

The Early History of Wage Labour and Worker Consciousness in North-Western Zimbabwe, 1898 – 1940

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Abstract

In the early colonial period European employers in the country experienced great labour shortages and uncertainty as a result of several crucial factors. One was the general unwillingness of indigenous African societies to submit to wage exploitation, as long as the rural economy provided an option. In North-western Zimbabwe the Shangwe were able to expand their pre-colonial tobacco industry on the onset of colonial rule to meet the colonial tax demands, and thereby delayed their proletarianization by more than three decades. The second factor is that all the mines, farms and other companies which paid low wages, or had reputations of worker ill-treatment, or high accident and sickness rates, such as the Wankie Colliery, suffered shortages throughout the era of labour migration and often had to turn to the state for provision of forced labour. One of the key reasons behind the formation of the Rhodesia Native Labour Bureau in 1903 was to intercept and capture Africans, and channel them to mines like the Wankie Colliery and other employers in the region, who because of their poor working conditions and exploitative practices, could not secure independent labour. The restriction of independent mobility and desertion by the compound system and other colonial measures, eventually led to the evolution of labour protest and strikes.

Key words: *Wage, Labour, Indigenous, EarlyHistory, Zimbabwe.*

Introduction

Most studies of the initial encounter between Zimbabwe's pre-capitalist societies and the colonial capitalist economy (with its tax and labour demands) have underlined the unwillingness of indigenous African societies to submit to wage exploitation, as long as the rural economy provided an option. These studies have also shown that in instances where the rural economy provided an option, indigenous societies were able to delay their proletarianization by the colonial wage labour economy (Stichter, 1985, 138-198; Shanin, 1971, 109; Saul & Woods, 1971, 109-110; Kosmin, 1977, 279-285). In the generally marginal environment of North-western Zimbabwe, the only region that was fairly well-endowed with the agro-potential for the development of a cash-crop exporting peasantry able to pay the colonial government's taxes, fees and fines without selling their labour to the

Whiteman, was the Mafungabusi Plateau in modern-day Gokwe district. Building upon their pre-colonial tobacco industry, the Shangwe expanded their production and sales from 1898-1922 to meet the colonial tax demands. The first colonial reports of the Shangwe tobacco trade were made in 1897 about Shangwe men hawking tobacco to Ndebele villagers in the Bubi and Bulawayo districts, something which was not remarked upon as unusual. This had enabled them to withhold their labour from the settler economy and delay their proletarianization for about forty years longer than their Nambiya and Tonga neighbours to the west (Carbutt, 1924, 77; Kosmin, 1977, 272).

It has been noted in other peasant studies that the extent to which a peasantry could respond to cash-cropping depended on the adaptability of the traditional agricultural system to the expanded production of the cash crop without threatening the security of minimal subsistence production (Saul & Woods, 1971, 109). The Shangwe apparently had no problem in quickly adapting their agricultural system to the expanded production of tobacco for the colonial market because, in the Mafungabusi Plateau environment, tobacco was a much easier crop to grow than maize because it needed less attention, and therefore did not divert much labour-time from food production. Furthermore, the expanded tobacco production did not demand any technological changes in the traditional production methods, and therefore did not strain the traditional agricultural system. Pre-colonial agricultural practices and methods remained largely unaltered, and the short-handled hoe continued to be the chief agricultural implement throughout the early colonial period (Kosmin, 1977, 271-73). Ultimately, however, even the initial prosperity of the Shangwe peasantry could not avert its eventual proletarianization by the settler capitalist economy. It was not until after the death of their 'Inyoka' tobacco industry in the 1930s that the Shangwe began to turn out for wage labour in significant numbers.

