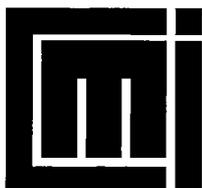


# **Underdevelopment and labour migration: the contract labour system in Namibia**

Richard Moorsom

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**Bergen, June 1997. 83 pp.**

**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

*To be ordered from Chr. Michelsen Institute, Fantoftvegen 38, N-5036 Fantoft, Bergen, Norway. Telephone: +47 55574000. Telefax: +47 55574166*

## 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:

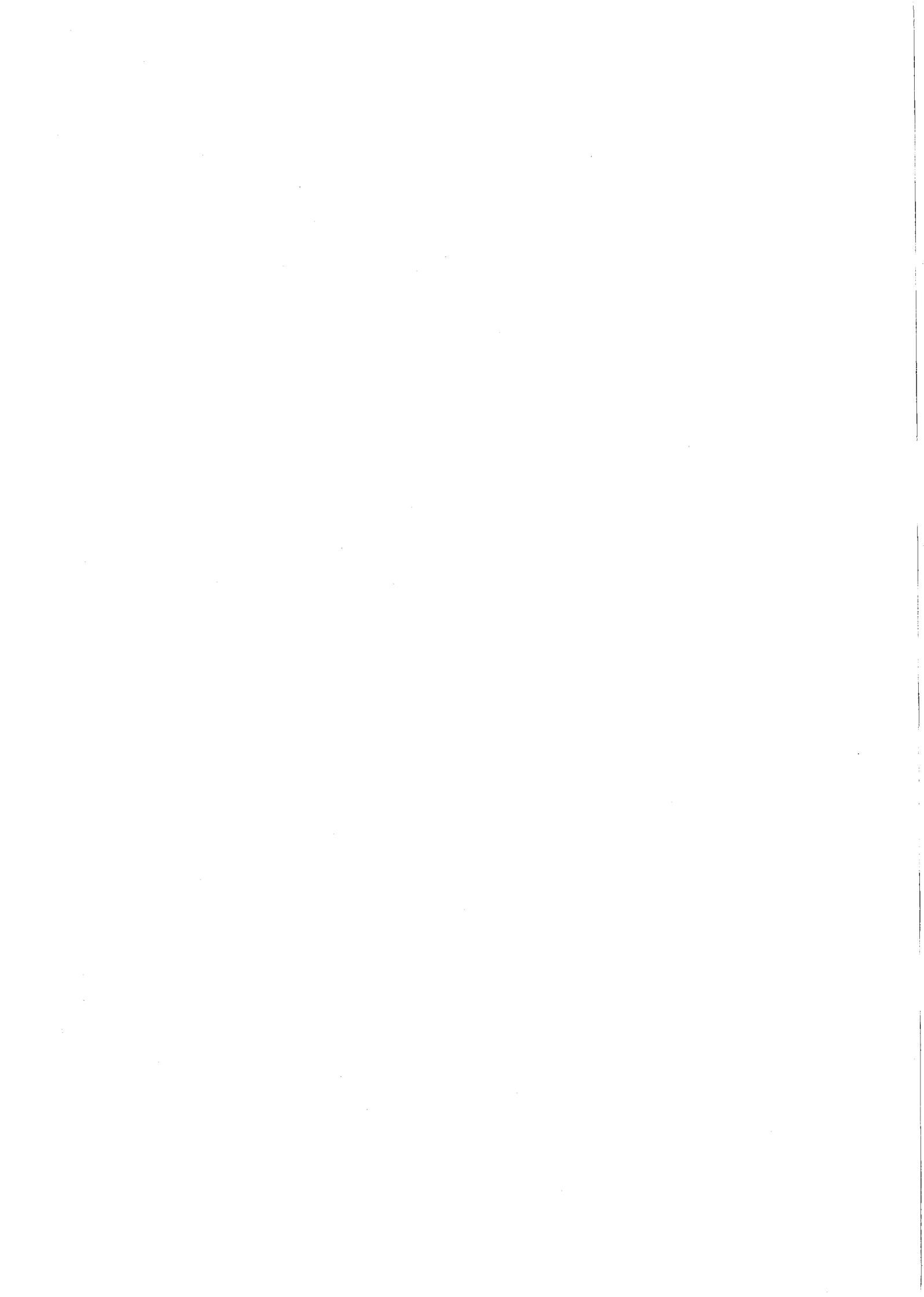
- correction of misprints and the occasional factual error;
- clearer configuration of the tables;
- more sub-headings;
- a uniform footnote style;
- a list of references and archives.

