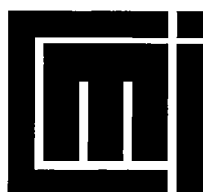


Underdevelopment and labour migration: the contract labour system in Namibia

Richard Moorsom

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Summary:

This volume reproduces, with minor changes, a set of previously published papers on the history of the origins, formation and evolution of the contract labour system in Namibia from first commercial contact with industrial capitalism in the 1840s through to the onset of final collapse in the early 1970s. The main aim of republication under one cover is to make this work undertaken during 1974-76 and appearing first in the late 1970s, more easily accessible, especially to Namibian readers. The content and referencing of the papers has not been updated but the presentation has been improved and parts of the text integrated where appropriate.

Indexing terms:

Labour migration

Contract labour

History

Namibia

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Preface

This volume reproduces, with minor changes, a set of previously published papers on the history of the contract labour system in Namibia. The main aim is to make them easily accessible, especially to Namibian readers - at present they are scattered around different academic books and journals which are often difficult to obtain, especially in Namibia.

The research on which these papers are based was undertaken during 1974-76. At that time, published scholarly research on any aspect of Namibian history was extremely sparse, the first Namibian history doctorate had only recently been completed (Dr Zed Ngavirue at Oxford) and conditions for research under hostile colonial regimes and escalating counter-insurgency operations in both Namibia and Angola were decidedly difficult. These papers must therefore be read as part of the pioneer phase of modern historical research and writing on Namibia, now greatly enriched with primary research by scholars such as Frieda-Nela Williams, Harri Siiskonen, Patricia Hayes, Martti Eirola, Lazarus Hangula and Peter Katjavivi, with more in the pipeline from researchers such as Wolfram Hartmann, Emmanuel Kreike and Meredith McKittrick.

It must be emphasised that the papers in this volume have not been updated from their published versions: no new research is incorporated and footnote references to secondary literature are limited to what was available at the time of writing 20 years ago. I have however taken the opportunity to integrate the technical presentation of the original papers through:

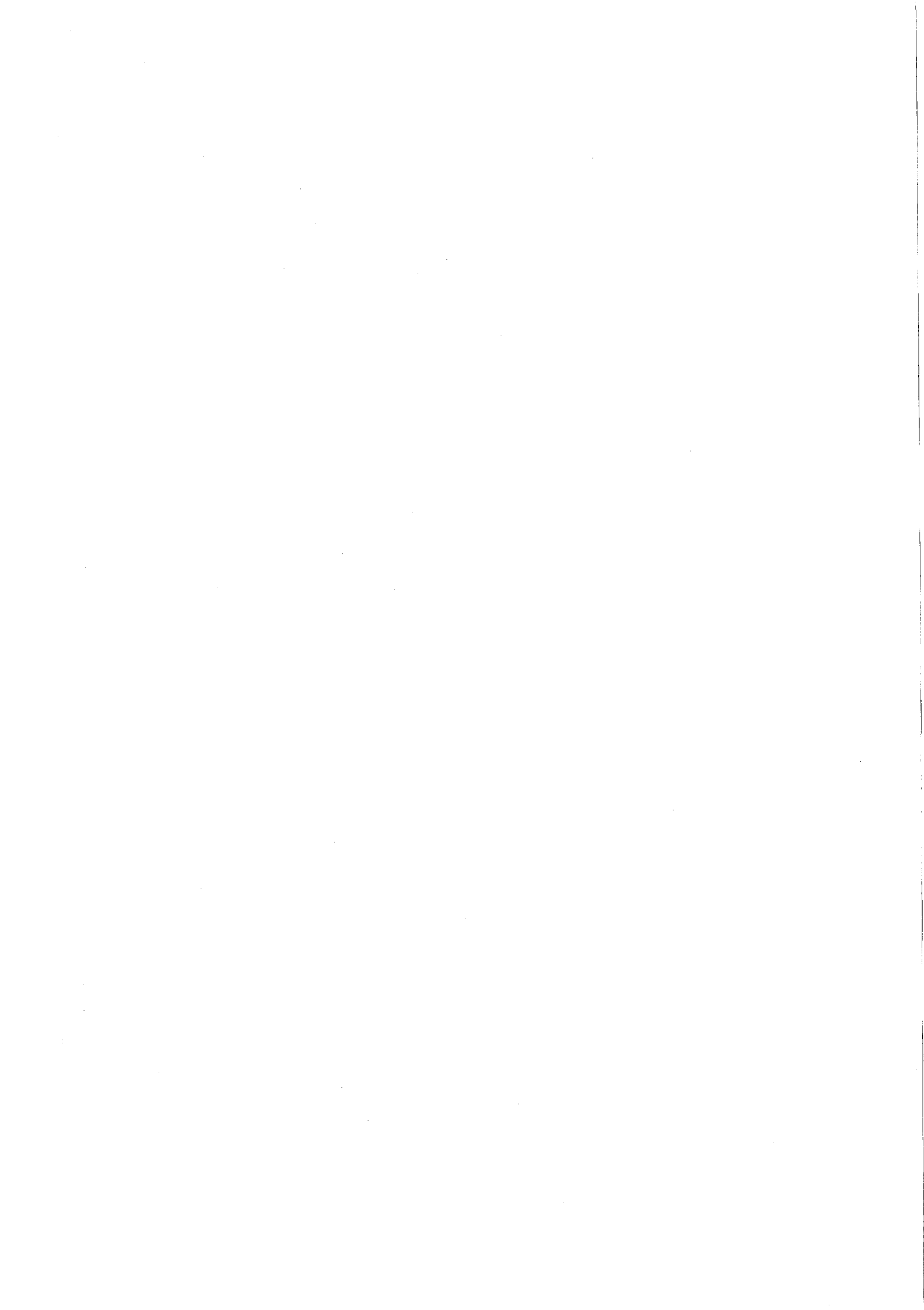
- correction of misprints and the occasional factual error;
- clearer configuration of the tables;
- more sub-headings;
- a uniform footnote style;
- a list of references and archives.

For the sake of clarity the origins of each paper are summarised below:

Paper 1: based on a synthesis of my own research on Namibia and Gervase Clarence-Smith's doctoral research on southwestern Angola. The paper was published first as a journal article and then with minor revisions in an anthology on southern Africa; this later version is used here (Gervase Clarence-Smith & Richard Moorsom, "Underdevelopment and class-formation in Ovamboland, 1844-1915", *Journal of African History*, 16, 3, 1975, pp. 365-381; *ibid.*, "Underdevelopment and class-formation in Ovamboland, 1844-1917", in Robin Palmer & Neil Parsons (eds.), *The roots of rural poverty in central and southern Africa* (London, Heinemann, 1977), pp.96-112). My earlier version was also published (Richard Moorsom, "Underdevelopment and class-formation: the origins of migrant labour in Namibia, 1850-1915", in T. Adler (ed.), *Perspectives on South Africa: a collection of working papers* (Johannesburg, African Studies Institute, Univ. of the Witwatersrand, 1977).

Paper 2: first published as a seminar paper and later with minor revisions in an anthology, which is the version used here (Richard Moorsom, *Underdevelopment and class-formation: the birth of the contract labour system in Namibia*, Univ. of York, Centre for Southern African Studies, *Collected Seminar Papers*, 5, 1978/79, pp. 17-44; *ibid.*, "The formation of the contract labour system in Namibia, 1900-1926", in Abebe Zegeye & Shubi Ishemo, *Forced labour and migration: patterns of movement within Africa* (London, Hans Zell, 1989), pp. 55-108.

Paper 3: because of overlap, I have combined two papers into an integrated text (Richard Moorsom, "Underdevelopment, contract labour and worker consciousness in Namibia, 1915-72", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 4, 1, 1977, pp.52-87; *ibid.*, "Labour consciousness and the 1971-2 contract workers strike in Namibia", *Development and Change*, 10, 1979, pp.206-31).



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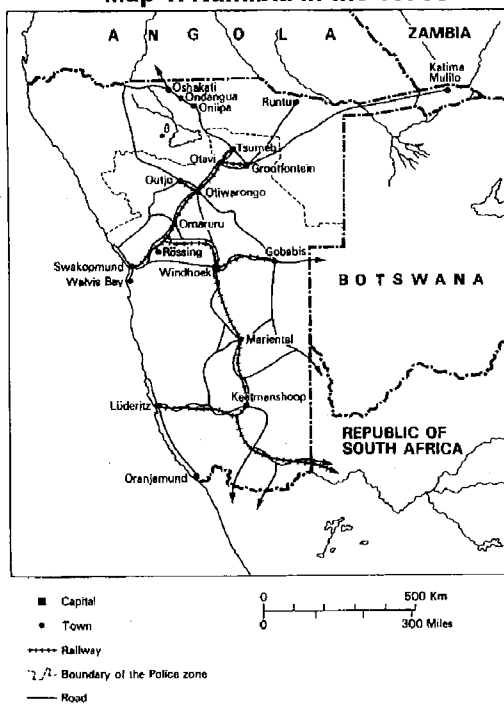
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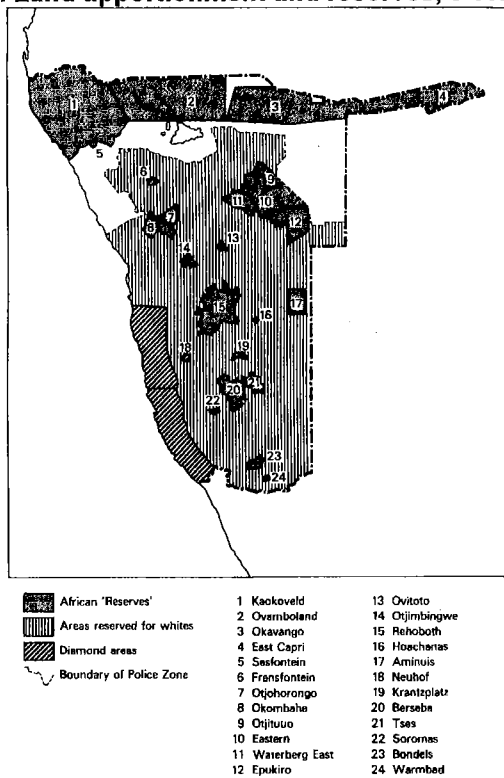
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Map 1. Namibia in the 1970s



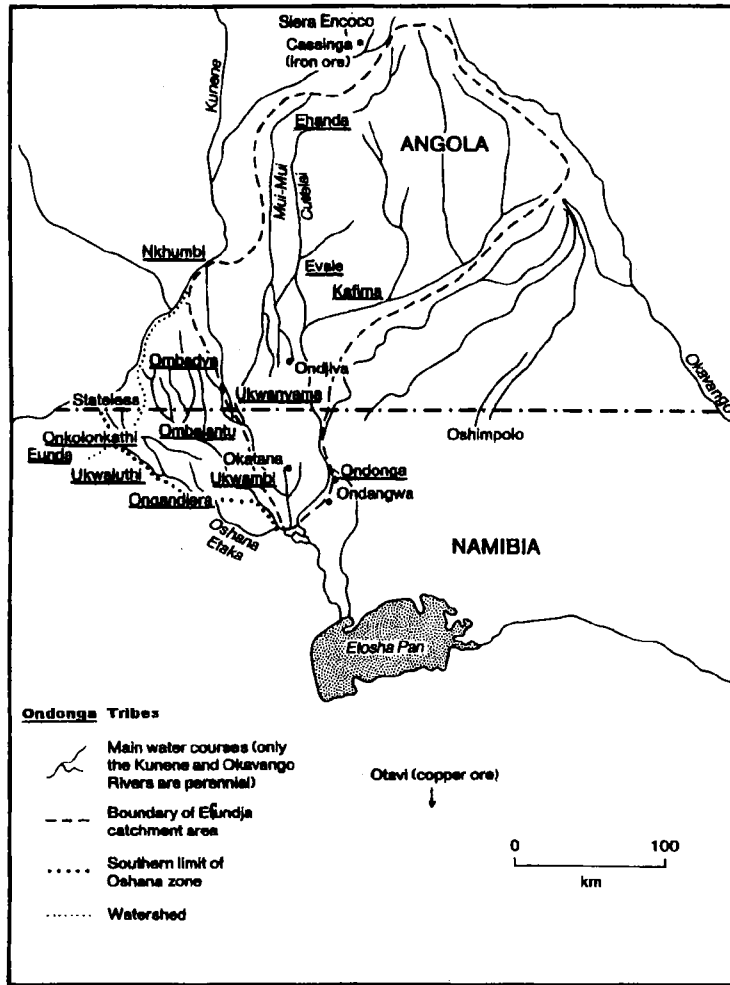
Source: Kiljunen, Kiljunen & Green, *Namibia: the last colony*, (London, Longman, 1980), map 1.2.

Map 2. Land apportionment and reserves, c 1920-1970

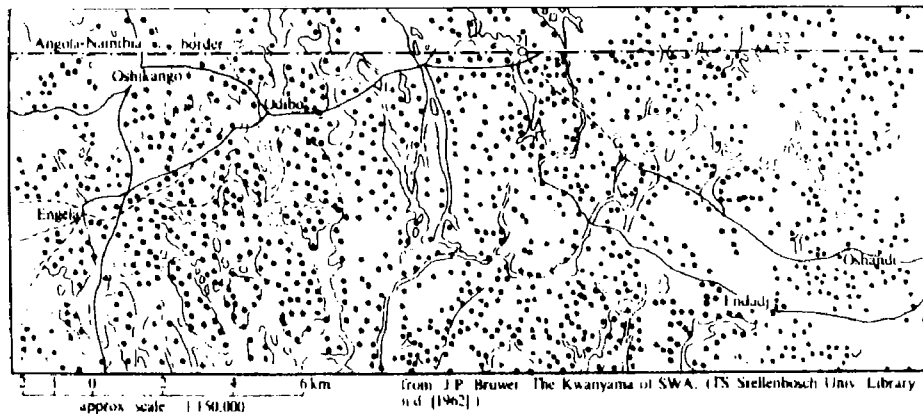


Source: Kiljunen, Kiljunen & Green, *Namibia: the last colony*, (London, Longman, 1980), map 5.2.

Map 3. Ovamboland: human settlement and floodplain system, c 1911-14

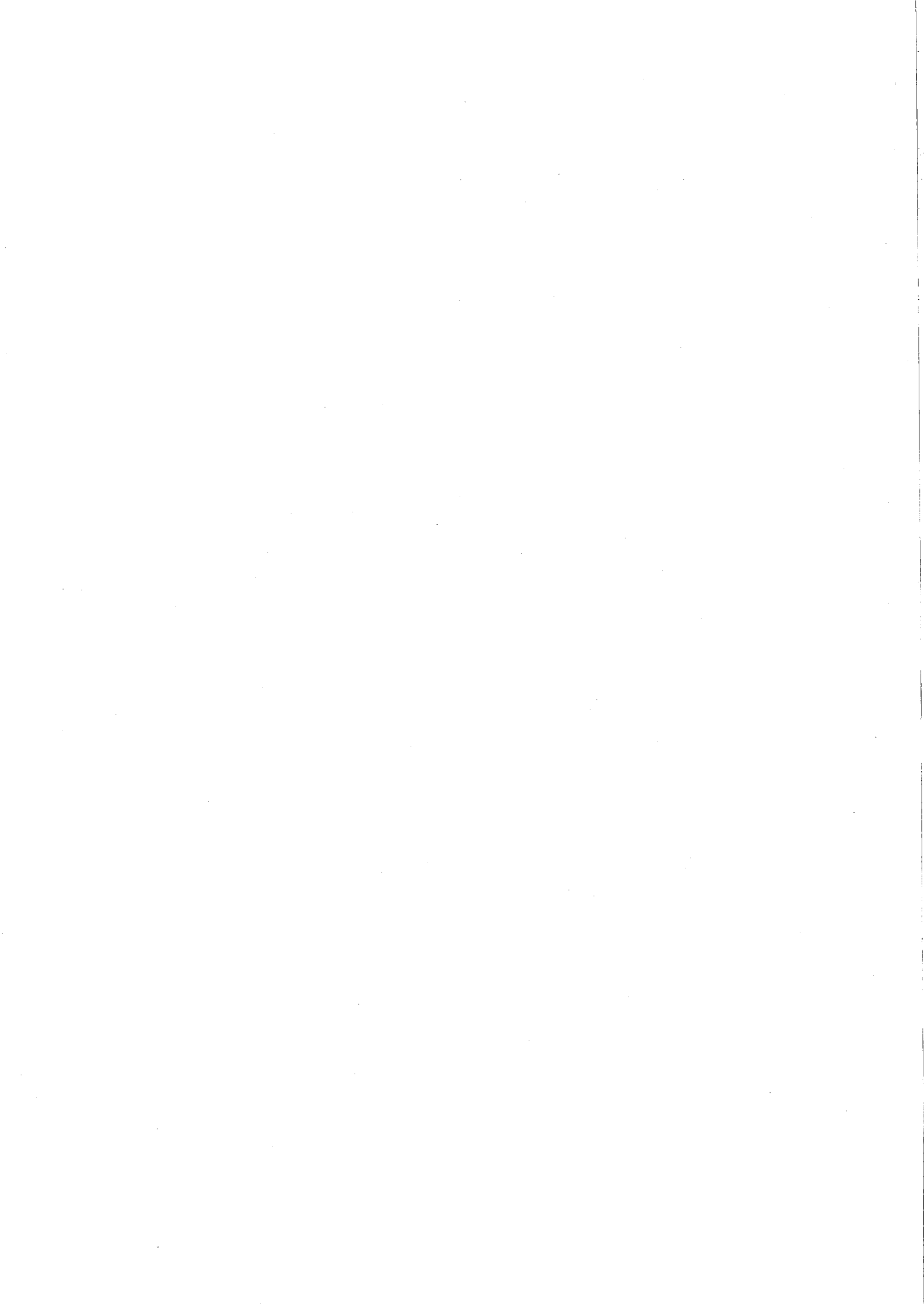


Map 4. Section of Ukwanyama showing watercourses and homesteads, early 1950s



Abbreviations

AGCSSp	Archives Générales de la Congrégation du Saint-Esprit, Paris.
AHA	Arquivo Histórico de Angola, Luanda.
AHU	Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Lisbon.
CDM	Consolidated Diamond Mines.
ICS SSA	Institute of Commonwealth Studies (London), Seminar Series 'Societies of Southern Africa...'
IM	Inspector of Mines, Windhoek, <i>Monthly and Annual Reports</i> .
IMLO	Inspector of Mines, Lüderitz Office.
LCoM	Lüderitzbucht Chamber of Mines.
MM	Military Magistrate, Lüderitz.
NA	Central Archives, Pretoria: South Africa, Dept. of Native Affairs
NLC	SWA Native Labourers Commission (1948).
NLO	Northern Labour Organisation (predecessor of SWANLA).
OMEG	Otavi Minen- und Eisenbahngesellschaft, the owners of the Tsumeb mine.
QM	Quarterly Magazine of St Mary's Anglican Mission, Odibo.
SLO	Southern Labour Organisation (predecessor of SWANLA).
SWA	South West Africa.
SWACO	South West Africa Company.
SWANLA	South West African Native Labour Association.
WU Arch	Witwatersrand University Archives.



1. Underdevelopment and Class Formation in Ovamboland, 1844-1917

Gervase Clarence-Smith & Richard Moorsom

Introduction

Much work has recently been done on the processes of underdevelopment and class formation in Southern Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Mostly it has focused on agricultural societies in close and direct conflict with white settler or company agriculture, under the shadow of the colonial state. The purpose of this paper is to look instead at a peripheral African society in a period when contacts with white settlers, companies, or colonial officials were reduced or non-existent. Even in these conditions Ovambo and Nkhumbi society underwent a process of underdevelopment essentially similar to that of other African peoples who have become impoverished labour-exporting peasantries. Articulation with European capitalist societies was characterised by an initial productive boom, followed by a slow decline into rural stagnation^[1].

Ecology and pre-colonial agriculture

The land of the Ovambo and Nkhumbi form an isolated area of dense population in the wide expanses of the northern Kalahari.^[2] The Nkhumbi inhabit the flood plain of the middle Kunene, which spreads out on the western bank of the river. The Ovambo, linguistically and culturally closely related to the Nkhumbi, inhabit a flat sandy plain immediately to the south-east, normally flooded by a wet-season river, the Kuvelai, which has its source to the north. The floodwaters of the Kuvelai and a few smaller streams filter through Ovamboland in an intricate maze of broad and shallow channels, with some surplus water occasionally reaching the Etosha Pan. All around this island of fertile flooded land lie vast areas of thorn bush and meagre pastures, which support only sparse groups of hunter-gatherers and cattle nomads. The traveller Galton, who reached Ovamboland from the south in 1851 after a weary journey through the thornveld, was struck by the sudden appearance of cultivated land:^[3]

Fine, dense timber trees, and innumerable palms of all sizes were scattered over it. Part was bare of pasturage, part was thickly covered in high corn stubble; palisadings, each of which enclosed a homestead, were scattered everywhere over the country. The general appearance was that of most abundant fertility.

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1. A seminal work in this field is G. Arrighi, "Labour supplies in historical perspective: a study of the proletarianisation of the African peasantry in Rhodesia", *Journal of Development Studies*, 6, 1970, 197-234. See also C. Bundy, "The emergence and decline of a South African peasantry", *African Affairs*, 71, 285, 1972, 369-88. This essay is the fruit of research by Gervase Clarence-Smith on southern Angola and by Richard Moorsom on Namibia, and has involved the use of three major archival sources on the Portuguese side: the Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino (AHU) in Lisbon, the Arquivo Histórico de Angola (AHA) in Luanda, and the Archives Générales de la Congrégation du Saint-Esprit (AGCSSp) in Paris.
 2. The ecological and ethnographic conditions described in these opening paragraphs are taken from the following: C. Estermann, *Etnografia do Sudoeste de Angola, Vol. I* (Lisbon, 1956); C. Estermann, "Les Bantous du Sud-Ouest de l'Angola", *Anthropos*, 59, 1964, 20-74; T. Delachaux, *Ethnographie de la région du Cunene* (Neuchâtel, 1948); A.W. Urquhart, *Patterns of settlement and subsistence in South-West Angola* (Washington, 1963); E.C. de Carvalho and J.V. da Silva, "The Cunene Region - ecological analysis of an African agropastoral system", in F. Heimer (ed.), *Social change in Angola* (Munich, 1973); J.P. Neto, *O Baixo Cunene* (Lisbon, 1963); E. Loeb, *In feudal Africa*, published as an annex to *International Journal of American Linguistics*, 28, 1962; C. Mittelberger, "Entre os Cuanhamas", *Estudos Ultramarinos*, 6, 1956, 131-72; G. Nitsche, *Ovamboland* (Kiel, 1913); F.R. Lehmann, "Die anthropogeographischen Verhältnisse des Ambolandes im nördlichen Südwestafrika", *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 79, 1954, 8-58; H. Tönjes, *Ovamboland* (Berlin, 1911); V. Lebzelter, *Eingeborenenkulturen in Südwest- und Südafrika* (Leipzig, 1934), 188-254; C.H.L. Hahn, H. Vedder and L. Fourie, *The native tribes of South West Africa* (Cape Town, 1928); 1-36; J.H. Wellington, "The Cunene River and the Etosha Plain", *South African Geographical Journal*, 20, 1938, 21-32.
 3. F. Galton, *Narrative of an explorer in tropical South Africa* (London, 1853), 125.

The similarities with the ecological conditions prevailing in Barotseland spring immediately to mind. Like the Lozi, the Ovambo and Nkhumbi combined fairly permanent settled agriculture with cattle-herding. However there were a number of important differences. The characteristic Lozi mounds did not exist in Ovamboland, and the population lived on sandy ridges which were not normally flooded. The land was less fertile, and only a very little maize was grown in the most manured areas close to the homesteads. Cassava was extremely rare. Some sorghum, generally used for making beer, was planted along the clay-covered margins of the flooded areas, but the staple crop was drought-resistant pearl (bulrush) millet, grown in the sandy soils of the ridges. Pasture for cattle was provided as the floods receded, and water remained in small pools for a considerable time. At the height of the dry season the Kunene provided a permanent source of water, and the surrounding bush alternative forms of pasture. As among the Lozi, fishing was a very important subsidiary source of food, and it was supplemented by hunting and gathering^[4].

The basic unit of production was the family, and homesteads were isolated in the middle of family fields. Fields were cultivated for four to eight years, and settlements were even more permanent, remaining in one location for up to forty years. Polygamy was widely practised and young men remained unmarried until fairly late. A typical household would thus have consisted of the family head, his wives and children, and his married or unmarried adult sons. Division of labour within the family was according to sex, the women being responsible for hoe agriculture and the men for the care of livestock. Specialisation of labour within the society as a whole was limited to two crafts, iron-smithery and medicine. All other activities, such as pottery or trading, were carried out in the spare time allowed by the prior demands of the agricultural cycle.

The efficient exploitation of varied local resources made possible the production of a certain surplus over and above subsistence needs, and by the mid-nineteenth century had allowed the development of two phenomena that will be of particular concern to us - vigorous local trade and strong centralised kingdoms. Taking kingship first, it is difficult to assess how far state and class formation had proceeded. European explorers at the time, and ethnographers since, have painted a stark picture of absolute tyranny, but this is suspect because it is so often used to justify European conquest and acculturation, and it is contradicted by some accounts^[5]. The first thing to note is that there was no single political authority over the whole area, although there is a possibility that in the eighteenth century the Nkhumbi kings of Humbe may have exercised some form of hegemony in the population cluster^[6]. In the mid-nineteenth century the Kwanyama kings of north-eastern Ovamboland were the most powerful, and the Kwanyama are still the most populous by far of the peoples of the area, but every kingdom was completely independent. In addition the tendency seems to have been towards increased fragmentation, as kingdoms on several occasions split in two as the result of a contested succession, although most of these splits did not prove permanent^[7].

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4. This and the following paragraph are written in an 'ethnographic past tense', which excludes modern activities and gives a picture of what conditions were probably like in the mid-nineteenth century. For the Lozi see L. van Horn, "The agricultural history of Barotseland, 1840-1964", in M. Gluckman, *Economy of the Central Barotse Plain* (Manchester, 1968). The best work on the Ovambo and Nkhumbi from this angle is Urquhart, *Patterns of settlement*.
 5. A. Nogueira, *A Raça Negra* (Lisbon, 1880), 253-311; H. Hahn, "Neueste deutsche Forschungen in Südafrika", *Petermann's Mitteilungen*, 12, 1867, 290. Nogueira's testimony is particularly valuable as he was a mulatto trader who lived for many years in the 1850s among the Nkhumbi and spoke their language fluently.
 6. Loeb, *In feudal Africa*, 49-50.
 7. For the splitting and reunification of Ondonga, see F.R. Lehmann, "Die politische und soziale Stellung der Häuptlinge im Ovamboland...", *Tribus*, 4-5, 1954-5, 269-79.

The powers of kingship

Within each kingdom the powers of the kings were great by the standards of South-Western Africa, and were often commented on by travellers. But society was still essentially structured on a kinship basis, with dispersed matrilineal clans. The royal clan does not appear to have been structurally different in any respect from the other clans, and was in many ways on *prima inter pares*. Indeed a cluster of very small Ovambo and Nkhumbi states living close to the westward bend of the Kunene had not developed the institution of kingship at all, and their Mbalantu neighbours were reputed to have had a king once but to have dispensed with him^[8]. Royal power was based in part on classic co-ordinating and arbitrating functions. The king exacted regular military service for raiding, although he was personally forbidden to leave home territory and thus could not act as war-leader. Supreme administrative and judicial power was exercised by him, but under the supervision of a powerful council of commoners. District headmen were appointed and revocable at will by the king, but in fact exercised considerable local power. Headmen of the royal clan were particularly independent and often much resented by the people of their districts, and they provided a constant focus for intrigue and even separatist tendencies.

The powers that were vested specifically in the king's person were intimately linked to ecological conditions. In ideological terms this was expressed in the belief that the king's greatest power was the magical one of making the rains fall, and it is significant that almost all reported cases of dethroning were justified by the inability of the monarch to perform this vital function^[9]. In practical terms it was the king who organised *corvée* labour to dig the large reservoirs to store the floodwaters,^[10] and it was he who had to take the difficult decision of when to start planting, judging whether the rainy season had started in earnest. It was the king who strictly preserved the fruit trees and checked excessive deforestation. In an area where climatic conditions were so precarious, these activities were essential for the survival of the whole community and legitimated a certain degree of centralisation. Another source of royal power was control of land, all of which was ultimately the 'property' of the king, although strict rights of usufruct and the extended permanence of settlements limited this in practice. Land was still in some sense an open resource, in that large swathes of uncultivated land separated the kingdoms from one another and have only recently been entirely brought under cultivation, but the dependence on floodwaters made for competition for privileged locations close to the major channels, and thus contributed to royal power.

The formal political powers of the king do not, however, in themselves give any precise indication on the extent of state and class formation. The crucial element is rather the extent of surplus appropriation, which in the mid-nineteenth century seems to have been little developed. Tribute was in kind and irregular. The king received half the cattle and captives taken on raiding expeditions, but these were still small-scale affairs, limited to the population cluster. *Corvée* labour was only demanded for limited work in the king's field and for moving the royal homestead, apart from the reservoir digging mentioned above. The king exercised a right of ritual seizure of young girls to be his wives, which made his homestead the largest and the most agriculturally productive in the land, and helped to spread his network of clientship. All this did not add up to very much, and the circulation of goods and services which centred on the royal court was still largely in the form of reciprocal gifts.

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8. For the Mbalantu see Hahn, Vedder, and Fourie, *The native tribes*, 8-9; P. Serton (ed.), *The narrative and journal of Gerald McKiernan in South-West Africa* (Cape Town, 1954), 107; C. Duparquet, "Voyage en Cimbébasie", *Missions Catholiques*, 1880, 429, 1881, 514.
 9. For the dethroning of the king of Humbe in 1891, see J.P.I. do Nascimento, *Da Huila as terras do Humbe* (Huila, 1891), Prologue; not all kings were credited with the same power to make the rain fall.
 10. AGCSSp 465-III, Duparquet, Notes sur les différentes tribus des rives du Cunène and 478-B-II, Duparquet, 25 July 1883; Urquhart, *Patterns of settlement*, 40; J.V. de Castro, *A Campanha do Cuamato em 1907* (Luanda, 1908), 185-6. This important point only rarely gets the attention it deserves in view of the intimate relations between this kind of activity and the rise of despotic state systems in Asia.

Nor can one speak of any form of 'feudal aristocracy' in the mid-nineteenth century. There was no private property of land, and the king had very few permanent dependants living at his court. The formation of bodies of armed men living permanently at the royal court clearly seems to have been an innovation of the late nineteenth century^[11]. It was almost impossible for any restricted kin group to build up and transmit to other generations a substantial amount of movable property, particularly cattle, for inheritance of such property was matrilineal and extended to the whole kin group, whereas residence was patrilocal. Thus at the death of a particularly wealthy family head, his herds of cattle would be redistributed throughout the land to all his distant matrilineal relatives. There was therefore in operation a powerful mechanism of social redistribution, which precluded the emergence of a permanently wealthy group, although it should be noted that certain clans were reputed to be more wealthy than others. Nor did this system stop the temporary accumulation of large herds in one man's hands, and particularly in the hands of older men.

Local and external trade

So far only directly productive activities have been considered, but surplus generated in the process of exchange must also be taken into account. Ovambo and Nkhumbi kings managed to exert a remarkably thorough control of the whole trading process, and a system of compulsory 'gifts' meant that in effect the surplus generated in trade tended to accumulate in royal hands. The limitation of possible trade routes in a semi-desert environment was probably an important factor facilitating this royal control, particularly with regard to long-distance trade. As this phenomenon was to be of the utmost importance in the period of contact with European imperialism, it is worth trying to sketch out the patterns of pre-colonial trade, as they emerge from the nineteenth-century sources and the ethnographic material.^[12]

Local trade was varied, but rested on three staple commodities, iron and copper artifacts, and salt. Iron ore came from the area of the present Kassinga mines of southern Angola, and was worked chiefly by the northern Ovambo. At some point before the mid-nineteenth century the Kwanyama kings managed to impose a monopoly over the sources of ore. Copper ore came from the area of the modern Otavi-Tsumeb mining complex in northern Namibia, and seems always to have been a monopoly of the Ndonga, the second largest Ovambo group who lived in the south-eastern part of the country. Salt was to be found in many places, but the principal sources were to the north of Etosha Pan, and the southern Ovambo were its main purveyors. One of these southern Ovambo peoples, the Ngandjera, made a speciality of trading, both at the regional and long-distance level, but their predominant position was broken in the 1860s.

Long-distance trade was in slaves and ivory to the north, sold directly or indirectly to the Portuguese traders of Benguela, and in metal artifacts to the east and south, sold to the peoples of the Okavango and Herero. The Ovambo and Nkhumbi organised their own caravans, but were also visited by their neighbours, particularly the Ovimbundu or 'Mambari' and the Damara. However long-distance trade was of subordinate importance in the mid-nineteenth century, particularly as the Nkhumbi kings completely forbade the entry of Portuguese traders into their lands. It must also be repeated that there were no full-time traders as such among the Ovambo and Nkhumbi, although it would seem that itinerant smiths along the Okavango and in Hereroland

11. Hahn, "Neueste deutsche Forschungen", 292-3; AGCSSp 478-B-III, Duparquet, 26 March 1885.

12. For nineteenth-century trading patterns before and during the ivory boom, see notes 2,3,5 and 8, and the following: B. Brochado, "Descrição das terras do Humbe, Camba, Mulondo, Quanhama e outras...", *Annaes do Conselho Ultramarino*, Parte nao-oficial, *Serie 1*, 1855, 187-97, 203-8; J.L. da Silva and Al Franco, "Annaes do Municipio de Mossamedes", *Annaes do Conselho Ultramarino*, 1858, 483-90; J.L. de Lima, *Ensaio sobre a estatística das possessões Portuguezas*, Vol. 3 (Lisbon, 1846), Part 2 and map; L. Magyar, *Reisen in Süd-Afrika in den Jahren 1849 bis 1857* (Pest and Leipzig, 1859), 298-9; C. Duparquet, *Viagens na Cimbébasia* (Luanda, 1953); J. Chapman, *Travels in the interior of South Africa* (London, 1868), I; C. Andersson, *The Okavango River* (London, 1861); C. Andersson, *Notes of travel in South Africa* (London, 1875); *Report of Mr. Palgrave* (Pretoria, 1969 edn, 1st edn 1877), 46-50; *Petermann's Mitteilungen*, 1859, 295-303, 1867, 8-12, 281-311.

may have formed the nucleus of such a group^[13]. There was no organised system of markets, and exchange was by barter, although tendencies to use certain commodities as currency were apparent. Surplus from exchange was to a large extent appropriated by the kings, and the system of widely dispersed matrilineal inheritance acted as an effective barrier to long-term private accumulation of capital.