By contrast, the Nambiya and Tonga of the modern-day Hwange and Binga Districts, accounted for the greater part of the high labour migration from the region between 1898 and 1950 because of a combination of several factors in their pre-colonial historical experience. The first factor was the catastrophic impact that the *Mfecane* had had on the Nambiya and Tonga societies in the 19th century. The impact of the Ndebele raids in the region between 1850 and 1893 had largely destroyed the original basis for organized society and economic self-sufficiency in the region, as evidenced by the destruction of the Nambiya state in 1862, the dislocation of many Tonga polities, and the general disruption of agriculture throughout the region. This had left the region's societies more vulnerable to the tax and labour demands of the settler capitalist economy that they would otherwise have been, because their material circumstances at the

beginning of the 20th century could lend them little support in the face of the colonial developments. By contrast, the Shangwe had been able to retain much of their pre-*Mfecane* socio-political organisation and economic self-sufficiency, largely because of their distant geographical location away from the main northern Ndebele raiding route, enabling them to later expand their pre-colonial tobacco industry into a cash crop to meet colonial tax demands (Ncube, 1994, 278-299).

The second factor was the wide pre-colonial experience in labour migrancy to the high-wage Transvaal mines in South Africa that the Nambiya and Tonga had gained since the 1870s, as a result of contact with South African traders at the trading stations like Pandamatenga. By 1870 the area around the Matetsi and Deka rivers in the Wankie District was a rendezvous for most European travellers to the Victoria Falls and was focussed on the permanent settlement and trading post that had been established by George Westbeech at Pandamatenga in 1871. The Nambiya used to go to Pandamatenga to exchange their ivory, grain and goats for cotton materials, glass beads, firearms, gunpowder and ammunition with the European traders from South Africa. It was through this contact that they had first learnt of the South African diamond mines that had been opened in the 1870s, and the idea of labour migration and working for wages first took root in North-western Zimbabwe. This had begun a steady outflow of labour from the region that gained momentum in the 1880s. Consequently, the Nambiya and Tonga had undergone an earlier transition from primitive agriculturalists to wage labourers than the Shangwe, beginning in the 1870s (Holub, 1881, 213; Coillard, 1951, 61-2; Thorpe, 1951, 61-62; Ncube, 2004, 111, 58-59; Matthews, 1976, 420; Tabler, 1960, 145-8; Gielgud, 1910, 486-88)

The number of Tonga and Nambiya labour migrants increased in the 1880s and 1890s after the ivory trade along the Zambezi, in which many of the region's males had engaged, had reached its ecological limit in the 1880s following the serious depletion of elephant populations in North-western Zimbabwe (Tabler, 1955, 5; Tabler, 1960, 154; Selous, 1920, 177-8, 225, 256; Selous, 1908, 163). After the decline of the ivory trade, the major traditional male economic activity that had remained was hunting, however, after the extension of the Matabeleland Native Department administration to the Zambezi in 1898, and the introduction of the Game Law Consolidation Ordinance, Africans were disarmed and prohibited from hunting in the Reserves, thereby further deepening male under-employment in the Nambiya and Tonga traditional economies. Thus, on the onset of colonial rule, the Tonga and Nambiya found themselves with very few options open to them to meet the tax bill, apart from the sale of their labour to the local labour centres such as the Wankie

Colliery, Kamativi Tin Mines, Rhodesia Railways and the Rhodesia Native Timber Concessions, or alternately, to venture further afield to mines and towns in other districts.

The Colonial Labour Situation in North-western Zimbabwe, 1898- 1940

Following the extension of colonial administration to North-western Zimbabwe in 1898, and the introduction of taxation as a labour-coercive measure, the rate of migration from the region to the south increased. While there probably were individual motivations for voluntary labour migration in the pre-colonial period, in the colonial period the underlying dynamic was in a broad sense economic because various forms of taxation obliged Africans to earn money. Therefore any attempt to separate individual non-economic causes of labour migration from economic factors would imply a degree of voluntarism on the part of individuals that is quite far removed from the African social and economic reality under colonial rule (Ncube, 2004, 112; Stichter, 1985, 6).

