

Native recruiters' activities along the Kavango River boundary in north-east Namibia, 1925-1943

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Abstract

The article examines the activities of native recruiters along the Kavango River boundary. Native recruiters (NRs) were local people appointed by an Assistant Native Commissioner (ANC) of Rundu on behalf of the Northern Labour Organization (NLO) to recruit contract labourers from the Kavango area and Angola for farms and mines in Namibia. The article looks specifically at their collaboration with individuals and institutions in the recruiting process. It further highlights NRs difficulties of establishing networks in distant villages, the unpredictable population movements and settlement patterns across the Kavango River, conditions of wealth and food self-reliance of local communities and the Bushmen attacks as impediments to their recruiting activities.

Introduction

Little or no research on the activities of native recruiters has been conducted for the literature on contract labour in Namibia. Despite the central role the native recruiters played in the contract labour system researchers have tended to focus on the contract labourers themselves and their families or communities.¹ It is important, for example, to

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¹ See for example, Richard Moorsom, *Underdevelopment and Labour Migration: The Contract Labour System in Namibia*, Bergen, Chr. Michelsen Institute, 1997; Ernst Stals, Ernst, *Die aanraking tussen blankes en Ovambo's in Suid Wes Afrika 1850-1915*, MA thesis, Universiteit van Stellenbosch, 1967; Alan Cooper, "Institutionalization of contract labour in Namibia, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 25 (1), 1999: 121-138; Petrus Banghart, *Migrant Labour in South West Africa and its Effect on Ovambo Tribal Life*, unpubl. MA thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 1969; Patricia Hayes, *A History of the Ovambo of Namibia, c 1880-1935*, PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 1992; Robert James Gordon, *Mines, Masters and Migrants: Life in a Namibian Compound*, Johannesburg, Ravan, 1977; Rauhanen Voipponen, "Contract work through Ovambo eyes", in: Reginald Green, Marija-Liisa Kiljunen and Kimme Kiljunen, (eds.), *Namibia the Last Colony*, Essex, Longman, 1981: 116-120; Vinnia Ndadi, *Breaking Contract: The Story of Vinnia Ndadi*, Bunbury, IDAF, 1989; John Ya Otto, *Battlefront Namibia: An Autobiography*, London, Heinemann, 1982; Helao Shityuwete, *Never Follow the Wolf: The Autobiography of a Namibian Freedom Fighter*, London, Kliptown, 1990; Sam

understand their work and their collaboration with missionaries, and how the missionaries' attitude towards the contract labour system was not uniform.² Native recruiters and escorts have generally been demonised as the source of labour migration evils. In countries such as Malawi, where labour recruitment was a lucrative business for private recruiters from South Africa who competed directly with the officially recognised recruiters, there was much criticism of the harmful impact of external labour recruiters.³ Competition between private labour agents or recruiters and the officially recognised ones became a common feature of the colonial economy in southern African after first appearing in the gold mines of South Africa in the 1880s. Despite the introduction of regulations to curb recruiting agents' illegal activities, they were not eliminated.⁴ For example, an illicit recruiting drive took place along the Transvaal border where unlicensed recruiters reaped huge profits by illegally trafficking natives who they later sold to licensed recruiting agents for distribution to employers under conditions that resembled slave auctions. It would seem that in the 20th century, laws to regulate labour recruitment pushed many recruiters to operate underground.⁵ Prior to 1920s labour migration around the world was dominated by issues of recruitment, financing, transportation and linking migrants to potential employers. This changed in the early 20th century with the rise of border controls and laws. In South Africa, employers came to depend on often aggressive recruiters for supplies of low cost labour. These recruiters usually operated outside the established framework of WENELA and lived by supplying employers with black labour from inside and outside of South Africa at inflated prices.⁶ Since labour recruiting was a highly competitive business, there were many instances of fraud and misrepresentation, if not outright abuse.⁷ To be successful, recruiters had to have strong networks on both sides of the borders of their recruiting areas which usually

Nujoma, *Where Others Wavered: The Autobiography of Sam Nujoma. My Life and Participation in the Liberation Struggle of Namibia*, London, PANAF, 2001; David Kudumo Ausiku. 'My own life stories: is this God's work or Satan's scheme?', unpubl. manuscript, 2005; Ndeutala Hishongwa, *The Contract Labour System and its Effects on Family and Social Life in Namibia*, Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 1992; John Kane-Berman, *Contract Labour in South West Africa*, Johannesburg, South African Institute of Race Relations, 1972.