European traders were from the first subjected to the same rigorous controls, and had to pay heavy 'gifts' to enter or leave the country, to trade, or to hunt. Royal officials watched over every move made by the traders, and reported regularly to the king. Bernardino Brochado, who managed to enter Nkhumbi territory in 1844, could only do so at the price of wearing a skirt, and the ban on trousers was periodically enforced by some Nkhumbi and Ovambo kings as late as the 1870s. In later years European missionaries, officials, and labour recruiters were constantly to come up against the same pervasive royal control of their activities. This meant that the new wealth and learning brought by the whites were first and foremost appropriated by the kings, and were used to distort the old social equilibrium in their favour.

Three phases in this process stand out clearly. From the mid-1840s to the mid-1880s trade relations were dominated by the growing European demand for ivory, but there were few formal attempts by the Europeans at colonisation in the whole South-West African region. From the mid-1880s to about 1900 cattle replaced ivory as the principal export commodity, while the Portuguese and the Germans imposed their control over the highland areas to the north and south. The final phase, which ended with the complete colonial conquest of the whole area in 1917, witnessed the decline of the cattle trade and the development of the migrant labour system. We shall attempt to show that the initial increase in the productive capacity of Ovamboland proved to be highly illusory, and led only to a slow decline into a rural backwater providing cheap unskilled labour for the colonial heartlands.

1844-1885: ivory trading

Portuguese traders from Mossamedes and 'Cape' traders from Walvis Bay both began to reach the Ovambo-Nkhumbi population cluster around the middle of the nineteenth century. The Portuguese traders arrived earlier and were more numerous until the 1860s, at which point the 'Cape' traders, more highly capitalised and equipped with horses and ox-wagons, began to supplant them. In both cases it was the search for ivory, already depleted in the areas closer to the home ports, which drove the traders even farther into the interior. Slaves in the north, ostrich feathers in the south, and cattle throughout the area supplemented the trade in ivory, but were no more than subsidiary items. The white traders brought beads and other forms of ornaments as well as clothes, alcohol, and horses, but one item stands out as being of critical importance - firearms. When the Europeans first reached the area the Ovambo and Nkhumbi possessed no firearms, and for a brief period in the late 1850s and early 1860s they suffered severely as a result. Between 1859 and 1863 the Portuguese made a short-lived attempt at the conquest of the interior, and although the Nkhumbi and Kwanyama had by then acquired a few firearms, they were deeply impressed by the effects of Portuguese weapons^[14]. In the south the introduction to firearms was even more dramatic, for the Ndonga were completely unable to resist the onslaught of the Nama overlord, Jonker Afrikaner, who ravaged the southern peoples with peculiar ferocity in 1860.

13. Serton, *Narrative*, 74; Lebzelter, *Eingeborenenkulturen*, 203-4. Archaeological evidence of iron-smelting along the Okavango is discussed in B.H. Sandelowsky, "Prehistoric metal-working in South West Africa", *Journal of the South African Institute of Mining and Metallurgy*, 74, 1974, 363-6. See also B.H. Sandelowsky, "The iron age in South West Africa and Damara pot making", *African Studies*, 30, 1971, 3-14.

14. N. da Matta, "Relater" *Boletim Oficial de Angola*, 28 July 1860, 3-8, and supplement to 17 June 1867, 267-89.

The Nkhumbi and Ovambo thus learnt the bitter lesson that firearms had become a new necessity for a people who wished to preserve their independence. And since local technology was generally incapable of producing firearms, external trade became essential for survival^[15]. The long-term success of this strategy was crucially dependent on the terms of trade, and here the Ovambo and Nkhumbi possessed a certain number of advantages. The traders came up against strong trading partners in the kings, who exercised close control over the whole trading process, and who from 1870 began to have missionary advisers to inform them of the values of commodities on the world markets. The substantial 'gifts' levied by the kings acted as a form of customs duty. At the same time the rivalry between the Portuguese and 'Cape' traders was skilfully exploited. The kings of the Kwanyama were particularly well placed for this, for the fluctuating trade frontier between the hinterlands of Mossamedes and Walvis Bay usually passed through their territory.

The white traders undoubtedly made considerable profits from their trade in the area, but it is not possible to assess the rate of unequal exchange simply on the basis of exchange values in world markets. It is also essential to see the impact of the trade on the productive base of the African economy. In a sense this impact was very positive, for firearms were not simple objects of consumption, but rather productive investments, in that they markedly increased the efficiency of hunting and raiding. At the same time ivory had not been exploited traditionally, and was therefore a new source. But this increase in productivity could only be temporary, for the prevailing ecological equilibrium was rapidly upset and elephants were all but shot out in the space of three decades. And the period of prosperity had brought the Africans no further towards being able to produce their own firearms, while leaving them dependent on importing new and increasingly expensive rifles and ammunition.

1885-1900: cattle raiding

However there remained one way in which to 'invest' the accumulated stocks of firearms, the intensification between about 1885 and 1900 in the scope and scale of traditional raiding activities^[16]. The southern slopes of the Bié highlands of Angola became the scene of annual raids, in which the horses and firearms acquired during the ivory boom gave the Ovambo and Nkhumbi a decided advantage over the fragmented and ill-armed Ngangela and southern Ovimbundu. The raiders seized mainly cattle and people, the former to sell to the European traders and the latter to ransom, sell to the Portuguese, or incorporate into their own lineages. The slaves who remained within Ovambo and Nkhumbi society were used to increase agricultural production, and the Nkhumbi today say that their fields were much larger when they had slaves^[17]. There was little resistance to the raiders from the Portuguese, who were crippled by a severe financial crisis during the 1890s. A slightly earlier attempt to conquer the Nkhumbi between 1886 and 1891 ended in a partial and very insecure victory for the Portuguese, but the garrison in Humbe was practically impotent. Not until 1905 did the Portuguese complete the conquest of the entire Nkhumbi area, and push their frontier definitively to the Kunene.

The Ovambo and Nkhumbi were also able to find ready markets for the fruits of their raiding. Slaves were sold to Portuguese and Ovimbundu traders from Kakonda, in spite of occasional attempts by the Portuguese authorities to stamp out this illegal traffic. The slave market was

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15. H. Vedder, *South West Africa in early times* (London, 1938), 269-71, is always quoted on this, but he is confusing and contradictory. Preferable sources are Andersson, *Okavango River*, 105, 139-40, 231-3, 239-40; Andersson, *Notes of travel*, 216-17. There is however evidence of the smiths of king Mandume having manufactured a breech-lock for an imported canon (Hahn, Vedder and Fourie, *The native tribes*, 35-6).
 16. For raiding from the Ovambo point of view, see Estermann, *Etnografia*, Vol. 1, 141-6. For Portuguese action, see R. Pélissier, "Campagnes militaires au Sud-Angola, 1885-1915", *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 9, 1969, 65-82. Vast amounts of detailed information on the raids are contained in AHU, AHA, and AGCSSp.
 17. Urquhart, *Patterns of settlement*, 88.

particularly buoyant, for the Ovimbundu needed plantation slaves to work their farms whilst they mounted long-distance rubber caravans, and also ran a lucrative trade with the Portuguese on the coast, who 'redeemed' the slaves and packed them off as indentured labourers to the cocoa islands of São Tomé and Príncipe. In return the Kakonda traders brought the Ovambo and Nkhumbi alcohol and smuggled firearms^[18].

But the major commodity in the trade of the Ovambo - Nkhumbi area was now cattle. Most of these were still exported through Mossamedes, but restrictions on arms sales after 1887 made this market less attractive. An important trade developed with the areas to the south-east of the Kalahari, to which over 4,000 head of cattle were exported from Ukwanyama alone between 1885 and 1895, according to Portuguese estimates^[19]. The demand on this market may be explained by the boom along the 'missionary road' of Botswana before and during the construction of the railway to the north^[20]. The route from Botswana to southern Angola had been pioneered by the 'Thirstland Trekkers' from the Transvaal in 1875-81, and had remained a minor trade route ever since^[21]. The advantage of this market also lay in the fact that the Transvaal constituted a major loop-hole in British measures to prevent arms sales to Africans^[22]. Indeed there is evidence to suggest that the terms of trade were becoming generally more favourable to the Ovambo; in 1891 a modern rifle was said to cost twelve head of cattle in Ukwanyama, whereas in 1895 the price was quoted as seven head of cattle^[23].

However pressure on the cattle resources of the Ovambo and Nkhumbi was growing in spite of raiding, resulting in some social tension. As early as the 1870s the king of Ukwambi, a southern Ovambo people, had considerably reduced the cattle population of his kingdom by ruthless taxation and extravagant spending on luxury goods (from fiddles to wagons), although his successor had restored the situation^[24]. In the 1890s similar pressure on the cattle population of Ukwanyama began to appear, and the king made up for the shortfall in cattle by seizing that of his subjects. The traditional seizure of cattle for the king's court (*okasava*) slowly developed into a regular form of taxation. Some Kwanyama began to emigrate permanently or to seek temporary employment with the Portuguese and the Germans, although this process remained fairly limited during the 1890s^[25].

Natural disasters and increasing Portuguese intervention brought the period of prosperous cattle-trading to an end at the turn of the century. Rinderpest broke out in Botswana in 1896, and the economic boom on the 'missionary road' collapsed^[26]. The disease reached Ovamboland from the Okavango in 1897, and in the space of a few devastating months destroyed over 90 per cent of cattle herds. This disaster was followed by a long series of drought years, interspersed with

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18. AHU-IR-15P, Governor General, 15 January 1895 and others; *Le Philafricain* [Swiss Mission Journal], *Série 1*, Rapport 4,9.
 19. AHU-Companhia de Mossamedes-9 Chefe Humbe, 5 January 1896.
 20. N. Parsons, "The economic history of Khama's country in Botswana, 1844-1930", in R. Palmer and N. Parsons, *The roots of rural poverty in central and southern Africa*, (London, 1977).
 21. D. Postma, *Einige schetsen voor eene geschiedenis van de trekboeren* (Amsterdam and Pretoria, 1897); F. Seiner, *Ergebnisse einer Bereisung des Gebiets zwischen Okavango and Sambesi* (Berlin, 1909), 106 and maps.
 22. S. Miers, "Notes on the arms trade and government policy in Southern Africa between 1870 and 1890", *Journal of African History*, 12, 1971, 577.
 23. AHU-2R-15P, Relatorio Ramalho, 20 June 1891; AHU-Companhia de Mossamedes-9 Chefe Humbe, 5 January 1896. Unfortunately it is not clear whether these two figures are strictly comparable.
 24. Serton, *Narrative*, 103-4.
 25. For migrant labour, see Loeb, *In feudal Africa*, 29-32; Estermann, *Etnografia*, Vol. I, 146. For emigration as a result of 'vexations' practised by the king and his followers, see AHU-Companhia de Mossamedes-9 Chefe Humbe, 5 January 1896.
 26. Parsons, "Economic history"; C. van Onselen, "Reactions to rinderpest in southern Africa, 1896-97", *Journal of African History*, 13, 1972, 473-88.

floods and plagues of locusts, which culminated in the terrible famines of 1911 and 1915^[27]. The Ovambo and Nkhumbi attempted to recoup their losses by intensifying raiding, but they found other areas as badly hit as they were. And under the pressure of raids and natural disasters the Ngangela and southern Ovimbundu drifted even farther north, or sought refuge in mission stations and in mountain hide-outs^[28].

Raiding also became increasingly hazardous after the turn of century because of more effective Portuguese resistance. The Portuguese financial crisis was at last resolved in 1902, and measures were taken to strengthen garrisons and equip them better. At the same time it was decided to conquer the whole of the Ovambo-Nkhumbi population cluster within the Portuguese sphere of influence, partly in order to put an end to raiding once and for all. A first expedition in 1904 was crushingly defeated by the Mbadya, the Ovambo people living closest to the Kunene, but between 1905 and 1907 this defeat was avenged and a chain of forts was set up in Mbadya territory. In 1908 and 1910 three other small Ovambo kingdoms were occupied without bloodshed by the Portuguese, and a chain of forts was set up along the Okavango river^[29]. The Kwanyama remained independent, but they were surrounded to the north and raiding became more difficult. Both the Portuguese and the Germans imposed strict regulations on trade, going so far as to ban it altogether in order to deprive the Ovambo of arms. Although raiding continued, and although the traders still managed to smuggle in arms from both sides of the frontier, there can be no doubt that the terms of trade were now heavily loaded against the Ovambo^[30].

1900-1914: pauperisation and labour migration

In this critical situation the Ovambo and Nkhumbi kings fell into ever-increasing debt with the traders, and the only solution left open to them was to intensify pressure on local cattle resources, which made it impossible for Ovambo and Nkhumbi society ever to recover fully from rinderpest. However this pressure was not evenly distributed in social terms. The kings did not pay the traders from their own herds, but turned to internal taxation in order to maintain both the European standard of living to which they had become accustomed and sufficient patronage to retain the loyalty of their followers. The increase in raiding had led to the formation at court of a permanent group of war-leaders, the *elenga*, each of whom received a horse and a number of rifles from the king and led a body of about a hundred men on raiding expeditions. The *elenga* now became tax collectors, and the traditional seizure of cattle for the king's court, *okasava*, became a harsh and arbitrary tax, which fell mainly on the most vulnerable members of society^[31]. The polarisation of the traditional stable social order had begun, and incipient classes were entering into increasingly unequal and antagonistic relationships. In the long term the rules of dispersed matrilineal inheritance could have evened out this tendency, but the pace of social change was now outrunning the traditional capacity for surplus redistribution.

The ravages of consecutive years of natural disasters and the growing weight of internal taxation combined to produce, at the opposite end of the spectrum from the *elenga*, a new social stratum: men without cattle. To be sure, the agricultural production of their wives was scarcely influenced by taxation, or by the pressures of external trade. Millet was of little interest to the *elenga* or traders, and the Ovambo continued to make their own hoes until the 1920s, thus insulating the

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27. For the rinderpest, see G.S. Dias (ed.) *Artur de Paiva*, Vol. 2 (Lisbon, 1938), 97-105. For the drought, see W.G. Clarence-Smith, "Drought in southern Angola and northern Namibia 1837-1945", SOAS/ICS African History Seminar, 1974.
28. AGCSSp 476-B-II, Lecomte, 1 September 1899, AHU-IR-21P, Projecto de reorganisação, 9 December 1901; *Le Philafricain*, Série 1, Rapport 11,7.
29. Pélissier, "Campagnes militaires", 78-96.
30. Nitsche, *Ovamboland*, 147; C.M. Braz, *Districto da Huila* (Coimbra, 1918), 14.
31. Loeb, *In feudal Africa*, 29-32; Estermann, *Etnografia*, Vol. 1, 141-2; *Bulletin Général de la Congrégation du Saint-Esprit*, 1908, 455-6.

agricultural cycle of production from external pressures^[32]. But drought, flood, and locusts between 1900 and 1916 followed in almost uninterrupted sequence, reducing agricultural production severely, and both the Portuguese and the Germans sent in relief supplies of grain^[33]. And even when a family's agricultural production was substantial, it should be stressed that the loss of cattle constituted a severe social disaster, in view of the importance attached to the possession of cattle^[34]. A complex process of pauperisation was thus set in motion, which the compensatory mechanisms of traditional society were incapable entirely of relieving.

There were several possible courses of action left open to this new group of pauperised men: they could attach themselves as clients to the *elenga*, join the Christian settlements of the missionaries, set themselves up as bandits in outlying areas, or emigrate permanently to other regions. But the major response to pauperisation was the development of migrant labour. The survival of kinship structures and of crop cultivation within the family unit, the distances to the centres of employment, and the controls imposed by both traditional and colonial authorities on migrant labourers combined to restrict the form of proletarianisation to recurrent migrancy, rather than permanent settlement in mining and urban centres. There was little or no attempt within the colonial economies at stabilising the workforce, for recurrent migrancy provided the type of labour most required by the large-scale employers, that is, substantial quantities of cheap unskilled labour for mining and infrastructural works^[35].

The growth of pauperisation in the Ovambo - Nkhumbi population cluster coincided with a sudden expansion in the demand for labour in the colonial economies. In Angola this was due to the building of the Mossamedes and Benguela railways from 1904 and to a permanent shortage of labour in the plantations and fisheries of the coast, especially after the abolition of servile labour in 1911^[36]. Ovambo and Nkhumbi labour was especially important in railway building, for they generally refused to work in plantations and fisheries, but there are unfortunately no detailed statistics. It would appear that the numbers rarely exceeded 2,000 per annum in the period under consideration. It should also be noted that much of this labour was obtained through the imposition of hut tax after 1907 on Nkhumbi and Ovambo conquered by the Portuguese^[37].

The flow of labour to the south was on a larger scale, and can be fairly accurately charted^[38]. Before 1908 it was under 2,000 per annum, but between 1910 and 1914 it averaged 10,000 per annum. In the year 1910-1911 it was even estimated that over 5 per cent of the total Ndonga population was away working in Namibia, which may have meant as much as a third of the able-bodied adult males. Percentages for other kingdoms were however lower, and it should be remembered that this was a year of terrible famine in the area^[39]. This expansion of migrant labour to central and southern Namibia was due to the fact that the Germans were struggling with a permanent and growing labour crisis from the outbreak of the Herero Revolt in 1904. The war of extermination waged against the Herero and Nama drastically reduced the local supply of labour, while increasing the land area given over to white farmers, thus intensifying the agricultural demand for labour. The almost simultaneous opening up of the Tsumeb copper mine (1906) and the Lüderitz diamond fields (1908) created overnight an acute shortfall in the labour supply. An

32. Urquhart, *Patterns of settlement*, 126-7.

33. E. Stals, "Die aanraking tussen Blankes en Ovambo's in Suidwes-Afrika, 1850-1915", *Archives Yearbook for South African History*, 31, 1968, Part 2, 334; J. de Almeida, *Sul d'Angola* (Lisbon, 1912), 153.

34. Estermann, "Les Bantous", 53-6.

35. H. Bley, *South-West Africa under German rule, 1894-1914* (London, 1971), 198, 272-3. For a detailed treatment, see R.J.B. Moorsom, *Colonisation and proletarianisation: an exploratory investigation of the formation of the working class in Namibia under German and South African colonial rule to 1945*, (MA, University of Sussex, 1973).

36. Almeida, *Sul d'Angola*, 389-90; S. Katzenellenbogen, *Railways and the copper mines of Katanga* (Oxford, 1973), 54-7; J. de O.F. Diniz, *Negocios Indigenas, Relatorio do ano de 1913* (Luanda, 1914), 61, 81-3.

37. Almeida, *Sul d'Angola*, 389-90, 519; R. Hutchinson and G. Martelli, *Robert's people* (London, 1971), 180-2; *Le Philafricain, Série 2,2,32*; AHA Avulsos 41-83-7, Relater, 30 September 1912.

38. Detailed monthly statistics are given by Stals, "Die aanraking", 333. For earlier years, see Nitsche, *Ovamboland*, 130-9.

39. Nitsche, *Ovamboland*, 134. For the famine, see Lehmann, "Die politische", 289.

accelerated programme of railway and harbour construction and the generally buoyant state of the colonial economy rendered the crisis even more desperate.

The German response was to segment the sources of labour supply. The forced labour regime instituted in 1907 bound the Herero and Nama to the farms and towns. Employers in construction and mining were thus forced to seek their supplies of labour elsewhere. Since foreign contract workers, principally from South Africa, proved expensive both in wages and in transport costs, it was to Ovamboland that the Germans turned their attention^[40].

They did not follow the Portuguese example of conquest and taxation, although Governor Leutwein had contemplated this before the Herero Revolt, but preferred the methods of indirect pressure. The expense and dangers of conquest had been clearly demonstrated by the Portuguese campaigns of 1904-1907, and as the Ovambo were not raiding to the south there was no pressing need for military occupation. After the traumatic events of the Herero Revolt, the German *Reichstag* was firmly opposed to any further military action in the colony, particularly in the far north where there were neither minerals nor lands suited for white settlement. In addition, the Portuguese victory over the Mbadya in 1907 had impressed the other Ovambo kings, and had made them far more amenable to German pressure. The spread of mission stations provided the Germans with excellent intermediaries. By 1909 the German and Finnish Lutherans had stations amongst all the Ovambo states in German territory which had kings. With the help of the missionaries, protection treaties were signed with all these kings in 1908, and constant contact was maintained with them to persuade them to send as much labour as possible to the south^[41]. In this the Germans were favoured by the dual process of natural disasters and pauperisation that we have outlined above.

Migrant labour and the loss of independence

The origins of the migrant labour syndrome may thus fundamentally be related to the process of pauperisation in the Ovambo - Nkhumbi homelands, combined with a severe labour shortfall in the colonial economies. However two other less specific factors should also be considered. The most difficult factor to handle concerns cultural adaptability to migrant labour. Colonial officials had an obvious interest in stressing this point, and its exact value remains in doubt. One can tentatively say that labour migration reveals many structural similarities with raiding and long-distance trading. In all three cases the men had to cross long distances through inhospitable country in order to bring back specific material prizes. As raiding and trading were increasingly curtailed by the expansion of the colonial system, it would appear that there occurred a form of culture transfer in favour of migrant labour^[42]. It should however be pointed out that whereas raiding exalted a feeling of self-confidence and pride in one's own society, migrant labour seems in the long term to have had an exactly contrary effect.

The other factor to take into account is that during the period under consideration the permanent shortage of labour in Angola and Namibia offered some relative advantages to Ovambo and Nkhumbi labour. Although the German authorities attempted to apportion labour on their own terms, the migrant labourers could in effect exercise a certain amount of choice. Groups of Ovambo refused to be broken up, and rejected offers of work on farms, where conditions were worst. The copper mine at Tsumeb tended to be used as a staging post on the way to the

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40. Moorsom, *Colonisation*; Nitsche, *Ovamboland*, 130-9; Bley, *South-West Africa*, 170-3, 180-1, 198, 259-60, 272-3.
 41. T. Leutwein, *Elf Jahre Gouverneur in Deutsch-Südwestafrika* (Berlin, 1908), 174-7, 191-2; Lehmann, "Die politische", 270-95; H. Driessler, *Die Rheinische Mission in Südwestafrika* (Gütersloh, 1932), 249; Tönjes, *Ovamboland*, 250; N. Mossolow, *Die Verhaal van Namutoni* (Windhoek, 1971), 45-7.
 42. Estermann, *Etnografia*, Vol. I, 1946-7; C. Estermann, *A vida economica dos Bantos do Sudoeste de Angola* (Luanda, 1971), 36.

diamond fields, where conditions were bad, but wages were higher^[43]. And the Ovambo and Nkhumbi retained the possibility of playing off the Portuguese against the Germans in order to secure better terms. The Kwanyama were visited by rival groups of Portuguese and German officials, who used all kinds of blandishments to entice labour into their economies. In general, the Kwanyama (and also a few Mbadya and Nkhumbi) preferred to go to central and southern Namibia. King Nande explained to the Portuguese envoys in 1909 that this was because they received better terms from the Germans^[44].

The Ovambo kings never seriously opposed the growth of the migrant labour system, but tried to make maximum profit out of it, while limiting its disruptive effects as far as possible. Workers were only allowed to leave for periods of six months, and at times when the annual cycle of subsistence activities required the least labour. Workers left in structured groups, under a leader, and remained together during the period of employment, thus maintaining cohesion and discipline on lines reminiscent of the raiding parties. 'Gifts' had to be made to the kings on return, a system reminiscent in form and intention to earlier taxation of long-distance traders and of raiding parties^[45].

Although the degree of royal control maintained over the process is a striking tribute to the resilience of African institutions, royal control was by no means absolute. German statistics show constant surpluses of departures over returns, partly due to the high death rates, but mostly to the setting up of Ovambo settlements in the towns of the 'Police Zone' formed in 1911^[46]. Similar settlements also sprang up in the highlands of Angola^[47]. Both within their home country and at their places of work the migrant labourers came increasingly under the influence of the missions, with all that this implied in the way of subversion of older institutions such as matrilineal kinship, polygamy, and kingship. This cultural mutation was most advanced among the Ndonga by 1915, for they were most profoundly affected by all aspects of European intrusion from the earliest date. It is significant that the last independent king of the Ndonga was the first Ovambo or Nkhumbi king to be converted to Christianity; and the colonial conquest of the whole area in 1915-17 was followed by a general increase in conversions^[48].

Early in 1915 a power vacuum was suddenly created for a brief period throughout the Ovambo - Nkhumbi population cluster. The Portuguese were defeated in a border skirmish with German forces, related to the outbreak of war in Europe, and retreated to the highlands. The Germans were unable to follow up this victory, for they had to retire to combat the invading South African forces. The last Kwanyama king, Mandume, made an attempt to impose his paramountcy over the whole area, and as Portuguese troops closed in on Ovamboland towards the end of the year he became the symbol of resistance. With Mandume's defeat at the hands of the Portuguese in

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43. Stals, "Die aanraking", 343; Nitsche, *Ovamboland*, 130-9; Driessler, *Die Rheinische Mission*, 260-1; Tönjes, *Ovamboland*, 88-9; C. Schlettwein, *Der Farmer in Deutsch Südwestafrika* (Wismar, 1907), 183.
44. AHA Avulsos, 31-9-4, Relatorios of Moraes, 27 February 1909, and Lobo, 1 March 1909; Nitsche, *Ovamboland*, 130-9.
45. Estermann, *Etnografia*, Vol. I, 146; Nitsche, *Ovamboland*, 130-9; Driessler, *Die Rheinische Mission*, 260-1; Tönjes, *Ovamboland*, 88-9; C. Schlettwein, *Farmer*, 183.
46. Stals, "Die aanraking", 333, 338-9; O. Köhler, *District of Karibib*, Union of South Africa, Department of Native Affairs, Ethnological Publications No. 40, (Pretoria, 1958), 83.
47. *Bulletin Général de la Congrégation du Saint-Esprit*, 1913, 255-6; AGCSSp 477-A-X, Rapport Steinmetz, 1917.
48. Driessler, *Die Rheinische Mission*, 260-3; Loeb, *In feudal Africa*, 33-8. The contrast in attitude between the kings of the two largest Ovambo peoples is striking. Mandume of the Kwanyama did his best to oppose these tendencies, whereas Martin of the Ndonga encouraged them. See Lehmann, "Die politische", 277-9, 290; L. Keiling, *Quarenta Anos de Africa* (Braga, 1934), 173-4.

1915 and his death at the hands of South African troops in 1917, the era of complete colonial domination had begun^[49].

Underdevelopment and class formation

Colonial strategy in the Ovambo - Nkhumbi area was essentially restricted to the maintenance of an effectively functioning pool of migrant labour, particularly in the sector controlled by South Africa. The general implications of this policy were that levels of production for the mass of the population should be kept below consumption needs, but sufficiently high to bear the costs of reproducing and servicing the migrant labour force^[50]. The incipient class differentiation noted above was more or less frozen, the *elenga* becoming a largely hereditary collaborating group, and becoming the direct representatives of colonial administrations in those kingdoms, such as that of the Kwanyama, where the kingship was abolished. The rest of the population sank to a generalised level of pauperisation, although upward social mobility was by no means impossible. The pressures of an ever-expanding population on extremely limited resources have been particularly important in this process, and by the mid-twentieth century land shortage and deforestation had become acute problems^[51]. The intensification of migrant labour was the only solution to these pressures. The stagnation of the economy of southern Angola up to the late 1960s meant that the mines of Namibia became the chief centres of employment for the whole population cluster, and indeed labour migration to Namibia or the Rand spread slowly to cover a very wide area of southern Angola^[52].

The particular form of underdevelopment that affects Ovambo and Nkhumbi society has thus been integrated into the classic Southern African pattern of the creation and artificial maintenance of labour-exporting peasantries. This raises a difficult theoretical problem as to the precise class position of the migrant labourer. Recent discussion of the peasants of Africa has defined them as a social stratum 'whose ultimate security and subsistence lies in [its] having certain rights in land and in the labour of family members on the land, but [which is] involved, through rights and obligations, in a wider economic system which includes the participation of non-peasants'^[53]. Labour-exporting peasantries are then defined as a specific sub-type.

But there is a qualitative difference in terms of the objective relations of production between peasants, who own the product of their labour up to the moment of exchange, and wage-labourers, who sell their labour-time to the owners of the means of production. The family units of migrant labourers are systematically involved in both relations of production, which renders their class position genuinely indeterminate. Normally it would also be transitional, but in this case non-economic forces are used to endow it with an abnormal degree of permanence. The definition of the class position of a migrant labourer must therefore rest, in the last instance, in the distribution of his own and his family's labour time between peasant production and wage-labour, and in the tendency for one or other to become increasingly dominant. The 1971-72 Ovambo strike in

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49. Pélissier, "Campagnes militaires", 96-111; P. de Eça, *Campanha do sul de Angola em 1915* (Lisbon, 1921); S. Pritchard, *Report by the officer in charge of native affairs on his tour of Ovamboland* (Cape Town, 1915); E. Gorges and M. de Jager, *Report on the conduct of the Ovakuanyama chief Mandume and on the military operations conducted against him in Ovamboland* (Cape Town, 1917).
50. H. Wolpe, "Capitalism and Cheap Labour-Power in South Africa: From Segregation to Apartheid", *Economy and Society*, 1, 1972, 437, 439.
51. Moorsom, *Colonisation*; I. Goldblatt, *History of South West Africa* (Cape Town, 1971), 214-15, 227-8 [the date given for Mandume's death is incorrect]. For deforestation, see Lebzelter, *Eingeborenenkulturen*, 189; J. Wellington, *South West Africa and its human issues* (Oxford, 1967); deforestation gets progressively worse from north to south.
52. A. Valente, "Problemas da emigração de trabalhadores rurais...", *Trabalho*, 18, 1967, 133-40.
53. J.S. Saul and R. Woods, "African Peasantries", in T. Shanin (ed.), *Peasants and peasant societies* (Harmondsworth, 1971), 105.

Namibia is an indication that in this instance the process of proletarianisation has now reached an advanced stage^[54].

54. For details of the strike, see *The Observer*, 6 February 1972.

2. The Formation of the Contract Labour System in Namibia, 1900-1926

Richard Moorsom

Introduction

This paper is presented as a contribution towards the analysis of the political economy of Namibia. More particularly, it investigates the origins of an institutionalised structure of labour exploitation central to colonial power and profit, the contract labour system^[1]. It is exploratory in character. Not being based primarily on archival research, it attempts to synthesise a broad interpretation of one of the major historical processes in the colonisation of the region.

Its origins lie in the pioneering phase of modern Namibian historiography, during which the extraordinarily brutal system of labour coercion imposed by the German colonial regime was a principal focus of research^[2]. On the region now divided between northern Namibia and south-western Angola the more protracted process of economic incorporation and political colonisation and the origins of labour migration were the principal themes^[3]. More recently, the pace of research on the transitional period (c1870-1930) has intensified: the coordinated Finnish history project is yielding its first results; and theses are in preparation on mission ideology and early labour migration^[4]. For the first time the extensive mission, administrative and private archival resources are being professionally researched and the results will modify and deepen our understanding of a key period and region in the history of southwestern Africa, both largely neglected hitherto.

In Namibia, colonisation proper was telescoped into a 20-year period under German rule. Not until the 1890s was over half a century of "informal colonialism", whose chief agents were itinerant traders and missionaries, reinforced by German military intervention. Yet by the outbreak of the Great War most of the land in southern and central Namibia had been expropriated, some of it already settled with immigrant farmers; internal resistance had been crushed in genocidal war; and the Namib diamond deposits and Tsumeb copper, still among the territory's main mineral resources, had been put into full production by international mining capital.

None of the sectors of capital which developed during this period had more than a marginal interest in the human resources of the country except as labour-power, whose recruitment, distribution and control were from the start among the principal functions of the colonial administration. However, the terrible cost exacted by the initial phase of military conquest was

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1. The research for this essay, undertaken during 1975-76, was limited largely to the contemporary non-Portuguese literature and published documents and to selected file groups in the Central South African Archives, as well as the records of the Anglican Mission. Many of its conclusions are therefore tentative. It forms the second paper in a trilogy on the origins and evolution of the migrant labour system in Namibia. (W.G. Clarence-Smith and R.J.B. Moorsom, "Underdevelopment and class-formation in Ovamboland, 1844-1917", in R. Palmer and N. Parsons (eds.), *The roots of rural poverty in central and southern Africa*, (London: Heinemann, 1977), pp.96-112; also *J.A.H.*, 16(3), 1975, pp.365-81; R.J.B. Moorsom, "Underdevelopment, contract labour and worker consciousness in Namibia, 1915-72", *J.S.A.S.*, 4(1), 1977, pp.52-87). An edited version appeared in Univ. of York, Centre for Southern African Studies, *Collected Seminar Papers*, 5, 1978/79, pp.17-44.
 2. In particular: H. Bley, *SWA under German rule*, (London, Heinemann, 1971); H. Drechsler, *Südwestafrika unter deutscher Kolonialherrschaft*, (Berlin, Akademie-Verlag, 1966), translated as *Let us die fighting*, (London, Zed Press, 1980).
 3. Substantial work on the pre-colonial social formations of southwestern Angola and northern Namibia includes W.G. Clarence-Smith, *Slaves, peasants and capitalists in southern Angola, 1840-1926*, (Cambridge, CUP, 1979); L. Berger, *Der Einfluss der Grenzziehung auf die Ovambo*, (MA, Wiesbaden, Univ. Mainz, 1980); and C. Borkowsky, *Zu einigen Aspekten des Ovambobens*, (MA, Berlin, Freie Universität, 1975).
 4. Under the Finnish project, two licentiate theses on political resistance to colonisation and long-distance trade, are being extended to doctorates: M. Eirola, *Ondangan kuningaskunnan vastaus saksan siitomaavallen lähestymiseen, 1884-1910*, (Lic., Univ. Oulu, 1987) and H. Siiskonen, *Kunikaiden kauppa eurooppalaisten ehdoilla..., 1850-1898*, (Lic., Univ. Joensuu, 1987); and a third, on political anthropology, is in preparation (M. Salokoski at Helsinki). Three further theses are in progress, on mission ideology (T. Varis at Tampere), on migrant labour on the diamond fields to 1914 (R. Strassegger at Graz), and on the rural origins of labour migration to c 1930 (P. Hayes at Cambridge).

sufficient to deter the German colonisers from completing the physical separation of subsistence agriculturalists from their means of production. From 1904, the year of the great rebellion, the level of recruitment from the ranks of the dispossessed consistently failed to meet the aggregate labour demand of colonial capital and the state. It became the central motive of both German and South African colonial regimes, in conserving the remaining areas of subsistence production, to close this gap with migrant labour and to secure the latter's long-term reproduction.