It has been observed in other labour studies that the whole of Central and Southern Africa in the colonial period could be viewed as a single labour market divided into more central, high wage areas (mainly located in South Africa and the major towns of Southern Rhodesia) and the more peripheral low-wage areas, and that, in the territorial competition for labour, the high-wage areas drew labour away from the low-wage areas, which consequently experienced scarcities (Stichter, 1985, 105). The whole of North-western Zimbabwe was one such low-wage area that soon found that it was not able to attract the necessary labour for its mines and farms. Even the largest employer in the region, the Wankie Colliery, soon found that it could only meet its labour demands by relying on the labour recruiting system that the Southern Rhodesian government introduced in 1903. The chief reasons for the local labour shortage appear to have been a combination of the low wages, and the harsh and unhealthy labour conditions that prevailed at these local labour centres (Ncube, 2004, 116-7).

For most of the colonial period the major employers of labour in North-western Zimbabwe were the Wankie Colliery Company, the Kamativi Tin Mines, the Rhodesia Native Timber Concessions and the Rhodesia Railways, and they were all concentrated in the Wankie District. The district was also dotted with a few, short-lived smaller mines like Tshontanda mine. A few White-owned farms also existed in both the Wankie and Sebungwe districts. Although the labour demand in North-western Zimbabwe was generally low, European employers in both districts still experienced great difficulties in obtaining the necessary labour because

of the low wages they offered. In general, indigenous Africans of North-western Zimbabwe showed particular aversion to these local employers because of their very low wages and reports of ill-treatment of African workers (S235/501-512, Annual Reports, NC Sebungwe, 1923-1934; S235/506-509, Annual Reports, NC Wankie, 1928-1932; N9/1/20, Annual Report, NC Sebungwe, 1917).

Like all the mines of Southern Rhodesia, The Wankie Colliery operated on a cheap labour policy. The need for cheap fuel for the expanding gold-mining industry ensured that the Colliery was under continuous pressure to increase production and reduce the price of its coal. In order to operate within this profit constraint, the Colliery management had to reduce to a minimum its direct expenditure on the African labour in the form of wages and its direct expenditure on food, accommodation and medical facilities (Van Onselen, 1974, 276-7). Such harsh labour conditions were a feature of the Southern Rhodesian mining industry as a whole in the early colonial period, and were a direct result of the cost-minimization strategy (cheap labour policy) adopted by almost all the mine-owners after the 1903 stock-market share collapse. This strategy entailed the minimization of expenditure on African labourers both in terms of their cash wages and conditions of employment (i.e. diet, accommodation, and hospitalization) so as to achieve profitable mining. Thus the African workers' health was subordinated to profitability, resulting in a high sickness and death rate among African labourers in the period between 1903 and 1950 (Van Onselen, 1974, 277-8; Phimister, 1975, 214-220).

From 1904 onwards hard work and inadequate diet at the Colliery frequently produced a high sickness and death rate among the African workforce that was associated with outbreaks of scurvy in the compound. During the first two decades of the 20th century scurvy outbreaks appeared at the Colliery in 1906, 1908, 1910, 1912 and 1918. In 1907 no fresh vegetables were issued at all to the African miners at the Colliery. In 1908 it was reported that for five days every week the African miners' sole diet was mealie-meal. In that same year the Colliery management implemented a general reduction in wages for the African miners. This effectively reduced the miners' ability to purchase extra food from the local store and from peasants from the neighbouring Nambiya villages to supplement their deficient diet. Consequently, Colliery workers in the first two decades of the 20th century frequently found themselves living on below-subsistence wages (Van Onselen, 1974, 277-280).

The 'bachelor wage' that the African workers were paid was inadequate to support them or purchase sufficient quantities of the extra food supplies to retain their health because a considerable number of them had become long-term residents

with wives and children in the compound. The 'bachelor wage' was part of the mining industry's overall cost-minimization strategy and was founded on the managerial ideology that perceived African workers as single migrants who were not entitled to wages which would support families because their families were supported by the rural economy (Stichter, 1985, 14-21; Lancaster, 1981, 239; Van Onselen, 1974, 277-80).