² Sibylle Gundert Hock, "Mission influence and labour migration: the case of Vanuatu in the last decades of the 19th century", *Journal of Pacific History*, 26 (1), 1991: 98-102 (98).

³ Wiseman Chijere Chirwa, "The Malawi government and South African labour recruiters, 1974-92", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 34 (4), 1996: 623-642 (633).

⁴ John Taylor, "Mine labour recruitment in Bechuanaland Protectorate", *Botswana Notes and Records*, 10, 1978: 99-112 (100).

⁵ Martin. J. Murray, "'Black birding' at 'Crooks' Corner': Illicit labour recruiting in Northeastern Transvaal, 1910-1940", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 21 (3), 1995: 373-397 (374).

⁶ WENELA which stands for Witwatersrand Native Labour Association, was an Anglo-American recruitment association which recruited men from South West Africa/ Namibia to the South African gold mines and the tobacco farmers of Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe).

⁷ Murray, "'Black birding'": 380.

stretched back to the recruits' home villages.⁸ In Namibia, while there is a body of literature on the contract labour system in general, there is little focus on native recruiters. This paper therefore used a qualitative research approach of perusing the archival materials in the National Archives of Namibia and oral interviews to garner perspectives on who the native recruiters were, what their activities along a permeable Kavango River boundary entailed, and what impacts those activities had? The focus period of this study is 1925 to 1943 because the native recruiters under discussion worked for the Northern Labour Organization which was formally founded in 1925 and was dissolved in 1943 to eventually form South West Africa Native Labour Association (SWANLA).

The native recruiters

Appointment

Native recruiters (NRs) were local people appointed by an Assistant Native Commissioner (ANC) of Rundu on behalf of the Northern Labour Organization (NLO) to recruit contract labourers from Kavango, Angola and Zambezi (which referred to Western Zambia) for farms and mines inside Namibia. NRs had the full backing of the authorities in executing their duties and it was stated that any person or persons who was found to interfere with the work of an NR was to be severely dealt with.⁹ An NR was expected to be hard-working i.e. able to recruit large numbers of contract labourers efficiently. In 1938, when Mr Gaerdes was appointed an NLO official in charge of the Rundu store, he also took over the task of appointing and supervising NRs in the Kavango area from the ANC of Rundu.¹⁰ Mr Gaerdes appointed the following six NRs for the six tribal administrative areas of Kavango: Phillipus (reserve area), Shivanda (Kwangali area), Kasiki (Mbunza area), Frans Kashasha (Shambyu area), Linus Shashipapo (Gciriku area) and Muyatwa for (Mbukushu area). A conflict between the newly appointed NRs and the older, more established ones developed in the late 1930s as was noted by a colonial official:

Some older recruiters who still busied themselves personally or through their agents in their old recruiting areas gave up their work of finding the natives they had sent down, disputed to them by the locally [newly] appointed foremen or recruiters. They became dissatisfied seeing the fruit of their labour going to those who sat at home simply demanding payment for all recruits who crossed into their area and found little sympathy in their disputes with the local "big men" related to the chiefs.¹¹

⁸ Johan Lindquist, "Labour recruitment, circuits of capital and gendered mobility: conceptualizing the Indonesian migrant industry", *Pacific Affairs*, 83 (1), 2010: 115-132 (125).

⁹ See The native recruiters: Okavango area, 18 February 1937, National Archives of Namibia (NAN), Windhoek, NAR 1/1/55, file 11/7.