On the class analysis of labour migration

I do not intend to enter here into the complex debate on the articulation of non-capitalist with capitalist modes of production. However, since my analysis is informed by both the problematic and the debate, it is necessary to touch on a few conceptual issues. Labour migration implies the articulation of two modes of production within a single social formation, the dominant mode in this case being capitalist. At an advanced stage, as in parts of the South African reserves, such articulation may entail the complete dissolution of non-capitalist relations of production. At its formation, the system may follow the extension of the political hegemony of a capitalist state over a previously politically autonomous non-capitalist formation.

But even at the outset, as will be seen in this study, the articulation may operate more strongly at the economic than at the political level. A proportion of the direct producers in the non-capitalist formation may be compelled, for temporary or permanent want of their subsistence by other means, to sell their labour power before separation from their means of production at the hands of capitalists or, more forcibly, the capitalist state.

The particular configuration of capitalist interest within the state - perhaps even independently of it - will have a strong bearing on the form and scale of recurrent labour migration which it attempts to institute. However, the system that finally emerges under capitalist control is forged in a complex process of struggle and collaboration with non-migrant workers, with the exploiters, the exploited and the marginalised in the non-capitalist social order, as well as with the migrant labourers themselves. For the non-capitalist society, into which the capitalist state intervenes politically to subordinate it to its production needs, is often not - as it was not here - in a pristine state of 'primitive communism', whether differentiation was generated by indigenous or external forces. Where antagonistic social relations are incipient or developed, the politics of alliance and conflict between classes from different modes of production within a common social formation is integral to the analysis. Under such circumstances, labour migrants face struggle on two fronts. This double dimension of class conflict, once placed in the centre ground of historical process, allows space to the underclasses as well as to the rulers as historical subjects.

The analytical framework is still incomplete, for there is a further and equally fundamental dimension of exploitation and conflict, the exploitation of women, or as some would define it, the sphere of patriarchy. This theme can receive only limited treatment here, a product both of the silences in many of the published and archival sources, of many of the already scanty written sources and of the formative state of much feminist theory, particularly as applied to social analysis in the southern African context.

It is nevertheless a central plank of the argument presented here, for one of the most striking features of the contract labour system that was constructed in Namibia was its attempts to exclude all rural women from the north from wage labour. This exclusion cannot be fully explained by deploying 'patriarchy' simply as a description of male privilege or the subordination of women, for, as with other social hierarchies, the social interest and the source of power of the advantaged and the oppressors remain untouched. Nor is it sufficient to define it in terms solely of other particular modes of production, in other words, a concept with only relative (and hence subordinate) autonomy. To do so is to reduce the different forms it takes to a set of arbitrary particularisms, related not by their common content but by their location in other varieties of class oppression.

The standpoint taken here is rather that patriarchy is amenable to materialist analysis as a species of exploitation in an absolute sense: it may be specified in the absence of other forms of class exploitation and, although this may be anathema to a strong current in the socialist feminist critique of capitalist society, it may equally be absent in their presence. As such it refers to an appropriation of surplus labour, both productive and non-productive, within or by means of the domestic or household economy. Why gender should become the criterion of class identity and men rather than women the exploiters requires, like racialism, particular historical explanation, for there are exceptions as well as an infinite variety of forms.

But that explanation, in turn, requires the prior concept of patriarchal exploitation. It also entails acceptance of the plurality of class exploitation and the complex, almost contradictory nature of the notion of objective class position. Historically, patriarchy has usually coexisted with and its classes have participated in other modes of production. Male household heads or female housewives may at the same time be landlords, capitalists or petty commodity producers, wage labourers or perhaps none of these. A similar plurality in the relations of production governing the productive labour of migrating workers is an essential concept in understanding the strategies of the struggle and survival under the migrant labour system.

This interpretation has an important bearing on the analysis of labour migration in the Namibian context. First, it directs attention to social relations between men and women in non-capitalist as well as capitalist society, especially where other forms of class exploitation are non-existent or incipient. The demand for male rather than female labourers may not be solely the product of the ideological expectations of the executives of the intruding capitalist class. Second, it brings household labour, servicing as well as productive, into the foreground of the analysis of the relations of production and the restructuring of the labour process, urban as well as rural. Thirdly, it brings women into the foreground in analysing the complex class conflict which created the contract labour system not merely as a residual peasantry, or the passive and shadowy appendages of a stratum of the new Namibian working class, but as a specific class with its own interests, consciousness and sphere of struggle.

Capital formation and labour demand

The Ovambo-Nkhumbi population zone forms an island of dense settlement near the northern edge of the vast Kalahari basin. Largely waterless during the dry winter, in the mid 19th century the Kalahari sandveld was occupied, except along the few perennial rivers, by dispersed bands of nomadic hunter-gatherers and cattle-pastoralists. During the 1840s and 1850s itinerant traders rapidly established a network of routes and exchange relations throughout the interior. Ovamboland became the interface between three such routes, based on Walvis Bay, Mossamedes, and Lake Ngami and the "missionary road" through Botswana.

The agrarian societies of the interior were thus articulated by means of commercial ties to the metropolises of world capitalism in an epoch of industrialisation. Yet for over half a century thereafter, attempts to start up local production in capitalist enterprises were spasmodic, small scale and mostly short lived. Such attempts included intermittent copper mining in central Namibia; guano (bird-dung) recovery and sealing along the southern Namib coast; fishing and oasis plantation agriculture in the northern Namib (southern Angola); settler farming around the southern Angolan escarpment; and caravan and later ox-wagon transport. Nowhere before the late 1890s was potential labour demand substantial or regular. Nor, when it did exist, were either the relations of production those of wage labour - slavery predominated in coastal Angola and

quasi-feudal bonds in settler agriculture^[5] - or the preferred sources of supply wholly or partially internal to local social formations. Thus at the same time that the penetration of commodity exchange was catalysing incipient class antagonisms within the Ovambo social formation which, as will be shown, was generating a stratum of marginalised men, the local demand for wage labourers remained insignificant.

From the late 1880s European and South African based corporate capital dominated local investment, if at first only negatively. Before the national uprising of 1904, its primary interest was to speculate and to exclude competitors by securing exclusive concessions to land and mineral rights. Only where major mineral reserves were proven - copper at Tsumeb (1906) and diamonds in the southern Namib (1908) - did corporate capital move decisively into local extractive production.

German colonisation policy, however, for political reasons outside the scope of this analysis, was not exclusively or at times even predominantly tied to the interests of German "Grosskapital". From the mid-1890s, the point at which the German imperial state assumed decisive control of the colonisation process, a principal objective was the establishment by state- and privately-sponsored schemes of capitalist settler agriculture on expropriated tribal lands in central and southern Namibia. Colonisation itself necessitated fluctuating but often large scale expenditure both on infrastructural projects, notably railways, and on administration and the forces of repression. After the South African military conquest in 1915, military and infrastructural expenditure was substantially reduced. On the other hand the pace of land settlement was stepped up, with greater tolerance of peasant as opposed to capitalist farming by the incoming settlers.

The formation of the colonial economy thus falls into two broad stages. Between 1894 and 1904 - the years of piecemeal conquest - agricultural settlement was sparse, unstable and barely capitalist. An inflated bureaucracy and military establishment sustained large- and small-scale transport and construction contractors and a mainly urban petty-bourgeoisie. After the uprising, a minority of capitalist farmers were augmented by increasing numbers of marginally subsistent peasant settlers; capital expenditure by the state continued at a high level for over a decade more; and the territory's two large mines began full production.

The level of wage employment in the colonial economy is hard to gauge from the few available published sources, though it is likely that it continued to fluctuate markedly after the national uprising (1904-07). More significant for colonial recruitment policy was the gap between the aggregate demand for local labour and the potentially available supply from that part of the indigenous population subject to the coercive authority of the colonial state locally - broadly speaking those living in the aptly-named 'Police Zone'. Prior to the uprising, the demand was largely fulfilled except for brief periods on large-scale production projects. The methods of recruitment ranged from free wage labour to the forced labour of prisoners of war. During the war absolute demand expanded rapidly, and for a decade thereafter remained at a high though fluctuating level. The national uprising marked the total collapse of the gradualist policy of piecemeal expropriation and accelerated underdevelopment that had been officially in force since 1894^[6]. The disaster was compounded by the military intervention of the imperial power, whose deliberate strategy of genocide decimated an estimated 60 per cent of the black population in the Police Zone.

The result was a major and chronic aggregate labour shortage which conscripted labour and the forced labour code of 1907 could do little to resolve, even if they had been completely successful. The prolonged passive resistance by the expropriated peoples - emigration, desertion, illegal

5. W.G. Clarence-Smith, "Slavery in coastal southern Angola, 1875-1913", *J.S.A.S.*, 2(2), 1978; "The thirstland trekkers in Angola: some reflections on a frontier society", *ICS SSA*, Nov. 1974.

6. Bley, *SWA*, parts 1 and 2.

mobility, collective celibacy^{7]} - ensured that this optimum was not attained and deepened the crisis of labour supply, a crisis which equally confronted the South African regime after 1915.

The crisis was, at least after 1904, in no way open to resolution by varying the wage rates or working conditions. The major employers were therefore compelled to seek to recruit outside the political domain of its state. Neither companies nor administration were well placed economically or politically to compete on the world market for indentured labour. Most attempts failed, except within southern Africa, which was in any case an uncertain source of supply owing to the overriding sub-continental power of Rand mining capital. At the height of railway building in 1913 the number of 'Cape Boys' (mainly Transkei Africans) employed in Namibia reached a temporary peak of 11,000 - about 25 per cent of the entire wage labour force. In 1923-24 Consolidated Diamonds Mines (CDM) could manage only with difficulty to recruit labourers elsewhere in southern Africa to break an Ovambo boycott. It had, however, been recognised as early as 1904 that Ovamboland was to be the principal external source of labour power, whose form, both at its inception and throughout its institution, was to remain that of recurrent labour migration on fixed-term contracts.

The migration of Ovambo men as wage labourers, however, did not simply 'happen'. It is the task of the remainder of this paper to propose explanations for several of the principal outstanding questions. First, why did the initial demand for labourers between 1905 and 1909 meet with so massive a response when even the rudiments of a recruiting organisation and of means of direct inducement and coercion were lacking? Explanation must be rooted in the specific trajectories of social transformation in the Ovambo social formation, particularly in incipient class antagonism.

Second, when the supply of labourers continued to fail to meet its aggregate requirements, why did the German colonial state not move to complete the forcible dispossession of the peoples within its allotted domain? Why too, did the post-1915 South African regime, which did bring Ovamboland under its direct administration, perpetuate the policy? Third, what were the concrete conditions of struggle for labour migrants within both modes of production, and how successfully did they exploit them? In particular, why was it necessary for the South African administration, ten years after the conquest, to bring the recruitment and distribution of all Ovambo labour migrants under the control of a monopoly labour organisation?

Ecology and the Ovambo social formation

Precise specification of the Ovambo mode of production prior to its penetration by commodity exchange relations is not possible here, for lack of detailed contemporary descriptive accounts, anthropological studies, or oral evidence^{8]}. It is apparent, however, that the local ecology established particular limiting conditions given a low level of development of the production forces^{9]}. Average rainfall allows adequate pasturage for cattle pastoralism over much of the sub-continental Kalahari basin and suffices over the northern half for dryland cereal cropping, which becomes marginal below about 450mm per annum. But the deep Kalahari sands restrict the potential of each, in the case of the former by phosphorous deficiency, of the latter by low organic

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7. H. Bley, "German SWA", in R. First and R. Segal, *South West Africa: travesty of trust*, (London, Deutsch, 1967); also Drechsler, *SWA*.
 8. For a preliminary analysis, see Clarence-Smith and Moorsom, "Underdevelopment". A later paper by Clarence-Smith on the Nyaneka points to the possibility of a more rigorous interpretation of contemporary sources: "Capitalist penetration among the Nyaneka of Southern Angola, 1840-1918", (Lusaka, Univ. of Zambia, History Seminar, August 1976).
 9. Clarence-Smith and Moorsom, "Underdevelopment" (J.A.H.), pp.365-7 and sources listed in note 2. For a more detailed analysis of climatic factors, Moorsom, "Contract labour"; J.H. Wellington, *SWA and its human issues*, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1967); Clarence-Smith, *Notes on drought in SW Angola/N Namibia*, SOAS African History Seminar, 1974.

content, and of both, crucially, by the lack of surface water, which is almost totally absent through the rainless winter.

Ovamboland forms the level flood-plain of one major and several minor wet-season rivers rising to the north, whose flood-waters combine with local run-off to percolate through a maze of shallow channels (*oshana*) towards the Etosha Pan. It therefore benefits in two respects: alluvial sediment, although poor, slightly increases the potential crop yield; and a leached impervious sub-soil layer improves the retention of fresh water above the deeper saline groundwater. Water is thus generally accessible for approximately half the year on the surface and for the remainder of the year underground at shallow depths. These advantages are qualified by the general unreliability of annual rainfall; by drought being usually worsened by the simultaneous failure of the seasonal flood-waters (*efundja*); by the unpredictable incidence of rainfall across the growing season; and by its uneven regional and local distribution. Furthermore, those indices of unreliability increase from north-east to south-west as the average rainfall decreases and the external floodwater catchment area shrinks. The southern margin of the floodplain coincides roughly with an annual rainfall of 400mm, submarginal for cropping.

The precise linkage between these ecological constraints and the overall settlement pattern is at present obscure. In the mid-19th century, as at colonisation in 1915, the Ovambo population was clustered into continuously and densely settled pockets, separated by uninhabited swathes of virgin woodland and pasture. The territory of each cluster was defined, as we shall see, by a unitary political system, though its precise form varied. Few significant ties of reciprocity existed between clusters at either the ideological or the economic level. The major exception was trade in three principal manufactures (copper and iron artifacts, and salt), the production of which was dominated by single or associated clusters¹⁰, and more irregularly, in foodstuffs, handicrafts and war captives.

Most of the clusters lay astride a major *oshana*, emphasising the critical importance of dry season water supplies. Furthermore, cluster size decreased dramatically from north-east to south-west. The source of this systematic variation is not to be sought in the nature or the level of the productive forces, which appear to have been similar across the whole social formation. Instruments manufactured by handicraft were the principal means in all branches of production, both direct (hunting, fishing) and processing (crops, animal products), except one (gathering of wild plants); as well as in household production. Given an iron age technology, the principal instruments of production (spear, bow, knife, hoe) and storage (stockade, pottery, basketry) were probably near full development and were widely distributed through the social formation. The reasons for the variation in scale and for the clustering itself, which the ecological conditions made possible, must therefore be sought in the social relations of production within each cluster.

At first sight, the dominant mode of production in Ovamboland appears straightforwardly enough to be a lineage mode, or in terms of Hindess and Hirst's categories, the complex redistributive variant of primitive communism. The social product was appropriated to a limited extent individually, notably cow's milk by herders while on seasonal migration, but for the most part communally through a variety of overlapping mechanisms coinciding generally with the major sources of subsistence. Surplus labour fell largely into the second category; and the whole was anyway determined at the ideological level by hierarchies of kinship ties which constituted the relations of production. The primary unit of production was the extended family, settled in a single stockaded homestead situated in the midst of its own fields. Distribution of the main food staples (millet meal and sorghum beer, and domestic animal products, especially from cattle), as well as subsidiary and seasonal supplements (game, fish, wild herbs and fruit) was organised according to complex social rules within this social unit under the overriding authority of the usually male homestead head.

10. Iron smithing Ukwanyama; copper smithing Ondonga; salt processing Ukwambi and Ongandjera.

Table 1. Climatic and harvest data, 1868-1937

Year	Regional rainfall (% of mean)	Rainfall & harvest in Ovamboland							
		Floodplain		Northeast		Central		Southwest	
		Rainfall	Harvest	Rainfall	Harvest	Rainfall	Harvest	Rainfall	Harvest
1868-9			Fam						
1872-5		D							
1878-9		D							
1879		D	H-						
1880			Fam						
1881									
1882									
1883									
1884	113								
1885	132								
1886									
1887	129					FI			
1888	58					Dx			
1889	61					Dx			
1890	84					N			
1891									
1892	143					FI			
1893	174					FI			
1894	83								
1895	65								
1896	50								
1897	125		P ^a						
1898	129								
1899	126								
1900	87		D						
1901	68		D						
1902	82		D						
1903	61		D						
1904	111								
1905	101								
1906	92								
1907	103		P ^b		FI	N			
1908	68		Fam		D	Dx		D	
1909	160	FI	H		FI	FI			
1910	122				N	N			
1911	42		Fam		Dx	Dx			
1912	122					N		D	
1913	54		H-		N	D		Dx	
1914	82		P ^c			D	H-/Hx		
1915	81		Fam			Dx	Hx		Fam
1916	51	Dx	Fam		Fam				
1917	139								
1918	106	D	H-						
1919	56	D	H-						
1920	91	D	H-						
1921	123								
1922	43	Dx							
1923	133	N	H+						
1924	71	D	H-		H-	N		Dx	
1925	164	FI	H+		H	FI			
1926	74		H/H-						
1927	93	D	H						
1928	88	D	H-		H				
1929	55	Dx	Fam		H-		Hx		Hx
1930	56	Dx	Fam				Hx		Hx
1931	87		H/H+						
1932	56	Dx	H-/Hx		Hx				
1933	50	Dx	H-/Hx		H-		H-/Hx		H-/Hx
1934	211	FI	H/H+						
1935	84			N	H	Dx			
1936	93	N	H						
1937	96	N	H+						

Notes: a) Rinderpest. b) Locusts. c) Caterpillars.

'Regional rainfall' is taken from Wellington's table of annual mean rainfall for Namibia north of Windhoek. For Ovamboland, the figures are here related to a long-term regional mean of 450 mm. However, in many years rainfall figures are lacking or incomplete and descriptive information has been used where available.

Symbols:

Rainfall: FI - floods (over 150%); N - normal (85-150%); D - drought (under 85%); Dx - severe drought (<70%);

P - pestilence (rinderpest, locusts, insects etc).

Harvest: H+ - in surplus; H - adequate; H- - poor; Hx - crop failure; Fam - famine.

Sources: J.H. Wellington, *South West Africa and its human issues*, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1967), p.43; published station records; contemporary descriptive accounts, mainly from missionary resources.

But wider networks of circulation also operated. Locality-based working parties would be called in against the standard rewards in food and drinks at points of peak labour input in the cropping cycle (field-clearing, harvesting) and for the necessarily frequent resiting of the homestead. Social and ritual celebrations as well as hospitality also redistributed surplus labour within a wider social network, framed by both neighbourhood and kinship ties. Kinship relations were organised into matriclans, which for the purposes of redistribution served three main functions: firstly, the allocation of cattle on a share-cropping basis; secondly, the inheritance of non-personal movable property, notably cattle; and thirdly, by the rule of clan exogamy, the exchange of wives. In both cases, the combination of matrilineality with patrilocal residence entailed the broad territorial dispersal of means of production and subsistence, principally cattle, and a framework of social relations defined at the level of the population cluster.

The advantages of extended and complex reciprocity, given a high incidence of both local and regional climatic fluctuation and the devastating coincidence of deficiencies in natural resources induced by drought, do not require elaboration. Food storage precautions within the primary production unit, notably the basket granary capable of holding up to five years of grain supplies, bear additional testimony. The survival of small clusters on the marginal south-western edge of the floodplain suggests that lineage social relations were a sufficient condition for the long-term reproduction of the social formation. However, occasional sequences of severe drought, on average once in about 30 years, could kill an appreciable proportion of the population by both food and water famine¹¹.

There are, nevertheless, aspects of the social formation for which lineage relations of production cannot fully account. In the small and even the medium-sized clusters, for instance Ombalantu and Ombadya, it is probable that such relations could structure real appropriation in its variety of forms to the limits of its general ecological potential. But although it is not possible on the available evidence to posit an optimum cluster size, the proposition becomes increasingly untenable for the largest clusters. This conclusion presumes a generally uniform instrument technology and the universality of the dispersed settlement pattern, which did in fact continue to hold until at least the late 1950s.

The tenacity of the resistance to village-formation cannot be fully explained on available data, but may well be associated with firstly, field manuring by rotation of the homestead site and secondly, in view of the concentration of sites in *oshana* margins, optimal articulation between the principal sites of labour. Any substantial increase in the size of a population cluster therefore, entailed a lateral expansion in its settlement area, which beyond a certain point would begin to impede access, for households near the centre, both to important directly appropriated natural resources and to cattle pasture, to an extent beyond the capacity of lineage reciprocity to compensate.

By-passing the theoretical controversy on this point¹², we may specify the social relations which integrated these larger communities as a tributary mode of production. In the two large (Ondonga and Ukwanyama) and some of the medium-sized clusters (Ongandjera, Ukwambi, Ukwanyama), the heads of particular matriclans had, by the mid-19th century, inserted themselves at the ideological level by claiming religious and ritual powers, most critically to make rain, and at the political level by asserting the hereditary transmission of the rights to govern, to make war, to exert judicial and limited legislative authority, to exact customarily defined tributes, and to apportion land. The tributary mode did make possible a limited development of the productive forces, though more by increasing labour productivity and insurance against climatic uncertainty than by instituting new methods of production. It was distinguished by the conservation of natural

11. For a harrowing description of such a famine, see S. Pritchard, *Report on the tour to Ovamboland by Major Pritchard*, (Cape Town, Government Printer, 1915. UG 38-15).

12. See P.L. Bonner, "Classes, the mode of production and the state in pre-colonial Swaziland", *ICS SSA*, 10 February 1977.

resources (wood, certain fruit trees, dry-season cattle pasture) and especially of the wells which guaranteed dry-season water supplies; and by the central regulation of the timing and articulation of the seasonal production cycle¹³. It was precisely in Ukwanyama, the largest cluster, in which the regulatory and military powers of the state were highly developed, that systematic exploitation of wet-season pastures outside the floodplain through large-scale seasonal cattle migration was the most advanced.

It is uncertain to what extent surplus labour was expanded under the incipient tributary mode. It was, however, under centralised kingships, and again to the fullest extent in Ukwanyama, that strata of specialist trader-artisans formed. Tightly controlled by the kings - a control later exercised over European traders - these strata remained part-time specialists despite establishing long distance networks of exchange. Nowhere in the Ovambo social formation was class formation more than incipient, and hesitantly so.

The postulation of a tributary mode implies its co-existence with the lineage mode. Despite the obvious political dominance of its hereditary governing stratum, it is not possible, for reasons of evidence cited earlier, to specify either the precise balance in relations between the two, or the main historical trend in the transformation of that balance, except that it was slow and irregular. Appropriation of surplus labour through the exaction of tribute was irregular, ill-defined and small-scale. The bulk of the product at the king's disposal was produced directly by his own household, which differed from others only in scale and its elaborate functional social organisation. Indeed, the king's right to communal labour for field work and for resiting the royal kraal can be interpreted as the exploitation of standard lineage reciprocity.

Kinship tensions within the royal clan and the continuing de facto authority of leading members of other clans severely inhibited despotic tendencies. This was expressed at the level of the state by, in particular, customary restrictions on the king's marriage policy and by commoner representation through a consultative council. In executive functions, it limited the king's role as war leader and allowed clan leaders to assume formally delegated royal prerogatives such as land allocation. That contradictions in the co-existence of the two modes did exist occasionally found dramatic evidence in moments of crisis in a medium-sized cluster, when the failure of a major function of the tributary political leadership, often rain-making, could lead to its overthrow.

Patriarchy formed the third mode of production to be found in pre-colonial Ovambo society, and its social relations were more pervasive than those of the tributary mode. It was founded on the monopoly of male household heads over the life-time use-right to the family homestead and fields. Women could survive only as wives or as subordinate kin in the households of male relatives, and only in rare cases had direct access to land, whether household or commonage. Men appropriated women's labour mainly in the form of services within the household (house maintenance, food preparation, fetching water, care of young children), but also from productive agricultural labour. This was divided according to sex, men controlling hunting and cattle, the principal source of animal protein and store of wealth, leaving women to undertake the cultivation and gathering of grain and vegetables¹⁴.

A fair measure of reciprocity nevertheless remained in the consumption of the products of men's and women's labour, as also in the training of children to their adult gender skills and social identity. Furthermore, women were able as of right to appropriate much of their field and

13. Notably the first planting, which with the often premature onset of the first rains depended on experienced judgement, in which the king had greater resources, sometimes in the form of professional rainmakers. See Clarence-Smith and Moorsom, "Underdevelopment" (J.A.H.), p.369; and M. Salokoski, "Rain making and power in pre-colonial Ovamboland", paper delivered to the 20th Nordic Congress of Historians, Reykjavik, 9-15 August 1987.

14. The principal exception was fishing, an important source of protein during the summer floods, although men and women cooperated separately and used different techniques.

handicraft labour and to engage in trading. In particular, women worked their own fields as well as the husbands', and appropriated the product directly for the consumption of their immediate family and for exchange when in surplus. Furthermore, since there was no bridewealth, although marriage was inescapable, women retained the possibility of mobility for themselves and their children, and thereby real bargaining power. In both household and agricultural labour and in the field of matrilineal kinship relations, women also retained a substantial degree of autonomy, probably more so than in the Nguni societies of south-eastern Africa. Nevertheless, men's managerial authority and control over accumulated wealth remained dominant. The acquisition of women as field-workers, housewives and mothers was the chief mechanism by which male household heads expanded household production and their own personal consumption, and polygamous marriage was the usual method of exchange of women's labour.

Little attention has thus far been devoted either to the technical division of labour or to forms of co-operation in the labour process. Where the labour processes of two modes of production are articulated, it is the dominant mode which, although modified by class struggle, will be able in the main to structure the subordinate process to its requirements and to exploit its internal weaknesses when the two are dissonant. Of concern here is not the long-term disruptive impact of articulation with capitalism on the non-capitalist mode as such, but the space for struggle by migrant workers subject to the structural determination of such articulation. Capital and the colonial state called forth, specifically, young to middle-aged men as wage-labourers. As we will see, it was precisely this category whose role in the labour processes of both modes of production of Ovambo society was the most drastically modified by the catalytic intrusion of commodity exchange relations.

The forms of cooperation bear a different significance. No peasants suddenly proletarianised, whether temporarily or long-term, enter the new relations of production with a blank consciousness. Their past socialisation will modify their ability to develop new tactics of struggle under new antagonistic social relations. In particular, experience of cooperative labour, whether or not productive, may provide models for building collective methods of resistance where of necessity a proletarian tradition is still embryonic.

External trade and class polarisation

The first Portuguese traders reached Ovamboland from the north in the late 1840s. Within a decade, regular trade relations through Mossamedes and Walvis Bay, and from the late 1870s through the central Kalahari, had brought Ovamboland into the global sphere of commodity exchange. Although control of trading and of trade credit was soon highly centralised, throughout the pre-colonial period its scope was restricted by fluctuations in the pattern of industrial capitalist demand, by the distance and difficulty of the trade routes and by the carrying capacity of ox-wagon transport. Thus traders sought raw materials in commercial demand with a high price-to-weight ratio, such as ivory, and a market for field crops never developed. Limited and unstable local markets also developed for cattle and slaves, whose particular advantage was that they could transport themselves to the market.

It is impossible for lack of data to make any precise calculation of the scale of the trade^[15]. Nevertheless, its general course is reasonably clear. Between the 1850s and early 1880s, the principal export commodity was ivory, to a lesser extent ostrich feathers. In return, the Ovambo kings, victims between 1859-63 of armed incursions from the west by a Portuguese military expedition and from the south by the Oorlam ruler, Jonker Afrikaner, demanded arms. The power of the tributary states was sufficient to enable them to regulate ivory hunting by foreign traders and impose a substantial levy on its proceeds. Fire-arms, initially sought for defence against external

15. For a detailed empirical treatment, see Siiskonen, *Kunikaisten kauppa*.

aggression, were turned also to productive use as the kings themselves accumulated ivory for sale. Since elephants were not an existing subsistence resource and the local labour diverted into hunting them was minimal, the relations of production were barely affected.

However, the kings' ability to extend the control they exerted over their own specialised artisan-traders to the commercial agents of capitalism strengthened their political and economic power in crucial respects. Besides extracting a substantial levy-in-kind in desired commodities, they were able to regulate both the scale and to a certain extent the content of direct exchange between traders and peasants. Thus in the first phase fire-arms were reserved as a royal monopoly, and barter trade was restricted principally to luxury manufactures in return for ivory and cattle. Fire-arms greatly increased the potential productivity of royal hunting and were directly appropriated. The king's monopoly over the principal trade commodity tied the content of capitalist manufactures for which they were willing to exchange it to their own luxury consumption. Together with the large subsistence resources at their disposal, it enabled them to expand their political power through mechanisms of patronage.

The Ovambo kings, however, permitted hunting on a scale far beyond the animals' natural reproductive capacity, and by the early 1880s the elephant and ostrich population had been all but wiped out. By now, although evidence is sparse, the kings were already substantially dependent on imported arms and luxury goods, the former for general defence against external aggression and for the competitive local petty raiding that had long been traditional, the latter principally as means of political patronage and both for prestige. Lacking alternative raw materials in demand on industrial capitalist markets, they were compelled to resort to the only commodities saleable on local markets, cattle and slaves. Cattle were used as feed stock in the trading and missionary network. More particularly, flourishing export markets had opened up by the early 1890s amongst the emigrant Boers on the Humpata plateau, in the Atlantic plantation islands via Mossamedes, and along Rhodes' Bechuanaland railway¹⁶. Slaves could be sold to the Ovimbundu in central Angola, although the trade in people was never large-scale.

Cattle were a principal subsistence resource, and the appropriation of both them and slaves as trade commodities could only proceed by means of antagonistic social relations. To achieve their ends, the kings transformed or redirected several pre-existing methods of surplus appropriation. Probably anxious to minimise the risk of internal resistance, they channelled their newly acquired military technology into external raiding. Small-scale inter-tribal raiding, seizing cattle and people, who were ransomed or incorporated into lineages as debt slaves, appears to have intensified generally during the 1880s and 1890s. Simultaneously, long-distance raiding, of which Ukwanyama was the leading exponent, developed to the north for cattle and slaves, who were either absorbed or sold to traders.

But increasingly the kings resorted to internal expropriation, mostly in the form of cattle. The frequency of witchcraft accusations and "judicial raids", traditionally sanctioned instruments of political policy and taxation on wealth, exceeded their ideological legitimacy to become arbitrary exactions. Above all, the *okasavu*, formerly "the traditional ritual seizure of cattle for the king's court, became a harsh and arbitrary tax"¹⁷, its voluntary nature superseded by military force.

It is important to note that intensified surplus appropriation by the tributary state was firmly established before the rinderpest disaster struck Ovamboland in 1897. The diary of the Swedish traveller Möller, who crossed the area in 1895-96, mentions Ovambo refugees settled in the

16. In addition to references in Clarence-Smith and Moorsom, "Underdevelopment" (J.A.H.), note 19, see P.A. Möller, *Journey into Africa through Angola, Ovampoland and Damaraland*, (Cape Town, Struik, 1974, transl. from the Swedish edition of 1899), pp.7, 32; entries in E.C. Tabler, *Pioneers of SWA and Ngamiland*, (Cape Town, Balkema, 1973); N. Parsons, "The Economic History of Khama's Country in Botswana, 1844-1930", in R. Palmer and N. Parsons, *The roots of rural poverty in central and southern Africa*, (London, Heinemann, 1977).

17. Clarence-Smith and Moorsom, "Underdevelopment" (J.A.H.), p.376.

middle Kunene, mainly from Ukwanyama and Ukwambi. Most "have left their tribe to escape the oppression and system of plunder that the despotic chiefs exercise towards their people. It is particularly the cattle that the chiefs extort for themselves...". An accurate reporter, Möller's assessment of Ukwanyama^[18], less than two years before the rinderpest catastrophe, is suggestive. Weyulu, the king, himself owned "about 20 excellent modern guns", and "about as many horses", the latter bought for about 60 oxen each. He was able to offer £25 in gold coins for Möller's repeating rifle. Weyulu hinted in conversation that long-distance raiding was the principal means of supporting such an investment; but still found it necessary, according to Möller, to "tax his people very heavily in their cattle". Despite the constant circulation of functionaries between court and country, he did not possess sufficient "iron discipline" to prevent a constant trickle of emigration.

Initially the embryonic tributary state lacked even a rudimentary apparatus of coercion outside the royal entourage. However, the escalation of raiding, especially of regular long-distance expeditions, "...led to the formation at court of a permanent group of war leaders, the *elenga*, each of whom received a horse (an extremely expensive and short-lived animal) and a number of rifles from the king and led a body of about 100 men on raiding expeditions"^[19]. This new stratum of military leaders, normally recruited on grounds of ability rather than lineage authority^[20], built up personal wealth and a body of retainers proportionate to their success in royal service, to counterbalance as the state possessed neither an administrative bureaucracy nor ideological legitimation for its oppressive role. To a limited extent the *elenga* could therefore exploit the contradiction between the king's needs to increase the rate of appropriation and his delegating the power essential to achieve it in order to consolidate their relative autonomy. One instance of the ideological expression of this tension is given by Möller, who noted the use in Ukwanyama of insignia of rank and rewards for bravery^[21].