To supplement their meagre rations and wages, African workers at the Colliery found themselves spending a substantial part of their free time gathering wild produce in the surrounding countryside, fishing and hunting. Phimister has shown that this was also the case on many other mines in the country. However, during the drought years when the countryside could not yield the essential wild produce, there was nothing to alleviate the malnutrition of the Colliery workers. In such years, dietary deficiency combined with severe production demands to raise the sickness and mortality rates at the Colliery. This was the case in 1912 when a drought, poor diet, and production pressures combined to produce a number of scurvy cases and deaths between December 1912 and March 1913, ultimately resulting in a workers' strike. Although statistical data on the number of deaths is scanty, it has been observed that in January 1913 the number of scurvy deaths doubled as compared to December 1912, and that, 20 new scurvy cases emerged in the compound in March 1913. These regular outbreaks of scurvy in the Colliery compound bear testimony to the fact that the African workers were underfed and overworked, and by the end of 1928 23 deaths had been recorded as a result of the scourge (Van Onselen, 1974, 275-281; Phimister, 1976, 244-49).

The health situation in the Wankie Colliery and the Kamativi Tin Mines in the first three decades of the 20th century was aggravated by the fact that both mines had not bothered to build hospitals for their African labourers until 1912. Despite the frequent outbreaks of diseases in these mines, the cost-conscious mine managers were reportedly 'very loath' to spend money on workers' health care. The hospitals that both mines built in 1912 were too small for their labour force and the hospital equipment was generally inadequate. On both mines there was clear evidence of the subordination of African workers' health to profitability. At the Wankie Colliery mine management postponed the building of a new, bigger hospital for many years, and chose instead to construct new coke ovens, despite the acknowledged fact that the hospital was too small and unsuitable for the daily rate of sickness. On the smaller, less developed Kamativi mine this disregard for workers' health was deplored by an investigating health officer who noted that no interest was taken in the welfare of African labourers because the focus was on making 'large immediate

gains, paying natives as little as possible and giving as little food as possible'. He described the health of the African workers as 'appalling'. Phimister has shown that in general small mines in Southern Rhodesia were all struggling with falling output in the post-World War II period hence they continued to minimize expenditure on their African labour force, with the result that medical services on the smaller mines lagged far behind those on the larger mines by the 1950s. On the smaller mines of North-western Zimbabwe such as Tshontanda in the Wankie District and Edge O'Beyond mine in the Sebungwe District, medical facilities remained non-existent throughout the colonial period (Phimister, 1976, 244-49). Because of the general unwillingness of the Southern Rhodesian mining industry to build adequate accommodation for its African workers, accommodation on almost all the mines was usually squalid and overcrowded. Before World War I no accommodation was provided for African workers on almost all the mines, and the workers were left to build their own accommodation, which usually consisted of a pole and grass hut that was nothing more than a few bundles of grass tied roughly on to a flimsy structure of twigs. It was only after World War I that the Wankie Colliery erected 'Rand type' barrack compounds for their African workers. A typical dormitory in these compounds had no windows, no fire places and no ventilation except the door, and was generally unfit for human habitation. These rooms were extremely cold during the night and excessively hot during the day. Mine managers generally did not provide beds or stretchers and consequently African workers were forced to sleep on the cold and sometimes damp ground, unless they constructed beds for themselves. Mine housing was not only squalid but also insufficient in quantity. For example the 'Rand type' barracks were built to accommodate only one shift at a time (i.e. the day or the night shift) but not both at the same time. Overcrowding was consequently a characteristic feature of compound life (Phimister, 1975, 214-220).