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).



## Contents

- Map 1. Namibia in the 1970s  
Map 2. Land apportionment and reserves, c 1920-1970  
Map 3. Ovamboland: human settlement and floodplain system, c 1911-14  
Map 4. Section of Ukwanyama showing watercourses and homesteads, early 1950s

### **Underdevelopment and Class Formation in Ovamboland, 1844-1917 (Gervase Clarence-Smith & Richard Moorsom)**

Introduction .....	1
Ecology and pre-colonial agriculture .....	1
The powers of kingship .....	3
Local and external trade .....	4
1844-1885: ivory trading .....	5
1885-1900: cattle raiding .....	6
1900-1914: pauperisation and labour migration .....	8
Migrant labour and the loss of independence .....	10
Underdevelopment and class formation .....	12

### **The Formation of the Contract Labour System in Namibia, 1900-1926 (Richard Moorsom)**

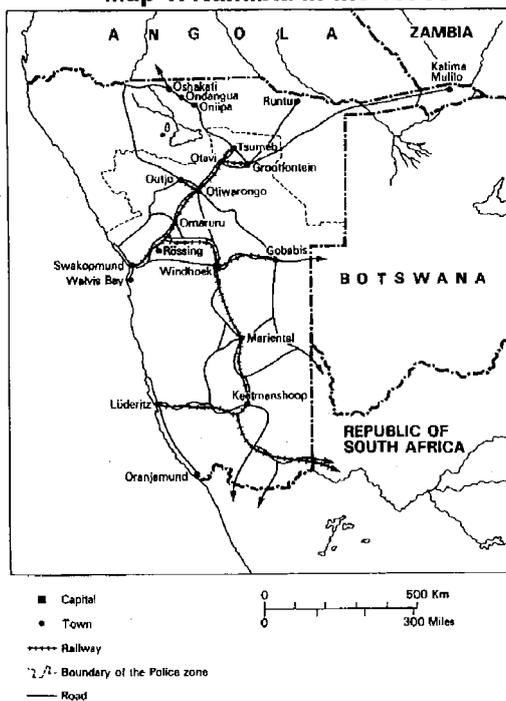
Introduction .....	14
On the class analysis of labour migration .....	15
Capital formation and labour demand .....	16
Ecology and the Ovambo social formation .....	18
External trade and class polarisation .....	23
The colonial stand-off and labour migration .....	27
The struggle for control over labour migration .....	30
Indirect rule .....	33
The gender economy of labour migration .....	35
Worker consciousness and labour action .....	35
The formation of the contract labour system .....	40
Table 1. Climatic and harvest data, 1868-1937 .....	20
Table 2. Labour migration to and from the Police Zone 1910-15 .....	31
Table 3. Usual expenditure of an Ovambo contract worker, late 1920s (£) .....	34
Table 4. Monthly totals of workers recruited in Ovamboland .....	39

### **Underdevelopment, Contract Labour and Worker Consciousness in Namibia, 1915-72 (Richard Moorsom)**

Introduction .....	42
Resource imperialism and racial labour control .....	43
Ecology, subsistence farming and underdevelopment in Ovamboland .....	46
Entrenching the labour reserve economy .....	51
Structural determinants of migrant labour consciousness .....	55
The contract system, labour repression and informal resistance .....	58
'Beating the system' .....	62
Collective labour action without trade unions .....	65
Liberation politics and labour action .....	67
Mobilising against the contract labour system .....	70
National strike and peasants' revolt .....	73
The aftermath: contract workers and national liberation .....	74