The rinderpest epidemic, from which drought and pestilence hindered recovery, devastated raider and victim alike, and destroyed the Bechuanaland market. In Ovamboland, the mortality rate reached as high as 90 per cent. Long-distance raiding was already subject to diminishing returns as the tribes under attack developed defensive techniques, broke up or moved north. After 1904, and more particularly after 1907, when the Portuguese established a ring of forts around the northern perimeter of Ovamboland, raiding became militarily more hazardous too. At the same time, the growing military power of colonial regimes on both flanks, especially after 1904, enhanced the need for defensive rearmament. It is thus not surprising that the *elenga* were progressively redirected into collecting the *okasavu*, and were able - possibly because the kings' means of patronage were reduced - to appropriate an increasing proportion of the proceeds of this and other forms of arbitrary exaction to their own use. By these means and through external and inter-tribal raiding, they built independent clientage networks.

Although the evidence is fragmentary^[22], it is likely that the level of peasant consumption declined in the 30 years before colonisation (mid-1880s-1915). Not only were cattle stocks decimated by natural catastrophe, but the rate and generality of taxation began to exceed the capacity of lineage

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18. Möller, *Journey*, pp.110-13. He may be partially reflecting the views of the veteran trader Eriksson, with whom he was travelling. See also the account from oral tradition in E.M. Loeb, *In feudal Africa*, Supplement to *Internat. J. Am. Ling.*, part 2, XXVIII No.3, July 1962, chapter 1.
 19. Cf Schinz's description of a returning Kwambi war-party in 1885 (H. Schinz, *Deutsch-Südwest-Afrika, 1884-7*, (Oldenburg/Leipzig, Schulz, 1891), p.236).
 20. Möller, *Journey*, p.126; W.G. Clarence-Smith, "Mossamedes and its hinterland, 1875-1915", *SOAS African History Seminar*, 1 May 1974, p.3.
 21. Möller, p.126; H.E. Schoch, diary 20/6/20 (WU Arch, A839/Ja2); Pritchard, *Report*, para 85.
 22. Schinz, *DSWA*, pp.298-9, 311; H. Tönjes, *Ovamboland*, (Berlin, 1911), p.69; G. Nitsche, *Ovamboland*, (PhD, Univ. Kiel, 1913), p.130.

reciprocity to compensate. It is possible that limited forms of peasant resistance - holding back crop and stock production, even emigration - reinforced the tendency^[23].

The mediation of patriarchal social relations made the impact of impoverishment in fact more specific. For a minority of households, the survivors of inter-tribal raiding or of "judicial raids", all had no option but to flee and/or attach themselves as clients to powerful *elenga* lineages. For the rest, the material and cultural shock at the sudden seizure of cattle lay particularly heavily on the men. Furthermore, game-hunting became an aristocratic monopoly^[24]. Younger men were recruited as retainers and for military expeditions. Even so, a substantial number faced either social dislocation or in the sudden appropriation of their cattle, the loss not only of means of subsistence but also of social wealth.

The particular forms of surplus appropriation under tributary relations of production thus affected women rather less, since taxation in cattle did not seriously damage either social reproduction or crop output. Although the more violent methods of appropriation - judicial raids and inter-tribal raiding - often did entail the complete dispossession, capture or death of whole households, their victims were a minority of the social formation, and their intensification was a product of the post-rinderpest crisis in the tributary mode itself.

The impact of embryonic class formation on and through patriarchal social relations led to modifications in the forms of cooperation in the labour process whose ideological spin-off influenced the tactics of organised struggle developed by labour migrants. In the long term they also strengthened the managerial autonomy of women in rural production. The annual cattle migration, restricted to men and boys, and undertaken in a difficult environment, had long ingrained techniques of cooperation and improvisation at the level of groups comprising lineages or a number of homesteads. The deployment of tribute labour into raiding parties, as many as 100-150 strong, assisted in welding a strong, all-male tradition of group solidarity.

It is suggested therefore that in the years following this the tributary state was already approaching a crisis; that peasant consumption was being depressed to the margins of subsistence on too wide a scale for the compensatory mechanisms of lineage social relations fully to compensate; and that the specific form of tributary state surplus appropriation and labour conscription had a particularly adverse impact on younger men in the divided labour process.

Migration statistics from the last five years of German rule point to the scale on which Ovambo households were turning to migrant labour out of necessity^[25]. Over the four years (1910-1913), outgoing migrants exceeded those returning by as many as 8,145 out of 36,480, or 22 per cent, and even after the shutdown of most businesses in late 1914 a net surplus of over 5,000 (11 per cent) remained. It is during those years that permanent urban Ovambo settlements were first noted. The fact that peasants could opt to settle under a savagely labour-repressive colonial regime is further evidence of the deterioration of economic and political conditions in Ovamboland^[26].

Figures for individual clusters in the year ended June 1911^[27] tend to confirm the differential development of internal class-formation. Although population estimates at this time were no more

23. Schinz, *DWSA*, p.298; Dr. Gelber, (1902), reported in T. Leutwein, *Elf Jahre Gouverneur in Deutsch Südwestafrika*, (Berlin, Mittler, 1906), p.201; Loeb, *In feudal Africa*, p.31-2; A.W. Urquhart, *Patterns of settlement and subsistence in South West Angola*, (Washington, 1963), p.111.
24. Tönjes, *Ovamboland*, p.69; Möller, *Journey*, p.115; V. Lebzelter, *Eingeborenenkulturen in Südwest- und Südafrika*, (Leipzig, Karl W. Hirsemann, 1934), vol.2, p.190.
25. Cf. E.L.P. Stals, "Die aanraking tussen Blankes en Owambos in Suidwes-Afrika, 1850-1915", *Arch. Yearbook for S.A. Hist.*, 31(2), 1968, pp.333-4.
26. O. Köhler, *District of Karibib*, (South Africa, Dept. of Bantu Administration and Development, Ethnological Publications Series, 1958-9); NA 4349/639, Imperial Native Commissioner, Windhoek, report for year ended March 1913.
27. Nitsche, *Ovamboland*, p.134. NB this was a famine year.

than informed speculations, it appears that labour migrants formed about 10 per cent of the Ndonga population - or about 30 per cent of active men, a remarkably high proportion even for a famine year - as against 7 per cent, 5 per cent and 2.5 per cent for Ukwambi, Ukwanyama and Ongandjera respectively, with very few from further north and west^[28]. In general, the great majority of migrant workers came from the larger clusters, ruled by kings and subject to more definite social differentiation. The evidence is incomplete, but it can reasonably be concluded that, exacerbated by prolonged drought and by increasing internal social dislocation and surplus appropriation, appreciable numbers of peasants had been pushed to the margins of subsistence; and that the massive wave of labour migration after 1908 was a direct response.

The colonial stand-off and labour migration

The year 1904 marked the beginning of both the national insurrection in the Namibian 'Police Zone' and a more determined Portuguese attempt to conquer northern Ovamboland. Simultaneously the rate of labour migration began to rise. Yet the greater part of Ovamboland was not subjected to colonial rule before 1915, and then only fortuitously as a result of a change in colonial regime. And it was another decade before the new colonial power established total control over labour migration through a monopoly recruiting system. Although the outcome of this transitional period was predictable, its form and timing were strongly modified by the conflicting interests and strategies of Ovambo political leaders, the three colonial governments, and the labour migrants themselves.

The growth of labour migration can be charted with reasonable accuracy. Small numbers of Ovambos worked in the interstices of the trading network in both Namibia and Angola during the 1880s and 1890s^[29], and on the smaller mines and guano workings in Namibia after 1892^[30]. Hundreds were recruited for the Swakopmund harbour works (November 1893-1903) and the railways to Windhoek (September 1897-June 1902) and Otavi (October 1903-December 1906)^[31]. Up to 1907, however, there were probably never more than about 1700 in the Police Zone at any one time^[32]. Yet, by 1910 the annual total of incoming migrants had shot up to over 9,000, or, assuming an average migrancy cycle of 8-9 months each, a labour force of over 6,000; and this high level was maintained until 1914^[33]. After the temporary shutdown in 1914-15, the rate of recruitment probably equalled its pre-war levels for the first five years (statistics are scarce), and settled back to an annual 3,500-4,500 for the second^[34]. There are no precise statistics for Angola, but recruitment for the Mossamedes and Benguela railways from 1904, mostly from conquered areas subject after 1907 to hut tax, probably never exceeded an annual 2,000^[35].

The broad outlines of Portuguese and German colonial strategies are fairly clear^[36]. The former, intent on imposing "direct rule" and taxation, embarked on the military conquest of the southern

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28. Possible reasons why the Ondonga rate was double that of Ukwanyama are the former's proximity to the migration routes, its more advanced penetration by missionaries, and the greater marginality of both its water supply and its adjacent grazing areas.
29. Tönjes, *Ovamboland*, p.88; Tabler, entry Björklund; Möller, *Journey*, pp.15, 46.
30. E. Stals, pp.323-4; R. Gordon, "A note on the history of labour action in Namibia", *SA Lab. Bull.*, April 1975, p.9; K. Dove, *Deutsch-Südwest-Afrika*, (Berlin, 1903), p.186.
31. H.E. Lenssen, *Chronik von Deutsch-Südwestafrika, 1883-1915*, (Pretoria, 1953), pp.7, 171; J. Irlé, *Die Hereros*, (Gütersloh, Bertelsmann, 1906), p.219; Stals, "Die aanraking", p.323.
32. Nitsche, *Ovamboland*, pp.130-9.
33. Stals, p.333. A nine-month average per worker allows for longer-term contracts and re-hiring, but it is a very rough estimate. Assuming that very few workers would migrate more than once a year, the annual recruitment statistics are the better guide to the actual number involved.
34. South Africa, Dept. of Foreign Affairs, *Owambo*, (Pretoria, 1971), p.20; SWA Administrator, *Annual Reports of the Administrator for SWA to the League of Nations*.
35. Clarence-Smith and Moorsom, "Underdevelopment" (J.A.H.), p.377.
36. On the Portuguese, Clarence-Smith, *Slaves*. On the Germans, Stals, "Die aanraking"; F.R. Lehmann, "Die politische und soziale Stellung der Häuptlinge in Ovamboland", *Tribus*, 4-5, 1954-5.

interior, occupying Ombadya (1907), after a crushing initial defeat (1904), three small northern Ovambo clusters (1908-10), and the Okavango River^[37]. But fear of Kwanyama military power and their need for railway labour deterred the Portuguese from completing the process of subjugation. Ukwanyama, straddling the disputed border and well within the German "sphere of interest" under the secret Anglo-German partition treaty of 1898, now became the centre of rivalry between German and Portuguese diplomats, labour recruiters and traders^[38].

The newly established German regime (1894-95), on the other hand, remained pre-occupied with the colonisation of the Police Zone until the collapse of its treaty system in 1904. The imperial government balked at the anticipated military and, after 1904, political cost of conquest; and steadfastly rejected any local initiative both before and after the war to intervene militarily and establish a direct administration, to the extent that even retaliatory raids were banned. Nevertheless, Ovamboland, now that it was a major supplier of essential labour, was the object of close political attention as the Germans tried to maximise the supply through diplomatic ties with the political leaderships^[39].

After 1904 the scope for strategic manoeuvre for the Ovambo kings narrowed. The Portuguese occupation of their perimeter made long-distance raiding hazardous for the Kwanyama. The incidence of internal inter-tribal raiding was probably increasing, with smaller clusters the chief victims; yet none was able to secure any significant military ascendancy, and the mode of warfare changed little, despite the increased efficiency of imported arms technology^[40]. The tributary states were therefore increasingly forced back upon internal methods of surplus appropriation. Realisation through trade of its proceeds, however, was becoming more difficult and less reliable as colonial occupation of trade-routes placed controls on access to markets and to essential commodities. By the mid 1890s, both the Germans and the Portuguese had banned trade in fire-arms; when rinderpest reached Namibia the Germans stopped the entry of all cattle from Ovamboland; from 1906 they allowed traders access only by licence; and at about this time the Portuguese banned trade altogether^[41]. Although smuggling was possible through Hereroland before 1904 and through Angola up to and beyond 1915^[42], it was subject to considerable risk during the last decade of independence.

Given the tightening constraints of their strategic situation, the Ovambo kings were relatively successful in exploiting colonial rivalries and the misperceptions of colonial agents. In 1908, after more than a decade of almost open hostility before and during the genocidal suppression of the insurrection, the Ovambo kings allowed their political relations with the Germans to be formalised in "protection treaties". In practice, most succeeded in keeping their distance. At least one maintained an efficient intelligence network^[43]; and visitors, missionaries and migrant workers were used as ongoing sources of information. Though good relations with traders were indispensable, very few were allowed either to settle permanently in tribal territory or given the freedom to

37. Clarence-Smith and Moorsom, "Underdevelopment" (J.A.H.), p.375.

38. Clarence-Smith and Moorsom, "Underdevelopment" (J.A.H.), p.379.

39. Lehmann, "Die politische", for details from German records; also Leutwein, *Elf Jahre*, pp.175-6, 92; Stals, "Die aanraking", p.290.

40. Lehmann, "Die politische", p.282-3, 293, 295; *Südwest*, 4/2/13: Mbadya v. Ukwanyama (in NA 1161/179). For effective resistance by "kingless" tribes, NA 4994/1227, Res.Comm. - SWA Sec.1/3/16; Schoch, diary 24/6/20. For earlier descriptions of border cattle-raiding, eg Schinz, *DSWA*, p.320; P. Serton (ed.), *Narrative and journal of Gerald McKiernan in SWA*, (Cape Town, Van Riebeeck Society, 1954), p.109.

41. Stals, "Die aanraking", p.291; Möller, *Journey*, p.33; Landeshpt. Enactment 29/3/97 para 4 and regulations under Proc. 9/10/07; Ovamboland Proc. 25/1/06; Lehmann, "Die politische", p.289.

42. Between the turn of the century and 1915, the quantity of arms in Ovamboland appears to have increased considerably: compare Möller, *Journey*, p.102, 23 and Nitsche, *Ovamboland*, p.147, with Pritchard, *Report*, para 39, and NA 4994/1227 Res. Comm. - NA Windhoek 10/1/16 (report), Res. Comm. - Dep. Sec. Windhoek 6/8/16. On arms smuggling after 1915, Lebzelter, *Eingeborenenkulturen*, p.208.

43. Eg Lehmann, "Die politische", p.274 (Nehale, 1902).

operate outside royal control. As late as 1911, when Portuguese traders tried to exploit famine conditions by overcharging, the Kwanyama king Mandume expelled them from his territory^[44].

This notwithstanding, the kings could not escape the contradiction which bound them: that internal taxation on cattle was yielding diminishing returns from a static subsistence productive base. Not only was the power of the state threatened for lack of adequate means of exchange for the instruments of appropriation, which indigenous metal technology could not reproduce, but also the stability of the kings' alliance with the new stratum of functionaries (the *elenga*), which its methods of surplus extraction had called into being. Increasingly the kings were losing exclusive control over the possession of guns and horses, and the *elenga* were channelling appropriated cattle and people into their own retinues. In general, the price of royal supremacy over the *elenga* seems to have been regular dispossession, judicious marriage and patronage strategies, and an authoritarian personal rule dependent in varying degrees on a court-based military contingent^[45]. Inevitably, the efficiency and articulation of the tributary state were impaired.

In this context, the suddenly urgent colonial demand for labour after 1904 held advantages for the rulers of the tributary states. It was the only substantial bargaining counter they possessed against colonial encroachment, particularly from the German side, as the degree of official involvement in recruiting efforts must have made plain. It was certainly a means of obtaining regular trade and political information, and possibly of smuggling in arms^[46]. It provided an outlet for the victims of their more arbitrary methods of surplus appropriation and alleviated the burden of providing relief after bad harvests. It was an alternative to raiding which the *elenga* would not oppose and would possibly assist in supervising, a politically valuable point since the *elenga* seem generally to have been more hostile to diplomatic relations with the colonial powers^[47], understandably in view of their stake in raiding. Above all the export of labour under official direction offered the kings a new opportunity for taxation through levies on the goods with which the workers returned.

Despite the scale of their requirements, the German authorities went little further than to set up border control posts on the two main migration routes and, from 1906, to restrict entry to approved recruiters. They resisted pressure from recruiters for open access and from the diamond companies for a recruiting station inside Ovamboland. The colonial government, having adopted a policy of co-option, was anxious to maintain harmonious relations with the kings - thus serving political as well as economic ends - which competition between recruiters and unscrupulous practices on the latter's part might jeopardise. Instead, officials toured the country with increasing frequency to persuade the kings to encourage labour migration. In 1911, private recruiters were barred altogether and a "Native Commissioner", symbolically the veteran Ovamboland missionary Tönjes, was appointed at Lüderitz.

To a considerable extent, the disadvantages to the Germans of not having permanent representatives or administrators at the royal capitals was offset by the network of mission stations, which were generally located, both geographically and politically, near the centres of state power. Missionaries of the Finnish Missionary Society, established in the area since 1870, and the Rhenish Missionary Society, strategically located in Ukwanyama since the early 1890s, proved willing and reliable sources of intelligence and, on balance, influential surrogates for colonial political advisors^[48].

44. Lehmann, "Die politische", p.289.

45. Mandume was perhaps the clearest example of a strong reforming ruler, nevertheless lacking the means to transcend his dependence (see Lehmann, "Die politische", pp.288-91; NA 4994/1227, H.M. Consul, Lüderitzbucht, Memo. January 1912, also NA 1161/179, Consul - Sec. NA 16/7/12).

46. Lehmann, "Die politische", p.270 (1905), p.298 (1912).

47. Lehmann, "Die politische", p.286 (Ukwanyama 1901), p.283 (Ukwambi 1911/12).

48. Lehmann, "Die politische", p.272, esp. p.278; Stals, "Die aanraking", p.334; Pritchard, *Report*, para 23; NA 4994/1227, Res. Comm. - SWA Sec. 1/3/16, memos by Rautanen and Wulfhorst; Consul, memo., January[?] 1912.

Within these limits the Germans exploited their opportunities to the full. The years 1907-16 witnessed an unparalleled sequence of bad harvests (1910 and 1912 were the only exceptions), culminating in the devastating famines of 1911 and 1915. In 1908, the year in which Hauptmann Franke was sent north to secure protection treaties and encourage labour migration, the Germans sent 80 tons of relief supplies, via the Finnish Mission, for "free distribution", a practice which became regular in succeeding years and a powerful inducement to royal goodwill^[49]. Government representatives distributed gifts judiciously, and sensing the structure of power in matrilineal succession, cultivated the more powerful of the king's female relatives^[50]. Ondonga, with its troubled royal succession and unfavourable situation for raiding, came in for special attention. The government intervened directly in its succession dispute, and plied the half-blind and alcoholic Kambonde II (1884-1909) with liquor and a sizeable bribe^[51]. In the last year of their regime the Germans took the first rudimentary steps to improve the conditions of travel for migrants on the hazardous, waterless route to the Otavi railhead by drilling boreholes and starting a railway from Otjiwarongo to Ondonga. Whether military or economic motives were the foremost consideration in the latter venture, the First World War brought the project to an abrupt and permanent halt^[52].

The struggle for control over labour migration

Although the Germans held back from both indirect and direct coercion in seeking to secure large-scale labour supplies, the Ovambo kings at the minimum never seriously opposed the growth of labour migration after 1907. By the turn of the century an increasing number of Ovambo men were being reduced to the margins of subsistence and deprived of status and employment by the appropriation of their cattle. Wage labour was one among several alternative forms of subsistence, whether as a temporary means of recovery or a permanent change in class position. Its explosive growth might be interpreted as an independent response by the more impoverished peasant households to their material and political circumstances, a response which their rulers were powerless or disinterested in opposing. The extent to which the tributary states exceeded a merely passive role in either promoting labour migration or regulating its form is important in determining the margins and context of struggle available to labour migrants.

Hauptmann Streitwolf, who visited Ovamboland several times on recruiting missions, concluded in 1913 that verbal commitments by the Ovambo kings to itinerant German official made little impact on the trend of recruitment^[53]. Whatever negotiating tactics the kings may have employed, there is evidence that they did in fact take an active part in both promoting and regulating the flow. Schlettwein gave an explicit description of the mechanics of state control in 1907^[54]:

The chief chooses the men and sends them out under a foreman to acquire clothes and other useful articles. The final date by which such a party has to be back is precisely stipulated, and woe betide anyone who doesn't return at the correct time... With their earnings the men must buy goods, all of which they are required to set down before their chief. The chief then takes for himself whatever he likes, and disposes of the rest quite arbitrarily.

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49. On 'gifts' eg NA 4994/1227, Consul - Sec. NA (Personal), 6/6/12, citing 'lecture' by Tönjes; on relatives, Lehmann, "Die politische", passim.
50. Clarence-Smith and Moorsom, "Underdevelopment" (J.A.H.), p.378; Lehmann, "Die politische", passim, esp. on Ondonga; Stals, "Die aanraking", p.299.
51. Lehmann, "Die politische", pp.269-73.
52. NA 4994/1227, Consul - Sec. Int., 14/2/13 and 19/11/13 (enclosure); Pritchard, *Report*, para 13; South Africa, *Memorandum on the country known as German SWA*, (Pretoria, 1915), p.86.
53. Lehmann, "Die politische", p.284; Stals, "Die aanraking", p.333, a view which Stals endorses.
54. C. Schlettwein, *Der Farmer in Deutsch-Südwest-Afrika*, (Wismar, 1907), p.255, author's translation.

That the king was able to levy a tax-in-kind on returning workers was confirmed by a second observer twenty years later^[55]:

Every black who returns from the mines must report immediately to the chief and give a detailed account of everything that happened and hand over the gifts expected of him.

Fragmentary evidence from the early years of labour migration tends to confirm Schlettwein's view that the king also controlled the call-up and dispatch of workers, though the criterion of selection is not clear. In 1896 Möller reported of the Kwambi king^[56]:

Nezumbo rules his people with an iron hand but also with wisdom. He wants absolute obedience from everybody; before they marry the young men must work with the white people on the other side of the Kunene and from there bring back a cow as payment.

Clearly the dividing line between the redeployment or extension of tribute labour by the state and the dispatch of sub-marginal peasants as labour migrants was delicate and by no means absolute. Similarly, the extent to which forcible methods of appropriation of cattle and people were specifically translated into conscription for labour migration cannot be determined on the available evidence.

Table 2. Labour migration to and from the Police Zone 1910-15

Year	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
1910: to from	1436 443	2501 727	702 695	537 589	432 235	573 134	1351 505	674 991	425 726	215 692	241 440	268 628	9355 6805
1911: to from	1144 438	615 225	591 197	1532 560	1581 432	626 100	393 588	383 1164	553 593	623 680	603 667	649 935	9284 6579
1912: to from	646 491	160 229	135 341	540 413	625 504	798 197	550 570	547 340	623 108	611 424	498 569	343 587	6076 4773
1913: to from	1049 730	1364 436	1558 572	1404 721	1271 737	860 986	745 589	1115 1121	719 824	630 1275	538 1015	511 1171	11764 10177
1914: to from	1167 560	1064 735	1246 910	977 508	400 875	1531 460	1430 664	403 4543	46 300	31 749	39 292	508 447	8824 11023
1915: to from	776 453	49 1108											

Note: The figures indicate the number of migrant workers passing the two northernmost border posts.

Source: Stals, "Die aanraking", p.333.

It is probable that the stronger kings adapted the institutions of the raiding party to labour migration. Several times between 1900 and 1925 it was reported that Ovambo migrants travelled in groups and refused to be broken up^[57]. Indeed, one Omaruru farmer on the route put the average number of each at 100-150, a size equivalent to the raiding party. Migration statistics for

55. Lebzelter, *Eingeborenenkulturen*, p.219, also p.209.

56. Möller, *Journey*, p.117.

57. Lenssen, *Chronik*, p.171 (1904/5); Nitsche, *Ovamboland*, p.135 (c.1910/11); Stals, "Die aanraking", p.325 (1910), also p.331 for possible government reinforcement of tribal authority; SWA Administrator, *Annual Report 1921*, p.12.

the period 1910-14 tend to confirm that the six month maximum period of absence usually stipulated by the king^[58] was being observed by many workers. In 1904-5 one Ovambo king, Nehale, was strong enough to enforce a ban on migration after German provocation^[59]. In Ukwanyama, the continuing ability of the king to bargain with rival Portuguese and German recruiters indicates a degree of regulation over outgoing workers. It may be tentatively concluded that the Ovambo kings attempted to retain some control over this new source of revenue by putting migrants under their own representatives, by limiting the period of absence, and by sanctions against those who disobeyed royal injunctions.

It is not likely, however, that after the four-fold increase in the annual rate of migration between 1907 and 1910, the kings could continue to exercise detailed personal supervision over the recruitment, dispatch and return of the labourers. Schlettwein's description was written before this escalation; nor is it known whether most or all migrants travelled in groups, or whether those who did were always led by tribal officials. As early as 1902, a drought year, the northern recruiting station reported a surplus of new arrivals over demand, and according to Stals, "many Ovambos" at this time were coming "on their own initiative"^[60]. Later, while the five to seven months lag between emigration and return may indicate observance of the royal injunction, it also conformed roughly to the rhythm of peasant production, the men returning in time either for field preparation in spring or for cattle pasturing^[61] and the harvest in late summer.

Interpretation of the migration statistics for the period 1910-14 is not easy, since at least three out of the five years saw bad harvests, and short-term variations were at times strongly influenced by local hostilities and anti-colonial resistance^[62]. In general, however, they support the view that periods of labour migration were integrated with the seasonal cycle of subsistence production. Peaks of emigration tended to follow closely periods of heavy demand upon male labour-time, or to coincide with crop or pasture failures. Comparison of the out-migration figures for 1912, a year of good rainfall, with those for 1911 and 1913 shows, predictably, that the seasonal peaks were much reduced in expectation of good crops and pastures. It also reveals that the total for 1912 was still 60 per cent of the average for 1911 and 1913, indicating the scale on which labour migration was by this time structurally necessary.

In general, the statistical evidence remains ambiguous on this question. For the purpose of preventing permanent emigration and the loss of both labour-power and revenue, a short maximum period of migration was as much in the king's interest as was continuous supervision of the migrants. Since both maximising the output in cattle and securing tribute labour and military service remained principal state concerns, it is likely that the king's policy would have reinforced the tendency to articulate migration with the seasonal production cycle. Nevertheless, the steady flow underlying the seasonal climatic peaks indicates that such articulation was of lesser importance to a substantial number. When taken together with the gaps between the kings' promises to recruiters and their actual fulfilment, it also suggests that tributary states could do little more than organise peasants acting in their own interest.

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58. Nitsche, *Ovamboland*, p.136; Lüderitzbucht Chamber of Mines, *Annual Report*, 4/3/11, (in NA 4994/1227 Consul - Sec. NA 29/8/11), p.3.
 59. Cf. Lennsen, p.171; Leutwein, p.195-6.
 60. Stals, "Die aanraking", p.326.
 61. Many migrants not possessing cattle could expect subsequently to build a herd through kinship mechanisms or through barter exchange using purchased goods.
 62. These remarks apply particularly to Ukwanyama (Stals, "Die aanraking", pp.334-5; see NA 4994/1227, Consul, memo. January 1912; memo 14/2/13, press extracts).

Indirect rule

The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 intruded abruptly upon relations between the colonial and the tributary states. After a brief skirmish with a German force the Portuguese abandoned the whole of southern Angola in panic. The Germans, however, soon had to confront an invading force from South Africa. In the brief hiatus that followed, the Kwanyama king Mandume, who had since his accession in 1911 substantially reasserted royal ascendancy over his *elenga* by combining autocracy with populist measures, attempted to establish Ukwanyama as the leading military power in Ovamboland. This embryonic paramountcy can be seen as a new stage in the uneven evolution of the tributary states.

But the tendency lasted barely long enough to reveal its form. In mid-1915 the Portuguese returned in force to inflict a total and bloody defeat upon Ukwanyama, and the leadership and sections of the surviving population fled across the border. Representatives of the South African invading force, arriving at the same time from the south, found Ovamboland in the grip of severe famine and were able to establish an administrative presence without opposition. From this point the character of colonial rule north and south of the border diverges, and I will be concerned for the most part only with the latter.

From the outset the new colonial power applied to its northern reserves the standard principles of indirect rule: a skeleton administration, relying on the personal and paternalist influence of white officials, and backed where necessary by overwhelming military force; minimal interference in tribal affairs; and the least possible state expenditure. Politically, the government attempted, with some success, to secure the collaboration of the *elenga* by recognising their executive authority and by setting up councils of headmen as the subordinate judicial and political authority where kings were non-existent or deposed. Relations with the kings, still potential symbols of resistance within their communities, and occasionally on a broader front, were often uneasy and two were deliberately deposed by force^[63]. Aside from the obvious advantages of collaboration, the *elenga* had little option but to cooperate: raiding and violent methods of extortion, their principal revenue-earners, were suppressed and trading was reduced to an illegal trickle^[64]. There were no permanent stores before 1925 and very few itinerant traders, while barter exchange across the Angolan border remained on a small scale.

Collaboration, on the other hand, formalised their delegated local powers of land allocation, their rights, sometimes usurped from deposed kings, to taxation on grain and cattle and to tribute labour, and their control over migrant labour. The price of confirmation in their executive and taxation rights was subordination as administrative 'headmen' to the overlordship of colonial officials, whose chief priority now lay in the labour requirements of the colonial economy.

The form of colonial intervention struck at the core of the tributary states by either removing or emasculating their central political and ideological institution, the kingship. The power of the co-opted *elenga* was confined to more or less fixed districts within each cluster. The social formation was now articulated at the level of the reserve administration in the overriding interest of colonial capital.

Under the pragmatism implied by the policy of co-option, particular variations between clusters were occasionally considerable. In general, however, lineage relations of production, with which the patronage mechanisms of headmen tended to mesh, strengthened at the expense of antagonistic methods of surplus appropriation, which were in any case limited and standardised by the colonial administration. Cattle levies were substantially reduced and their principal trading

63. Mandume of Ukwanyama (1917) and Ipumbu of Ukwambi (1932); on the former, see NA 4994/1227, correspondence March-September, 1916.

64. NA 4994/1227, Res.Comm. - SWA Sec. 1/3/16, Report; Schoch, diary 24/6/20 (Ombalantu).

purpose, the acquisition of arms, was banned as were most of the arbitrary methods of expropriation such as 'judicial raids'. Colonial taxation was not introduced until 1929, and even then could be paid in kind. The trend in the use of tribute labour was unclear, but demands by the colonial administration were small and periodic, while one major activity employing younger men, raiding, was now ended.

The sudden ending of inter-tribal raiding removed one major disincentive from colonising the forest belts or from exploiting them more freely for raw materials. Ukwanyama is likely to have been an exception to this general conclusion, however. Refugees from the Portuguese military conquest in 1915, from the redrawing of pre-colonial boundary further south in 1926, and from Portuguese repression and taxation, continued to settle on a narrow strip of territory adjoining the border in substantial numbers. The incidence of labour migration, in contrast to the pre-conquest years, was if anything slightly above the regional average in the mid 1920s, when Kwanyama men accounted for 60 per cent of all contract workers from Ovamboland^[65].

For lack of direct evidence any assessment of the impact of these changes in social relations on either the level of production or the labour process must remain speculative. With traders barred before 1925 and the export of cattle banned, the only means of access to capitalist-produced commodities was through wage labour by migration. For the kings and headmen, the taxation-in-kind of returning migrants, whether formal or informal, was thus their only means other than government subsidies of acquiring items of luxury consumption or prestige. For peasants, on the other hand, direct dependence on external commodities was still small, except where ideologically induced as amongst the growing number of Christians. Indigenous smiths continued to produce the bulk of the instruments of production well into the 1920s, although their long-term fate was sealed by the loss of their ore sites at Otavi and Kassinga to capitalist concerns.

Table 3. Usual expenditure of an Ovambo contract worker, late 1920s (£)

At work	'Gifts'	Clothes	Purchases:		Total wage ^a
			Police Zone	Ondangwa	
5	4	4	10	4-5	30

Note a For 10 "months", the earning is approximately 300 shifts, or nearly one calendar year. This figure suggests a rate of 2/- per shift, rather high when compared with the minimum rates then prevailing.

Source: Lebzelter, *Eingeborenenkulturen*, p.219.

But stock levels were undoubtedly generally lower following the devastating drought of 1915-16. They were also more unevenly distributed in the aftermath of heavy taxation and raiding. Trade goods bought with wages were one ready means of acquiring cattle by exchange. An assessment in the late 1920s of the average expenditure pattern of Ovambo migrants points to such a tendency: out of an annual wage of £30, fully one-third was spent on "purchases", and a further £4-5 at the mine store by then established in Ovamboland. Aside from taxation ('gifts' to tribal functionaries), much of the remainder went on the worker's own reproduction costs. The lower and fairly stable rate of migration throughout the 1920s suggests that subject to the determining framework of long-term or periodic impoverishment and of pressures by headmen, the principal objectives of migration were two-fold: first, to acquire items of exchange for means of production, particularly the case with younger men establishing a homestead; second, ideologically determined consumption, fulfilling household, prestige or religious needs. But in view of the scanty evidence, this must remain a tentative hypothesis.

65. Pritchard, *Report*; Loeb, *In feudal Africa*, pp.37, 43; SWA Administrator, *Annual Report 1926*, pp.34-35.

The gender economy of labour migration

Finally, the question, although often taken for granted, must be asked: why was labour migration an exclusively male preserve? Much of the answer has already been implied. Men monopolised the long-distance seasonal migrations to the cattle posts, an annual experience for many from boyhood onwards. The cooperation and shared solidarity of men in groups drawn from a number of homesteads was reproduced in a more intense form in the long-distance raiding parties of the 30-40 years before colonisation in 1915.

