African authorities gradually undermined the power and prestige of the ruling classes through ostensibly buttressing it. The colonial administration, as it has done in Ovambo, divided the Kavango into tribal administrative units, each with an appointed native recruiter (also known as labour headmen).<sup>7</sup> Kings usually recommended their next of kin for positions of native recruiters who were subjected to the orders of the Native Commissioner and kings.<sup>8</sup> Equally important were the missionaries found in the sending areas of Kavango and Ovambo. Stals (1967:215) maintains that in Ovambo, for example, missionaries were instrumental in distributing drought relief food which was sent by the colonial authorities to the mission stations not just as a humanitarian act but also to win the trust of the Ovambo and maintain the labour supply. Missionaries were also appointed to positions within the contract labour system as they were seen to be more influential in encouraging their congregation members to go on contract (Ibid).

The colonial administration finally convened all the major stakeholders in the economy to a conference which resulted in the formation of the Northern Labour Organization (NLO) and the Southern Labour Organization (SLO) in 1925. The SLO agreed with the diamond mines of the south to draw contract labourers from Ovambo while the NLO got permission from the administration to supply northern mines and industrial concerns and farmers in the territory with the Kavango contract labourers. Due to the continued strained relationships between NLO and SLO they were later merged in 1943 into South West Africa Native Labour Association (SWANLA).<sup>9</sup>

Emmett (1999:173-174) argues that "while drought and famine helped to lay the foundations of the migrant labour system in Namibia, colonial policies reshaped these ecological responses into a comprehensive system of labour control and exploitation." Some of the early policies and agreements of European colonialists were the Brussels treaties of 1890, which in addition to its attempted work of ending the slave trade by international agreements, was meant to control the arms trade in Africa (Beachey 1962).

The restriction of gun sales left kings in Kavango and Ovambo angry because they were now accustomed to buying guns from European traders when necessary.

In view of the threat of contract labourers to South African mines and the loss of potential labourers a need for stringent control over the labour supplies was necessary and the colonial authority in Namibia passed the Northern and Extra Territorial Native Control (NETNC) Proclamation No. 29 of 1935 which finally allowed control and recruitment of labour outside Namibia.<sup>10</sup> The proclamation defined a “native” as one whose parents is an aboriginal and it required the compilation of a register of all “natives” in the territory. The policy of the administration was to prevent the detribalization of the Kavango and Ovambo people. In pursuance of this policy such Africans were expected to return to their homes periodically. Hartmann et al. (1998: 33) argue that the rigid institutionalized canals of the migrant labour system attempted to integrate male labour from the north into the larger economy, while maintaining Ovambo’s isolation from that economy. Similarly, Emmett maintains that the principal object of the proclamation was to prevent northern and foreign “natives” from moving into the urban locations, where they become “detribalized” and failed to support their families (1999: 188). Although “detribalization” undoubtedly caused some concern among administrative officials in Ovambo and the Kavango, the major thrust of the new legislation was to ensure a cheap and rigorously controlled labour force for the farms and mines (Ibid). Nevertheless, the Proclamation also made clear that the towns were the white man's establishment and Africans should only be allowed to enter them as long as their labour was needed.

Proclamation No. 39 of 1935 required all men from Kavango and Ovambo to possess an identification pass to be recruited in the police zone and discouraged further issuing of visiting passes to them. Visiting passes were no longer issued to Africans to limit their movements to the urban areas. They were only issued passes for employment purposes and thus controlled the Africans as reserves for colonial labour. It was agreed that a metal tube container as used in Northern Rhodesia should be issued to the African labourers to carry their identification passes.<sup>11</sup> These Africans were mainly recruited by companies such as SWACO and the Otavi Minen Und Eisenbahn Gesellschaft (OMEG) of Tsumeb, Otavi and Grootfontein areas. The series of colonial regulations that were provided in 1935 did not only prevent the men from Kavango and Ovambo from moving permanently to the city but it helped to channel migrant labour at reduced wages (Ibid). Act No.32 of 1937 declared the Kavango and Ovambo as a Native Territories and a tribal fund tax was introduced to be paid. Tribal fund tax was a colonial strategy for labour recruitment which targeted only matured men who were not physically challenged to report as contract labourers for the colonial economy (Ibid).

### **Contract Labour Migration**

According to Eckl (2004: 120) contract labour migration from Kavango during the German occupation period was low and totaled only 122 men from 1910 to 1913. This is in contrast to Ovambo which recorded 9 295 labourers in 1911, 6 076 in 1912 and 12 025 in 1913 (Olivier 1961:253). According to Hayes, up to 1907, there were probably never more than 1,700 Ovambo migrant workers in the Police Zone at any one time (1992: 148-149). The statistics for labour migration indicates that the response to labour migration in

the Kavango was not the same as in Ovambo and there was never the same value attached to contract labour migration in the Kavango as in Ovambo (Olivier 1961:253).