¹⁰ See Runtu/Okavango territory, 02 June 1937, NAN, NAR 1/1/55, file 11/1/7.

¹¹ The Northern Labour Organization Limited to the Assistant Native Commissioner, Runtu, Okavango territory, 02 June 1939, NAN, NAR 1/1/55, file 11/7.

Some of the new native recruiters were, on suggestion from the ANC of Rundu, discharged from their duties on account of these disputes.¹² The appointments were influenced by the prospective NR's family connections or social relations to the traditional chiefs. Traditional chiefs usually recommended their family members to the ANC of Rundu for appointment as NRs. It was for example, understood from Chief Shampapi of Vagciriku tribe in the 1930s that he wished one of his relatives to be appointed as NR in the Gciriku tribal area.¹³ In another example, an NLO official wrote: "We understand that the natives recommended were mostly relatives of the chief of their respective areas and were residing in that area."¹⁴

The appointment and dismissal of native recruiters or changes in the terms and conditions of their employment required the consent of the ANC of Rundu who was careful not to upset the chiefs. He was very assertive about his authority in his communication with the NLO official: "I would like to remind you that you are not permitted to appoint any native as a native recruiter unless such native first receives my approval."¹⁵ His influence in appointing and dismissing NRs and his care not to upset the chiefs ensured cordial relations and co-operation between the ANC and the chiefs which smoothened recruitment process and made political control of the local people easier.¹⁶ The certificate of approval of the appointment of an NR could be withdrawn at any time.

Dismissal

An NR could be punished or dismissed from his duties for assaulting labour recruits or if the chief and ANC of Rundu were dissatisfied with his operations. For example, in South West Africa/Namibia it was the policy of the colonial administration to refuse to issue travel passes to women wishing to accompany their husbands to the police zone as labour recruits. An NR who did not adhere to the law and took native women along was liable to be fined. Langhans Kanyinga, for example, indicated in his sworn in statement in front of the officer in charge of Native Affairs why he was fined:

I was fined five head of cattle by Chief Shampapi because I took certain two Angola women down to Grootfontein last year. These women were not in possession of a pass. I often heard Nakale [ANC of Rundu Harold Eeds] order that no women were to be taken south, and also heard Chief Shampapi give a similar order.¹⁷

NRs were also punished or dismissed if they were found in possession of prohibited substances such as Dagga or if they resisted the Native Police officials from the office of

¹² Ibid.

¹³ See Native recruiters: Okavango Area, 04 February 1937, NAN, NAR 1/1/55, file 11/7.

¹⁴ Runtu/Okavango territory, 02 June 1939, NAN, NAR 1/1/55, file 11/1/7.

¹⁵ Native recruiters: Okavango native territory and western Caprivi Zipfel, NAN, NAR 1/1/55, file 11/1/7.

¹⁶ Declaration by Langhans Kanyinga, 02 Jan. 1936, NAN, NAR 1/1/55, file 11/1/2.

¹⁷ Ibid.

the Assistant Natives Commissioner (ANC) of Rundu who were sent to inspect the NRs' kraals. An NR could also be dismissed if his work was deemed inefficient. This was the case for the recruiter Kampanza who was dismissed in favour of Mutangara Sikindo and for Liveve in the Mbukushu area of Kavango. Recruiters who came into conflict with the Bushmen on the route to and from Grootfontein area without proof that they had acted in self-defence also faced dismissal. A Native Recruiter was dismissed upon the withdrawal of a certificate to operate in Kavango territory on notice given by the ANC of Rundu.