Correspondingly, the increasing loss of cattle through taxation, judicial raids and inter-tribal warfare hit at the foundation of male economic power and social prestige. On the other hand, although a minority were severely victimised by raiding, women's labour and its products were less generally affected by the increased surplus appropriation, the absolute decline in cattle production, and the heavier demand for tribute labour. The first phase of labour migration can be interpreted in part as a period of uneasy cooperation between younger men and the rulers of the tributary states, transferring the ideological prestige, the tradition of male solidarity, and the organisational experience of the raiding party and the cattle trek to the long-distance work-gang.

By the time South Africans took over, the pattern was entrenched. For women, land for fields became more accessible. For men, although surplus appropriation and tribute labour were reduced, they were not ended. Labour contracts remained a principal means whereby younger men paid tribute and accumulated the savings in cattle needed to marry and establish a homestead. Women, who had in any case been excluded from the start from the colonial regimes' recruiting mechanisms, continued to reach the towns in small numbers after 1915 as before, despite the extreme hardships and illegalities of travel. But they were totally barred from the large-scale employment on the mines, public works, and railways, to which at that time contract workers were exclusively directed.

The intrusion of the wage relation strengthened the articulation of productive and reproductive roles. Male labour power was now removed from the agrarian production cycle for long, continuous periods. Despite attempts by both peasants and the tributary states to render the articulation non-antagonistic, the reduction in available labour time, as opposed to means of subsistence, decreased both the forms of output for which men were alone responsible (cattle, hunting) and also heavy labour inputs at points of peak seasonal demand, as well as small kinds of craft and repair work. Since wages were calculated at little above the worker's immediate subsistence, this loss could only be compensated, and even then only partially, by an intensification of women's labour and an extension of their role in the labour process.

Worker consciousness and labour action

Up to this point I have considered tendencies towards class-formation within the Ovambo social formation, forms of surplus appropriation, their impact on the direct producers and the technical division of labour and the space for tactical manoeuvre remaining to peasants to cope with the resulting pressures. The structural constraints left migrant workers little scope - though probably rather more in the 1920s - for exploiting tactically the duality of their class position, although the evidence suggests that the kings reinforced for their own ends attempts by peasants to integrate wage-labour with the agricultural production cycle. It remains to be seen to what extent labour migrants exploited that scope as wage-labourers, and the forms of consciousness and collective action they developed in struggle within capitalist relations of production.

A number of general factors operated to condition the manner in which labour migrants came to experience wage-labour. The length and difficulty of the migration routes was not the least of these. The tracks to Okaukuejo and Namutoni were almost waterless during the dry winter

months, as were long stretches of the roads in central Namibia, where water-holes had become private property. Food for the trip had to be carried. In the early years mortality was high^[66]. Although railway travel and official measures in 1911 improved conditions in the Police Zone somewhat, contemporary accounts make it plain that the journey was an ordeal not lightly to be undertaken. The Lüderitzbucht Chamber of Mines complained both before and after 1915 at the number of migrant workers who had to be hospitalised on arrival. In the late 1940s workers were still cooped up for days en route in cattle trucks without food or water^[67].

Whether or not parties set out under the discipline of the kings' delegates, such conditions were conducive to group solidarity, notably for protection against robbers on the return leg^[68]. Since most workers came on fixed-period contracts with large employers, the travel-party is likely to have held together through the employment period and the return journey^[69]. In an environment both unfamiliar and hostile, the traditions of male group solidarity reinforced the cohesion of the travelling and working party.

Conditions at the rough construction and mining camps were generally, though not uniformly, harsh^[70]. The sharp temperature variations inland and particularly the cold and damp climate of the coastal desert rendered workers from sub-tropical Ovamboland vulnerable to disease. Accommodation was often primitive, sometimes non-existent; company rations were commonly insufficient for basic survival in good health and alternative shop supplies were rarely available. On the isolated diamond fields and railway construction sites, labour supervision, necessarily self-reliant, was frequently violent. Workers too had little protection from swindling^[71].

In such circumstances, avoidance of the worst locations and the most notorious employers, as well as tactics for self-defence on the work-sites, were at times a matter of life and death. The work itself was heavy and dangerous in construction and underground mining, lighter but tedious in diamond recovery. In all cases large bodies of workers were concentrated in the production process and residence, an environment which facilitated communication and collective forms of action. Wages on the diamond fields were relatively high by the standards of a forced labour economy, but the fact that thousands of contract workers from the Cape earned two-and-a-half times as much on the railways must have been well-known^[72]. Taken overall, the contrasts between the work environments and routines of agrarian production and wage-labour could hardly have been more extreme. On the other hand, workers could draw on a number of organisational and ideological resources to strengthen their tenuous bargaining position.

At the most general level labour consciousness in a workforce finds expression in patterns of communication and common response. In Namibia, the constant circulation of labour migrants between isolated centres of peasant and capitalist production fostered communication networks which could be put to effective tactical use. A particularly clear instance of such a network in operation occurred in 1924-25 on the diamond fields^[73]. Conditions on the fields at this time were so bad that in 1924 there were no fewer than 296 cases of scurvy, an incidence of 50 per 1,000. As many as 52 actually died; and overall mortality was an astronomical 437, or 74 per 1,000. Very

66. Schoch, diary 17/6/20; Stals, "Die aanraking", pp.324-5.

67. Cf eg Sec. State FA - Consul 5/6/12 (enclosure); LCoM, Annual Report 1910/11; LCoM - IM 16/10/16, and IM's comments (IM 10/16); V. Ndadi, *Breaking contract*, (Oakland, Cal., LSM Press, 1974), pp.20-1.

68. Stals, "Die aanraking", p.324; A. Graham, *The response of African societies in Namibia to white administration, 1915-39*, (MA, London, SOAS, 1971), p.11.

69. Cf Nitsche, *Ovamboland*, p.135.

70. For details, Stals, "Die aanraking", pp.334-343; NA 2410/1227 (c1910-12); after 1915, IM reports. After new regulations came into force in March 1911 and January 1912, conditions of employment and travel improved somewhat, but were still bleak (see MM 2070/17, Herbst, memo 17/5/17).

71. NA 4994/1227, Consul, memo 30/6/10; MM 2070/17, NA Officer, Lüderitz - SWA Sec. 8/5/17. On the forced labour regime generally, Bley, *SWA*, part 3.

72. A.F. Calvert, *SWA during the German occupation, 1884-1914*, (London, T.W. Laurie, 1915), p.23.

73. Statistics from IM reports and SWA Administrator, *Annual Reports*.

few of these deaths can have resulted from accidents at work. At the same time, the average monthly Ovambo workforce dropped from 3,565 in May 1924 to a low of 1,513 exactly a year later. New arrivals totalled a mere 214 in the last half of 1924, compared with 1,901 for the same period in 1923. Furthermore, assuming the one-year contracts which were then standard^[74], departures in July 1924 exceeded arrivals in July 1923 by the abnormally large figure of 224.

Since the respective harvests can have played little part - good in 1922/23 and below normal in 1923/24 - the figures suggest a concerted boycott as migrants returning in the first part of the year warned their comrades of this death-trap. Indeed in the following year, while overall recruitment from northern Namibia remained the same, the number actually on the mines fell by 22 per cent over the 1924 average, and on the diamond fields themselves by 38 per cent. Conditions were so extreme that a group of 163 Xhosa contract workers, who, the South-West African Administrator complained, "had a mania for making complaints", made a suicidal bid to escape to South Africa across the Namib desert, in which at least 14 died^[75].

The evidence is too fragmentary to permit close analysis of types of worker action during these early years. Nevertheless, migrants appear to have discriminated actively over terms of employment in a way which presumes a degree of consensus over tactics. Conditions on farms were notorious and they were effectively boycotted from an early stage^[76]. Workers resisted contracting for periods which would interfere with the next season's agrarian production, and when deceived insisted on terminating before completion^[77].

As early as 1909-10, they were sufficiently alive to tactical openings to use the Tsumeb copper mine as a temporary staging-post en route to the diamond fields. At a time when migration to the south had reached full flood, the Tsumeb mine was so undermanned - "because a pronounced emigration of Ovambos to the Lüderitzbucht diamond fields became disturbingly noticeable"^[78] - that it had to import 250 expensive 'Cape Boys' to maintain production. At this time the fields were offering better wages and hours, and the work was lighter and above ground^[79]. Tsumeb was soon notorious amongst Cape workers as well, although a German official later reported a considerable improvement in conditions^[80]. At the end of 1917 it is interesting to note that the positions were reversed: with wage-rates now equal, Tsumeb now had a full labour complement at the same time that the fields were over 1,000 men short^[81].

In general, choice of employer could often be a matter of life and death. It is perhaps significant that at the same time that the mortality on the diamond fields rose to an incredible 149.6 per 1,000 (year to March 1911), both the total number of incoming migrants and the average fields workforce changed little between 1910 and 1911, respectively years of good rainfall and dire famine. Similarly, the year to March 1913, with the new labour regulations in force and a mortality rate down to 41, saw the fields workforce increase by 38 per cent over 1911/12 and by 6 per cent of the total recruited over the same months^[82].

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74. Arrivals and departures correlate fairly closely at a lag of one year during 1923-25.
 75. SWA Administrator, *Annual Report 1924*, pp.22-3, which also describes CDM's desperate recruiting drive throughout southern Africa for alternative labour supplies.
 76. United Kingdom, Foreign Office, *South West Africa* (London, 1920. Handbook no. 112), p.43; SWA Administrator, *Annual Report 1921*, p.12.
 77. Lüderitzbucht Chamber of Mines, *Annual Report 1910/11*; Stals, "Die aanraking", p.330.
 78. Nitsche, *Ovamboland*, pp.135-6, translated. His figures for the black complement at Tsumeb, which established large short-term variations, suggest that the tactic was established practice.
 79. Calvert, *SWA*, p.23; Stals, "Die aanraking", pp.348, 343; NA 4994/1227, Consul, memo 30/6/10.
 80. Stals, "Die aanraking", p.341; NA 4349/639, Consul - Gov. Gen. 9/10/11.
 81. IM, *Annual Report 1917*. Other factors also probably influenced the workers' preference see below.
 82. Stals, "Die aanraking", p.337.

At the point of production there is some evidence of considerable resistance to intolerable conditions by workers acting individually or in small groups, mainly by desertion and by complaints to officialdom^[83]. The penalty for desertion, if not recapture, was frequently hardship or death on the road, and for "false complaint", arbitrary imprisonment or flogging^[84]. Neither option was to be lightly taken. Nevertheless, a minority of workers could, and did, take advantage of the willingness of some employers and recruiters in conditions of chronic labour shortage to take on workers illegally, by re-engaging or signing on outside state supervision^[85].

Individual action - "beating the system" - and passive resistance in a variety of forms are likely to have been the dominant modes of self-defense, particularly before 1912, in a work and social environment which was dehumanising and disorientating. Little is known of the extent or forms of collective action amongst Ovambo migrants before 1915. Ovambo workers were, however, involved as early as December 1893 in a strike for higher wages by the ethnically mixed workforce at SWACO's Gross Otavi mine, against a background of passive resistance which reveals, Gordon considers, a sharp appreciation of labour tactics^[86].

The reports of the government mining inspector between 1915 and 1925, on the other hand, provide ample evidence of the militancy and flexibility of workers' tactics, particularly on the diamond fields, where, as we saw earlier, conditions remained primitive and dangerous to life before the mid-1920s, with epidemic disease endemic. Workers exploited the demoralisation of the largely German field supervision after conquest, the reduced police cover, and the restrictions on arbitrary and corporal punishment^[87], to protest specific grievances and more generally to break up the discipline of capitalist production^[88]. Their principal tactics were the flash strike and the go-slow^[89], and both were widely used in a protracted struggle against the deferred pay system which the South Africans imposed in late 1915^[90].

Even at this early stage workers were able to generate a grass-roots leadership and a tradition of solidarity on which it could rely for effective support^[91]. By 1917 workers were operating "a kind of mutual benefit society" to indemnify those victimised in labour action^[92]. It is probable, to judge from official concern, that the politically conscious Cape workers who were employed in large numbers on railway building and, in the early 1920s, on the fields, materially aided by example and contact the raising of Ovambo worker consciousness^[93]. The Administrator^[94] could describe Lüderitz as being in the early 1920s

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83. Stals, "Die aanraking", pp.334-43 passim; cases are also scattered through the IM reports.
84. For the treatment of 'privileged' Cape workers who complained, see NA 2410/1227. For a detailed historical analysis, W. Beinart, "Jamani": Cape workers in German SWA, 1904-12", in W. Beinart & C. Bundy, *Hidden struggles in rural South Africa*, (London, James Currey, 1987), pp.166-90.
85. Cf Stals, "Die aanraking", pp.327, 329.
86. Gordon, "A note", pp.8-11.
87. Many IM reports, esp. MM 2070/17 Herbst, Memo., 17/5/17, p.2, 5, and Military Mag., report 2/2/17; IM LO 8/17, *Annual Report 1917*; IM 9/24.
88. IM 5/16, IM LO 10/24.
89. On strikes, IM 8/16; LCoM - IM 16/10/16 (IM 10/16); IM LO 6/17, 8/17, 12/24, 2/25, 9/25. On go-slows, MM 2070/17, Mil. Mag., report 2/2/17, NA Officer, Lüd. - SWA Sec. 8/5/17; IM LO, *Annual Report 1917*, 10/24, 2/25; IM 9/24, 2/25.
90. IM reports and memos, 1916-17. The system had been abolished by October 1917 to 'humour' the workers (IM 10/17).
91. IM 8/16; IM LO 8/17, 12/24; IM 8/16, 10/16; Mil. Mag., report 2/2/17; IM LO 8/17. For a synopsis of her research based on the Windhoek Archives, see E. Thompson, "Organised labor activities among Namibian workers, 1910-1950", paper presented to the *International Conference in Solidarity with the Struggle of the People of Namibia*, Paris, 1980.
92. IM LO, *Annual Report 1917*.
93. Eg NA 4349/639, NA Dept., memo 8/15, enclosure: Minutes of Landesrat 14/5/12.
94. SWA Administrator, *Annual Report 1924*, pp.27-8. As a fishing port, Lüderitz had already attracted Cape fishermen, who were politically active. The results of extensive research on the UNIA/ICU movement in the early 1970s is to be found in G. Pirio, *The role of Garveyism in the making of the southern African working class and Namibian nationalism*, paper, Univ. of California, 1982, and A.B. Emmett, *The rise of African nationalism in Namibia (1915-1966)*, (PhD, Johannesburg, Univ. of the Witwatersrand, 1987).

the centre of the Native political movement in this country. Several Unions were in existence there, the chief of which were the Universal Negro Improvement Association and ... the International (sic) and Commercial Workers' Union.

Nor was militancy confined to the fields. At Tsumeb, a strike by black workers in 1920 followed one by their white counterparts, who were unionised and militant until broken by the management in 1925^[95]. A description in 1925 of Tsumeb^[96], where workers, mostly Ovambo, were taken on at the mine rather than recruited through the contract labour administration, highlights the degree of relative autonomy which workers had secured:

From the 1st to the 8th of every month the underground complement is depleted, the natives absenting themselves from work; some stay in the compound or do a round of the 30-odd stores in the village, others go away into the bush for a bit, and others even, without word or sign return to their homes.

During the six months (September 1924 - February 1925), the last week's complement was an average of 36 per cent greater than the first week's in any one month; and the management admitted that it had little option but to acquiesce. Most workers also preferred to build their own houses rather than live in the compound, so as to bring their families with them^[97]. Even the few Ovambos on farms were asserting their interests by deserting after six to eight months^[98].

Table 4. Monthly totals of workers recruited in Ovamboland

Year	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
1926:													
Ov.	250	344	603	541	316	290	454	382	395	144	173	141	4033
Ang.	70	97	170	152	90	81	140	60	109	44	72	49	1134
1927:													
Ov.	408	554	1062	361	325	335	356	308	159	101	97	145	4211
Ang.	56	82	222	101	204	117	150	137	66	106	57	105	1403
1928:													
both	319	604	648	690	621	432	469	300	179	209	184	246	4091
1929:													
Ov.	383	301	390	588	475	218	240	230	117	106	65	158	3271
Ang.	106	54	121	232	321	224	218	216	115	79	117	82	1905
1930:													
Ov.	242	428	355	154	491	287	307	107	19	9	16	92	2507
Ang.	125	150	153	97	182	247	316	191	33	29	42	84	1649

Note: The rows distinguish workers arriving from south ('Ovamboland') and north ('Angola') of the border with Angola.

Source: SWA Administrator, *Annual Report 1926-30*.

It will be apparent that the conventional image of migrant workers as 'docile' and helpless labour units is a poor parody of the reality; that isolation did not prevent them developing a labour consciousness and tactics of struggle appropriate to their circumstances; and that this consciousness did not grow in simple linear proportion to length of industrial experience. These points do not, however, shed light on the general trend in the formation of class consciousness as peasants or workers in labour migrants. That a constant trickle of migrants continued to settle permanently in Police Zone towns; that women as well as men fled to the south from the 1915

95. Schoch, diary 12/7/20; IM 10/24, 8/25.

96. IM 3/25, cf also 10/24.

97. IM LO, *Annual Report 1917*; SWA, *Report of the Drought Investigation Commission*, (Windhoek, 1924), para 299.

98. SWA *Drought Investigation Commission*, para 295, evidence of K. Altman (from central Namibia), 3.

famine^[99]; and that a semi-permanent settled community formed at Tsumeb, which for long remained largely outside the contract labour system, suggests a commitment to their proletarian status by a minority. But it is unlikely to have been an attractive option, even in the towns, except for those whose returns from subsistence production were becoming regularly sub-marginal.

In the early 1920s the impact of evangelical Christianity, reflected in the inculcation of the work ethic, the costs of church maintenance and new cash essentials (such as clothes, compulsory under the Finnish Mission), was still slight, albeit increasing. In 1913-14, the Finnish Mission (mainly Ondonga) had 2,873 members and the Rhenish Mission (Ukwanyama) 729. By 1930, the former had increased its members to 23,126^[100]. Some migrants were still trying to buy cattle and horses^[101]; and migration statistics for 1927 suggest that although the minimum contract period permitted was now usually a year, migrants were nevertheless timing their departure to follow the planting and harvest seasons. The evidence, although of course inconclusive, does suggest that most migrants exploited what limited scope their class duality allowed them to assert the primacy of their peasant interests; but that within the capitalist production process they rapidly developed effective tactics of common or collective struggle and a tradition of solidarity.

The formation of the contract labour system

Whichever of their class interests was dominant, the ability of labour migrants to exploit their opportunities as workers presented colonial capital with a considerable challenge. Both the German and the South African colonial administrations were pre-occupied with the task of subordinating worker bargaining power to the exigencies of large-scale capitalist production. Above all, with labour chronically short and its quantity rather than terms more important in the first instance, they were concerned to ensure its distribution proportionate to requirements by preventing a bidding up of wages in which not all concerns could compete equally.

Comprehensive labour-repressive legislation enforced by a strong works supervision and police force would partially have achieved the first objective. Neither colonial regime was slow to take legal powers - indeed, almost the first major South African enactment applied its domestic mining labour law to Namibia^[102]. But as we have seen, German controls were not fully effective, and the local officials compensated with arbitrary violence; nor before the mid-1920s, was South African legislation effective either. Crucial to the South African system, both to eliminate the mobility of labour and to establish round-the-clock social control, was compulsory residence in a bachelor compound. It is likely that full implementation could only have followed the completion of major new blocks by CDM in 1925 and by Tsumeb in 1926^[103].

The key to effective control, however, lay in regulating the circulation of labour. Both regimes legislated for a compulsory contract system with criminal penalties for evasion, and for official supervision of re-hiring. These laws were reinforced by a thicket of labour-repressive proclamations, particularly pass and vagrancy enactments, applied to the black Police Zone population^[104]. But the Germans never stamped out illegal recruiting, and despite tight restrictions on licensed recruiters, never entirely eliminated the workers' ability to choose between them.

99. NA 4994/1227, Res. Comm. - SWA Sec. 1/3/16, report, part IV p.4.

100. Stals, "Die aanraking", p.285; G.K.H. Töttemeyer, *Die rol van die Wambo-elites in die politieke ontwikkeling van Owambo*, (PhD, Univ. Stellenbosch, 1974), p.82.

101. WU Arch, AB851, Rev. Tobias, letter 14/12/24.

102. Mines and Works Proc. 3-17, specifically modelled on the gold mines (SWA Administrator, *Annual Report 1922*, p.16).

103. IM 1924-5, esp. 11/25; SWA Administrator, *Annual Report 1926*, p.91.

104. Bley, *SWA*, pp.170-3; Stals, "Die aanraking", p.323ff; Moorsom, *Colonisation and proletarianisation: an exploratory investigation of the formation of the working class in Namibia under German and South African colonial rule to 1945*, (MA, Brighton, Univ. of Sussex, 1973), chapters 4 & 5.

The South African administration in Ovamboland, on taking responsibility for recruiting, channelled supplies of Ovambo labour to the mines and railways^[105]. But whether or not it tried to cut out worker choice, it was not successful in the early years^[106]. However, in order to dampen down the often extreme clashes between the cycles of peasant and capitalist production, it soon imposed a standard length of contract - one year for the mines - thereby robbing the labour migrant of the opportunity to articulate wage-labour with subsistence production.

The prolonged labour crisis in the diamond industry between 1923 and 1925 prompted the colonial administration to act decisively to remove the worker's ability to discriminate between employers. After previous attempts had failed, conferences of the large employers in 1925 (government, railways and mines) established early in 1926 a semi-official recruiting monopoly in the form of the Northern and the Southern Labour Organisations, precursors of the South West African Native Labour Organisation (SWANLA)^[107]. Henceforth, the only option allowed to labour migrants was whether or not to migrate; once recruited, workers were graded for job categories according to a rough scale of physical fitness, and assigned arbitrarily to employers. A more complete mechanism for the reduction of workers to atomised units of labour power could hardly have been devised. It was to last unaltered until the great contract workers' strike in 1971-72 for the abolition of the contract labour system.

105. SWA Administrator, *Annual Report 1919*, p.5, also p.24 and p.21.

106. Eg Herbst, memo, 17/5/17, p.5; and discussion of Tsumeb above.

107. IM 5-6/23, 9/23, 3-6/24; SWA Administrator, *Annual Report 1922*, p.14; 1925, p.28; 1926, p.36.

3. Underdevelopment, Contract Labour and Worker Consciousness in Namibia, 1915-72^[1]

Richard Moorsom

Introduction

In mid-December 1971, thousands of contract workers at Walvis Bay and Windhoek struck against the contract labour system in Namibia. During the following month, the workers' rebellion escalated into a general strike involving some 20,000 migrant labourers, which in the second half of January 1972 sparked a half-stalled peasant insurrection in the densely-populated northern bantustan of Ovamboland. The general outline and causes of the strike have been ably analysed elsewhere^[2]. As yet, however, little attention has been devoted to the structural determinants and historical evolution of worker consciousness in Namibia. The fact that the recent disruption of South Africa's periphery of 'buffer' states has sharply widened the strategic options available to the liberation movement in Namibia gives added priority to such an analysis. The purpose of this essay is therefore to discuss some of the background factors conditioning the consciousness of the Ovambo contract workers and to make a few tentative observations on the general significance of the strike for its participants.

The analysis of systems of recurrent labour migration, particularly in social formations in which capitalist relations of production have intruded upon, but only partially destroyed a pre-existing peasantry, still lacks an adequate set of working concepts, let alone a coherent theory. Recent work on southern Africa has highlighted the cost-saving function of migrant labour to large employers of unskilled labour in such a social formation, and the impact of capitalist exchange relations and governmental coercion on subsistence or peasant societies. But labour migration itself has largely remained the province of economists and anthropologists of the liberal school,^[3] whose descriptive generalisations, while reflecting some of the major issues, have only limited explanatory power for the analysis of worker strategy and social consciousness^[4]. Labour migrants have been represented as a category of the peasantry, alternatively as a mass of impotent labour units, or, schizophrenically, straddling the logical chasm of the 'dual economy' as 'men of two worlds'.

While I lack space for theoretical digression, a few general clarifications are necessary. Labour migrants, members of a social stratum in transition from small-scale agrarian production to wage-labour, possess an objectively divided class interest. In the former, they control the product of their labour until consumed or exchanged; in the latter, they sell their labour-power as commodity. When not coerced, workers' strategy, although most fundamentally determined by the relative returns to labour, is modified by a number of factors. While the family remains the basic economic and social unit, its active members are systematically aggregated not only in space but also in the

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1. This paper can be taken as no more than a preliminary interpretation. The concluding section on the 1971-72 general strike must be regarded as provisional, since much evidence is not accessible, for obvious reasons. Although I have avoided apartheid terminology so far as possible, the organisation of data in official publications sometimes necessitates the use of its categories. In the text, 'Police Zone' refers to the area in which the German colonial administration exercised authority, and 'Northern Zone' to the area outside it, comprising principally the four northernmost bantustans.
 2. R. Simons, "The Namibian challenge", paper *Namibia International Conference*, Brussels, May, 1972; J. Kane-Berman, *Contract labour in SWA* (Johannesburg, South African Institute of Race Relations, RR 30/72).
 3. Amongst others, notable exceptions are Arrighi's study of the proletarianisation of the Rhodesian peasantry in G. Arrighi and J. Saul, *Essays on the political economy of Africa* (Monthly Review Press, 1973); D. Clarke, *Contract workers and underdevelopment in Rhodesia* (Mambo Press, 1974); and C. van Onselen, *Chibaro* (Pluto Press, 1976).
 4. For instance, a 1969 thesis on Ovambo migrant labour, explicitly modelled on Schapera, could conclude that 'on a large level, there have been few harmful effects' (p. 144); that while 'hardships' do exist, 'they are not considered to be of paramount importance by the Ovambo' (p. 145); and that such changes as have occurred in 'tribal' society 'have had stabilising effect on all levels of Ovambo cultural and social life' (p. 148) (P.D. Banghart, *Migrant labour in SWA and its effects on Ovambo tribal life* (MA, Univ. Stellenbosch, 1969).

labour process and in working and living conditions. The respective conditions of material life within a capitalist and peasant society and the frequency of migration itself will therefore influence the relationship between objective class position and ideological commitment. A further factor in this respect is the rate and direction of transformation of the respective modes of production, particularly within the peasantry. Clearly visible deterioration in rural production within a migrant's working lifetime is likely to strain that acquiescence in the permanency of the system as a whole on which ideological acceptance of its institutions depends.

Nevertheless the most fundamental underlying determinant of social consciousness rests in the mode of acquiring means of subsistence. Within the peasant subsistence economy, necessary cash income (beyond impositions such as taxation) is a function both of the average surplus/deficit in production for subsistence and of implements for production and household use available only from capitalist producers. In general, the critical watershed in the balance of class commitment for labour migrants is likely to be the point at which with a substantial proportion of peasant families indispensably dependent on income from wage-labour, such income becomes necessary not merely for the migrant's own subsistence and for household and production implements but also to supplement the basic food requirements of his family as well.

Resource imperialism and racial labour control

Any consideration of the situation of migrant workers in Namibia needs to be set in the context of the political economy of the particular kind of colonialism which 50 years of South African rule has erected in that country. Namibia is a classic example of 'resource imperialism'. Investment means of production has come overwhelmingly from foreign sources, and has remained under foreign control. It has also been dominated by either transnational corporations or capitalists from the colonial metropolis.

The Ovambo-Nkhumbi population cluster forms an island of dense settlement near the north-west fringe of the vast, sparsely populated Kalahari basin. In the second half of the nineteenth century it became the interface of competition between interior trading networks linked to industrial capitalist metropolises. Before the turn of the century, however, capital formation in both Namibia and South West Angola was limited to trading posts, scattered farming settlements, and land and mineral speculation.

Mining has been the leading sector during most phases of the expansion of the productive forces. In 1906 the Tsumeb copper mine, still by far the largest base mineral producer in Namibia, began operations; and two years later the discovery of diamonds in southern Namibia triggered an immediate rush. Between 1914 and 1946 production was periodically disrupted by wars and by wild fluctuations in world demand, but since the Second World War there has been steady expansion. These two mines still account for the greater part of mineral output today, in terms of both value and labour power exploited. Simultaneously, and particularly in the past 15 years, a wide range of small and medium-sized mines have been opened up. The latest project, now under development, is the large-scale open-cast uranium mine at Rössing. Nearly all are owned by South African parastatals. The entire product is exported to the industrial centres of world capitalism, with no local manufacturing.

Settler farming, the second major capitalist sector in Namibia, was promoted by the German colonial regime with only limited success; but under South African settlement programmes it developed rapidly. In the centre and north cattle ranching for export was dominant; and in the arid south the rearing of karkul sheep for lambs' pelts, much in demand on the lucrative Western fashion market, was developed extensively from the mid-1930s. Today, agriculture is dominated entirely by commercial settler farming, mostly by individual proprietors or partnerships, many of whom are absentee.

The third sector, fishing, only attracted capital after the Second World War, but has since expanded into a major processing and canning export industry, exploiting one of the world's richest fishing grounds. The pelagic fishery, the largest locally based sub-sector, is controlled by a handful of Afrikaner-owned companies who can or process the entire catch in modern factories, largely at Walvis Bay, for export to South Africa or Europe.

In each sector the structure of ownership is distinctive: mining has been dominated from the first by international corporations based mainly in South Africa and North America; fishing by a group of companies strongly linked to 'Afrikaner' capital; and stock-raising, notwithstanding the existence of a few ranching companies, by settler and absentee farmers.

It is clear that each major producing sector of capital in Namibia is interested in the local population solely as producers and not as consumers, and even then, not as producers of goods but as sellers or reproducers of labour-power. This simplicity of interest allows a straightforward concentration on maximising profits and output, and an uncomplicated relationship with the colonial state. In return for the investment which finances its economic exploitation and military priorities, the colonial regime guarantees both a rate of profit competitive with other potential zones of exploitation and the conditions for stable investment planning.

One of the means by which it achieves this end is a generous servicing function: low taxation rates, profit repatriation, permissive industrial legislation, and adequate infrastructure. The other is a system of labour repression which in the latest form has come to be known as 'apartheid'. This system performs both an economic and a political function. In terms of the former, it is a consciously devised mechanism for structuring the sources and quantities of labour supply, as well as minimising its cost to employers. The criterion for such discrimination is primarily, though not exclusively, race identity. Politically, the system denies representation or status to most of the working class and seeks to destroy political or trade union organisations with any degree of popular support.

Capital in Namibia, lacking a manufacturing sector, has been able to organise its labour process without difficulty to conform to the system. Artisans, technicians, managers, and the higher grades of administrative and supervisory staff can be recruited in South Africa and drawn from the industrial metropolises by a premium in salaries and fringe benefits. The job category boundary coincides invariably with the racial criterion which restricts political rights to whites. Below this line, apartheid provides for limited flexibility by allowing intermediate groups, mostly 'coloureds' (person of mixed race), into low-level supervisory, clerical, semi-skilled or, in a few instances, artisan categories on a free labour market basis. So rigidly hierarchical a labour process depends, however, on drawing nearly all its productive labour-power from a mass pool of unskilled workers, all of whom, under apartheid, are blacks - a few coloured, the remainder African.

Mobility between the racially-defined job strata is virtually non-existent, even where it is not forbidden in law; and is meaningless within that stratum for black unskilled labourers. But for blacks, apartheid is more than an all-embracing job colour-bar: it is a totalitarian system of controls upon every aspect of their lives. It hinges upon the denial to blacks of any rights outside barren, remote reserves, a denial policed by pass and contract laws which put absolute control over job allocation, residence and mobility in the hands of colonial officials.

There have been, however, significant historical variations in the system. German colonisation expropriated and proletarianised most of the sparse indigenous population of the 'Police Zone', but left the densely-settled peasantry of Ovamboland untouched. The German policy of genocide during its suppression of the black rebellions of the 1904-07, which decimated 60 per cent of an already sparse population, immediately confronted large employers with a chronic local labour shortage. This shortage, despite the German forced labour regime and the deliberate inadequacy of the 'native reserves' permitted by the South Africans, remained endemic to the colonial export economy until the 1970s.

From the very outset, and even under a forced labour regime, the potentially available unskilled labour supply within the Police Zone fell short of the aggregate demand of capitalists who erected means of production there. Ovamboland, subordinated to colonial administration only in 1915 by invading Portuguese and South African forces, was the obvious fall-back. It thus became a principal function of the colonial administration to close the labour shortfall with migrant labour from the Northern Zone and Angola, and to regulate its distribution between the sectors and employers.

The South African administration attempted in its early years (c. 1915-25) to segment the sources of labour supply into four mutually exclusive categories. In the first, workers on settler farms were immobilised by pass and vagrancy laws. In the second, small, overcrowded reserves were created to service neighbouring farms and towns with labour migrants. In the third, the permanent urban population was restricted to local employers' labour needs and barred from accumulating property.

Finally, migrant labour from the north - principally Ovamboland - was reserved for large employers, at first only the government and the largest mines. But as the pace of capital accumulation accelerated, so the functional segmentation broke down. By the late 1940s, northern labour migrants were being directed to almost every sector of employment: mining, farming, fish canning, government and municipal utilities, commerce, even domestic service. By the mid-1960s, they formed 45-50 per cent of the total black labour force, some 40 per cent of them from Angola, principally Angolan Ovamboland - a classical reserve army of labour power for capitalist production in the territory as a whole.