Overcrowding facilitated the spread of infectious diseases such as the Spanish Influenza epidemic of 1918-1919, and often caused the entire labour force to fall ill at much the same time (Phimister, 1973, 143-48). From the time that the first cases of the influenza epidemic occurred among the staff of the Rhodesia Railways in Bulawayo on 9 October 1918, mining towns like Wankie, which were linked to Bulawayo by rail, were swiftly infected. It has been observed that the spread of the infection was facilitated by the mode of communication with other infected places and population density in any particular centre (N9/4/35 Vol. 2, Monthly Report, CNC, October 1918). After the first cases of influenza appeared at the Colliery on 14 October 1918, in the space of a few days nearly 2, 000 African labourers were prostrated. Because group-infection often caused the entire workforce to fall ill at much the same time, this rendered stretched the medical resources of the Colliery

management and raised the death rate (N9/4/35 Vol. 2, Monthly Report, NC Wankie, October 1918).

Despite the Government ban on all travel by Africans that was imposed to prevent the spread of the infection, it was carried to many parts of North-western Zimbabwe by thousands of Africans who deserted the Wankie Colliery. As soon as the Spanish Influenza appeared on the Colliery in October, thousands of indigenous African labourers deserted the compound and fled to their villages in the Wankie and Sebungwe districts, thereby spreading the infection to the rural areas in both districts (N9/4/35 Vol. 2, Monthly Report, NC Wankie, October 1918; N9/4/35 Vol. 2, Monthly Report, NC Sebungwe, October 1918). In the Wankie District the infection spread rapidly from the Wankie Colliery to the outlying Nambiya villages and in a few days most of the Nambiya were attacked by it. By the end of October 1918, over 180 Africans had died from the infection in the district. In November 1918 alone, 236 deaths were recorded in the district as a result of the epidemic. By December 1918 the epidemic had begun dying down in the district, although 35 more deaths were recorded in that month. The Native Commissioner of the district reported that women and children appeared to have suffered most from the epidemic in the three months between October and December 1918 (N9/4/35 Vol. 2, Monthly Reports, NC Wankie, October/November/December 1918).

Early colonial reports on the Wankie Colliery indicate that sanitary arrangements in the workers' compound were very rudimentary and at best consisted of a bucket or pit latrine. The reports indicate that the poor sanitation was responsible for the frequent dysentery outbreaks among the African labour force between 1903 and 1910. It was reported that in 1904 a large number of Tonga workers deserted the Colliery after contracting dysentery, and returned to their villages in the Sebungwe district. Most of these workers subsequently died from the disease upon reaching their villages. These deaths earned the Colliery a bad name in the Sebungwe district, and after 1904 there was a considerable decrease in the number of Tonga who sought employment at the Colliery. This rendered a great blow to the Colliery's operations because, from its opening in 1903 to about 1910, the Tonga had constituted the greater portion of the African labour force on the mine (NB6/1/5, Annual Report, NC Sebungwe-Mafungabusi, 1904; NB6/1/5, Annual Report, NC Wankie, 1904; NB6/1/6, Annual Report, Asst. NC, Wankie, 1906).

Because the Nambiya and Tonga had been the Colliery's first workers when it opened in 1903, they had also been the first to experience its harsh labour conditions. Consequently the mine quickly became unpopular among the local Africans and many of them deserted the compound in the first twenty years of the Colliery's

existence. The bad name that the mine had earned itself among locals caused it to suffer periodic labour shortages. By 1908 there was such a rapid decline in the number of local Africans seeking work at the Colliery that the management was forced to import 84 African workers from Kimberley. Thus the mine found that it could no longer rely on a voluntary labour supply because of its bad reputation among locals, and it came to rely heavily on foreign labour migrants supplied by the labour recruiting agencies such as the RNLB (Van Onselen, 1974, 275-77).

Another employer that the local Africans showed particular aversion to because of its very low wages and reports of ill-treatment of African workers was the Rhodesia Native Timber Concessions (RNTC). The RNTC was the second largest employer of African labour in the Wankie district but had created for themselves a bad name in the past because of poor wages and ill-treatment of workers. Throughout its existence in the district, the RNTC always had great difficulty in meeting its demand for unskilled labour. Even after the improvement of working conditions in 1925, the company could not shake off its bad name and continued to experience labour shortages (S235/502-503, Annual Reports, NC Wankie, 1924-1925).