Remuneration

NRs did not have a fixed salary but were remunerated depending on the number of recruits they enlisted for the police zone. One recruiter, for example, stated that he did not know what his salary was and that sometimes he was given two pounds if he took 20 boys down to Grootfontein- sometimes only 10/-Shillings while another recruiter, Kanyengo, said he was paid one Shilling per labourer he brought to Grootfontein.¹⁸ In general NRs were paid one Shilling per head of recruit.¹⁹ In order to ensure that recruiters were only paid for the work done, a ticket book system was introduced in the late 1930s. A native recruiter was provided with a ticket book by a Rundu store keeper who was an NLO agent. The Rundu store keeper ensured that the name of a native recruiter was on the pass of every new recruit who presented a ticket. On this basis the payment per head was made to the recruiter as the NLO managing director explained:

Each recruiter will be supplied with distinguishing tickets for his use and recruits producing these tickets on arrival at Runtu will be booked against the recruiters' name for payment. The ticket of a boy shall be considered proof of to whom we owe his recruitment notwithstanding the fact that he may have immigrated into the territory or crossed the river in some other recruiting or tribal area.²⁰

The recruiting company could only pay for such new recruits as had been examined and passed by the Rundu store agent based on travel passes received from the office of the ANC of Rundu's office.²¹ The wages of the recruiters therefore depended largely on number of recruits they enlisted.

Recruiting activities

NRs did the actual work of recruiting for the NLO. They obtained recruiting licences under instructions to comb the villages that fell in their area for recruits. For the purpose of identification and control, they had to ensure that all their potential recruits

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ See Runtu/Okavango territory, 02 June 1939, NAN, NAR 1/1/55, file 11/1/7. Also see for example The Northern Labour Organization Limited, Grootfontein, 12 July 1928, NAN, SWAA 1/1/46, 2426, file A521/26, V.5.

²⁰ See Runtu/Okavango territory, 02 June 1939, NAN, NAR 1/1/55, file 11/1/7.

²¹ Ibid.

carried a Native Identification Pass (NIP). The NIP was detailed with the full names and surname of the recruit, his date of birth, names of parents and his traditional leader, name of tribe and village, date of contractual period, place of work, signatures of the Master to confirm the date of arrival and discharge of a recruit from duty.²²

NRs worked most effectively when they worked within familiar territories. Although they were required to have established links within their areas, in reality not all of them had such links as an official lamented:

Of the remaining five recruiters only one seems efficient and, we know, has some friends in Angola working in conjunction with him. Of the others, one lives about 20 miles south of the river, others are appointed for the Kwangali, Mbonza and Gciriku areas but they admit of not having any collaborators outside their area and their activities are mainly limited to a monthly visit to Runtu, where they claim the fees due for natives they have never even seen in some cases. The recruiter who is supposed to work in Gciriku and Mbukushu area lives in Shamyu district which is some 120 miles from the last village of his area [of recruiting operation] near Muhembo.²³

NRs sometimes appointed runners to go into villages within their areas and seek new recruits on their behalf. The NRs would then register such new recruits under their own names with the ANC of Rundu or the NLO Rundu store official. As was the case with the NRs, it was important that the runners had strong links with collaborators and lived within easy reach of their recruitment pool. This proved difficult due to unpredictable population movement and settlement across the Kavango River boundary.

Challenges to recruiting

From 1925 to late 1935, when recruitment was still limited to the Namibian side of the Kavango River, the central challenges for NLO native recruiters was the illegal crossing of and the settlement along the Kavango River as a colonial boundary by the population which became a factor that impacted upon the recruiting activities. The colonial position was to limit recruitment to men domiciled in Namibia. This was problematic as in some cases the local people misrepresented their domicile identity in order to escape colonial taxation or to be recruited. The relocation of individuals or families, however, meant the loss of the pool of labour for the NRs. The division of Kavango area between Angola and Namibia meant that NRs relied on the population on the Namibian side for labour supplies but the constant movement of the population across the Kavango River and the insufficient colonial control of such cross border movements meant that the population constantly fluctuated and the supply of recruits on the Namibian side was unreliable. Besides, people tended to settle next to their hereditary king and thus the colonial administration benefited from a king settling on their side of the river as he was followed by potential labourers.