The three sectors of colonial capital have not, however, been able to compete on equal terms; nor is the character of their labour demand identical⁵. The large and medium mines, operating integrated and capital-intensive units of production, require a mass of predominantly unskilled labour. Thus while their ability to lower the terms of labour by devolving onto the peasantry the cost of its reproduction and of its subsistence during slumps is no slight advantage, their central interest lies in securing an adequate and regular supply of labour on a scale which enables them to economise on recruitment overheads. The state and public utilities share much of this interest. Fish canning and packing, similarly large-scale, mechanical and dependent on unskilled labour has, however, a sizeable seasonal fluctuation, and the ability to discard the bulk of its workforce for the off-season without direct or indirect costs of maintenance is clearly of major importance. Major construction projects, while target rather than season-oriented, have similar cost considerations. To farmers, on the other hand, the rate of wages, despite the proportionately greater cost of recruitment, has arguably been as decisive as supply shortfalls, particularly before the Second World War; complaints of labour shortage to some extent express a refusal to pay the rate demanded by local workers. Yet even here, capitalist farming since the Second World War - droughts excepted - has rarely been marginal. In general, the consistently high rates of profit over the last 30 years demonstrate that the lower cost of migrant labour has seldom been a necessary condition of profitability for capitalist producers.

5. Cf Clarke's analysis of post-1945 Rhodesia (*Contract workers*, ch.2).

Ecology, subsistence farming and underdevelopment in Ovamboland

Peasant production in Ovamboland depends on a precarious combination of ecological conditions⁶. Over much of the Kalahari sandveld, the lack of dry-season surface water restricts pastoralism and cultivation to isolated waterholes and the few periodical rivers. However, Ovamboland, formerly the delta of the Kunene, forms a dead-level plain from which the accumulated summer rainfall drains only slowly. It is conserved by an impervious sub-soil layer at a shallow depth, which also separates it from the generally brackish ground water; and in good years is supplemented by the run-off (*efundja*) of seasonal rivers both from the plains to the north and the higher rainfall highlands beyond. This water-action has replaced the north-west-trending dune sequence with an intricate and generally converging network of broad, shallow water courses (*oshana*), usually clay-bottomed, interspersed with low sandy rises not usually flooded. Within the *oshana* zone, sufficient surface and ground water can normally be stored in wells to last the rainless winter and thereby make possible both settled field-agriculture and a semi-nomadic cattle pastoralism, which also exploits the surrounding uninhabited grasslands, particularly to the northeast.

Both forms of subsistence are nevertheless marginal. Cattle diseases, especially lung-sickness, are endemic, as a pasture deficiency in phosphorus adds to their number. Prolonged drought, as elsewhere in Africa, can decimate local stock, as much by reduction of pasturage as by lack of available water. The summer rainfall, even in normal years, is barely adequate for the drought resistant millet which provides the staple food. Its unreliability is the fundamental insecurity in peasant production, for the local drought is usually compounded by the failure of the *efundja*. At Ondangwa, using continuous rainfall records for the 51-year period (1922-72)⁷, in as many as 23 years precipitation was less than 85 per cent of the average, and in 11 of these less than 60 per cent. Furthermore, since precipitation is usually showery, it is often distributed unevenly both regionally and locally. Figures for three adjacent stations illustrate this point clearly (see table 1).

Table 1. Local variations in average annual rainfall, 1940-72

Rainfall station pairs	Distance between stations	Direction 1st to 2nd station	Mean combined annual rainfall	Mean differences ^a / combined mean
Ondangwa/Oniipa	6.5 km	ESE	457.3 mm	8.5%
Ondangwa/Oshigambo	16.0 km	NE	457.4 mm	12.6%

Note a: Mean differences between the station's annual totals as a percentage of the combined annual mean.

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6. For a more detailed exposition of the following, see R.J.B. Moorsom, "The formation of the contract labour system in Namibia, 1900-1926", in A. Zegeye and S. Ishemo, *Forced labour and migration: patterns of movement within Africa* (London, Hans Zell, 1989); W.G. Clarence-Smith and R.J.B. Moorsom, "Underdevelopment and class formation in Ovamboland, 1845-1915", *Journal of African History*, 16, 3 (1975), pp. 365-8; W.G. Clarence-Smith, *Drought in southern Angola and northern Namibia* (SOAS/ICS African History Seminar, 1974); R.J.B. Moorsom, "Underdevelopment and class-formation: the origins of migrant labour in Namibia, 1850-1915", in T. Adler (ed.), *Perspectives on South Africa: a collection of working papers* (Johannesburg, African Studies Institute, Witwatersrand University, 1977).
7. Of the years missing, 1926-27 were assessed from contemporary descriptions, and 1933 and 1936 were averaged from the nearby station Olukonda. These and subsequent statistics are based on my own calculations from a wide range of German and South African climatic data, in particular W.G. Clarence-Smith, *Notes on drought*; P. Heidke, "Die Niederschlagsverhältnisse von Deutsch-Südwestafrika", *Mitteilungen aus den deutschen Schutzgebieten*, 32(1919); references in the records of St. Mary's Anglican Mission, Odibo, 1924-66, (WU Arch, AB851 and AB206) and official correspondence of the Department of Native Affairs 1908-16 (NA 4994/1227); SWA Administrator, *Annual Reports of the Administrator of South West Africa to the League of Nations, 1917-39, 1946*.

Taking an annual total of 450 mm as the standard minimum adequate for a normal harvest over the floodplain,⁸ with under 85 per cent defined as drought and over 150 per cent as floods likely to cause some crop damage, the period 1968-1972 saw 50 years of partial or complete drought, of which probably 15 were general and serious, a further 13 of abnormal floods, and at least two of devastating pestilence (rinderpest 1897, locusts 1907). Even so, the area averages mask significant regional variations. The marked decrease in average rainfall from north-east to south-west leaves the south-west fringe of the *oshana* network at a precarious 400 mm per annum, with a noticeably higher incidence of drought. Furthermore, the distribution of surface water is not uniform. The main *efundja* appears to flood only Ukwanyama, eastern Ondonga and western Ukwambi, the south-western *oshana* draining a progressively shrinking hinterland. While the impact of drought in the east may be accentuated by the failure of the *efundja*, the south-west depends largely on its lower and more unreliable local rainfall.

Adapting to their complex but marginal ecological environment, Ovambo subsistence farmers had developed before the mid-nineteenth century a diverse and highly integrated mode of subsistence⁹. Settled on the sandy interfluvies in dispersed family homesteads, each adjacent to its own fields, the family allocated its labour-time more or less equally, in accordance with a rigid sexual division of labour, between the two principal means of subsistence. These were stock-raising, mainly cattle (which had to be trekked each year while water was accessible to ease pressure on local pasturage), with some small stock and poultry; and field cultivation with pearl millet as staple, sorghum mainly for beer, and a variety of vegetables and fruit, often vital in serious drought. But other resources were fully exploited as well, notably fish, large numbers of which are swept down in the *efundja*; game, large and small; and the abundant wild vegetables and fruit. In addition, given an iron-age technology, the manufacture of household and production implements (notably basketry, pottery and woodwork), regular repair-work and the frequent rotation of the homestead site absorbed a sizeable proportion of family, especially male, labour-time. Taking a general view, subsistence resources were fully exploited, the labour-time of the subsistence farming family - the primary unit of production - fully employed, and the diverse production tasks highly coordinated within it.

In contrast to the reserves in South Africa, that part of Ovamboland which fell within Namibia was incorporated intact by the South African invaders in 1915; in fact, since the *oshana* zone forms only one-third of the allotted reserve, ecological rather than political restrictions have defined the area potentially available for subsistence production. Although South Africa maintained no more than a skeleton administration in Ovamboland for 40 years, the impact of the new political order on the subsistence productive base was considerable. Despite the fact that pre-colonial settlement (concentrated entirely within clusters of continuous land occupation) had been pushed to the margins of the *oshana* zone, in 1920 about 60 per cent of the internal area was still virgin land¹⁰.

Thenceforth, as large game was hunted to extinction and with inter-tribal raiding suppressed, the farmer's traditional right to cultivate new land became both more attractive and less risk-laden as a means of escaping land pressure and restrictive tribal controls in the former centres. It is not clear at what point this process of internal colonisation reached its limits; but this had probably

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8. Barnard assessed the land's crop potential as follows: above 600 mm annually - normal dry land agriculture; 500-600 mm marginal; 400-500 mm sub marginal; less than 400 mm - failure (W.S. Barnard, *Die streekpatrone van Suidwes-Afrika* (PhD, Stellenbosch, 1964), p. 166 and fig. 36). My norm (450 mm) and definition of drought (below 85 per cent, or 382.5 mm) are therefore on the conservative side; but they do generally coincide with what harvest descriptions are available.
 9. Pre-colonial subsistence and underdevelopment has been fully discussed in Clarence-Smith and Moorsom, "Underdevelopment" and Moorsom, *Colonisation*.
 10. Calculated from a map made by H.E. Schoch in 1920 (WU Arch, A839); also Barnard, *Die streekpatrone*, p. 235.

occurred well before the late 1960s, when an official map confirmed its completion¹¹). Its impact is to be measured not simply in the ratio of population to cultivatable land, but also in the shifting balance of subsistence resources. Game was rapidly reduced to small animals and birds; and forest reserves (wood for building materials, wild vegetables, overspill pasture) both progressively more depleted and less accessible to the densely populated centres.

Table 2. Population growth, 1933-70

Area	Numbers (000s)			Annual rates of growth (%)		
	1933	1951	1970	1933-51	1951-70	1933-70
Border	50.1	100.2	166.2	3.93	2.70	3.29
Central	57.1	97.6	176.3	3.02	3.16	3.09
Total	107.9	197.8	342.5	3.42	2.93	3.17

Border: Ukwanyama, Ombalantu, Nkolonkathi.

Central: Ondonga, Ukwambi, Ongandjera, Ukwaluthi.

Sources: SWA Administrator, *Annual Report 1933, 1938*; census reports 1951, 1960, 1970.

The general tendency was aggravated by the harsher regime of Portuguese colonial rule north of the border, which split pre-colonial Ovamboland, and in particular Ukwanyama, into two. Although the movement of people has never been effectively controlled, at an early stage the Portuguese banned Namibian cattle from their former rich seasonal pastures between Ukwanyama and the Okavango River. Furthermore, for at least 40 years after the devastating defeat of the Kwanyama by the Portuguese in 1915, groups of refugees from Portuguese taxation and forced labour, most but not all Ovambo, trickled steadily into a narrow belt along the border. In both cases Ukwanyama bore the main brunt; official census statistics, although approximate, suggest a generally higher and more erratic rate of population growth along the border (see table 2).

In recent years state investment in water infrastructure has to an uncertain extent modified the structural transformation of the subsistence mode. A 30 year period of irregular and small-scale dam-building, mostly in east Ukwanyama, gave way in the mid-1950s to comprehensive regional water planning. This centred on the construction of large numbers of small storage dams and of two transverse canals through Western Ovamboland, drawing additional supplies from the Kunene. The scheme was completed by the late 1960s.

The impact of this impressive-looking scheme on present production should, however, be assessed with caution. On the one hand, state-supervised 'scientific' farming, let alone 'betterment schemes', appears not to have been extended beyond a few experimental projects, especially since irrigation is largely impracticable and in most years unnecessary. On the other, water availability within the settled area is on the whole irrelevant to land shortages or the conservation of pasture or crops in drought¹². However, although not sufficiently advanced to have more than a limited impact on the last major drought sequence (1957-62), in guaranteeing a reserve water supply during prolonged drought the scheme will potentially reduce climatic insecurity for both peasants and their stock. This, together with limited reserved pastures in drought and increased expenditure on veterinary services, is likely to have improved stock mortality rates somewhat over

11. Department of Foreign Affairs (S.A.), *Ovambo* (Pretoria, 1971), A rough measure of this map gives a settled area of 1.32 m ha, which compares with the 1.29 m ha estimated for the *oshana* zone by itself by Barnard (*Die streekpatrone*, pp. 235-236).

12. Little attempt has yet been made, despite official claims, to open up adjacent waterless areas.

the last 15 years. Probably more important in this respect, and of longer standing (the first instance I have found is 1908), has been supply of government relief grain and, particularly after the Second World War, access to the capitalist food market. It need hardly be pointed out that this and the declining capacity of peasant production to generate substantial grain reserves has placed a premium on securing an adequate cash income. It is suggested that the priority given by a minority of Ovambo contract workers to accumulating substantial savings accounts had this object at least partially in view^[13].

Despite the lack of reliable statistics, the growing pressure on internal resources is readily apparent. The ratio of available land to population, as the following table demonstrates, is now generally below its pre-colonial levels, and land shortages are greatest in the more numerous populated eastern sector (see table 3). Already in the early 1930s land shortage in central Ukwanyama, where the pressure was most intense, was accelerating settlement east of the *oshana* zone. By the 1950s serious overcrowding was unmistakable, and by 1968 peasants around Oshikango averaged as little as 6.3 ha per household (see table 4)^[14].

Table 3. Land distribution, 1920-70

Area	Share of total population ^a (%)		Annual rate of growth (%)	Land settlement in 1920		Settled area in 1970 ^b (000ha)	Land per person ^c (ha)			Land per homestead ^d (ha)
	1920	1970		Settled area ^e (000 ha)	Land per person (ha)		1920	1951	1970	
Ukwanyama	31.0	38.7	3.39	157,500	6.3	382,000	15.3	4.69	2.89	21.1
- in oshana zone ^f		32.8				250,000	10.0	3.42	2.22	16.2
Ondonga	37.2	27.9	2.35	174,000	5.8	348,000	11.6	6.52	3.64	26.6
Ukwambi	9.9	11.6	3.25	89,600	11.2	203,000	25.4	9.14	5.13	37.4
Ombalantu	6.2	7.0	3.20	50,500	10.1	125,000	25.0	9.64	5.19	37.9
Ongandjera	6.8	7.2	3.03	28,000	5.1	125,000	22.7	9.77	5.10	37.2
Ukwaluthi	6.8	4.8	2.23	22,000	4.0	70,000	12.7	7.58	4.22	30.8
Onkolonkathi	2.2	2.8	3.48	25,400	14.5	67,000	38.2	11.75	6.91	50.4
Total	100.0	100.0	2.93	547,000	6.75	1,320,000	16.3	6.67	3.85	28.1
- less district 8		94.1				1,180,000	14.6	6.29	3.68	26.9
- oshana zone ^g				1,290,000	15.90	1,290,000	16.0		3.77	

Notes: a) Including absentees in the Police Zone. b) Estimated by direct measurement from maps. c) Using the 1970 settled area for all years. d) Assuming 7.3 persons per homestead, the 1951 average for Ukwanyama including migrants (Bruwer, *The Kwanyama*, p.51); e) ie excluding district 8.

Sources: SWA Administrator, *Annual Reports 1920s*; census reports 1951 & 1970; Schoch, map of Ovamboland 1920; Dept. of Foreign Affairs, *Ovambo*, p.10 (map); Barnard, *Die streekpatrone*, p.235-6.

Table 4. Ratio of land to population in Ukwanyama by district, 1951

District	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	1-7 ^a
Population	2,906	20,002	12,544	11,193	3,531	6,005	15,993	7,183	73,174
Approx. area (ha)	26,900	68,120	30,590	38,610	4,360	18,570	46,250	283,900	233,300
- per person (ha)	6.89	3.41	2.44	3.45	1.21	3.09	2.89	36.33	3.19
- per homestead (ha)	55.5	23.8	17.0	26.9	7.0	22.3	21.5	288.5	22.0

Note: a) ie within the *oshana* zone.

Source: Bruwer, *Die Kwanyama*, pp.5, 12, 35.

13. M.J. Olivier, *Inboorlingbeleid en administrasie in die Mandaatsgebied van Suidwes-Afrika* (PhD, Univ. Stellenbosch, 1961), p. 392; Banghart, *Migrant labour*, pp. 94-96.

14. On this, see SWA Administrator, *Annual Reports*, and the quarterly magazine of St. Mary's Anglican Mission, Odibo (complete set in WU Arch, AB 851), hereafter cited as QM; J.P. Bruwer, *The Kwanyama of South West Africa* (TS, Stellenbosch University, 1962), p. 74; Olivier, *Inboorlingbeleid*, p. 25; Banghart, *Migrant labour*, p. 72.

Land/population ratios by themselves may be misleading, however, since land was not uniformly interchangeable between different forms of production. In the Oshikango area of central Ukwanyama, for instance, *oshana* beds, unusable for crops and for part of the year to stock, covered as much as 40 per cent of the surface^[16]. Further east, in the margins of the waterless zone, *oshanas* took in 20 per cent and unoccupied land - principally areas more than half a mile distant from *oshana* beds - another 15 per cent. On the remaining 55-65 per cent, now at a premium, field cultivation has substantially displaced indispensable natural subsistence resources. Indeed, the 100,000 ha area of cultivation estimated for Ukwanyama in the late 1950s, 70-80 per cent of it under millet, would have embraced 60-70 per cent of potentially available land^[16]. Figures for the whole Ovamboland for 1965 and 1967 suggest proportions for such land of 35-45 per cent in 1965 and 45-55 per cent in 1967, notwithstanding partial drought in each case^[17].

Despite the extension of the area cultivated, however, the increasing density of settlement has entailed a reduction in the average field area and harvest per family. By the 1950s, according to Bruwer, in Ukwanyama 'even in good years, produce barely meets the demand of the growing population'. If a 'good year', such as 1957, yielded a regional average of about 13 to 14 bags of millet per family, not only would major drought sequences such as 1957-62 bring disaster for much of the peasantry, but even minor droughts such as 1965 and 1967 would suffice to reduce yields well below subsistence needs (see table 5).

Table 5. Production of millet, 1957-67

	1957	1958	1959	1960	1961	1962	1965 ^a	1965 ^a	1967
NZ (000 bags) ^a	450	170	94	380	150	62	160		
Ovamboland (000 bags)	426							277	405
Rainfall ^b	N/pD	pD	D/pD+	pD+	D+,L	D+	pD	pD	pD
Bags/homestead ^c	13.8	5.4	2.9	11.6	4.4	1.7	4.0	7.0	9.5

Notes: a) Northern Zone, c 95 per cent produced in Ovamboland. b) N - normal, D - drought, D+ - severe drought, L - rains late, p - over part of area. c) Average 7.3 persons per homestead including labour migrants. d) Dept. of Foreign Affairs, *SWA Survey 1967*, table 7. e) Magura, *Die Entwicklung*, p.171.

Sources: Barnard, *Die streekpatrone*, pp.304-5, 392; as above.

Significantly, and perhaps contrary to expectations, the average ownership of stock, increasingly cattle, appears to have maintained its pre-Second World War level right up to the early 1970s. If official estimates of carrying capacity are anywhere near accurate, however, this has been at the expense of the gross overcrowding of the diminishing pasture available^[18]. Improved and more reliable water supplies may have been primarily responsible for this. Even so, and despite the increased consumption of meat noticed in the late 1960s, animal products cannot compensate for the declining proportionate production of the staple cereal^[19].

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15. The following data are measured from Bruwer, *The Kwanyama*, map of Oshikango area.
 16. Oliver, *Inbooringbeleid*, p.351, citing official Agricultural Annual Reports for 1957 and 1958, both years of normal rainfall in Ukwanyama.
 17. W. Magura, *Die Entwicklung der Landwirtschaft in den Bantugebieten von Süd und Südwestafrika* (Munich, IFO-Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung, 1970), p. 71, presumably drawn from official sources.
 18. P. Fraenkel, *The Namibians of South West-Africa* (Minority Rights Group, 1974), p. 52; cf Barnard, *Die streekpatrone*, fig. 38.
 19. Banghart, *Migrant labour*, pp. 96-97; cf Bruwer, *The Kwanyama*, pp. 7-8.

Entrenching the labour reserve economy

There can thus be little doubt that at least for the last 20 years food shortages have regularly been a major factor impelling labour migration. This general deficiency has, however, been compounded, and for a much longer historical period, by specific requirements, both 'necessary' and 'discretionary', which could increasingly only be supplied from capitalist production. Ovambo subsistence farming entered colonial rule with few technological dependencies on capitalist markets. This was largely due to the character of pre-colonial exchange relations, which had been geared to the luxury consumption needs of the tribal aristocracy and to the supply of arms, whose only productive use other than external raiding - game hunting - had anyway become an aristocratic monopoly. The indigenous smithing industry was an early casualty of colonial rule, cut off from its supplies of both copper and iron ore, and undercut after 1925 by industrial imports at local stores. The universal adoption within a couple of generations of European clothing, a transition part enforced, part induced by successful missionary evangelism, has become a second major component of the peasant's cash needs. The resilience of homecrafts, notably basketry and woodwork, and the rebirth of small-scale metal-working using scrap, has, however, prevented complete dependence on capitalist-produced household implements.

The skills of indigenous craft industries, once substituted by imports, can rarely be revived. The rate of substitution is, however, not exclusively a function of disparities in selling price, although this is usually the principal factor. Also significant are the available means of exchange (particularly where the choice is between barter and cash mediums), the quality of the product, and ideological resistances which yield to differing 'thresholds' of hardship. Where peasants are effectively barred from producing for sale, their assessment of relative savings in productivity between home production and imports accessible only through cash exchange is complex and necessarily indirect, not being possible through the comparison of exchange values^[20].

Any analysis of trends in the terms of trade is vitiated by the absence of comparative data. It is, however, noteworthy that the labour-recruiting agency, the South West African Native Labour Association (SWANLA) and its predecessors, which had a retail monopoly in Ovamboland until the 1950s and a wholesale monopoly until the late 1960s, was able not only to recover the high costs of transport to Ovamboland but also to extract super-profits from local consumers to subsidise recruiting operations^[21]. Despite the take-over by imports of the supply of most means of production, agricultural productivity, already efficient for its ecology, has improved only marginally. The one major technological innovation has been the substitution of ploughs for hoes. First introduced into Ukwanyama in the late 1940s, ploughs were still an 'insignificant' factor a decade later, but by the late 1960s were 'now used extensively throughout Ovamboland'^[22].

The slowness of technological adaption and of production for sale, surprising as it may seem to those familiar with peasant innovation elsewhere in southern Africa, is attributable not to inefficient market assessment, but entirely to official trade restrictions and local conditions of production. By not completing the railway connection to Ondonga started by the Germans, the South African Administration effectively cut off any possible market for grain or vegetables, particularly at the mines in the Grootfontein area. It has also maintained a ban on cattle exports - conducted on a

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20. Voipio found, for instance, that 'women too are asking why they should wake up at 4 a.m. to grind corn and do heavy digging when they can buy flour at a nearby shop' (R. Voipio, "The labour situation in SWA", *SAIRR*, RR 2/73, p. 14). Such a judgement centres on immediate labour saving comparisons and only takes into consideration the cost to husbands in wage labour in a general or background sense; it also questions the very rationality of the forced articulation of the two modes of production.
21. On this, see Olivier, *Inboorlingbeleid*, p. 386, quoting a SWANLA memo of 12 November 1949; cf. *South West Africa Native Labourer's Commission* (henceforth NLC) (1948), paras. 37-41. As late as 1974, despite the take-over of SWANLA's trading activities by the Bantu Investment Corporation, Fraenkel noticed a substantial mark up in Ondangwa on Windhoek food prices (*The Namibians*, p. 39).
22. V. Ndadi, *Breaking contract* (ed. D. Mercer: Richmond, Canada, LSM Press, 1974), pp. 19-20, and p. 33; Bruwer, *The Kwanyama*, p. 6; also Olivier, *Inboorlingbeleid*, p. 351; Banghart, *Migrant labour*, pp. 118, 133-134.

large scale before 1915 - ostensibly to protect capitalist cattle-farmers from the lung sickness endemic in Ovamboland. The climate is anyway too dry and the soil too poor for the replacement of millet by maize, a more profitable export crop; and whatever means are used to break the soil, the laborious task remains of building it into the raised mounds essential for drainage and for efficient fertilisation with cow-dung. That an energetic peasant response to favourable trade opportunities was possible has been amply demonstrated in the Okavango valley. When it became a major migration route to Wenela recruiting stations in the 1940s, it was reported that 'fields have been doubled or trebled in size, hundreds of ploughs have been bought, and all with a view to extracting as much wealth as possible from the stream of labour recruits'. By 1946 there were 1746 ploughs in the area, or at a rough estimate one for every second homestead; and labour migration by local residents was a meagre 269 per annum out of the 1,750 recruited in the area^[23].

It will be abundantly clear by now that wage-labour, or local petty-bourgeois activities dependent on its earnings, has been the only possible source of cash income for the vast majority. Wage-labour has in its turn made an appreciable and in some respects cumulative impact on the subsistence productive base, in terms both of the division of labour and of the supply of material needs through exchange. The extent to which the processes of underdevelopment analysed above have modified the allocation of labour-time within the family unit of production is problematic. Colonisation reduced men's public obligations (warfare, tribal labour levies) and traditional male subsistence activities (game-hunting, long-distance cattle and trade treks). On the other hand, cattle-raising, before 1915 under considerable pressure from both abnormal drought and expropriation by the tribal state to meet its trading debts, appears to have maintained its absolute proportion of family subsistence as that of field crops has declined. Since the Second World War ploughing, and to some extent the Christian work ethic has pulled a growing number of men into routine fieldwork as well^[24]. As most repair, supervision and homecraft activities remain as demanding as previously, serious male under-employment, except perhaps between adolescence and marriage, is unlikely to have been a major factor in inducing labour migration.

The fact that, nevertheless, a consistently high proportion of adult men, most of them in their prime, should have migrated over a lengthy period can only have entailed consequences both damaging and cumulative for so highly integrated a system of subsistence production. It would appear that between 1910 and 1930 the average number of Ovambo men on contract in the Police Zone at any one time was rarely less than 20 per cent and after recovery from the Great Depression, not less than 25 per cent (see table 6).

Table 6. Annual labour migration, 1910-71

	1910-14	1920	1926	1932	1938	1946	1951	1956	1960	1966	1971
Ovambo men on contract (000)	7.0	6.0	4.8	-	6.2	11.3	15.6	19.5	18	20	23
% of all Ovambo men	23	31	21	0	21	27	32	36	30	27	27

Sources: Olivier, *Inboorlingbeleid*, pp.288-9, 300-1,312; Banghart, *Migrant labour*, p.49; Barnard, *Die streekpatrone*, p.162; Bruwer, *The Kwanyama*, pp.8, 12; SWA Administrator, *Annual Reports*; NLC, paras 9-10, 23, 25; Kane-Berman, *Contract labour*, p.5; Stals, "Die aanraking", pp.333-4.

By stipulating standard minimum contracts of at least one year, official South African policy, in force since the first years of its occupation, negated any attempt by migrants to articulate periods of absence with the labour demands of the seasonal production cycle, which had to some extent been possible before 1915. Not only therefore could the migrant not be on hand when his labour-

23. NLC, paras 38, 205, 225; Olivier, *Inboorlingbeleid*, p. 315.

24. Ndadi, *Breaking contract*, pp. 19 and 34; QM, also Bishop Tobias' letter in *SA Outlook*, 1, November 1938.

time was indispensable, but a part of the following season's effort would be required to repair the consequences. The loss could be partially compensated by lengthening productive labour-time, but equally the long-term effects of the social disruption inherent in the break-up of the production unit reduced that labour's general efficiency²⁵. A migration rate of 25 per cent implied an absence for one in every four years, and a much higher proportion between the ages of 15 and 45.

It is not clear how far contract wages met either the loss of labour power and the effects of dislocation on peasant production, or the cash requirements of both worker and family. The provision of workers' immediate subsistence (food and accommodation) allowed employers to justify a standardised low-wage policy, under which minimum contract rates (admittedly substantially exceeded by a few large-scale employers), increased little overall in real terms between the early 1920s and the late 1940s, and by not much more than 50 per cent by 1971 (see table 7).

Table 7. Index of monthly contract cash wages at constant prices, 1913-71

	Average wage (R) ^a			Index				
	1913	1920s	1971	1920s	1949	1956	1960	1971
Mines	2-50	2-50	11-00	100	92	78	96	120
Farms		1-25	7-00	100	92	106	134	152

Note: a) For lack of reliable wages and price data these figures are very approximate. Related so far as possible to official minimum rates, they are intended to reflect the likely cash wages of the majority of unskilled workers in each category. They are drawn from disparate sources. The 'average wage' is at current prices.

Sources: Principally SWA Administrator, *Annual Reports* and references in F. Troup, *In face of fear*, (London, 1950); Olivier, *Inboorlingbeleid*; Banghart, *Migrant labour*; Fraenkel, *The Namibians*; W. Courtney & J. Davis, *Namibia: US corporate involvement in Africa*, (Africa Fund/WCC, 1971), p.13; J. Morris, "The black workers in Namibia", in: R. Murray et al, *The role of foreign firms in Namibia*, (Africa Publications Trust, 1974).

By no means all of these meagre returns to labour were recycled into peasant production. Expenditure on such basic items as clothes, bus fares and entertainment, fines under the harsh net of race and labour laws, transport and luggage charges on the return journey, tribal taxation and 'gifts' to tribal officials, all combined to siphon off an appreciable part of contract wages²⁶. Gifts to relatives and friends after return, church membership and education fees took a further slice. Most of the rest, in the 1920s as in the early 1970s, was spent on basic clothing and household utensils, but in the late 1960s, especially during drought, increasingly also on processed foodstuffs and meat²⁷.

The impact of drought on marginal production can be seen in 1959, third in a sequence of drought years, and severe in the western Ovamboland. Local production was a mere 90,000 bags; the government sent in 100,000 bags of maize for relief, by no means all of which would have been free; Ovambos bought 30,000 bags in Ovamboland at R2.30 each; and Ovambo workers in the Police Zone bought another 30,000 bags. The total, about 240,000 bags, was a long way below adequacy, yet the workers' own expenditure on the above totals amounted to an approximate average of R6.60 per homestead, or R12.00 per contract worker then in the Police Zone.

25. These themes come through clearly in the replies to Voipio's questionnaire on migrant labour and marriage (R. Voipio, *Kontrak - soos die Owambo dit sien* (Johannesburg, Christian Institute, 1972); page references are to the part-translation in Kane-Berman (Appendix IV).

26. Lebzelter's breakdown suggest a figure of 40 to 50 per cent in the late 1920s (V. Lebzelter, *Eingeborenenkulturen in Südwest- und Südafrika* (Leipzig, Karl W. Hirseman, 1934), vol.2, p. 219).

27. *Ibid.*; Voipio, "The labour situation" and *Kontrak*. On the meat trade, Banghart, *Migrant labour*, pp. 132 and 138; Bruwer, *The Kwanyama*, p. 7.

Similarly, the value of all grain imports amounted to R18.30 per homestead and R33.30 per worker - equivalent, if the full cost was borne by the workers, to 2½-4 and 6-10 months' wages per worker respectively^[28].

Although precise estimates are not possible with the available data, it would appear that except with careful saving, little remained from cash wages either for insurance against drought and changes in family circumstances, or as the means to larger-scale or more capital-intensive farming. The violence done to family and social relationships by institutionalised labour migration, to which Voipio's survey gives graphic insight, has entrenched disparities of perceived need and patterns of involuntary spending in both worker and family, of which those familiar with its counterpart in South Africa need no reminding.

The general character and rate of underdevelopment can therefore be established reasonably clearly. It remains to situate the generation of labour migration and its forms of social consciousness in the transformation of the indigenous social formation, more particularly, class formation and class mobility. In this, colonial policy has played an overwhelmingly dominant role. On the one hand, the incoming South African administration, applying classical principles of indirect rule, successfully incorporated the pre-colonial stratum of state functionaries and war-leaders as a subordinate bureaucracy, by allowing it local autonomy and autocratic powers and a guaranteed stake in revenue from fines, land distribution and labour migration^[29].

On the other, official controls, both direct and indirect, have undermined any marked trend towards class polarisation. The preservation of tribal law and inheritance has prevented the concentration and transmission of land rights, and thus the emergence of private ownership in land. Non-investment in transport or credit facilities and restrictions on trading allowed the commercial arm of the recruiting organisation a complete monopoly. Although after the Second World War the more rapid penetration of cash exchange permitted the rise of a trading petty-bourgeoisie, SWANLA and its successor, the Bantu Investment Corporation (BIC), retained a virtual monopoly of wholesale supply and credit, relying on its economies of scale and the legal and at times illegal collaboration of government^[30].

Table 8. White collar workers and the petty-bourgeoisie in Ovamboland, 1972

Tribal officials	Clergy	Teachers	Clerical workers	Nurses	Traders	Total
1,050	130	1,400	500	700	4,500	8,280

Source: G. Töttemeyer, *Die rol van die Wambo-elites in die politieke ontwikkeling van Owambo*, (PhD, Univ. Stellenbosch, 1974), p.46ff.

Nevertheless, from the late 1950s the emergence of the petty-bourgeoisie provided the first significant alternative to labour migration, and with its low entry-price, an outlet for savings from contract wages. The number of trading licences in, for instance, Ukwanyama, increased from two in 1954 to 71 in 1958 and 330 in 1973 out of a total for Ovamboland for that year of 1,388 (all but 60 were 'general dealers')^[31]. But far larger numbers traded outside legal restrictions (4,975 identified in 1973, or, together with those licensed, about 1 for every 58 persons, making 1 in 8

28. See F. Lempp, "The Ovamboland water scheme", in H.W. Stengel, *Water affairs in SWA* (Windhoek, Afrika Vig. Der Kreis, 1963), p. 361.

29. See especially Olivier, *Inboorlingbeleid*, Chapter 4, p. viii, and Chapter 5; Lord Hailey, *A survey of native affairs in South West Africa* (TS, 1946, deposited in Rhodes House Library).

30. Cf. Olivier, *Inboorlingbeleid*, pp. 384-388; Voipio, "The labour situation", pp. 6-8.

31. Bruwer, *The Kwanyama*, p. 84; Owambo (Government of), Department of Economic Affairs, *Annual Report for 1973*.

families, although few of these were fulltime) as small-scale retailers, butchers and eating-house proprietors, illegal liquor dealers, or lorry owners. During the 1960s, white-collar employment in education and administration came to provide a second main alternative as Töttemeyer's estimate of elite groups in 1972 indicates (see table 8).

Local unskilled labour, mainly on housing, water and road construction has absorbed several hundred more. Even so, these categories, open anyway to a number strictly limited by circumstance or qualification, could take in only a fraction of those to whom wage-labour was structurally necessary.

A number of general factors combined to condition the formation of social consciousness amongst migrant workers. These can be broadly classified in terms of changes in structural class position; working and living conditions as wage-labourers in the colonial economy; and experience of and resistance to labour repression.