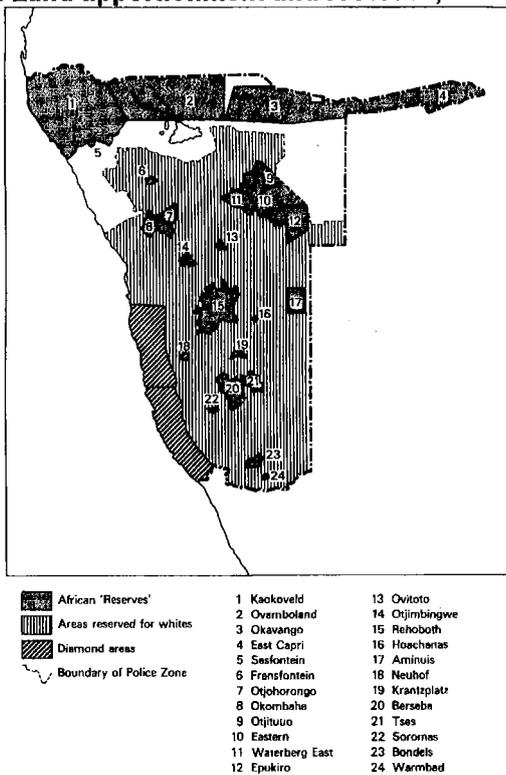
Table 1. Local variations in average annual rainfall, 1940-72 .....	46
Table 2. Population growth, 1933-70 .....	48
Table 3. Land distribution, 1920-70 .....	49
Table 4. Ratio of land to population in Ukwanyama by district, 1951 .....	49
Table 5. Production of millet, 1957-67 .....	50
Table 6. Annual labour migration, 1910-71 .....	52
Table 7. Index of monthly contract cash wages at constant prices, 1913-71 .....	53
Table 8. White collar workers and the petty-bourgeoisie in Ovamboland, 1972 .....	54
Table 9. Size of cattle herds owned by contract workers in the sample .....	56
Table 10. Distribution of cattle ownership in Ukwanyama, 1955 .....	58
Table 11. SWANLA: annual recruitment by industry as a proportion of annual totals .....	59
Table 12. Approximate size of main contract worker compounds, 1971 .....	61
Table 13. Membership of the Finnish Mission/ELOK, 1913-1972 .....	67
<b>References .....</b>	<b>77</b>

**Map 1. Namibia in the 1970s**



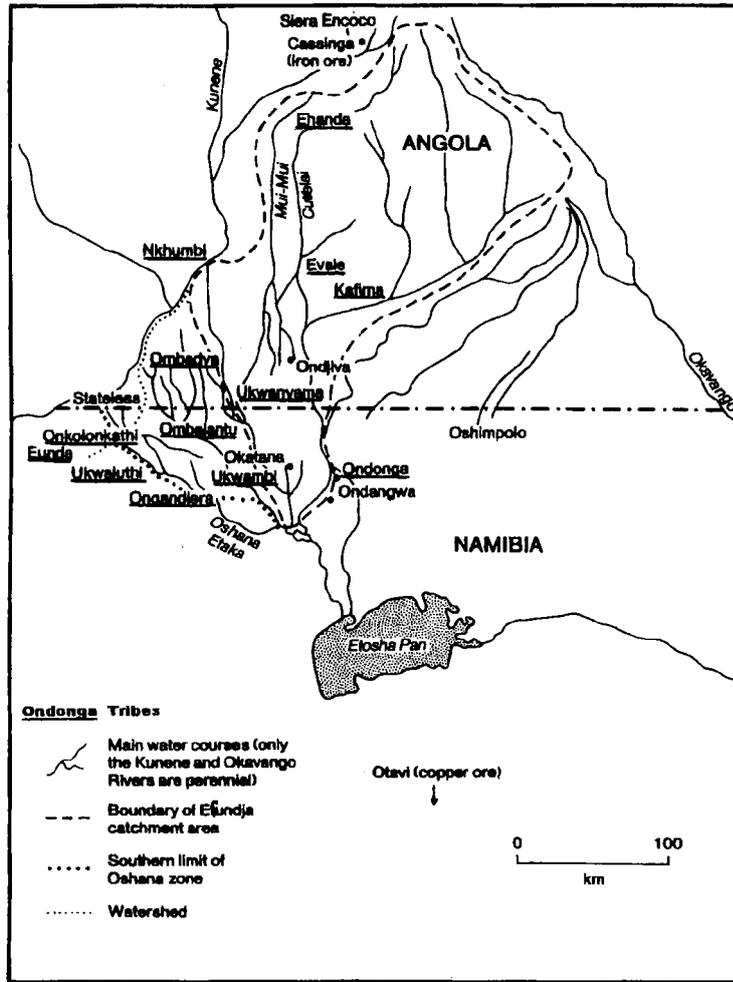
Source: Kiljunen, Kiljunen & Green, *Namibia: the last colony*, (London, Longman, 1980), map 1.2.