²² See Identification passes: proclamation 39/1935, 10 June 1936, NAN, NAT 1/1/54, file S/U-20, 25.

²³ See Runtu/Okavango territory, 02 June 1939, NAN, NAR 1/1/55, file 11/1/7.

The Northern Labour Organization was at pains to identify and recruit only people who were domiciled on the South West African/Namibia side of the Kavango River and this impacted negatively on their recruitment process as the NLO secretary informed the administration secretary:

We can assure you that all our recruiting is and until the administration removes the recent restrictions will be confined to the Ovambos and the Okavango [Kavango] tribes. As regards these latter we should like to beg his honour the administrator to allow us some latitude. We should point out that the natives of these tribes are, as regards domicile, exceedingly mobile and unstable. A village which is this week or this month on S.W.A. side of the river may, by next week or next month, have shifted with all its inhabitants to the other side of the Okavango [Kavango], or vice-versa. Six important groups from Diriko [Gciriku] area have transferred themselves to the Portuguese side within the last twelve months or so. These changes of domicile are so frequent that it is impossible for us to be certain in every case whether recruits desiring contracts are technically domicile or originated in this territory. But we view with apprehension the present trend of the natives from the South West African to the Portuguese side which will remove so many of them from our source of labour supply, if the present restrictions are to be maintained in all their severity.²⁴

The colonial authorities spread reports about the Portuguese authorities mistreating the local people in order to justify the resettlement of the Kavango population from the Angolan side to the Namibian side as 'fugitives' and thus increase their pool of contract labourers. The colonial administration, therefore, was not interested in returning the population from their side. The scarcity of labour from Kavango due to a marginal population along a permeable boundary later compelled the NLO to seek, in vain, labourers from Botswana. An NLO provides reasons for this failure:

To recruit Bechuana was out of question, they are rich with stock [...] and if they allowed other natives to leave the territory, the Bechuana would have to herd their own stock, this he would never do. One Bechuana counsellor owns twelve to fifteen thousand cattle, has forty outposts and has over 300 natives as herd boys [...] the whole system appears to be nothing more or less than slavery and the administration seems powerless to act. Store keepers employ large numbers of natives for the purpose of driving cattle to Livingstone and elsewhere and they, I am inclined to think also advised the Chief and Counsellors not to allow natives to leave the territory. On my return journey I travelled up the swamps on the Tamalakan River to ascertain what natives resided there, I found them very scattered with plenty of food and unwilling to work.²⁵

Until 1935, recruitment of men outside Namibia by native recruiters was still prohibited as the following letter from the administration official to the managing secretary of the NLO shows:

²⁴ NLO managing secretary to the secretary for South West Africa, 28 Nov. 1935, NAN, NAR 1/1/55, file 11/1/2.

²⁵ The Northern Labour Organization Limited, Grootfontein, 12 July 1928, NAN, SWAA 1/1/46, 2426, file A521/26, V.5.

The administration does not desire that natives from outside the territory be recruited. A copy of your letter is being forwarded to Mr Eedes [ANC of Rundu] and he is requested to see that in future headmen do not allow natives to cross over and settle in South West Africa.²⁶

NRs thus had to fake the identity of potential recruits to get a National Identification Pass (NIP) which meant they could be recruited in Namibia. The practice of falsifying the area of abode brought trouble with the authorities for some NRs. A letter from Father P. August Bierfert of Nyangana Catholic mission station to Mr Eedes for example, shows one such misrepresentation by a recruiter in Gciriku tribal area. Father Bierfert stated that a headman, Muduva (alias Shakapango), told him a lie by asking for permits for eight Zambezi and four Vanyemba men with provision for the journey and passes to Grootfontein depot. Father Bierfert indicated that the potential recruits from Angola and Zambezi went with a NR, Kanyengo. Kanyengo collected these labourers from Mbambi and Andara. Bierfert further stated that after mistakenly allowing Zambezi to go on contract, he was confronted by an old Nyemba from Kwito with his four sons over the issue after which Bierfert agreed to grant them permits too. As a result a request was made to NLO for the dismissal of the service of Kanyengo as a NR.²⁷ The NRs' work was also complicated by the fact that men from Kavango had little inclination to enlist as contract labourers, as an NLO official explained:

The local natives, having sufficient food supplies etc. are not likely to seek work in any large numbers, in view of the long distances they have to walk, and particularly in view of the poor and inadequate rations issued to them for the journey south. The low rate of wage, and the fact that employers, especially farmers, deduct portion of wages for alleged loss of stock, are also causes for complaint by Okavango Native territory natives.²⁸

As long as no other options for recruitment were on offer within the reaches of the people of the Kavango area the NLO recruitment scheme with the NRs worked fairly satisfactorily. But problems arose later when WENELA began to recruit in Kavango and South East Angola for the South African gold mines. NLO recruiters found that potential recruits preferred WENELA because of higher wages and motorised transport to the recruiting centre.²⁹ In view of this more stringent control over the labour supplies across the boundary was necessary. The passing of the Northern and Extra Territorial Native Control (NETNC) Proclamation No. 29 of 1935 finally allowed the recruitment of labour outside Namibia.³⁰ When the ban was lifted, men from Angola and Zambezi were recruited at Rundu and this meant a means to ferry many of them across the Kavango River had to be found. Since the NLO did not have boats of its own it was dependent on

²⁶ Recruitment of Rhodesian and Angola natives, November 1935, NAN, A.521/26, file 11/1/2.

²⁷ See Illegal recruiting, 28 November 1935, NAN, NAR 1/1/55, file N3/5/2.

²⁸ See Labour supply from Okavango native territory, 11 October 1938, NAN, SWAA 2407, file A521/10.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Circular on Control of Extra-Territorial and Northern Natives, 8 Jan. 1936, NAN, NAT 1/1/54, S/U-20, file 25.

local boat owners who were remunerated by deducting small amounts from the salary of the designated NRs. This soon caused conflicts between the boat owners and the NRs.³¹

Escort routes challenges

NRs also took up the job of escorting the gangs of contract labourers on foot to Grootfontein area and back to the Kavango area. Kanyengo stated that he was one of the NRs employed by the NLO in eastern Kavango and that his duty was to recruit natives and to escort them south to Grootfontein.³² There were two main routes from Kavango area to Grootfontein or Tsumeb. The first route was from Nkure-nkuru via Tsintabis to either Grootfontein or Tsumeb. The second route from Kavango east to Grootfontein was via Omuramba Omatako to Karukuvisa then Nurugas and then on to Grootfontein. In the beginning, the journey from the Kavango to Grootfontein took a long time due to the lack of transportation between Grootfontein and Nyangana mission station. Furthermore for a very long time, the labourers travelled on foot and usually needed about seventeen days.³³ The journey by foot from Kavango has parallels with the migration from Ovambo areas. In the latter case most men went to search for work during the periods of hunger and thus were already weak and often not able for the journey.³⁴ Furthermore, white farmers along the way accused them of destroying poles and pumps and refused to provide them with water.³⁵ During the rainy seasons, many of these men are said to have drowned or lost their property trying to cross swollen streams.³⁶ The NRs and contract labourers had to carrying their own loads on their shoulders and to provide food for themselves. On the Kavango leg of the journey they also had to endure thirst and attacks by Bushmen.³⁷ A colonial official explains further:

The Ovombo [Kavango] is not afraid on the forward journey to Grootfontein or Tsumeb, but on the return journey when he is laden with supplies he has purchased with his wages he is very frequently raided by Bushmen, who often attack them at night by firing one shot when the Ovombo [Kavango], who is unarmed, decamps and leaves everything to the victor. This, however, I hope to be able to overcome by arming two or three of the headmen who come down with each batch of boys.³⁸

³¹ See report on the conflict between native recruiter for Sambyu area, Kashasha and Mbandje, a boat owner at Runtu, in Native recruiter, Sambio area, NAN, NAR 1/1/55, file 11/7.