Similarly, the wages that were offered to Africans on the local farms in the Wankie district were very low, ranging from 5/- to 8/- per month. European farmers in the Gwayi Settlement Area and the Matetsi Area frequently experienced great difficulty in obtaining the necessary labour because Africans were unwilling to work for the 5/- they offered per month. These conditions compelled the local populations to prefer employment outside the region. With their wide pre-colonial experience in labour migrancy to the high-wage Transvaal mines, the local population showed a collective preference for the better-paying gold mines, none of which existed in the region (S235/512-515, Annual Reports, NC Wankie, 1934-1936).

In the Sebungwe District the Tonga showed a similar aversion to work on the small mines like the Edge O'Beyond that were far from population centres like Que-Que town, and also far from the railway line and trading stores. Those who desired mine employment preferred the Globe and Phoenix gold mine in Que-Que town. It has been estimated that well over 60% of the able-bodied males of the region who were not engaged in the Shangwe industry of the growth, manufacture and sale of small-leaf tobacco, migrated to the gold mines in Matabeleland South, and to the Gwelo, Hartley, Lomagundi and Gatooma districts, while others migrated to towns like Bulawayo, Gwelo, Que-Que, and Gatooma, in search of work (S235/503-505, Annual Reports, NC Sebungwe, 1925-1927; S235/518, Annual Report, NC Sebungwe, 1946).

The Delayed Proletarianization of the Shangwe, Gokwe District, 1898 -1935

When the Shangwe were confronted with the need to earn money in the cash-based market economy, they were already guaranteed a ready market and a good price for their small-leaf tobacco among the Ndebele. In addition to the traditional Ndebele market, the coming of colonial rule also initially aided the development and expansion of the Shangwe tobacco industry by increasing its market as mines and towns were established in the Wankie, Bubi, Gwelo and Hartley districts. Colonial records indicate that the tobacco commanded large sales among African workers in the labour centres as pipe tobacco and snuff (S235/511 Vol.4, Annual Report, NC Sebungwe, 1933). The good price and ready market that the tobacco commanded in the Ndebele villages, mines and towns meant that the Shangwe had little reason to turn out for wage labour in large numbers because they could easily meet their tax obligations from their expanded tobacco sales.

The years of prosperity for the Shangwe tobacco industry lasted until 1932 and during this period only 10% of the Shangwe men turned out for wage labour. They were able to meet their annual tax bill of about 2,500 Pounds Sterling from the proceeds of their tobacco sales until. The success of the Shangwe tobacco industry, with its consequent restriction on labour supply, disappointed the colonial officials who sought to induce them to turn out for wage labour in greater numbers. Their disappointment is reflected in official colonial documentation where the Shangwe came to be stereotyped as lazy, backward 'stay-at-homes' who were solely dependent on tobacco sales 1932 (S235/501-518, Annual Reports, Sebungwe District, 1923-1946; N9/1/16-26, NC Sebungwe, 1913-1923; Kosmin, 1977, 279-285). Beginning in 1922, however, their tobacco industry had begun to experience a surprisingly rapid decline that was associated with a fall in price.