Contract labour migration in Ovambo was linked to famine and other disasters such as Rinderpest outbreak leading to food shortages, impoverishment and later to colonial labour policies in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Emmett argues that climatic and ecological conditions were crucial in creating the conditions for labour migration from northern Namibia and southern Angola (1999:171). Many historians have dealt with the process of impoverishment and underdevelopment due to natural factors which deprived Ovambo people of productive resources such as cattle and forced them into migrant labour. But the question posed by Kreike, Hayes and McKittrick was, why did young Ovambo men become migrant labourers when there was no external conquest, taxation or land dispossession to encourage wage-seekers to migrate (Clarence-Smith & Moorsom 1975; Moorsom 1997; Hayes 1992; Kreike 2004; Micktrik 1997)? Examining the reasons why the men went into migrant labour does not only give a better understanding of how disillusionment with traditional authorities happened, but also leads to a discussion about the Ovambo's eagerness to change and to have access to western goods.

In the Kavango, migration of contract labourers was not a result of hunger and starvation, because men from royal palaces where food was in abundance also became contract labourers. Rather, the need to acquire European clothes which no longer was easily available locally played a greater role in migration (Mukoya 2009 int.). In the Kavango, lack of clothing was the main problem they faced and was central in the labour migration narratives. The love for clothes had been introduced to the Kavango and Ovambo people by colonialists (European hunters, traders etc.) and accessibility to it was again curtailed later by the 'native' commissioner. The mission stations in the areas were not providing clothes and the colonial prevention of the killing of animals reduced accessibility to animal skins for traditional clothing and people therefore left as contract workers (not to supplement food supplies as they always had these in abundance) but to acquire money to purchase clothes.

In Ovambo as was in the Kavango, the end to hunting and disarmament (in the 1920s and 1930s) more generally, had an impact on the source of wild animal skins which were also used to make costumes, as hunting was now in the hands of colonial officials together with Ovambo local control under kings and headmen (Hayes 1999 & Kreike 2004). Thus as a result, we argue that, Ovambo people had no choice but to turn to European clothing, even if it was just to use fabric as loincloth, which were only available through waged labour as well as those given by missionaries. Contract labourers therefore used their wages to buy clothing which at that time did not only serve as exchangeable goods but also signified status. Clothing created a powerful emblem of elitism, identified by their European symbols of modernity. Former migrant labourer's biographies (see Nujoma 2001 & Ndadi 1974) not only confirm the critical role migrant labour played in their lives, but also attest to the local version of modernity because they invested their wages in cattle and all sorts of goods to maintain a rural way of life and most importantly goods that signified modernity.

Consequently, European clothes became a part of life of the Kavango and Ovambo people and the lack of it was deemed 'ruhepo' (poverty/hardship), while the

wearing of skins began to be regarded by the local people as a sign of 'poverty' rather than as 'mpo yetu' (our culture) (Linyando 2009 int.).<sup>12</sup> In the Kavango, some men regarded migration as an act of 'kudanaghura' (playing around) which is a simplistic, non-serious oriented engagement in any particular activity for the purpose of fun. As such, migration was not a crucial aspect of their lives but simply as an act of play and fun searching. Some men migrated because the south was becoming famous as a place of opportunity and they hoped to accumulate wealth (Shintunga 2009 int.). The young men in the villages felt inferior to a returning labourer as a result of his change in appearance, status and difference to them. Thus, some men saw contract labour migration as an act of manhood. The 'native' commissioner insisted that the parents should refuse marriage of their daughters to 'youngsters' who have not yet gone on contract work. As such to some men contract labour migration became a ritual act of transformation into maturity in preparation for marriage.<sup>13</sup>

Although migrant labourers personally chose to leave their homesteads and go to the recruitment centre they did so as a response to the economic and social hardships that resulted from the colonial activities upon them. This is because more complex mechanisms for migration to southern labour markets were put in place during the South African colonial period through the establishment of shops. In Rundu, a SWANLA shop was opened in the 1930s for the same purpose as was in Ovambo. For example, the Endola shop opened in Ovambo in 1939, whose main purpose was to encourage migrant labour (Emmett 1999: 198). This was not the only store in the area however, as there was a SWANLA<sup>14</sup> shop in Ondjondjo, near Ondangwa before it. Additionally, some goods were brought in by migrant workers from Tsumeb or Grootfontein on their way home, as according to Kauluma, "it happened that goods were often cheaper in the southern region than in the north partly because of the SWANLA virtual monopoly".<sup>15</sup> With the opening of these shops, the administration was therefore opposed to any form of trade or bartering other than the exchange of consumer goods for cash and Ovambo's only source of cash was migrant labour (Emmett 1999: 198).

Grootfontein Depot was the recruitment and distribution centre of contract labourers from the Kavango and Ovambo. The journey by foot from the Kavango to Grootfontein has parallels with the migration from Ovambo. In the latter case because most men went to search for work during the periods of hunger, they were weak and the journey was too much for them to bear (Stals 1967: 197). White farmers along the way accused them of destroying poles and pumps and refused to provide them with water (Ibid). During the rainy seasons, some streams overflowed and could not be crossed and many Ovambo labourers are said to have drowned or lost their properties there (Stals 1967: 198). In the case of Kavango, labourers too walked on foot during the journeys to Grootfontein and had to bear the burden of carrying their load of goods on their shoulders and were similarly hampered by Bushmen attacks and thirst (Nkayira 2009 int.). Ndadi (1974:18) claims that contract labourers were put into cattle car packed together and they could hardly move their legs and got no opportunity to relieve themselves for a long time.