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

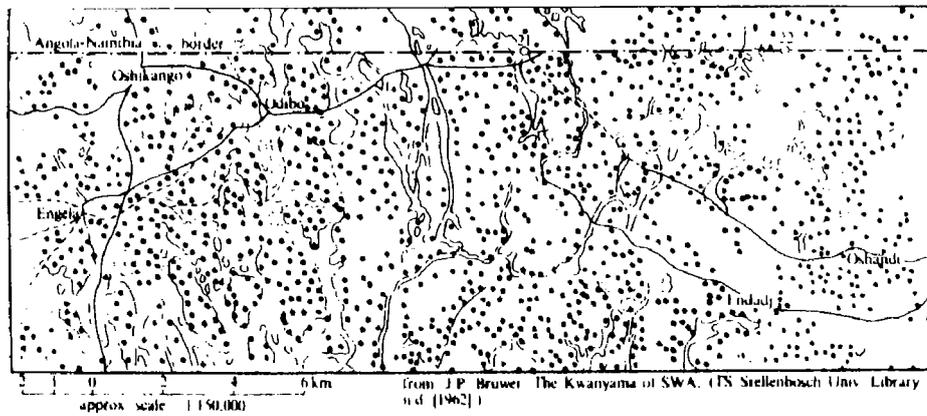


Source: Kiljunen, Kiljunen & Green, *Namibia: the last colony*, (London, Longman, 1980), map 5.2.