The underlying reason for this decline appears to have been a change in smoking habits among the Shangwe's traditional African market due to Westernization, which was transforming the lifestyle of the African population in the labour centres. African smokers in the labour centres had begun to acquire a taste for the factory-produced cigarettes marketed by European tobacco manufacturers, and this had led to a general move away the traditional pipes and snuff. This shift in taste was accentuated by a determined effort by the European manufacturers to penetrate the African market in the late 1920s after they had lost their overseas markets due to a tobacco slump. They began to produce cheap, attractively packaged cigarettes that they priced as lowly as one Penny for ten. The younger generation of Africans in the labour centres preferred the modern packaging of tobacco, in packets and tins, to the traditional Shangwe tobacco cones. It has also been observed that by the late 1920s, snuff-taking had practically died out in the labour centres and was

only practiced by old men in the Ndebele villages. This Westernisation process was largely responsible for the considerable contraction of the Shangwe market, thereby restricting it to its pre-colonial market in the Ndebele villages, where cash was, however, usually in short supply (S235/501-518, Annual Reports, Sebungwe District, 1923-1946)

Statistics indicate that the fall in the demand for Shangwe tobacco in the 1930s compelled them to reduce the price of their tobacco. According to figures supplied to the Native Commissioner of Sebungwe District between 1931 and 1935 by a local European trader to whom the Shangwe had sold some of their tobacco for years; and also according to information gathered by the Native Commissioner from Shangwe hawkers who annually came to his offices in Gokwe to seek hawking passes; there was a sharp fall in the price per pound weight (lb.) of the tobacco in this period (S235/509-513, Annual Reports, NC Sebungwe, 1931-1934). This fall is indicated in the table below:

Table 1: Shangwe Tobacco Selling Price (per lb.) 1931-1935

Year	Sold to Local Trader (Average Price per lb.)	Hawked Outside District (Average Price per lb.)
1931	8.0 d.	16.8 d.
1932	8.0 d.	10.0 d.
1933	6.6 d.	10.7 d.
1934	7.0 d.	10.0 d.
1935	3.5 d.	6.0 d.

[Source: Files S235/509-514, Annual Reports, Sebungwe Dist. 1931-1935]

The 1932 tobacco crop was the last that managed to meet the Shangwe tax bill. From 1933 onwards the Shangwe began experiencing great difficulties in selling their tobacco to the already shrunken market which, according to the Native Commissioner, had little hope of any expansion in the future. In 1934 the Native Commissioner reported that many despondent Shangwe hawkers were returning to their villages 'with half the stock with which they had set out, having sold the other half at low prices' after walking around 'for 2 or 3 months' (S235/512, NC Sebungwe, Annual Report, 1934). Consequently, many of the Shangwe failed to pay their taxes in 1934. Faced with the decline of their industry, and the continuing obligation to pay taxes to the colonial government, the Shangwe had no other option but to turn out for wage labour outside the district. It was reported in 1934 that the Shangwe were finally 'awakening' to the

fact that they had to sell their labour in order to meet their tax bill (S235/512, NC Sebungwe, Annual Report, 1934; Kosmin, 1977, 283).

With the increasing degree of the Shangwe's involvement in wage labour, and the growing number of years that Shangwe males came to spend in the labour centres, labour migration eventually undermined the Shangwe peasantry by introducing disequilibrium in the rural economy (Saul & Woods, 1971, 109-111). Thus, as had been the case everywhere in colonial Africa where African peasantries had prospered and declined, the Shangwe peasantry was ultimately phased out by its proletarianization in the industrial sectors of the colonial economy. By the 1960s, all traces of the Shangwe tobacco industry had disappeared, and the Shangwe country was regarded as one of the most backward areas of the Rhodesian Tribal Trust Lands (Kosmin, 1977, 284).

The Introduction of Non-Indigenous Labour in Northwestern Zimbabwe, 1903-1940

The response of the Southern Rhodesian government to the labour shortages that the country's low-wage areas experienced in the first three decades of the 20th century was the formation of the Rhodesia Native Labour Bureau (RNLB) in 1903. Much like all the other labour recruiting agencies in Central and Southern Africa at the time, the RNLB's most important function was to frustrate the independent geographical mobility of Africans in the labour market, and divert some of the labour supply from the high-wage markets to the low-wage areas, which the independent migrants generally avoided. Hence the RNLB worked to channel labour to mines like the Wankie Colliery and other employers who, because of their poor working conditions and exploitative labour practices, could not secure independent labour. The underlying objective behind a more equitable labour distribution was the elimination of competition for labour among employers which was driving up African wages. Increased labour supplies by the RNLB between 1904 and 1908 made it possible for the European employers in Rhodesia to effect immediate wage reductions. Between 1906 and 1911 the RNLB supplied an average of about 13,000 African labourers annually to Southern Rhodesian employers, and more than 80% of these went to the mining industry (Stichter, 1985, 101-103; Van Onselen, 1976, 104).