Conversely, this kind of dehumanizing treatment in which the workers were transported to their work places was among the many means of control that the colonial state utilized. All potential recruits underwent a medical test which contained clinical power at practice. Butchart (1996: 185-197) stated that recruitment's "clinical power can

be likened to sovereignty, the doctor equated with the king in the control exercised over bodies”. But on a whole, the medical examinations done on potential workers were of particularly brutal and invasive exercise of colonial power on the bodies of its subjects. The colonial medical perceptions gave way to this functioning of power which subjected the workers to physical examinations which made diseases localizable within their bodies. Hartmann et al. (1998: 34) suggest that the oral histories conducted with former migrant workers in Ovambo in the early 1990s, were profoundly about the body and the journey south was another dominant and recurring component of these histories.

After workers were examined they were classified according to their health; the strength of their bodies. That was the only important thing to the recruiting agent – he does not want to buy a sick or weak person unable to perform the work he is contracted for (Ndadi 1974: 17). Classifications of potential labourers were increasingly employed as a means of control (Hartmann 1998: 34). Originally, classifications were done into three categories, (A, B, and C). Later on category D was added to accommodate child labour from Angola and Zambia. Some of the labourers who came from Angola and Zambia to Namibia arrived with under-aged relatives and since they could not return home alone or be left uncared for, they were permitted to proceed south for employment. In view of these circumstances it was proposed that an additional class ‘D’ be created for these under-aged labourers who could be supplied for light farm work or domestic services in towns, to employers recommended by the Magistrate.<sup>16</sup> Later under-aged teenagers from the Kavango, Ovambo and Angola were also recruited by SWANLA to do farm work. Although an order was granted to prohibit the practice of underage recruitments after 1948, it continued (Olivier 1961: 276-277). All contract labourers from Ovambo and Kavango gathered at Grootfontein recruitment depot from which they were recruited and then distributed to their employers where they experienced variant working and living conditions.

### **Living and Working Conditions**

The underlying dehumanizing actions of contract labour can be traced to the organization of living and working conditions, which have in turn influenced the lives of contract labourers from Ovambo and the Kavango. The living conditions were extremely dire, with contract labourers living in virtual prisons or compounds. Even the provision of food and clothing was controlled by the employers. Similarly, the contract labourers who worked on farms lived on those farms and the provision of basic amenities rested on the farmer.

According to Gottschalk (1978: 80), “Namibian workers laboured under the disadvantages, restrictions and weakened bargaining position of pass laws, indenture and migrancy, enforced by criminal law”. In the face of contracted work, each worker received a blanket, a shirt, sometimes a pair of khaki shorts, which were supposed to last the worker the whole period of his contract period. The cost of provisions such as, food and sundries, a medical exam and a recruiting fee, was all paid by the employer. And for the duration of the contract, migrant workers were confined to the property of the employer, could not visit home, could not accept visits from family, ate only what their employer was willing to feed them and suffered whatever punishment an employer thought appropriate for any suspected offences. Contract labourers lived either in

compounds, “pondoks” and their places of work (e.g. on farms). The labourers on farms usually slept in small rounded houses called pondoks that were usually situated in the backyard of the main house of the farm. The labourers did not receive blankets from the farmer but used those which they received at the Grootfontein recruiting depot. Since there was no bed or a mattress the labourers usually slept on the floor (Shevekwa 2009 int.). Shevekwa (2009 int.) indicates that the poor sleeping arrangements resulted in inadequate sleep. During the cold seasons, labourers suffered from extreme cold and it was worse for labourers who worked in the cold mountainous farm areas of Namibia (Unengu 2009 int.). The work conditions for farm labourers were evidently awful, besides being completely isolated for days, out there alone with flocks of sheep, they were also held accountable if some got lost. Accommodation was bad and most of the time non-existent regardless of the environment and weather (Ya Otto 1982:7). Some of the pondoks were old with leaking roofs and cracked walls and were not usually renovated or fumigated and became the breeding ground for ‘ntjanya’ (bugs) which tormented the labourers during their sleep and it was worse when it rained (Shevekwa 2009 int.).

The number of labourers per pondok depended on the availability of pondoks and it ranged from one to as many as five labourers in a pondok. Apart from using pondoks as a form of accommodation, the contract labourers were also assigned any available structure such as a storage room as was the case with Shihungu (2009 int.) during his first contract to Outjo farms in the 1950s:

And then they gave me a simple excluded storage room where he used to store all his things, every material that he used was stored in there, where else did you think you could sleep?

Similarly, this kind of degrading behaviour was subjected to contract labourers but it was not the only means of mechanism that the colonial state used. Conditions in the mines, factories and public services, which employed a number of Ovambo and Kavango workers were also not favourable, considering the long hours of routine work most of the time under repressive supervision. Workers were also subjected to serialized various forms of humiliations and tools of punishment. This is based on the various conditions and descriptions of jobs on contract. According to Cooper (1999:122):

Employment at the fishing factories at Walvis Bay necessitated standing at conveyor belts for sometimes 18 hours on end to decapitate sardines before stuffing them into cans to be exported to consumers in North America and Europe. Another option for African workers was strip mining uranium at Rossing which led to exposure to radioactive contamination. Contract labour was available for white farms in the Police Zone, where labourers worked from dawn to sunset, often alone in the fields with hundreds of sheep and with no shelter or provisions.