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

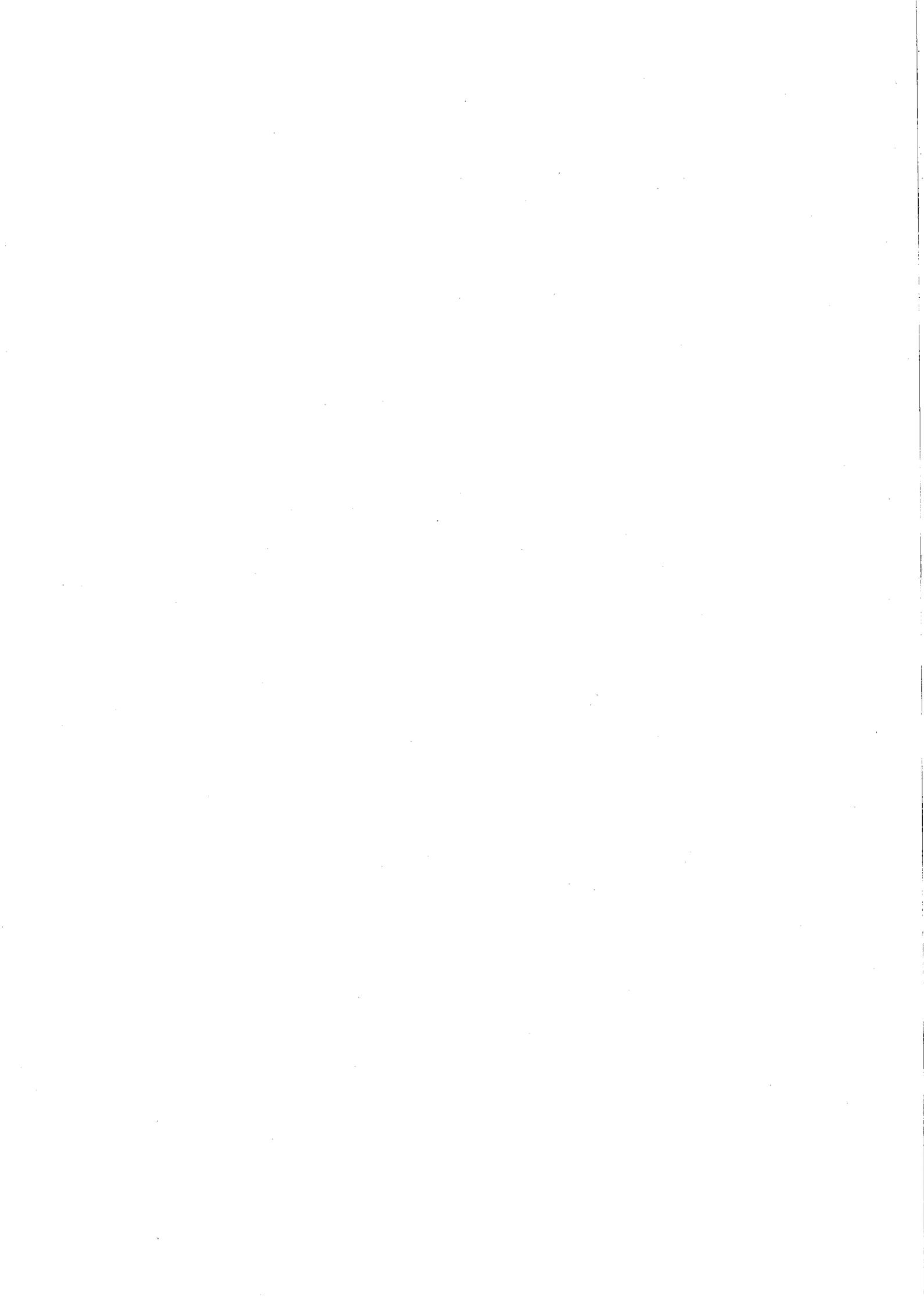


Map 4. Section of Ukwanyama showing watercourses and homesteads, early 1950s



## 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<sup>[1]</sup>.

## 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.<sup>[2]</sup> 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:<sup>[3]</sup>

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 Cunène* (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<sup>[4]</sup>.

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<sup>[5]</sup>. 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<sup>[6]</sup>. 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<sup>[7]</sup>.

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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<sup>[8]</sup>. 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<sup>[9]</sup>. In practical terms it was the king who organised *corvée* labour to dig the large reservoirs to store the floodwaters,<sup>[10]</sup> 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<sup>[11]</sup>. 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.<sup>[12]</sup>

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<sup>[13]</sup>. 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<sup>[14]</sup>. 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.

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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<sup>[15]</sup>. 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<sup>[16]</sup>. 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<sup>[17]</sup>. 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. I, 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<sup>[18]</sup>.

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<sup>[19]</sup>. 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<sup>[20]</sup>. 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<sup>[21]</sup>. 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<sup>[22]</sup>. 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<sup>[23]</sup>.

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<sup>[24]</sup>. 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<sup>[25]</sup>.

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<sup>[26]</sup>. 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<sup>[27]</sup>. 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<sup>[28]</sup>.

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<sup>[29]</sup>. 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<sup>[30]</sup>.

#### **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<sup>[31]</sup>. 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.