Structural determinants of migrant labour consciousness

The centrality of the first of these will be readily apparent from the foregoing analysis of structural underdevelopment. Labour migration on appreciable scale extends back over 60 years before the 1971-72 strike, and has become a permanent necessity over generations. Over the whole period, the number on contract averaged one from every third homestead; after the Second World War the proportion increased to 1:2. With over 30 per cent of men absent at any one time, few families will have escaped altogether, while for many the periodic or nearly continuous absence of at least one member for the first 20-30 years of adulthood will have been normal. Banghart's 1968 sample of Ovambo contract workers^[32] had spent 26-31 per cent of their adult lives (i.e. 15 years and over) on contract, which if generalised for the 1971 total on contract, suggests that 74-89 per cent of all men had migrated at least once^[33].

Since labour migration is thus so generalised through the population, it is important to understand to what extent the two sources of subsistence are complementary. Wage-labour before marriage, now as in its early years, has provided some of the means of courtship and of buying land for establishing a family homestead. The unmarried among Banghart's survey comprised 17 per cent of the sample; 62 per cent did not marry before the age of 25, and 35 per cent before 30^[34]. Yet, whereas men younger than 30 had spent an average 35 per cent of their time on contract, those in the 30-40 age bracket had worked only 30 per cent. Further, 67 per cent had first migrated before their 21st birthday, and all but 2 per cent by their 26th. The age-structure is also clearly related to the building up of cattle herds, younger migrants owning proportionately smaller herds^[35]. To a certain extent, therefore, the worker could articulate his periods of wage-labour with the life-cycle of peasant production.

It is equally evident, however, that such articulation is structurally subordinate to the general impoverishment of subsistence production. Out of 93 in the Banghart sample 76 were already married; 87 out of 105 were aged 30 or over, 35 over 44; and 74 had served more than 5

32. Op. cit. Based on random selection from the Tsumeb mine workforce, this sample (105 informants), limited and unspecific though it is, provides the only detailed breakdown so far available. In the following, I must emphasise that my calculations are at times approximate; and that the interpretations are my own except where acknowledged (Banghart does not always make the basis of his tables clear; occasionally therefore, assumptions are required to enable interpretations).

33. Banghart, *Migrant labour*, table 26; Kane-Berman, *Contract labour*, p. 5. The percentage spread corresponds to the outer limits of the age-bands used in the table. I am assuming an average contract period of one year, which is roughly correct for the mid-1960s. The proportion of younger contract workers is understated in the sample.

34. Banghart, *Migrant labour*, table 34, re-worked by myself with the twelve unknown cases excluded.

35. Ibid., table opposite p. 73, re-worked. The tendency is obviously understated for men older than c. 45, since the proportion on contract, and recorded here, decreases with age.

contracts, 20 more than 10^[36]. Long-term, regular migration is thus the general rule for the majority. Furthermore, while 98 per cent were aged less than 25 at their first contract, 46 per cent were 18 or younger and as many as 19 per cent under 15, well before marriage can have been in contemplation for all but a few^[37]. Finally, of 72 workers 30 years old or more, 53 owned less than the approximate Ovamboland average for the year of 11 cattle per homestead; and 15 per cent of the sample owned no cattle at all^[38].

The evidence is that the workers' own diagnosis of their reasons for migrating is accurate - 59 per cent gave 'poverty', 20 per cent to 'help family', and of the remaining 21 per cent, 8 per cent wanted cattle, 7 per cent clothes, 1 per cent land, 4 per cent to marry and only 1 per cent wanted 'adventure'^[39]. We will see that contract labour was, given equal productivity, not an attractive alternative to agrarian production, and the rate of migration is therefore probably a fairly accurate running index of its submarginality.

Table 9. Size of cattle herds owned by contract workers in the sample

Size of herd	1-7		8-24		25+		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Age band ^a :								
20-34	14	70	5	25	1	5	20	100
35-49	29	52	23	41	4	7	56	100
50+	5	31	6	38	5	31	16	100
Total	48	52	34	37	10	11	92	100

Note: a) The number of workers within the given age band.

Source: Banghart, *Migrant labour*, table opposite p.73.

Table 10. Distribution of cattle ownership in Ukwanyama, 1955

District	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Total	1-7 ^a
Cattle per homestead ^b	13.0	8.7	14.0	33.5	6.7	5.1	16.8	45.1	17.9	15.0

Notes: a) 1e within the *oshana* zone. b) Using 1955 stock and 1951 population figures at 7.3 persons per homestead.

Source: Bruwer, *The Kwanyama*, pp.12-13, 75.

The direction and rate of change in the relative and absolute levels of subsistence production and wage-labour have an obvious bearing on the sharpness and sense of crisis in peasant-worker strategic perceptions. Broadly speaking, the Ovambo peasantry has passed through three stages since colonisation: a period of respite (1916-29), ended by devastating drought and simultaneous total unemployment (1928-34); an accelerated decline (1935-55), at the end of which the proportion of men on contract hit a peak not reached before or probably since; and a paradoxical final 15 years during which the rate of labour migration stabilised while the decline into sub-

36. Ibid., table 26. Banghart's figures are fully borne out by Voipio's descriptive survey two years later (Kane-Berman, *Contract labour*, App.IV, p. xxiii).
 37. Banghart, *Migrant labour*, table 35. NB None of the workers interviewed was under 20; of the latter, most were on farms.
 38. Ibid., table opposite p. 73 (see fn. 34 above). The marked local disparities revealed in Bruwer's figures for Ukwanyama in 1955 also suggest wide inequalities in ownership (see table 10).
 39. Banghart, *Migrant labour*, p. 92.

marginal production continued unabated. Complexities multiply during this final period, as on the one hand commodity exchange relations rapidly penetrated local consumption, and on the other, state projects lessened climatic uncertainties. Neither are, however, likely to have compensated entirely. By 1970, 30 per cent of Ovambo men were wage-earners; and including the petty-bourgeoisie, about 36 per cent, were drawing some form of cash income^[40]. Some 1,500 women also fell under the latter category. It should be noted, although the evidence is fragmentary, that there is little sign of closed stratification in the peasantry itself. In general, it may be tentatively suggested that at the end of the 1960s the Ovambo peasantry was in the process of transition from marginal to generally submarginal food production for which a cash supplement was necessary to avoid real hardship. It is at this point that the relative importance of wage-labour and agrarian production as subsistence providers is likely to be brought sharply into focus for producers at both poles^[41].

The manner and rate of the shift in the peasant family's material stake from the production of its own subsistence into wage-labour set the limiting conditions for general worker-peasant strategy. Its application and success potential was nevertheless mediated by the migrant worker's experience as wage-labourer. Wage-labour was unavoidable periodically for most, continuously for some, for the first 25-30 years of adult life, by which time sons could take over the cycle. Labour migration itself was therefore a very limited bargaining option when wage-rates were near or below the level of cash income necessary to reproduce the family unit; once entrenched and generalised, over generations, it centred the worker's interest on adjusting the terms and conditions of labour *within* capitalist production relations.

The determinants of labour consciousness in workers under such a system derived both from objective class position and from situational conditions. Contract labourers were involuntarily involved in two modes of production, as coerced peasants and as forced wage labourers. Although various methods of administrative coercion were employed from the outset, principally through the coopted 'tribal' functionaries and more recently through cash taxation, the contract regime relied mainly on generalised impoverishment to fuel its labour supply. Wage labour had been necessary to supplement subsistence agriculture well before colonisation, and the South African administration ensured that this dependence deepened by tying a growing population to a fixed usable land area and by denying peasant produce any possible market. The system was designed to transfer most of the cost of reproducing and servicing its work force to the peasantry. By imprisoning women in the reserves, capitalists could fix wages at little above the subsistence needs of the individual workers. Thus contract labour entailed not merely the subordination of the male migrant to a rigorous and inflexible work routine but also the extension of labour-time spent by women both in food production for themselves and their dependents and in housework, the regressive economic and ideological effects of which were gradually cumulative.

The critical point at which the balance of objective class interest transfers from peasant to proletarian status occurs when the migrant's family becomes regularly dependent on his wages not merely for items of equipment but also for day-to-day living costs, in particular food. The systematic separation of producers from reproducers in the economic structure at the same time that the primary social units which bind them, monogamous families, are being strengthened ideologically, in particular by Christianity, induces a differential consciousness which is nevertheless unstable at both poles. Women are continuously confronted with their economic exploitation and personal deprivation; men, having no rights at their place of work, seek to retain the social ties with the peasant formation which give them a modicum of security. Both perceive - the men most sharply - the increasing separation of their supposed 'homeland' from the centres in which their labour-power is actually being appropriated and whose very existence is the

40. Of Banghart's sample, as many as 40 per cent had one or more relatives working in the Police Zone (brothers - 18 per cent, sons - 13 per cent, others - 9 per cent) (*ibid.*, p. 141).

41. With periodic relapses under climatic pressure and in the pre-marital stage of the life-cycle; and with specific cash needs in utensils and clothing.

manifestation of such appropriation. For many peasant families with migrant workers, the critical turning-point is likely to have come in the 1950s and 1960s; indeed, since the mid-1950s, if not earlier, Ovamboland has been a net food importer except in the best harvest years.

From the 1950s onward about 30 per cent of Ovambo men - and a much higher proportion between the ages of 15 and 45 - have been on a contract at any one time. In other words, an average of one in two families have at least one adult male away on contract at any one time; and most men have experience of labour migration, many for much of the first 30-odd years of their lives. Their individual experience of wage-labour strengthens the objective tendency among the peasantry as a whole towards proletarianisation. Furthermore, by 1971 this experience had been generalised throughout the peasantry for decades, for many going back two or three generations in their kin groups. The workers concern to strengthen their tactical position to improve wages and working and living conditions had been present from the earliest days of wage labour. Following a critical transition in the balance of their material interest, it was now to become the principal focus of their general struggle.

The contract system, labour repression and informal resistance

I have been concerned to specify the limiting conditions and potential resources for the formation of labour consciousness in a migrant workforce. But it is struggle that a class-in-formation discovers and tests its strategic strengths and weaknesses. It is essential to dispense with two myths. The first is the *a priori* assumption that because workers in a system of extreme institutional repression have left few records of their collective or cooperative actions, their historical agency has dissolved into the employers' ideal-type of 'docile' labour units. The second is the determinism of linear evolution, which by dealing exclusively with the cumulative processes of class consolidation denies its equally crucial cyclical, dialectical dimension. Indeed, it was largely in response to the success of the workers' challenge to state controls in the first decade of South African rule that SWANLA was founded in 1926^[42].

Since the contract labour regime has been adequately described elsewhere,^[43] and will be familiar to those conversant with South African labour-repressive legislation, it is not necessary here to do more than summarise its salient features. For nearly half a century (1926-72), the recruitment and distribution of labour from the Northern Zone and Angola was the monopoly of an officially sanctioned organisation, SWANLA,^[44] owned by the major capitalist interests in the colony. Operating, except during the Depression and for brief periods thereafter, in conditions of excess demand for contract labour,^[45] SWANLA's principal functions were firstly to impose on recruits a standard scale of minimum wages, which employers could but need not exceed; and secondly to arbitrate their allocation to applicants in accordance with the balance of capitalist interests. Since Ovambos possessed no significant alternative sources of cash income, prospective recruits had no option but to contract at the SWANLA rates.

From the mid-1930s, contract labour has become the mainstay of all significant sectors of production. The periods of most rapid expansion are clear; in farming, 1935-46; in fishing, 1947-

42. See Moorsom, *Colonisation*.

43. Especially Simons "The Namibian challenge"; Kane-Berman, *Contract labour*; Ndadi, *Breaking contract*; contributions in R. First and R. Segal, *South West Africa: travesty of trust* (Deutsch, 1967).

44. First formed in 1926, the recruiting administration was originally sub-divided into two, the Southern Labour Organisation, recruiting exclusively from Ovamboland for the diamond mines, and the Northern Labour Organisation, recruiting on the Okavango River and taking the SLO's surplus and rejects. It was unified in 1943 under the title South West African Native Labour Association (SWANLA), which for convenience I have used here for the whole period.

45. I have no space to analyse productivity, overbidding, and the substitution for higher paid local labour, all factors integral to the system. Suffice it to say that ostensible labour demand expresses a complex of contending class forces.

60; in mining, 1946-1950 and, together with commerce and services, 1960 onwards (see table 11).

Table 11. SWANLA: annual recruitment by industry as a proportion of annual totals

Per cent	1934	1938	1942	1947	1951	1955	1960/61	1965/66	1971
Mines	71	38	14	22	29	32	27	25	29
Farms	29	?	80	49	45	34	34	28	25
Industry/govt*			5	4	10	23	33	26	32
Other			2	19	7	7	6	5	6 ^c
Fishing				7	10	5			
Total %	100		100	100	100	100	100	100	100
- no. ^b	920		7,680	16,500	19,200	22,800	25,100	38,500	43,400

Notes: a) The categories are not always properly distinguished in the sources. b) Contract periods varied over time (approx. 18 months from the mid-1940s to the mid-1950s, 12 months in the mid-1960s). Thus in 1955, for instance, about 34,000 workers would have been on contract at any one time. c) House servants.

Sources: Kane-Berman, *Contract labour*, p.5; Dept. of Foreign Affairs, *SWA Survey 1967*, table 24; Olivier, *Inbooringbeleid*, p.289; SWA Administrator, *Annual Reports 1934, 1938, 1946*; NLC, paras 9-10; Banghart, *Migrant labour*, p.49.

All but a fraction of the work is unskilled, but some categories, particularly on the big mines,^[46] develop marketable skills through experience or on-the-job training. Nevertheless, conditions have been far from uniform. Predictably, farming has been consistently the worst^[47]. Accommodation has been primitive and at least until the 1960s sometimes non-existent. The hours are long, with dawn-to-dusk working and a 6½- or 7-day week common. Isolation is complete, especially for the appreciable number of karakul herders, who might spend days out alone with flocks for which they could be held legally accountable. Conditions in mines, factories and public services, which took in the bulk of the remainder, are probably no more severe than in South Africa itself, combining long hours of routine labour with autocratic supervision.

Several characteristics of the urban and mining centres served to make them the forcing ground of labour consciousness amongst contract workers. First, most of the larger concerns employed predominantly contract labour in the main production processes. The cultural homogeneity of contract workers allowed but limited scope for divisive managerial tactics along ethnic or language lines at the point of production^[48]. A second and related factor is that most workers came from a single region - Ovamboland both sides of the Angolan border - and shared a common history, culture and language. No potentially explosive cultural cleavages therefore existed amongst migrants themselves as foci for communal factionalism. Third, not only the large scale and repetitive routine of production but also compulsory residence in the closed, barrack-like bachelor compounds appended to most mines and municipalities intensified social interaction and mutual interdependence amongst contract workers outside as well as within the production process^[49].

The long-distance northern migrants were subject to a special web of controls under the contract labour system. The population of the four northern reserves (now all bantustans) comprises some

46. See Banghart, *Migrant labour*, pp. 53-56.

47. Cf. the comments of the NLC; F. Troup, *In face of fear* (1950); Ndadi, *Breaking contract*, passim.

48. This is, however, only a qualified statement. Management of large concerns did attempt, with occasional success, to exploit geographically-based ethnic differences, for instance between Ovambo and Kavango workers, notably by allocating certain job categories, usually low grade supervisory or white-collar, to particular groups. For fuller treatment of this theme, see R. Gordon, *Mines, masters and migrants* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1977).

49. It appears that workers were not segregated by job category, nor always even by ethnic origin. To most whites, the terms 'Ovambo' and 'contract labourer' were synonymous, and this intrusion of class perception permitted a partial loosening of apartheid rules in contract worker compounds.

65 per cent of all black Namibians, the Ovambo alone 53 percent. Outside their reserves, their status was exactly equal to that of a foreign African. No black from the north was permitted to leave the reserve except under a fixed-labour contract; women were barred altogether. Between 1926 and 1972, SWANLA and its predecessors was the only agency authorised to contract labourers. The 'contract' was in fact a standardised form of indenture specifying a uniform wage-rate and conditions, over which no bargaining was permitted. It also carried not civil but criminal sanctions for breaches of the serve disciplinary code to which it bound the worker. Thus, during their average 12-18 month period of contract, which they could not terminate of their own will, workers were virtually forced labourers under prison-style discipline. Protest action against an employer, whether individual or collective, was a criminal offence.

On the face of it, the totalitarian regime of labour regulation seems complete. Wage-labour was only permitted on contract; the recruiting organisation dictated wages, standard minimum lengths of service, and employer; once signed, the contract legally bound the worker to his employer, and evasion was made hazardous by pass laws; and on termination, repatriation was compulsory. Even so, the system had its weak points, which on the fragmentary evidence available,^[50] Ovambo migrants exploited to the full. To a certain extent, SWANLA's monopoly could be evaded. In the 1940s, before the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA) struck an agreement with SWANLA, workers could reach South African urban areas by travelling hundreds of miles on foot through Botswana, usually to a WNLA recruiting station. More generally, workers could reach urban centres in Namibia by using false or borrowed passes, by hitch-hiking, and by deserting, especially from farms, once having legally arrived in the Police Zone. Once there, it was often possible to find illegal employment and since the compulsory 'Identification Pass' did not contain a photograph, to evade or manipulate the pass laws.

Even the apparently inflexible SWANLA distribution system was open to a degree of manipulation. At SWANLA's Ondangwa compound, prospective contract workers were medically examined and classified into three grades of physical fitness, which determined eligibility for different job categories, and work parades were held at regular intervals to fill requisitions from the large employers. Thus workers could reject the terms of recruitment and except for those in the C grade, reserved exclusively for farms, discriminate between employers to a limited extent. It is hardly surprising that from the earliest years of labour migration farm work was taken only as a last resort, and even then was widely used by C grade contract workers as a means of illegal entry to the towns.^[51]

Under so totalitarian a labour-repressive regime 'informal' resistance was not merely residual but an appropriate and effective mode of defensive labour action. The high rate of labour turn-over and low rate of return to the same employer precluded all but short-term leadership at the point of production, and hence any effective institutional resistance. Such forms would anyway have been highly vulnerable to employer/state intimidations and victimisation, even where large-scale employers had managed to entrench a high rate of return in their contract labour-force, as at Consolidated Diamond Mines (CDM) (100 per cent) and the Tsumeb mine (40-70 per cent)^[52]. Such informal action embraced not only evasion of the law to escape or evade the worst employers or to seek higher wages, but also partial confrontations in the production process itself,

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50. Mainly from NLC; Troup, *In face of fear*; Ndadi, *Breaking contract*; Olivier, *Inboorlingbeleid*; Banghart, *Migrant labour*; R. First, *South West Africa* (Penguin, 1963); R. Gordon, "A note on the history of labour action in Namibia", S.A.L.B., 1975.
51. Gordon "A note", pp. 12-13. 40-50 per cent of contract workers, and most of those on farms, are from Angola. It should be noted that the C grade specifically allowed for child labour (i.e. under 15 years), which, although evidence is scanty for the 1960s, was used extensively on farms from the mid-30s to the mid-50s. When the authorities did attempt to enforce an age restriction, Ovambo parents would send their sons across the border to re-enter as 'Angolans' (cf. Olivier, *Inboorlingbeleid*, *passim*).
52. Banghart, *Migrant labour*, p. 56; Ndadi, *Breaking contract*, p. 34 and p. 46; UCT Wages Commission, *TS Notes* on interview with CDM's personnel manager, June 1975.

ranging from individual self-assertion against small-scale masters to go-slows or disruption on the factory production line^[53].

It is misleading also to characterise such acts of resistance, often restricted to individuals or small groups, in isolation. Both evasion and resistance assumed a strong and general basis of mutual solidarity, and the former an efficient communications network. And the very institutionalisation of labour controls induced the verbal transmission of common tactics and accepted standards of reciprocity. The fact that most non-farm workers lived together in large bachelor compounds greatly facilitated rapid and general communications. Workers' living quarters in town, chiefly attached to private houses or catering establishments, were focal points for pass evaders.

Table 12. Approximate size of main contract worker compounds, 1971

	Katutura	Walvis Bay	Fishing off-season	Tsumeb	CDM	Total	Per cent ^a
Workers	5500	7400	3500	5000	4000	18,500-22,000	60-75

Note: a) ie of all contract workers except those on farms and in live-in domestic service.

Informal resistance also depended importantly on systematically rendering workers' motivations opaque to labour supervisors and state organs. In this, contract workers appear to have become markedly successful. Attempts at cooption by the state were virtually non-existent: only at the beginning of 1972 was a representative of the bantustan 'government' delegated to liaise with workers in the Police Zone, and his homestead was one of the first to be burnt down in the disturbances in Ovamboland in late January 1972^[54]. As for employers, CDM tested incoming workers for leadership potential and allocated them low-level supervisory posts; but few others seem to have attempted a co-option strategy^[55]. Informers - the only other means of rendering repression efficient - seem to have been few and ineffectual, to judge from the total failure of state intelligence before and after the strike.

The situational context of contract labour contoured migrants' social consciousness and shared tactics in specific ways. In the mining and urban centres, workers are housed in dormitories in large bachelor compounds, usually cramped and with minimal facilities or personal privacy. Many also work in large production units or work gangs. Horizontal communication both in and outside working hours is as a result dense and fairly continuous; it is unavoidable, as well as easy. At work and in the compounds, their supervisors usually cannot communicate in their language, and to a lesser extent the reverse is also true; the same applies to other black workers, from whom they are largely segregated in the production process and residentially. Conversely, most contract workers share a common language, whose dialects are mutually intelligible, and similar geographical, cultural and social background. Such factors make a strong tradition of communal solidarity among contract workers as a whole.

For the purposes of this analysis, and to bypass the definitional problems surrounding the concept 'class consciousness', it is most convenient to distinguish three levels of social consciousness

53. For examples of both, see Ndadi, *Breaking contract*, especially his graphic account of a go-slow in a Walvis Bay fishing factory in 1959 (pp. 54-59).

54. Owambo (Government of), Department of Finance, *Annual Report for 1972*, para 4.2; *Windhoek Advertiser*, 25 January 1972.

55. Banghart, *Migrant labour*, p. 79-80. See Gordon, *Mines*, for an extended discussion on this theme for one mine.

among contract workers: 'occupational', which is confined to tactical adjustments within the organisational boundaries of the labour process and the supervisory regime; 'trade unionist', which embraces wider challenges to the labour regime as a whole, but within the framework of the existing exploitative property relations; and 'socialist', which envisages the transformation of such property relations into non-exploitative, socially-controlled forms. Since under colonialism the economy has been structured by primarily political means, both the latter two levels are necessarily channelled into or expressed within the political sphere. Since the large compounds and production units have been the forcing ground of worker consciousness, it is this context with which I shall be concerned here for the most part.

'Beating the system'

The first level, 'occupational' consciousness, can aptly be described as the strategies that contract workers adopt for 'beating the system'.^[56] It is equivalent to the petty pilfering, the creation of rest-spaces within work time through covert 'tea' or 'smoke' breaks, or skiving as sick, by means of which workers in the capitalist metropolises attempt to humanise the rigid industrial routine imposed on their alienated labour. These practices are legitimised by a genuinely autonomous worker morality, but it is a morality limited by the framework of capitalist ethics. Their sense of justice depends upon non-discovery. Thus 'stealing' from the employer may be facilitated by the fact that it is the product of their alienated labour; but when caught, the definition of the act as 'theft' is still accepted, rather than as the re-appropriation of such alienated labour. Under a contract labour regime this level of labour consciousness is no longer incidental or marginal: of necessity it becomes central tactics of survival in, accommodation to and improvement of their position under the system. It has to cover not merely the hours at work but all other phases of life as well. Labour and compound supervision is harsh and autocratic, and work and living conditions poor and often dangerous, making escape and adjustment techniques imperative.

These conditions of necessity turn a wide range of individual or unconscious reactions into explicit tactics of self-defence, whose general success depends on a shared acceptance of the norms of solidarity. Since the penalties for direct confrontation with those in immediate authority are generally severe - loss of wages, sometimes physical violence, or more seriously imprisonment or deportation to the reserve - an effective 'front' is imperative.

Several factors strengthen the efficiency of workers' techniques, most hinging on the degree of social distance between the workers and the supervisory level in which immediate control of the production process is vested. Work-gang foremen - usually called 'indunas' or 'boss-boys' - are promoted from the rank-and-file. Yet such is the insecurity and horizontal job mobility of all contract workers and so great is their general subordination under a totalitarian colonial structure that the boss-boys have to become mediators and negotiators in the interests of the workers under their charge rather than surrogate disciplinarians for management.

The next level, that of the ganger, or works or factory foreman, is recruited entirely from the racially-defined rules in colonial society. They do not understand by direct experience the shop-floor environment, nor, usually, the workers' language - a key factor protecting workers' autonomy. And they share with all other whites the universal expectation that theirs is the right to command in all situations in which they come into contact with blacks.

It is in the workers' interests to encourage the whites in authority over them in this belief, for by reinforcing the stereotype with which their superiors characterise them, they gain more space

56. Evidence for my discussion of this concept is largely drawn from Gordon's contemporary study of workers on a copper mine. Although I do not agree with aspects of his theoretical framework, his empirical work yields valuable insights.

within the system to promote their particular interests. A foreman's belief that his workers are lazy and stupid allows those workers considerable latitude in determining the average pace of work, particularly since in most cases production bonuses are minimal or non-existent. Individual workers use the same technique extensively to secure favours from particular supervisors or compound or office staff, or protection against other whites.

This strategy carries an inherent contradiction. While rendering workers' motives and practices opaque to supervisors, it also entails that the stereotype in terms of which these supervisors act does not fully match the reality. Indeed, it is the principal object of the caricatures as which they represent themselves. To a considerable extent the elements of self-justification in the supervisors' ideology of superiority which the stereotype reinforced become self-reproducing: thus, given that, for example, workers have succeeded in establishing a stereotype of 'laziness' or 'stupidity' in their supervisors' perception of them at work, slowing the rate of production further will tend to intensify that perception, although also entailing of course - the balance of judgement is a fine one - the risk of harsher control measures. But their success depends on obscuring the deliberate and concentrated method by which it is achieved, as well as the relative autonomy which it is designed to win, in this case humanising and controlling the process of direct production. Workers have therefore to be constantly on guard against discovery or discrepancies in behaviour, and thus to monitor white authority figures closely and if necessary appease them. The contradiction between the self-abasement such methods require and the self-esteem and dignity for which they are designed to create space could hardly be more extreme.

To a large extent, though not completely, the tensions of keeping up the 'front' are compensated by an intense ethic of communal solidarity, a commitment to mutual support that amounts virtually to a closed shop among contract workers. It is aptly designated 'brotherhood' by Gordon - indeed, one worker's essay extolling the necessity of cooperation written in 1973, was entitled 'Brotherhood is essential at [name of workplace]^[57]. It embraces far more than solidarity at the point of production: transmitting money and messages to relatives in the reserves, banking a compatriot's savings, doing favours, the prohibition on stealing from other workers (not from whites) - all are covered by this comprehensive solidarity mechanism. Indeed, even that apparently most incomprehensible of compound phenomena, the 'faction' or 'tribal' fight, may be interpreted, as Gordon points out,^[58] as a perfectly rational, although drastic, means of conflict resolution, whereby when other procedures have failed, 'brotherhood' obligations can be forcibly reasserted over individualist deviants such as informers, bosses' favourites, and non-sharing wealth accumulators, by means of intimidation and the redistribution or destruction of their hoards.

The managerial favouritism which often gives workers from a particular area a privileged position tends to obscure the fact that such conflict is defined by the framework of 'brotherhood' solidarity. Even the more violent 'riots' in which workers are seriously injured or occasionally killed, are usually strongly conditioned by its principles, since the victims are often groups of workers brought in from South Africa either as blacklegs or as better-paid specialists, who therefore threaten the inclusive unity which is the basis of solidarity among the workers.

It is the articulation of this level of consciousness with perception of the labour and political system as a whole which is relevant to the discussion here. To a limited extent it would seem that 'brotherhood' reinforces a conservative, introspective focus. The key to preserving the delicate balance between a real relative autonomy and an effective disguise for the perceptions of those in authority is a systematic avoidance of 'trouble', which includes direct confrontations. To some extent also, its internal mechanisms replace some of the functions of trade unions.

57. MS in author's custody.

58. In a case-study as yet unpublished.

Nevertheless, in major respects 'brotherhood' is at worst neutral and at best ideologically and tactically supportive towards class mobilisation on broader issues. First, it presupposes total alienation from colonial society and regards agents as oppressors and therefore 'fair game'. This applies most forcefully to immediate supervisors and repressive agencies such as police; but it extends to the society as a whole, and therefore to all whites and to their black collaborators. The force of the interaction of the generalised perception of colonialism with this level of consciousness can clearly be seen in the instance of 'stealing' from whites, which contract workers, recalling the killing of the last and most famous Kwanyama king by a South African punitive force in 1917, describe as 'mourning Mandume'^[59]. Second, its membership criterion is class-based, and not limited to the particular workplace or compound or to one tribal group. This is not merely a permissive qualification, but a 'closed shop' upon entry to the ranks of contract labourers: a 'brother' has the right to expect any other brother to live up to certain obligations and standards of reciprocity. Third, its primary ethic of solidarity and egalitarian cooperation ingrains a solid practical and ideological base for other forms of collective action. Fourth, it presupposes a diffuse, rank-and-file leadership - where one is required at all - and a generalised versatility in techniques of communication and of 'beating the system'.

Finally, many of the tactical expedients developed under the umbrella of 'brotherhood' have bordered on direct challenges to the system of labour repression, although initiated largely by individuals or small groups. The major fields of conflict has always lain in avoiding control on movement and job mobility. Under the SWANLA allocation procedure, newly contracted workers were crudely classified according to four grades of physical fitness and, to a limited extent, job experience, and were then arbitrarily parcelled out to employers' requisitions. The system was and has remained subject to state policing, which brings workers directly into confrontation with the police, courts and puppet bantustan authorities. Workers have therefore devised a range of techniques to maximise their choice of jobs and area - securing direct calls from favoured employers, forging or buying passes and contract documents, deceiving colonial officials as to identity and personal detail and, if all else fails, deserting and surviving in town illegally. All require considerable ingenuity and practical solidarity from brothers; all expose the oppression of the contract system as whole and identify as its chief agent the colonial state.

By the 1960s, therefore, worker autonomy in their communal and cultural life was soundly based and resilient in the face of a harsh, sometimes dangerous environment. In addition, the large majority of Ovambo workers were working in the mines or towns and living in large compounds or on their urban employers' premises, both of which factors were favourable to the associative processes outlined above.

Correspondingly, the mechanism of labour repression and its agents were unusually free of ideological trappings. The necessity for direct physical controls, which attempted to compensate for their inefficiency by their crudity and severity, impinged upon every aspect of the labourer's working and social existence. Labour supervisors, as dictators of an alienating production routine; the police and labour and location officials as heavy-handed repressors of worker attempts to humanise their social environment; and the tribal bureaucracy, as slavish and self-interested collaborators, together constituted a close circle of labour-repressive devices. The tribal bureaucracy requires special mention. During the relatively laissez-faire regime on indirect rule prior to the 1960s, there is little evidence of direct coercion in Ovamboland to stimulate recruiting, either by forced labour or by heavy taxation. But by virtue of possessing considerable economic power, especially over access to land, as well as autocratic executive powers, tribal administrators could exert pressure in response to central directives. More importantly, they could be used (to

59. C. Winter, *Namibia: the story of a bishop in exile* (Lutterworth Press, 1977), pp. 107-108.

what extent is unclear) to track down and punish transgressors of the labour laws, thus cutting out a crucial line of escape^[60].

The intensity of conflict between contract workers and the state is graphically revealed in the battle for control over the 5-6,000-man bachelor compound at Katutura, Windhoek, during the year preceding the strike. By early 1971 the workers had made it virtually a no-go area for the local police outside working hours, a haven for pass evaders and a centre for illegal trading - liquor, street trading, and an informal bulk-buying cooperative which served the whole location^[61]. The authorities' only resort in the face of such a challenge was to periodic mass raids by armed police - there were three during 1971 alone. This final period of open confrontation witnessed not only an immediate and massive communal response to interference from outside, but highly specific actions directed at the agents of repression, such as the destruction of the entry control point to the compound on the night of 11 November 1971.^[62]

Collective labour action without trade unions

In such circumstances, it is not easy to identify tendencies among workers towards political forms of consciousness. Nor is the absence of overt labour organisation a reliable indicator of a lack of 'trade union' perceptions, since many functions are taken care of by brotherhood mechanisms and workers accurately perceive the vulnerability of a formal leadership, whether public or clandestine, under so totalitarian a system of repression. There have indeed been several attempts at formal unionism. An ICU branch existed at Lüderitz in the early 1920s, and the militant Cape-based Food and Canning Workers Union successfully organised a branch in the same town in the early 1950s. This latter initiative drew in contract labourers in the canneries either directly or in parallel unions, and although the FCWU branch was destroyed by physical and legal attacks by the state in 1952, contract workers mounted large strikes in 1952 and 1953. The key lesson of this episode, however, was that standard trade-unionism could be easily smashed, and that state ruthlessness in such suppression was without limits - several workers were killed or wounded in the 1953 strike.

That workers should have concentrated largely on small-scale action outside working hours represents an accurate appreciation of their strategic resources. Contract workers in mine or urban compounds are nevertheless no strangers to large-scale collective action of an 'open' character: the first strike - for higher wages - in which Ovambos are recorded as participating took place in December 1893 at the South West African Company (SWACO) mine Gross Otavi^[63]. Collective industrial action has been periodically employed since the turn of the century in mines and factories. Outright mass confrontation at the point of production has however been highly vulnerable to isolation, physical repression and intimidation, and has rarely secured more than minor demands. The nature of the control apparatus eliminated most tactical forms intermediate between informal resistance and an attack on the system itself.

The long historical roots, the regularity and resourcefulness of such action, despite the lack of supporting organisations, reveals the clarity and depth of hostility with which workers perceived the wider system which obtained them^[64]. Despite the scantiness of official records, strikes or threatened stoppages appear to have occurred regularly from the start of the South African

60. To what extent they were used in this way is unclear before 1971. Latterly, their role in operating employment bureaux and political blacklists has become more general and explicit.