The contract system was in fact, a standardised form of almost total control as there was resistance and agency within it. It consisted of specific conditions under which the labourer worked, wage rates were set and bargaining for more was not permitted. Thus, during the period of contract, which they could not terminate on their own will, migrant workers were virtually forced labourers, under prison-like regulation.

As Mbembe (2004:372) suggests - referring to mine migrant workers living in mine compounds in apartheid Johannesburg - "Around them was instituted a field of visibility and surveillance, hierarchies and inspections." Similar controls were also applied to the Ovambo and Kavango migrant labourers between prescribed areas of work and their recruitment points.

Contract labourers from both Ovambo and the Kavango worked as far as the farms and plantations in Angola and Zimbabwe and their working experiences on the Namibian farms were a continuation of those experiences. Their work experiences outside Namibia indicates experienced bad living and working conditions with low pay. The payments were one rand per month and it was only after six months of work that it was increased to one rand and twenty cents (Karenga 2009 int.). During the 1950s, the contract labourers mainly worked on railways, timber cutting farms etc. and they speak of insects in Angola called *mutakanye* (tick) which used to bite them. These were small insects that bite chickens. When the *mutakanye* insect entered one's feet it starts off like a small pimple and soon turns into a large sore (Ibid).

The contract labour period to Angola usually lasted for two years or more and was a reason for complaint. Some labourers got beaten by the Portuguese employers for daring to demand to be returned home when they were kept at their workplace long after their initial contract period had expired (Ndumba 2009 int.). Others also accused the Portuguese officials on the ships in Luanda of killing a contract labourer on each occasion of the New Year's festival (Shirengumuke 2009 int.). There is no written evidence to confirm or deny the death claims but the narrative shows how contract labourers made meanings of the mysterious disappearances and deaths of fellow workers and this speaks much to the mistrust and the brutal image contract labourers assigned to the Portuguese. Bhagavan (1986:11) claims that the contract workers in Angola were maintained at subsistence level and many died or failed to return to their villages. The employers cared little if contract labourers became incapacitated or died, for they could always ask that other labourers be furnished (Bhagavan 1986:144).

### **Socio-Economic impacts on Contract Labourers and Their Families**

Contract labour system did not only brutalize the contract labourers but it had very specific social and economic implications on their lives and families. This contact produced a marked effect on the labourers in terms of how they lived their lives and how they survived. The discourses of migrant labour, money and western commodities, were deeply linked to the colonial process, which divided the urban from the rural, and the industrial centre and the 'native' reserve. And it brought the contract labourers and women to adopt and appropriate aspects of modernity in their own economic and social consciousness.

For the Ovambo contract labourers, they sought to use wages from migrant labour in order to build up herds or to set up a household independent of 'patriarchal' restraints. This was because the wages earned from migrant labour allowed young men to challenge the authority of their elders, by building up status and wealth on their own, mainly in the 1920s and 1930s (McKittrick 2002:171). The wages earned from migrant labour enabled young men to compete and access goods that distinguished them from

other people in the society, for example, kings and headmen. McKittrick further claims that “workers sought from wage labour the means to become senior men within the existing terms of masculinity, as they used their small wages to buy manufactured goods, which in turn were bartered for livestock” (2002:125). This was because livestock amongst the Ovambo was a means of obtaining wealth and more importantly social recognition.

The importance of wages earned from either migrant labour or men’s contribution in the Second World War was reflected in Ndadi’s account, stating: My father came home in 1944, after more than three years in the army. He had been getting a small salary, which he sent to my mother at the Oshikango Administrative Centre. It was not much; two pounds, sometimes one pound ten. But my mother saved it and when my father returned he was able to buy some things for the kraal – corn, a few cows and more goats” (1974:16).

This clearly indicates that it was only after earning money from contract labour or taking part in the army at that time, could many families afford to buy livestock and household goods for themselves. Indeed, when Ndadi went on contract for the first time at a farm in Mariental, he recalled:

I left Jooste’s farm with less than two pounds...after three whole years! Once my father wrote saying the family needed money so I sent some through the post in Mariental. I also bought a jacket for my father and a few things for the rest of the family – as well as some trousers for myself. I had just enough money left for the long trip to Ovamboland (1974:23).

According to McKittrick, Christianity created a desire for goods which could only be obtained through wage labour and contract labour system gave many men sustained exposure to Christianity for the first time (2002:2). This was because, converts did not only see clothing as marking of power and status but something more, an intangible connection between foreign goods that offered security and a way of life that promised less of the uncertainty inhering in volatile local social relations (Ibid). Besides the European clothes, migrant labourers also adopted new haircuts and behaved with “town” manners as they spoke “broken” Afrikaans or German which they picked up from their employers (Nampala & Shigwedha 2006:213-230 ). Similarly, contract labourers from the Kavango accepted the order of the commissioner and missionaries to have all women in the Kavango to cut their “viiho” (traditional braids) since they had seen that women in the police zone had short hair. This allegedly caused a great outcry from the women (Weka 2009 int.).

Although waged labour was fraught with mistreatment and dehumanisation, migrant labourers did not display their subservient humiliations at the hands of their employers in the mines and farms. Rather, they displayed the clothing and imported goods they brought back home that displayed the culture of urban areas in which they worked, to signify their new prosperity (McKittrick 2002:6). Hayes referring to an earlier period also points out that a distinct subculture developed amongst Christianised migrants especially in Oukwanyama where young men who had visited the south

paraded their foreign clothes after church service and impressed others with their accounts of life in the south (1992:152). This relative affluence of the returning men meant that their habits also influenced changes in the others who did not leave the community. Thus the 'modernity' is a combination of cattle and new goods.