³² Declaration by Kanyengo, 5 December 1935, NAN, NAR 1/1/55, file 11/1/2.

³³ In 1931, a returning contract labourer Nehemia Mbamba got a lift from Grootfontein to Nyangana mission station from which he travelled on foot to Nkurenuru in western Kavango, See Pentti Toivanen, *Namibia : Kavango, Ngapi Nare?*, n.p., n.d (University of Stellenbosch library, TEOL 266.416881 TOI).

³⁴ Stals, *Die aanraking*: 197.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.: 198.

³⁷ Interview with Shikiri waNkayira, born ca. 1918, Ndongalinena, 8 August 2009.

³⁸ Native labour supply from Okavanga [sic!], 15 October 1920, NAN, SWAA 2407, file A521/10.

The annual report of 1925 describes an incident in which a group of Vacu attacked returning labourers but were captured by the colonial police and taken to Grootfontein to stand trial. As the following indicates:

The Bushmen who inhabit the dry stretches between the Okavango [Kavango] and the Police Zone gave some trouble. They attacked parties of returning labourers, wounding several, and followed that up by an attempt to overawe and intimidate the Bunja [Mbunza] tribe in their own area. The movement was suppressed by Chief Muduni, without serious conflict with the Bushmen, and later a police camel patrol was successful in capturing some of the Bushmen who were concerned in attacking the returning labourers, and took them to Grootfontein for trial. Since then all has been peaceful.³⁹

Later in the 1930s NRs or escorts were authorised to carry one rifle and five rounds of ball ammunition for the purpose of protecting the labour gangs. For political and security reasons the colonial administration and NLO officials did not entrust the NRs with full control of the rifles and ammunition. For example, the rifle and ammunition had to be deposited with the police or the officer in charge of Native Affairs. Furthermore, the rifle had the number and rounds of ammunitions recorded on their pass certificate. Langhals Kanyinga, who lived along the 'Muramba matako' labour route, was appointed an NR and escort by the colonial administration. He was provided with a rifle and bullets to protect the labourers from Vacu (Khoisans) attacks and any other dangers during the migration to or from contract work. Kanyinga would leave the rifle at the border control post before crossing the police zone and would only receive it upon return and hand it in for safe keeping to the missionaries at Nyangana in Kavango from where it would be collected upon their next journey.⁴⁰ There were cases where Kanyinga did not carry a rifle during escorts and was mocked by the contract labourers in a song on their traditional flutes: "Kanyinga, so foolish of you, go and get the rifle".⁴¹

Kanyinga apparently had a strategy to control Vacu (Khoisans) from attacking labourers and therefore did not always need to carry the rifle. Instead he brought along dagga herbs to provide to Vacu whenever they asked for a smoke.⁴² The excessive dagga smoked by Vacu made them pass out into a deep sleep soon afterwards and thus provided contract labourers ample time to move out of their reach. Such a strategy was not, however, applied by the contract labourers on their return journeys as dagga usage was prohibited in the police zone. It was on these return journeys that they were prone to attacks. These attacks continued and the administration had to find a lasting solution. Interviewees from the Kavango allege that the NLO officials at Grootfontein took the dramatic step of arresting and killing the leader of these Vacu. They then forced his followers to eat the leader. Shikiri relates this extraordinary story:

³⁹ Union of South Africa Annual report of 1925, IX/0220, p. 35.

⁴⁰ Native recruiters: Okavango area, 4 February 1937, NAN, NAR 1/1/55, file 11/7.

⁴¹ Interview with Anselm Likuwa Mukoya, born ca. 1942, Ndiyona, 4 August 2009. "Kanyinga we pauyero karete uta".

⁴² Ibid.