61. See especially, *Windhoek Advertiser*, March-April 1971.

62. *Windhoek Advertiser*, 12 November 1971.

63. Gordon, "A note", pp. 8-11.

64. The workers' term for contract is *odalate*, derived from the Afrikaans word *draad*, meaning 'wire'.

administration⁶⁵. Between 1950 and 1970, Gordon counted 43 'collective actions' reported in one local newspaper alone - undoubtedly far from the true total - 22 on mines, five on the railways, and the remainder in Windhoek and the two ports Lüderitz and Walvis Bay⁶⁶.

At Walvis Bay, on which more information is to hand than elsewhere, participant testimony and incidental press references during the period 1959-71 demonstrate a high degree of sophistication and stamina in labour confrontations: not merely flash strikes, but also go-slows, overtime bans, solidarity walk-outs over victimisation and general campaigns of non-cooperation, sustained at times over very lengthy periods. The campaign launched early in 1968 for a proper system of overtime payment was to continue intermittently for three full years, in the end winning substantial improvements from the harbour authorities and stevedoring companies in January 1971. It was broadly based - dockers were its leading force, but were joined on at least one occasion (July 1968) by most of the fish cannery workers. By consistently employing as its principal weapon a tactic - the overtime ban - which disrupted but did not stop the labour process, it exploited the reluctance of employers to lose production by staging a lock-out and mass deportation. Indeed, when in July 1968 an overtime ban by cannery workers escalated into a strike, they held out for nearly a month before the authorities eventually deported over 1000 back to Ovamboland. Incoming contract workers sent in as blacklegs joined the strike as did sections of the dockers. Ultimately the employers' gamble failed in its primary objective, to break the workers' resolve: by February 1969, dockers had re-imposed their overtime ban. Sustained confrontation of this order, in a workforce highly vulnerable to legal reprisals or deportation and with a high rate of turnover, presumes both a developed and conscious tradition of collective solidarity and tactical skill in grassroots communication and organisation.

A striking feature of these campaigns is the extent to which both rank-and-file and leadership could and did call upon 'brotherhood' solidarity and tactical experience; where class interests intervened strongly and the tactical situation was appropriate, the contradiction between open confrontation and 'avoiding trouble' became more apparent than real. An earlier struggle at a fish cannery, described by one of the chief organisers, Vinnia Ndadi, provides a useful illustration⁶⁷. Once the initiative had been taken, the mass meeting became the main vehicle through which grievances were articulated, spokesmen chosen, and tactics decided. Relations between leaders and workers were determined in dialogue within the framework of the meeting, with no separate superstructure. Given low pay, the long hours and appalling conditions of work, primary grievances were plentiful and shared, and the decision to act was unanimous.

Two points in the ensuing campaign reveal the clarity with which workers appreciated the scope and limitations of their actual bargaining power. First, they deliberately restricted their action to the single demand for the removal of their particularly vindictive factory foreman, a demand of considerable symbolic importance to them. Second, when this was rejected by the factory manager with provocative arrogance, they restrained their immediate inclination to strike in favour of a systematic go-slow. Ndadi, employed as shop-floor translator for the management and therefore with direct access to them, was able to put his double role to effective use in the conflict situation, presenting to management in the form of non-committal reports the very demands he helped to formulate, and thus protecting himself and other leaders against victimisation.

Most telling of all was the success of the workers in staging two decisive confrontations in contexts which momentarily stripped management of its power to command. In both cases, their strategy was to exploit their stereotype as passive instruments of production by inducing factory officials

65. For an account of the tactics and rank-and-file organisations of contract workers on the diamond fields between 1915 and 1925, see R.J.B. Moorsom, "The formation of the contract labour system in Namibia, 1900-1926", in Abebe Zegeye & Shubi Ishemo, *Forced labour and migration: patterns of movement within Africa*, (London, Hans Zell, 1989), pp. 55-108.

66. R. Gordon, "A note".

67. Ndadi, *Breaking contract*, pp.55-59.

to call them together under managerial command. The officials were then confronted with the united power of the massed workers who insisted on their own terms in a mostly passive manner. On the first occasion, which took place on the factory floor, the factory manager could only resort to issuing orders and then retreating. On the second, by having reinforced the stereotype of passivity and stupidity through the go-slow, the manager was induced to call a meeting in the compound yard, where a well-timed revelation of real anger by the massed workers extracted a rapid surrender from the manager and the transfer of the objectionable foreman. Throughout the three days of action, the skilful tactics of the workers robbed management of its usual standby, physical repression by the colonial police, and this was indeed the guiding strategic concern of the rank-and-file leadership in planning and mobilising the campaign.

The integration of the working and compound contexts under similar controls and organisation implies that any separation of the shop-floor from communal actions is largely meaningless: to workers, they are different boundaries of the same system; and compounds have tended to be the main organising base for shop-floor campaigns. Indeed, the compounds were the key centres for all major aspects of social, labour and political networks of association of contract workers - they formed the essential haven for pass-dodging, for communication, for grassroots organising, for mass mobilisation. By early 1971, the huge Windhoek compound at Katutura had, on the admission of the police, become virtually a no-go area after working hours. The large bachelor barracks, designed to function as concentration camps with barbed wire perimeters and controlled entrances, had before the general strike become to varying degrees autonomous enclaves within colonial society.

Liberation politics and labour action

We have seen that a number of factors operating at different levels, notably the stage and rate of decline of the average peasant product, the severity of working conditions and the pitiful returns to wage-labour, and the pervasiveness and visibility of state repression, were together highly conducive to the formation of a militant worker consciousness after the Second World War.

Table 13. Membership of the Finnish Mission/ELOK, 1913-1972
1913-70

Members	1913	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970
000s	2.9	7.7	23.1	37.3	63.5	118.3	194.9
% of Ovambo population	c3	c10	c20	29	33	49	57

1972

Members	ELOK	RC	Anglican	Other	Total
000s	213.8	30-35	40	c4	290
% of Ovambo population	58.5	c8.5	c11.0	c1.0	79.5

Source: J.J. Kritzinger, *Sending en Kerk in Suidwes-Afrika* (D.D., Pretoria, 1972), p.63, table 7.

Influences external to the workers' immediate environment have also been an important means of introducing wider action perspectives and a source of interpretative concepts. Fundamental in this regard has been the cultural mutation associated with the complete success of evangelical

Christianity in Ovamboland. Despite its pietism and its conservative leadership, particular universalist teachings, notably on family cohesion and on inter-personal relationships, both of which coincided with peasant tradition, supplied tools for a radical critique of institutionalised labour migration^[68]. Repeatedly in the course of the strike one finds religious idiom being employed as means of expression and exhortation by grass-roots leaders, and the singing with which large groups of strikers expressed their unity taking the form of hymns.

Probably the most important among other influences has been the symbolic role of the United Nations, whose claim to legal authority has been instrumental in destroying the illusion of legitimacy of colonial rule. Its universalist humanism has also made available a powerful alternative ideal-type.

But without the mobilising and coordinating power of independent organisations, collective action as a *class* is conditional further on a generalised appreciation of the possibility of systematic change. It is possible, indeed likely, that such perceptions developed organically from the interface of struggle itself. Gordon records that as early as November 1952, 'a letter... from "Ovambo male Okuga Jepongo"...complains about the serious malnutrition and underdevelopment' in the reserve, which the latter associates with the fact that 'the whole Ovambo-tribe is a fixed property of SWANLA (a human trade firm) and are the cheapest labourers for all the employers... The poor Ovambo tribe has not got a mouthpiece to interpret its unsolved problems'^[69].

While trade unionism in the orthodox sense familiar in the industrial West has always been an unlikely strategy under a totalitarian contract labour regime such as the South African administration erected in Namibia, contract workers were quick to perceive the necessity for political struggle against the contract system when organisers first took the issue to rank-and-file in the late 1950s. Rumbings of resistance had long been heard. Thousands of contract workers - among them the future national leader Andimba ya Toivo - having been diverted into military service during the Second World War, returned with a vastly broadened experience. In Ovamboland during the early 1950s, there had been protests, petitions to the UN, and mass meetings thousands strong against the systematic robbery of returning contract workers at the Namutoni checkpoint by the police^[70].

The first major initiative to organise nationally against the contract labour system^[71] arose amongst a group of Ovambo migrants working in South Africa, who, in 1957 formed the Ovamboland People's Congress (OPC), renamed in 1958 the Ovambo People's Organisation (OPO). Deported from Cape Town in 1958, their leading figure, Andimba ya Toivo, linked up *en route* with other grass-root leaders in Windhoek, notably Sam Nujoma and Jacob Kahangua, before returning to Ovamboland as regional organiser. Launched in both Windhoek and Ovamboland during the first months of 1959, in little more than a year the OPO became a mass organisation, its political strongholds and branch structure based solidly (though not exclusively) in the contract workers' compounds of the towns and mines. Although its leaders had from the earliest days developed and retained links with embryonic nationalist organisations and politicians, the OPO identified as its primary task and as its mobilising programme the abolition of the contract labour system. It was thus akin to a national general union of contract workers, though the political implications of its attack on oppression under contract labour necessarily also gave it a broader political focus.

68. To this the replies to Voipio's survey are revealing testimony (Voipio, *Kontrak*).

69. Gordon, "A note", pp. 11-12.

70. Winter, *Namibia*, pp.89-93.

71. For the following, see First, *South West Africa*, pp. 196-202; A. Shipanga, *Interview in depth* (LSM Press, 1973), pp. 4-9; Ndadi, *Breaking contract*, pp. 54-106; R. Vigne, *A dwelling place of our own* (International Defence and Aid Fund, 1973), pp. 23-24.

Once again, some measure of the explosive impact of the campaign to mobilise against contract labour may be gained from the experience of the Walvis Bay branch^[72]. Inspired by the success of a go-slow strike against a vindictive factory foreman at a fish cannery in January 1959, contract workers responded *en masse* to the OPO's first recruiting campaign, launched by Nujoma at the end of June. Three months later, according to the then branch secretary, 'We had a membership of several thousand [i.e., the vast majority of the contract work force] and had collected over £800'. Exploiting the scope afforded by the compound system for rapid and centralised communication, and harassed from the outset by police and employer repression, the OPO successfully formed a leadership structure at the level of the branch and of the compound. Already, therefore, the new branch could afford to use mass meetings sparingly, relying rather on delegate and report-back meetings.

Comparison of this early phase of organisation among contract workers with the antecedents to the national strike in 1971 is instructive. Mobilisation by the OPO did not lead to mass protest action of any kind^[73]. 'For the next few months we continued collecting money for the organisation and holding meetings in the compound'. The energies of activists were devoted principally to gaining general political information and awareness. 'We discussed politics whenever we could; talked about day-to-day problems, news from Windhoek and the rest of Africa, and our dreams of freedom in Namibia'^[74]. The tactical conditions of organising were not too dissimilar. While the compound system facilitated the formation of collective consciousness and solidarity and the circulation of leaders and information at the local level, the barriers to communication between the towns and mines continued to present formidable problems for nationally coordinated campaigning^[75]. These difficulties were compounded by the intensification of political repression, which struck hard at all levels of leadership and party organisation, and made public activity, if not always impossible, generally hazardous. Structurally, the position of contract workers in 1971 was if anything easier than in 1959, for although the pace of underdevelopment had quickened in the interim, in 1959 the Ovambo peasantry were in the grip of a second year of drought, by then severe^[76]. It is thus the very similarity in many respects of the situations of 1959 and 1971 which is most revealing. For notwithstanding the importance of specific influences immediately preceding the 1971 strike, discussed below, the crucial condition of mass action in 1971 and its extension on a national scale was the existence of an experienced national liberation movement in the form of the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO).

The transformation early in 1960 of the OPO, formed to oppose the contract labour system, into SWAPO, a national anti-colonial united front and from its inception the leading force for liberation, was the joint product of a year of struggle by contract workers without tangible gains and of the realisation after the Windhoek massacre that sectional interests could only be secured under so ruthless a colonial regime by the overthrow of colonialism itself.

This recognition marked two basic shifts in strategy among the national leadership. The first was that contract labour was too integral a part of the system of exploitation under colonial rule for any campaign solely for its abolition to have a chance of success. The second was that if the enemy was colonialism itself, the basis of mobilisation for liberation should embrace the broadest possible national coalition of anti-colonial forces. Within a couple of years it had been followed

72. The following account is based on Ndadi, *Breaking contract*, pp. 54-69.

73. The one exception was of course the resistance of the 'permanent' black Windhoek population to their enforced removal from the Old Location to the new apartheid township, Katutura. The resistance climaxed on the night of 10 December 1959 when police fired on unarmed demonstrators, killing 11 and wounding 54 - Namibia's 'Sharpeville'. Nevertheless, contract workers as such were peripherally involved in this struggle.

74. Ndadi, *Breaking contract*, p. 69.

75. Ndadi's account of the years 1959-63 abounds with instances of the difficulties caused by this constraint. Often local branches depended on chance briefings from activists passing through to obtain essential information.

76. See table 5 and discussion thereof above. The increased visibility of the regime of exploitation may well have facilitated the rapid growth of SWAPO throughout Ovamboland in the latter half of 1960 (Ndadi, *Breaking contract*, pp. 62-67). Indeed, SWAPO brought the issue into focus by buying grain for the drought areas (*ibid.*, p. 88).

by a third, that the nature and practice of the colonial regime made armed struggle a necessary part of the strategy for its overthrow. Neither in the OPO's campaign against contract labour in 1959 nor in the formulation of a nationalist programme for liberation in the early 1960s was more than the vaguest attention given to the capitalist nature of the system of exploitation which colonial rule was designed to guarantee. Nevertheless, liberation from this autocratic political form of capitalist domination entailed revolutionary struggle and brought all working-class action into direct political confrontation with the colonial state.

It is not possible to detail here the course of the anti-colonial struggle in the intervening years. By 1971, however, despite having launched the armed struggle in the north five years earlier, SWAPO had survived severe harassment to remain an effective national political organisation, with contract workers still its most consistent and militant base. Through its structures, workers retained access to an on-going tradition of radical thinking and experience, to organisational and communications resources, and to leadership, particularly at the grass roots level. While the precise linkage between political structures and the general strike is not fully known, some indication of its significance will be apparent in the account which follows.

Mobilising against the contract labour system

Several factors raised the level of tension in the latter half of 1971 in a situation which had long been potentially explosive. Gordon points out^[77] that the implementation of tighter pass controls from the end of 1970, with compulsory identity photographs, considerably increased the odds against successful evasion. The June 1971 ruling of the World Court that South Africa's continued occupation of Namibia was illegal highlighted the illegitimacy of colonial rule and the sense of impending change. The positive response to it of black leaders in Namibia ensured that its political impact was generalised on a national scale. Particularly important in this regard was the joint pastoral letter of the heads of the Evangeliese Lutherse Kerk (ex Rhenish Mission - ELK) and the Evangeliese Lutherse Owambokavangokerk (ex Finnish Mission - ELOK), whose endorsement of the ruling reached nearly every community in Namibia through the pulpits of their churches^[78]. The latter half of 1971 witnessed a marked escalation of anti-colonial political activity in every quarter, from statements and resolutions to demonstrations and defiance campaigns against South African rule.

It was the leading role played by students in this mass upsurge which provided another of the essential conditions for mobilisation on a national scale^[79]. Expelled from high schools in Ovamboland in August 1971 for demonstrating against the South African regime, a group of students, many already with experience of contract labour, decided to seek support for mobilising for a general strike against the contract labour system. Having found contract work, mostly at Walvis Bay, the ex-students, cooperating with local worker activists and SWAPO branches, established contact with other students and branches, particularly in Windhoek, and began the painstaking task of securing general acceptance for their strategy at the grass roots.

It is clear that throughout this preparatory phase, the working relationship between the organisers and SWAPO at the branch level was close. However, now and later during the strike the initiative lay entirely with the organisers and workers; it was an autonomous field of struggle and was not brought under wider considerations of strategy. In the early stages of the campaign, a statement

77. Gordon, "A note", p. 11.

78. The principles and framework laid down in Moderator Gowaseb and Bishop Auala's Open Letter to the Prime Minister at the end of June 1971 were particularly influential in the formulation of the strikers' demands (see article by J. Ryan in *Rand Daily Mail*, 19 January 1972).

79. The following account is based on press cuttings (mainly *Windhoek Advertiser*, *Namib Times*, *Rand Daily Mail*, *Star*, *Cape Times*) and on the testimony of Hinananje Nehova, one of the ex student militants ("The price of liberation", *LSM News*, 11-12, end 1976, pp. 30-36). Quotations are from Nehova unless otherwise attributed.

on 15 November by the Commissioner-General for Ovamboland, J. de Wet, claiming that contract labour was not 'slavery' since workers came forward voluntarily for recruitment, was turned into a principal consciousness-raising device. For contract workers, this statement brought into sharp focus the fact that for most wage-labour was unavoidable for survival and that it was Government policy which forced them to migrate without the option of permanent settlement at their work centre.

This mobilisation campaign took place against a background of sustained and militant struggle by contract workers, who had already secured a substantial degree of autonomy in the big compounds. Indeed, well before the strike campaign got under way, militants in Katutura were actively mobilising on the basis of the World Court ruling by means of leaflet campaigns and clandestine meetings. The only effective means of control left to the police, lacking an informer network and with gate-guards and pass-office clerks often conniving at evasion of pass and residence regulations, was to mount mass raids. The standard tactic was to encircle the compound with armed police at dawn and systematically check all occupants and their property with considerable loss and damage to the latter. Workers would be arrested for the slightest technical infringements, mostly of the pass laws. The police raided Katutura in March and June 1971; following the latter they erected a checkpoint at the sole entrance, at which workers were forced to show valid passes to enter or leave - a serious threat to evasion tactics. Five months later, on the night of 11 November, workers mounted a well-organised attack, completely destroying the checkpoint and offices. Four days later the police retaliated with yet another massive raid: it was virtually open warfare.

By early November, the organisers at Walvis Bay were strong enough to call a mass meeting attended by the vast majority of contract workers. 'The reaction after the speeches was overwhelming and support for the strike swelled.' The meeting decided upon a deadline^[80] for the start of the strike and sent delegates and letters to other centres to mobilise national support. The organisers spelled out the basis of their appeal in a letter to workers at Windhoek:^[81]

We are having problems with the white man de Wet. You are having similar problems. He said we ourselves want to be on contract because we come to work. But we must talk about ending the system. We in Walvis Bay discussed it. We wrote a letter to the government of Ovamboland and to SWANLA. We will not come back. We will leave Walvis Bay and the contract, and will stay at home as the Boer J. de Wet said.

The impact of this message is readily apparent in the diary kept by one of the organisers in Katutura at the time.

It is clear that the strike was not merely a mass spontaneous outburst ventilating generalised resentment, but was also a calculated political campaign, for which support had to be won and organised towards a specific objective, the ending of the contract labour system. The mass response to the strike call is sufficient evidence of the generally militant consciousness of the workers, best exemplified in the almost celebratory atmosphere of their mass meetings. At one such, called by the government at Walvis Bay on the Sunday preceding the deadline (12 December) to provide a platform for bantustan collaborators, pro-government speakers were shouted down and Bishop Auala, influential head of ELOK, was persuaded on the rostrum to

80. 11 December according to Nehova, but it is apparent elsewhere in his text that his date-sequence is three days behind. It was probably decided to call mass meetings on Sunday 12 December and to launch the strike the following week; and such meetings did take place in the compounds at Windhoek and Walvis Bay. The strike started on the 13th in Windhoek and the 14th in Walvis Bay.

81. From a diary kept by one of the 13 Katutura leaders put on trial in January 1972 (extracts published in "Strike diary", *Namibia News*, Jan.-Feb. 1972; see also an edited version in *South African Labour Bulletin: Special Issue on Namibia*, 1978).

endorse the strike. 'The crowd burst into shouting and applause, breaking up the meeting with SWAPO songs. Those who had passes burnt them in further protest against the system.'

Nevertheless, the translation of mass enthusiasm into committed collective action in the face of relentless state repression required sustained organisation and tactical flexibility. It is apparent in accounts from both Walvis Bay and Windhoek (Katutura) that activists could not afford to take the successful outcome of their appeal for granted. The partial failure of the strike at its originating centre, Walvis Bay, illustrates the difficulties they faced on the ground. The mass meeting in early November won the workers' support and launched the campaign; but it also revealed the timing to the authorities and exposed the leadership. As a result, 14 organisers were arrested, and the few remaining principal activists had thereafter to work clandestinely. The police could also harass workers by pass arrests, raids and interrogation; arrange an anti-strike meeting two days before the deadline, although this tactic backfired; and call the workers' bluff by providing trains, importing strike breakers,^[82] and mounting a show of force around the compound on the day to deter pickets. It is not clear what effects such intimidation had on mobilisation, since newspaper reports are contradictory and incomplete; but many workers stayed on to claim back pay, and it appears that only about 500 out of 3,000^[83] at Walvis Bay eventually returned to Ovamboland.

The other apparent failure, at CDM, is also revealing. It is perhaps not surprising that CDM's production workers, not wanting to risk losing the best wages and compound conditions in Namibia as well as virtually permanent employment, chose not to join an indefinite all-out strike. Nehova suggests that 'the "Baas-boys" who are paid better than average, had great influence'. Nevertheless, there is evidence that most workers did in fact strike for three or four days, although in the end less than 400 out of 4,000, mainly house-servants rather than production workers, returned to Ovamboland. A deputation of workers left CDM's general manager in no doubt that the entire workforce was in complete solidarity with the strikers, and requested him to inform the government of their stand. In this instance, conciliatory tactics by management, in particular the general manager, appear to have had considerable influence. The manager readily agreed to the workers' demand, and was active in efforts to bring forward the proposed conference between government and employers to review the contract labour system. A few days after the meeting with the deputation, whether or not coincidentally, CDM announced a wage rise of 10 per cent for all contract workers^[84].

In Windhoek, on the other hand, the organisers and workers were completely successful in resisting sustained intimidation by the authorities. The identity of the activists remains obscure, but it is apparent that mobilisation was well advanced by the time the call to action arrived from Walvis Bay on 5 December. Within Katutura, they employed the 'wallposter' technique, encouraging the circulation and posting in public places of handwritten critiques, exhortations and notices, thereby defeating attempts by compound officials to confiscate them and an apparent display of armed might by the police on 7 December. What seems to have been a meeting of delegates and organisers, from Katutura and Windhoek, was convened on Saturday 11 December, by which time letters from most other major centres had confirmed mass support for the strike. The meeting endorsed the strike call, and a mass meeting on the Sunday decided to strike the following day. Pickets were posted at night, but despite police action to drive them away from gates, they were scarcely needed, so total was the stoppage.

As at Walvis Bay, the authorities tried to use bantustan officials to cajole the workers' leaders to back down. Faced with a meeting at 24 hours' notice, the workers were able that Monday to elect a delegate committee, which met for three hours and produced a written statement of principles and demands which was to leave the 'big men' from Ovamboland speechless. At the meeting on

82. Nehova states that the attempt to use strike breakers imported from South Africa was a 'total failure'.

83. It should be noted, however, that some 3,000 cannery workers finishing their seasonal contracts before the start of the strike would have participated in the mass meeting which unanimously endorsed the strike strategy.

84. *Cape Times*, 29 December 1971, *Rand Daily Mail*, 31 December 1971, *Cape Times*, 5 January 1972.

Tuesday the committee resisted all pressure to comprise their popular mandate. The compound was immediately sealed off, and over the next few days, as the workers entrained for Ovamboland, police harassment became severe, extending to physical assault, arson, stoning at night, and propaganda and intimidation by loudspeaker. But the strikers remained solid, and it is clear from their own documents that the rank-and-file leadership played no small part in holding them together.

National strike and peasants' revolt

Despite the difficulties, the strike call was spectacularly successful. By 20 December, 11,500 workers had come out. By mid-January 13,500 had been transported to Ovamboland by rail by the government. Some 18,000 (counting the 3000 cannery workers who returned earlier) had returned to Ovamboland, about 25,000 had been involved in strike action,^[85] 22,500 of them from towns, mines and camps making a total of 23 centres, 11 of them mines. In other words, well over half the 43,400 recorded as being in the Police Zone in 1971 had joined the strike against the contract system. It is not entirely certain what proportion of the striking workers were from Ovamboland. Without doubt the vast majority of Namibian Ovambo workers (53 per cent of the total) in the towns and mines were involved, together with a substantial number of domestic and farm workers. A substantial though smaller proportion of Angolans (40 per cent of the total), who were mainly concentrated on farms, also joined.

In the compounds, where decisions and organisation could take place within a framework of collective solidarity, few workers remained, although the return to Ovamboland was by no means supported at all the smaller centres. Outside the compounds, news of the strike was passed by word of mouth and by the media, especially the government-controlled radio. 'The South Africans... made the mistake of announcing it over the radio and this alone caused a great many workers to leave for Ovamboland. Even small boys working on farms... left their jobs.' According to one farmer,^[86] 'my "kitchen-Ovambo" heard about the strike on the radio, told others about it, and they all went on strike', despite beatings from the police. This was undoubtedly one of many such instances at isolated points. Furthermore, they could generally count on at least tacit support from other workers, especially in towns. Indeed at Walvis Bay at the time of the strike, 'even people not working under the contract system came to stay in the compound. Others gave food to the workers going on strike'. And in Windhoek, workers living in the town, especially domestic servants, gave refuge to activists dodging the police.

The strikers' strategy was designed to exploit tactically the duality of their class position. It was central to their resolve not merely to withdraw from the contract system, but further to return to Ovamboland rather than remain at their work centres. Ironically, this demand coincided with the pre-arranged contingency plan of a colonial regime anxious both to avoid open confrontation with large, organised groups of workers near centres of production and white residence, and to disrupt the strikers' collective solidarity. As a result, a large majority of the strikers had already been transported back to Ovamboland before the end of December.

But the authorities' expectations were thwarted by the resilience of the strikers' rank-and-file leadership^[87]. Linking with an already militant white-collar opposition within Ovamboland, activists set up an *ad hoc* strike committee, whose members 'were elected on a regional basis'. On 3 January the committee met for the first time, resolved 'to reject any agreement reached if the strikers were not consulted and did not support it', drew up and circulated a list of the workers'

85. Allowing for those who returned after striking initially, and for those who used alternative transport to return to Ovamboland.

86. Cited in *Namibia News*, 4, 11-12, Nov.-Dec. 1971.

87. The following is based principally on Kane-Berman, *Contract labour*, pp. 24-33 and Appendix III (minutes of the mass meeting held at Oluno-Ondangwa on 10 January 1972).

grievances and demands, and put these as a series of resolutions to a mass meeting of 5,500 strikers called a week later. The meeting passed them unanimously, and elected a deputation to represent them at the forthcoming conference at Grootfontein between the government, the principal employers and the bantustan executive, which had been brought forward to 19-20 January. It warned against any attempt to restart recruiting in Ovamboland in the interim, and indeed, recruiting remained at a standstill until several days after the conference. Pickets were also successful in turning back at the border would-be migrants from deeper inside Angola; and 600 labourers on the Kunene project came out in sympathy. Overall, the dispersal of the strikers from their concentrated strongholds in the compounds was compensated by more effective, if tenuous, communication at the regional level once inside Ovamboland. The unity of the strike was maintained.

But very soon the struggle against contract labour had broadened into general resistance to the apparatus of colonialism in Ovamboland. The sudden irruption of thousands of militant workers into an already discontented peasantry with a radicalised white-collar stratum and intelligentsia, with which they were anyway intimately linked, catalysed widespread direct action against the symbols, fixtures and black personnel of colonial rule. By the second half of the January, speakers at mass meetings were beginning to articulate peasant grievances as well. For a brief period, government transport was stoned off the roads north of Ondangwa. On the night of 16 January, over 100 km of the border fence were destroyed. In the weeks following, there was a series of attacks on both sides of the border on stock control posts and on inspectors, headmen and informers^[88].

There are good reasons why, as appears to have been the case, the most radical resistance was concentrated in Ukwanyama, in particular along the border. As the largest and most militarised pre-colonial kingdom, and the victim of bloody subjugation by the Portuguese in 1915, it possessed a strongly self-conscious historical tradition of resistance. It was bisected by the international boundary, and thus robbed of its best cattle-pastures towards the Okavango River^[89]. And crucially, it was by far the most overcrowded part of the *oshana* (floodplain) zone, a burden exacerbated by the immigration of a steady stream of settlers from the north. It has also been the one area where a non-evangelical mission (Anglican), with its own high school and using English as its working language, has gained a large number of followers. Both before and since, Ukwanyama has remained a storm-centre of resistance to colonial rule.

The aftermath: contract workers and national liberation

By late February both the strike and the peasant revolt had largely been broken, although opposition on both fronts continued on a wide scale for some time thereafter and merged with the long-term guerrilla campaign in the north. Contingents of police moved in on 12 January, army units a fortnight later, followed on 5-6 February by reinforcements of police infantry. On the 4th, the South African Government clamped draconian emergency regulations on Ovamboland (R17-72) similar to those still in force in the Transkei. Police and army units instituted a reign of terror, attacking and firing on strike meetings and gatherings of any kind as well as rounding up, holding

88. Most notable among the victims was the member of the Owambo Legislative Council appointed 'representative' for contract workers in the Police Zone, whose house and store were gutted by arsonists (Kane-Berman, *Contract labour*, p. 29).

89. Indeed, a letter from Ovamboland at the time suggests that this was a principal motive for destroying the boundary fence, which 'prevents our cattle from reaching the grazing areas now at Angola'. In a similar vein, two strikers told Kane-Berman that the fence was probably cut because 'we are oppressed by the Government and we don't feel the fence was necessary. Owambo is not a white man's country. Who gave the white man permission to build a fence there?' (Kane-Berman, *Contract labour*, p. 27).

and imprisoning people on a large scale^[90]. Deliberate misinterpretation of the new labour agreement reached at Grootfontein on 20 January was used to weaken the strikers' solidarity^[91]. Furthermore, when workers began re-applying to the 'new' labour bureau in Ondangwa in late January, there is evidence that coercion was applied to prevent any bargaining over fresh contracts^[92]. Police attacks on workers' meetings disrupted picketing and the coordination of tactics, and many workers appear to have left to escape the reign of terror that was then in full swing. Even so, according to official figures by mid-February only 6,148 had registered as work-seekers, an unknown proportion of them not originally strikers in any case. As late as 7 July it was reported that the number of workers in the Katutura compound had only just reached 4,000 - two-thirds of its pre-strike total. A substantial proportion of the strikers continued to hold out for many months.

Ultimately the workers could not escape the major contradiction in their strategy: that although access to peasant resources considerably expanded their power to prolong resistance, they could no longer, as a matter of inescapable necessity, opt out of wage-labour indefinitely. In one sense, they had, by their national solidarity, transformed the colonial administration's standard method of repressing isolated collective action by deportation to the reserves into a major tactical victory. But in the end, when capitalists and government held to their intransigent position, it was not enough of itself to break the system.

The return to Ovamboland was a symbolic act of withdrawal as well as a tactic for extending survival. Indeed, Kane-Berman found workers asserting the possibility of self-sufficiency in food for Ovamboland. The strike committee resolved on 3 January that 'the men should go back to the land to raise as big a crop as possible to make Owambo independent of contract labour'^[93]. Many may indeed have held to that injunction through the 1972 harvest season, which was due to begin in March. It is also fairly apparent that after the mass meeting on 10 January, the strikers tended increasingly to merge their struggle with the gathering peasant uprising.

Nonetheless, the platform of the strike committee embodied a tacit acknowledgement of the irrevocable necessity of wage-labour. The foundation of its demands lay in the replacement of the SWANLA monopoly by a free labour market and the ending of influx control. Although not concerned with the wage-relation as such, and thus with socialising production relations, the platform contained a sharp critique of the dehumanising alienation of wage-labour (identifying it as contract labour), of the function of the reserves as a labour pool, and of the key role of SWANLA in profiteering from low wages and primitive, prison-like living conditions. Implicit in this declaration was a recognition that as their labour was the foundation of colonial prosperity, so the interests of contract workers were national in character. Given the fact that pass laws and influx controls are the cornerstone of the colonial economy, the strikers' demands were thus inherently subversive of the colonial dispensation.

This correlation was brought home sharply to workers returning on contract to the Police Zone to find the system of labour repression, contrary to government claims, the same in all essentials. Perhaps the weight of their proletarian interest lay more firmly in the class perceptions of returning workers, for in the series of strikes and acts of defiance which they mounted immediately upon their arrival, few were prepared to call the bluff of employers and government and risk a second deportation. In the end, the workers' experience of the limitations of sectionally-based economic

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90. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 33. Officially, 213 had been detained by 11 April, and altogether 303 in the whole of 1972 (SA *Hansard*, 6 February 1973, replies to questions); but the true total is likely to have been far higher with 'security forces' operating outside the law.
91. In particular, the leader of the strike committee, Johannes Nangatuuala, was either induced to make a statement or misquoted to the effect that the agreement met most of the strikers' grievances - implausible in view of the fact that one of the main demands, for consultation, had not been met. This and other propaganda broadcasts over Radio Owambo was influential in deceiving many of the strikers (Kane-Berman, *Contract labour*, pp. 25; 17, 26).
92. Cf. the comments of the two ex-strikers (Kane-Berman, *Contract labour*, p. 17).
93. Kane-Berman, *Contract labour*, pp. 32, 25.

sanctions, combined with the collective self-confidence gained by successful mass action, strongly reinforced the wider struggle for national liberation, the only means by which their 'trade union' interests could be secured. In this, both contract workers and the peasantry to which they are structurally bound have remained a disciplined and resilient core of the liberation movement.

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- AHA Arquivo Histórico de Angola, Luanda.
- AHU Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Lisbon.
- IM & MM Inspector of Mines, Windhoek, and Military Magistrate, Lüderitz, under the South African Department of Mines and Industries (Central Archives, Pretoria).
- NA Department of Native Affairs (Central Archives, Pretoria).
- WU Arch Witwatersrand University Archives, Collections A839 (H.E. Schoch) and AB851 (Damaraland Diocesan Records).

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