In Kavango, the purchasing of clothes under the contract labour system led to the eventual transformation from the wearing of 'muromba' to clothes which were regarded as an improvement in their lives. The contract labourers show appreciation for this eventual change:

We use to wear 'no muromba' [skin wear]. But when we saw what was coming from 'usimba' [police zone] we also began to have an interest, we also wanted the trousers. Are these things not nice [Ronginius pulls on his shirt]? Even if they decide to bring back 'no muromba' today do you really think we will accept them again? We will refuse them, no, these ones are just fine (Ronginius 2009 int.).

The 'magayisa' (returning contract labourers) bought clothing that varied from trousers, shirts, blankets, jackets etc. Contract labourers were happy to purchase clothing for themselves and their families. Weka (2009 int.) explains:

I use to get paid six rand at the farm, apparently that was a lot of money [laughs]. But it was better, at least one could buy a long bundle of loin cloth and that was exactly what I had always wanted that my mother should also benefit. I felt better during this second contract; I managed to bring something back at home. I brought along my trousers, shoes and a suit so that I could also come and show off, hey, no, that was better. I took out some trousers and gave my father. It was only then I felt I had arrived.

It seems that it was customary in some African communities for returning labour migrants to give their acquired goods upon arrival to their parents and depending upon their gender they first consulted either with their fathers or with their mothers. Among the returning Phokeng migrant women in South Africa, for example, Bozzoli (1991:91) states that "upon their arrival it was customary to give their mother all the money they had worked for and she would then call the father and put the money before him. They gave thanks and asked if she had a bus fare to go back to work and if there was nothing left for her then they would give her something out of that money". Among the Kavango people in Namibia, when a contract labourer returned home he always had to reach the homestead after sunset to ensure his spirit had settled in his village before he was seen and talked about by everyone the next day. He also did not open his metal box of goods until the third day. The contract labourers from the Kavango gave all their acquired goods to their fathers (Weka 2009 int.).

Some contract labourers, especially those who worked in towns, sent money home to their families through friends. As such the celebration of the return of contract labourers was not only an appreciation of the contract labourers' safe return but was an expression of appreciation of the few goods that were brought for them. Some contract labourers purchased goods like 'katishu' (a small gun for shooting birds) (Shampapi 2009 int.). Others bought metal ploughs (Karenga 2009 int.). Previously the Kavango people tilled their land with handmade hoes but with the introduction of the metal

plough they ploughed larger fields. During the 1940s it was reported by colonial officials that the fields in the Kavango had trebled in size and that hundreds of ploughs had been bought (Moorsom 1977: 66).

Contract labourers had realistic ideas as to what they wanted. These did not include things beyond their reach such as cars. Instead they purchased cattle. Since owning large herds of cattle was a sign of wealth in their communities some contract labourers indeed became wealthy and made life easier as they used the cattle to plough the fields, drank milk from it and sold the meat when the cattle died. Cattle ownership improved the social standing of the owners and also made one's heart feel at peace at all times and reduced one's worries (Ndara 2009 int.). Cattle ownership was, however, complex and in some cases it did not become an everlasting mean to family survival as cattle diminished by various means. Nyambe Merecky, for instance, purchased some cattle during his contract work period in the 1960s which multiplied but later he had nothing left (2009 int.).

Although young men could get a wife to marry without going on contract work, the contract labour system provided a means to purchase some items to be used in their marriages. The aspirant contract labourers usually purchased gifts for his in-laws to boost a good personal image. Contract labourers usually saved from their scant wages to purchase some cooking utensils for marriage purposes.

In Ovambo one impact of the contract labour system was the loss of male labour to agriculture as women were left alone to deal with family activities which included the care of domestic animals and subsistence farming (Hishongwa 1992:95). In the Kavango this was felt less. Here the homesteads for married couples were usually built within the boundaries of the homesteads of parents where family members were usually responsible for the welfare of others. During the absence of a husband there were usually other adult males left within those homesteads that the wife could use to help her with agriculture work etc (Likuwa 2001:10). Cattle herding, for example, was an activity for young boys (who usually did not go on contract work) rather than for adult men.

This should, however, not underestimate the impact of contract labour system on women in the Kavango but it should indicate that in the absence of husbands, there were usually other options left that women exploited to complete duties and get along with life. There were indeed some negative impacts of the contract labour system on women. Some women never saw their husbands again as some died inside the mines or joined the SWAPO armed struggle in Francistown, Botswana and died at the war front. Despite the suffering, women came to play a great role in the struggle of men under the contract labour system by providing the men with both economic and political support and they suffered equally as men from colonial oppression.

As stated earlier, the contract labour system bound labourers to a long period of contract without a chance to see their beloved family members. In some cases the married (or the just married) contract labourers left their wives for longer periods and in this way felt alienated from their spouses and children (Hishongwa 1992:89). The feeling of estrangement from the family also extended to estrangement from their home areas as they saw their home area as too idle to live compared to the areas away from

home during the contract labour period and felt the immediate urge to leave and return on contract work. Tuhemwe narrates how he felt upon his return in 1971:

When I reached at Rundu, I felt undecided whether I should proceed home or not. I decided I was going back immediately because when I looked at my area it looked ugly and I felt estranged as if it was not my land. I could not think of what I was going to do at the homestead if I proceeded there (2009 int.).