The 'Vacu' (San) never went to the police zone for work, they were just living quietly in their bush. In the past, Vacu use to kill contract labourers and they were later pursued by the whites and arrested. The king of those Vacu was taken for trial at Grootfontein where he was killed. His corpse was boiled in a huge pot and his followers were compelled to eat up their leader. Since then, Vacu also began to establish good links with Grootfontein.⁴³

Portelli made the point that 'oral narratives are always psychologically true' and that this truth may be as important as factually reliable accounts.⁴⁴ His argument can be applied in this case. It is highly likely that oral narratives of colonial officials killing, boiling and forcing the Vacu followers to eat the body of their leader are not factually true. What is important, however, is that the narratives shows the labourers' views that the colonial authorities and NLO were gravely concerned about Vacu attacks on labourers and took steps to stop these. It further signifies how the image of 'Vacu terror' lingers on in Kavango memory.

It was the duty of a NR to report any illegal possession of goods such as guns, ammunition, fuses and detonators by the contract labourers to the administration. In one particular example in the 1930s, an NR called Ndimba reported a contract labourer who possessed an old stocking containing a fuse and a box of detonators and the police arrested the culprit.⁴⁵ Colonial officials suspected some NRs of helping deserters to escape and warned that in such cases, those caught, would be punished as told by one contract labourer named Jonas:

Ndimba met Nakale (Mr. Eedes) on the road to Tsumeb and Nakale had warned Ndimba about assisting deserters to get back to their homes, and told him that it did not matter if he cheated the Government as he would be caught one day and severely punished.⁴⁶

A statement from one of the deserters who was arrested in Ukwangali tribal area asserted that indeed the NLO's escort and recruiter, Ndimba, for a fee assisted deserters to get back to their homes.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Native recruiters were appointed by the ANC of Rundu on behalf of the NLO and had the full backing of the colonial authorities in executing their recruiting duties as was evidently indicated in their appointment letters. These NRs who at times also acted as escorts were mostly relatives of Chiefs. They became powerful and respected men in their communities because of the economic and political gains from their positions and

⁴³ Interview Shikiri waNkayira. A similar story was given by Anselm Likuwa Mukoya.

⁴⁴ Alessandro Portelli, 'What makes oral history different', in: Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, (eds.), *The Oral History Reader*, London, Routledge, 1998: 63-74 (68).

⁴⁵ Declaration by Ndimba, 12 October 1936, NAN, NAR 1/1/55, file 11/7.

⁴⁶ Declaration by Jonas, 12 October 1936, NAN, NAR 1/1/55, file 11/7.

⁴⁷ Letter from Administrator to the Post commander of SWA police at Tsintsabis titled: Deserters, NAN, SWAA 2407, file A521/10.

their close relationship to the Chiefs. The NRs had to establish a wide web of connections to distant villages to ensure a steady supply of fresh recruits. The changing position of the colonial authorities of excluding recruitment from Angola meant that NRs often misrepresented the official residence of their potential recruits to make recruitment in Namibia possible.

The central challenge to native recruiters' activities remained the constant crossing and settlement pattern of the population along the Kavango River which left NRs with an unreliable pool for recruiting purposes as the potential population was not always in easy reach for recruiters. In order to control population movement and settlement across the river, the colonial administration introduced more stringent controls over the boundary but this did not result in reducing recruiting challenges for NRs or to an increase in the labour supply.

Labour recruiting activities among the people of Kavango were, at best, only moderately successful due to the lack of interest among the population and problems of poor road infrastructures which made it difficult for men to reach recruiting centres. Generally, wealth and food self-reliance of local communities also hampered successful recruiting as was the case for a failed attempt by an NLO agent to recruit among the wealthy Bechuana (Tswana) in the 1930s. Bushmen attacks hampered activities further. While NRs gained economic and social benefits for their participation in labour recruiting and escort activities, these were minimal and were not worth the exploitation endured. This paper has provided a starting point to focus research on the activities of native recruiters as an important component of contract labour history in Namibia but there is plenty of scope for further more in-depth research in the future.

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