The fear of embarrassment by the Kavango contract labourers was similar to what was also observed among the returning farm contract labourers in Ovambo. A Kwanyama King Weyulu testified that many of the farm contract labourers usually returned home crying with nothing to show from their long absence and were too shy to face their families and were usually compelled by the situation to return immediately on contract work (Kreike 2004:231). The contract labour system thus trapped workers in a constant cycle of re-enlisting.

The contract labourers also used to engage in alcohol consumption at their work destinations and therefore continued to do so upon their return to the Kavango. The long wait in Rundu compound for transport to take returning contract labourers home resulted in many spending their remaining money on alcohol in Mangarangandja informal settlement. Many contract labourers, however, purchased alcohol from the Portuguese across the Kavango River and this led many of them to become poor as they ended up exchanging their hard-earned goods or cash for Portuguese alcohol. Contract labourers assert that although traditional brew was drunk in the Kavango before the arrival of the Europeans this was only occasionally drunk by elders at traditional events such as shiperu. A high increase of alcohol abuse in the Kavango resulted from the Portuguese sale of liquor (Likuwa 2009 int.).

Contract labourers believed that the contract labour system was an example of colonial exploitation at its worst because they suffered extreme mistreatment as the Boers displayed the worst cruelty by treating contract labourers as non-persons (Shevekwa 2009 int.). This view of the inhumane treatment of contract labourers is similar to the view presented of Ovambo contract labourers in the 1970s that saw contract labour system as the source of destruction of all that was human in a man (Voippo 1998:114). The contract labour system instead of helping to bring an end to the hardship of contract labourers became another form of colonial oppression due to harsh working and living conditions and low wages inherent in it.

Kapinga Muhero who went on his first contract in Namibia in the 1960s asserts that although the contract labour system was the only means to acquire money at that time, one received nothing good out of it. Muhero compares the engagement in contract labour system to a local parable regarding the gathering of wild fruits where people take long journeys under great hardships to the dangerous jungle and collect 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 (Muhero 2009 int.). Here is once more the image of entrapment. This cycle of entrapment had a powerful effect on workers. Their frustrations led to their political mobilization.

### **Political impacts on Contract Labourers and Their Families**

The contract labour system brought the Ovambo and the Kavango workers in close contact with Africans from other countries and they shared stories of colonial exploitation and about the means to end colonial domination. Their exploitative work conditions rendered them ready for political mobilization. The years between the late 1950s and 1970s have long been regarded as watershed years for the Namibian contract workers' political consciousness. According to Emmett, large strikes were mounted by contract labourers in 1952 and 1953 but these were ruthlessly crushed by the authorities and, in 1953, several workers were shot dead (1999:263). As a result, the canning factories of Walvis Bay became a major centre of industrial strife, and it was here that one of the strongest branches of the Ovamboland People's Organization (OPO) was established in the late 1950s (Ibid).

South African mines offered an escape from the arbitrary system of job allocation managed by SWANLA, but it also served as a means of political education for those labourers who were able to go to South Africa after World War II (Emmett 1999:267). Following the Second World War, the rise of South African mining economy attracted contract labourers from both inside and outside South Africa. Thousands of contract workers such as Herman Toivo ya Toivo having diverted into military service, returned with a vastly broadened experience and spread news and ideas about political developments in South Africa and other African colonies. This approach led to contract workers forming political parties and becoming increasingly radical. The first major initiative to organize nationally against the contract labour system arose among a group of Ovambo migrants working in South Africa, who in 1957 formed the Ovamboland People's Congress (OPC), re-named in 1958 the Ovambo People's Organization (OPO) (Moorsom 1979).

Even more importantly, access to South Africa served to "open the eyes" of those able to escape the isolation and restriction imposed on the Ovambos and other northerners. Emmett argues that the new opportunities afforded by this means of escape was to lead directly to the formation of the Ovamboland People's Organization (OPO) in 1959 in Cape Town which, in turn, was to provide the basis of Namibia's most important nationalist organization, the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) (1999:268). This, in turn, meant that even when a majority of contract labourers were involved in other sectors of the economy, the dismal wages, appalling conditions and underlying violence of farm labour would be an integral part of their experience, and, thus, have a uniformly radicalizing effect on all contract workers (Emmett 1999: 270). Vital aspect of Namibian contract labourers' complex social identity was their involvement in both a wage-labour sector and in a residual subsistence economy. According to Emmett, the dependence of increasingly larger numbers of Ovambos on wage-labour that followed the progressive disintegration of the pre-colonial economy had a significant impact on the social consciousness of contract labourers, but the fact remains that, no matter how great this dependence, they were forced to return to their sending areas at the end of their contracts (1999:271).

However, while contract labourers were concentrated in large groups in the Police Zone, after the termination of their contracts they would be dispersed over large

areas in their reserves. Emmett claims that both the need for political support from other sources and the essentially nationalist orientation of Namibian contract labourers are illustrated in the formation of the Ovamboland People's Organisation (OPO) and its transformation into the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) (1999:273). He further claims that the very rigours of the contract system and the rigid control exercised over the lives of contract workers helped to create the conditions for the launching of a political movement which was to challenge not only the contract system, but the state itself (Ibid).

The OPO president, Sam Nujoma, clandestinely entered and carried out secret political meetings in various compounds across the police zone to address contract labourers. During such political meetings, money was donated to him and the message was passed on to various compounds among contract labourers to raise funds so that Sam Nujoma would leave for exile. Labourers donated money at secret political meetings in their respective compounds. Weka (2009 int.) narrates:

At a place where I stayed during my first contract we donated money for Sam Nujoma when he left the country to go and bring those things [independence] that he had brought to us now. It was at that time that people were sent to ask for donations. Then they said whoever had one pound or a fifty cent was also o.k. to donate so that Sam Nuyoma could use it to leave the country. The whole compound of the mine of Uesa [Uis] donated and we were the one who held the donation bowl around. A message was sent to all the compounds where his people were found. It was both the Ovambo and Kavango. That was the way it was.

Although the name OPO seemed to signify a focus on the Ovambo, in reality, it appealed to members across ethnic boundaries. Its membership extended beyond contract labourers. In the words of the founding president of OPO: "after the formation of OPO, soon people from the Kavango joined them and then later people from eastern Caprivi. OPO recruited members very quickly and in large numbers" (Nujoma 2001:57). By 1960, OPO was changed to SWAPO with a broadened scope of mobilization among all Namibians for political independence. Sam Nujoma left for exile after 1959 but his political campaigns among contract labourers were continued by SWAPO members and supporters.

Key among the assembly of these SWAPO campaigners was Nathaniel Maxuilili, an Oshivambo speaker who lived in Walvis Bay's African location. To some of the contract labourers Maxuilili became synonymous with SWAPO. Maxuilili became popular because they believed he was fearless of the police since he held his rallies publicly. Maxuilili mobilized labourers and other Namibians for SWAPO as far as Windhoek, usually with other friends who assisted in organizing such meetings. After the meetings, Maxuilili was usually arrested and put in jail but other colleagues continued the struggle. Some of the contract labourers from the Kavango, who were mobilized by Maxuilili, later believed the constant presence of planes across the Kavango River into Angola, signified the end of the white men's rule.

### 1971-72 general workers strike

According to Bauer, the general strike of 1971-72 holds a prominent position in the historiography of labour in Namibia, as more than 20,000 contract workers participated in the strike, which effectively shut down twenty-three workplaces and eleven mines during its first month. Also, within the first month, most of the striking workers were returned to their places of origin, Ovambo, where protests then commenced on an even wider scale (1998:18). This calls into question the 1971-72 workers' strike as an 'Ovambo strike'. The strike also included contract labourers from the Kavango and Angola. The invisibility of the Kavango was not only due to their smaller numbers but also a result of the colonial authorities' action to transport all the Kavango contract labourers to Ovambo (Shikombero 2009 int.) which created the public view that the strike was an 'Ovambo' activity.

Katjavivi claims that the strike began in response to a comment by the South African Commissioner for Indigenous People in Namibia, Jannie de Wet (1988:67). In response to growing criticism of the harsh and binding nature of the contract labour system, De Wet stated that it was not a form of slavery because workers signed their contracts "voluntarily". In so doing, argues Katjavivi, "he touched the nerve of people already full of anger at the way their lives were brutalised by this system" (Ibid). De Wet's statement raised an instantaneous reaction as letters were exchanged at the beginning of December 1971 between contract workers in Windhoek, Walvis Bay and Tsumeb, sharing ideas on how to organise a strike (Soggot 1986:46). This argues a level of literacy among contract workers. De Wet's speech became the topic of debate, thus spreading the wave of pro-strike feeling all over the country as letters telling people to take action were circulated back and forth between the different compounds and Ovambo (see Soggot 1986; Nehova 2009 int. & Nghipandulwa 1995 int.).

The strike spread to Walvis Bay; Tsumeb; Klein Aub and Oamites copper mines (Katjavivi 1988:68). The strike was described as a paralysis that spread to other centres while panic in the white community soared when businesses became affected, goods piled up on the railways, building construction stopped and heaps of garbage encroached onto pavements (Soggot 1986:48). In an attempt to put an end to the spreading industrial rot, the government called in headmen from Ovambo to persuade the workers, particularly at Walvis Bay to return to work. However, according to Soggot, "when the headmen (Elifas, Kaluvi and Iipumbu)<sup>17</sup> tried to speak, there was pandemonium and a *charivari* of cat-calls; only [Bishop] Auala was allowed to speak" (1986:48). In response, the government started to arrest those whom they regarded as the strike ringleaders; while the rest of the strikers had their request met and were returned to Ovambo.

After the strike, Namibian labourers from both the Kavango and Ovambo continued to report to Grootfontein labour depot but under new agreements with respective homeland governments. The tribal employment bureaus which were established in both areas continued the responsibility to supply the work-seekers to employers in the police zone. Under these new labour arrangements the director of community affairs was in charge of the new recruiting process and was assisted by labour officers who were responsible for the distribution of the work-seekers. The attesting and checking officer and African clerks dealt with contracts and records of the

work-seekers. Very little changed under the new recruiting system and although labourers were now no longer bound to a contract, the features of the old system of low wages, the compound, separation of families and the restriction on mobility of the Africans remained intact and many labourers discovered that most things were the same if not worse (Kane-Berman 1972: 7).

**Conclusions: Lessons contract labour system hold for Post-colonial Namibia**

Although colonial control over access to resources and the underdevelopment of the rural areas, the control of mobility and settlement of black Namibians in urban areas have been abolished with the coming of Namibia's independence in 1990, their legacies or lasting impact continues. The discourse of detribalization of labourers which denied contract labourers permanent residence and land or house ownership in urban areas, means that in post-colonial Namibia many black Namibians have less access to land and housing in the urban areas. The underdevelopment of the former homelands or labour reserve areas during the colonial period means that in post-colonial Namibia, many people in those areas continue to leave for better opportunities in the urban areas. Thus exerting urbanization strain in terms of provision of infrastructures and services, land and housing which remain an urgent matter to be addressed. The economic systems such as farming, mining and fishing industries that were established during the colonial period, continues to employ labourers under strenuous conditions. Hence there is a need to ensure that the labour practices of the past are not repeated. Contract labourers worked for long periods for little wages which could only buy them non-lasting materials but could not help them accumulate wealth. The social consequences of the contract labour system, as the dominant pattern of workers employment of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, have left a lasting impact on contemporary Namibian society. The movement of people from rural to urban areas has been the factor paramount in the development of the informal settlements following residential and social segregation. One of the results of past policies of migrant labour and influx-controlled urban areas is the continued break-up of families, which specifically affects women living in rural areas. As a result, a social phenomenon has emerged of "missing men" in rural areas, and in the majority of these situations, mothers receive no contributory maintenance for the raising of children. Poverty and inequality is also one of the results of contract labour system because Namibia has a very clear racial bias, a product of policies of racial discrimination and deliberate impoverishment.

## Endnotes

1. This paper forms part of a broader study that conducted oral interviews with former contract labourers in the Kavango and Ovambo in Namibia about their experiences under the colonial contract labour system.
2. Here we use Frederick Cooper's arguments about an African proletariat not fully becoming proletarianised, as an African rarely expatriates himself without the intention of returning most often to his milieu of origin. As a result he does not become permanently urbanised. Thus, for this work, we will use the term semi-proletariat as although the contract labourers stayed in the south for long periods, they always returned to their rural settings. See Cooper, F. *Decolonization and the African Society: The labour question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp 146, 179, 180-189.
3. Vimballi (also known as Mambari) were black traders from the confines of the Kingdom of Benquela in Angola who brought European goods, which they acquired from the Portuguese, for trade among the Kavango people.
4. Frank Brownlee to the secretary of the protectorate 'Patrol to Nkurenkuru' (ADM 30, file 243/3, part III, Windhoek, NAN, 16 Jan. 1917).
5. Acting military magistrate to the secretary for the protectorate 'Ovambo land labourers from Okavango' (ADM 95, file no 2794/8, 20 June 1917).
6. Native Commissioner (SWAA, 2083, A. 460/19).
7. By 1939 the following were the native recruiters, Phillipus Mudiro for the reserve area, Shivanda for Kwangali, Kasiki for Mbunza, Frans Kashasha for Shambyu, LinusShashipapo for Gciriku and Muyatwa for Mbukushu area.
8. 'Declaration by Langhans Kanyinga' (Windhoek, NAN, NAR 1/1/55, file 11/1/2, 02 Jan. 1936).
9. 'Amalgamation: Northern Labour Organization Limited and Luderitz Chamber of Mines recruiting' (Windhoek, NAN, SWAA 1/1/46, 2426, A521/26, V.5, 24 Nov. 1942).
10. Circular on Control of Extra- Territorial and Northern Natives' (Windhoek, NAN, NAT 1/1/54, S/U-20, file 25, 8 Jan. 1936).
11. Circular on Control of Extra- Territorial and Northern Natives' (Windhoek, NAN, NAT 1/1/54, S/U-20, file 25, 8 Jan. 1936).
12. Lipayi Linyando was born at Kadedere village. His father was Linyando and his mother was Mwendere. After his contract labour experiences he joined the South West Africa Territorial Force (SWATF) in 1970. After six years here he quit. In 1978 he secured employment in a secondary school hostel and worked until his retirement. In 2009 Bernhard Lipayi Linyando was a village headman of Ndiyona.
13. See report titled 'Meetings with Chiefs and headmen, Annual meeting held at Runtu on 3 January 1952 to 5 January 1952' (SWAA 1852 File 2/16/3/6).
14. SWANLA stands for South West Africa Native Labour Association. This was a colonial labour agency that recruited migrant labour for mines and farms in southern Namibia.
15. Kauluma, J. 'The Migrant Contract Labour situation in Namibia and the Response to it' (unpublished paper, NAN, Accession L. 096).

16. The Native Commissioner of Rundu to Chief Native Commissioner in Windhoek (Windhoek, NAN, SWAA 1/1/46, 2426, A521/26 (V.6), 11 Jun. 1945).

17. These were members of the Ovambo Legislative Council and represented respective ethnic group in the Council. Elifas was the Chief of Ondonga, Kaluvi represented Oukwanyama, and Iipumbu represented Uukwambi.

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