Between 1903 and the mid-1920s the Rhodesia Native Labour Bureau (RNLB) was able to divert many 'high-wage migrants' from Northern Rhodesia to the Wankie Colliery and other Southern Rhodesian 'low-wage areas' by way-laying them in the Victoria Falls area. The RNLB stationed its agents at strategic catch-points along the migration routes from Northern Rhodesia and is known to have used trickery, fraud,

gross-misrepresentation of terms of employment, and just about any means to divert them to the Southern Rhodesian low-wage areas. The favourite method employed was to control the ferries that the Northern Rhodesian migrants used to cross the Zambezi River at Kazungula in their attempt to travel south. From 1908 onwards 'free ferries' were used by the RNLB to lure thousands of formerly independent labourers to Southern Rhodesia. Such measures were necessary because the RNLB was competing with the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA) for the rich supplies of labour from Northern Rhodesia (Stichter, 1985, 105-110; S235/505, Annual Report, NC Wankie, 1927; S235/517, Annual Report, NC Wankie, 1939). By 1926 there were about five RNLB agents operating at the Kazungula ferry facilities near the Victoria Falls. In 1939 the colonial officials reported that the ferry facilities at Kazungula had led to a gradual increase in the number of labour migrants from the north entering Southern Rhodesia via the Victoria Falls entry point (S235/505, Annual Report, NC Wankie, 1927; S235/517, Annual Report, NC Wankie, 1939). It was these large numbers of foreign immigrants that enabled the Wankie Colliery and other employers in North-western Zimbabwe to meet their labour demands.

However, many independent 'high-wage migrants' from Northern Rhodesia soon became afraid to travel along the main routes to Southern Rhodesia and South Africa because of fear of being intercepted by RNLB agents. For them, labour migration became a hazardous game of hide-and-seek with RNLB agents. Wherever possible, the more experienced Africans attempted to avoid recruitment agencies, preferring to find their own way to the mines (Stichter, 1985, 109-110). It is known that in north-western some districts of Northern Rhodesia, between 1904 and 1910, the local police simply rounded up people and handed them over to the RNLB. Those who refused to go were either flogged or their grain stores were burnt down (Van Onselen, 1976, 104-105; Stichter, 1985, 108). In what was clearly a bid to avoid the RNLB interception at Kazungula, many labour migrants from the Gwembe District of Northern Rhodesia entered Southern Rhodesia through the Sebungwe District by crossing the Zambezi at Chief Binga's village. These migrants usually sought employment in the Gwelo and Gatooma districts. However, what can be termed the main route into Southern Rhodesia for those immigrants bent on avoiding interception by the RNLB proceeded from the mouth of the mouth of the Bumi river, via Chief Chireya's area, to Gokwe (N3/13/5, Sleeping Sickness 1911-1917, Ag. NC Gokwe to Supt. of Natives, Gwelo, 1916). In 1933 it was estimated that about 500 of these migrants passed through the Sebungwe district annually in search of work (S235/511 Vol.4, Annual Report, NC Sebungwe, 1933).

With the introduction of this non-indigenous labour supply from Northern Rhodesia, Nyasaland, and Portuguese East Africa, which usually contracted for long periods, the local employers of Northwestern Zimbabwe grew to prefer this source of labour to the local Africans who tended to work for very short periods and gave notice

when the ploughing season approached. Because local Africans seldom worked for more than two or three months (which was usually sufficient to meet their tax obligations) they were not wanted by the mines in the Wankie and Sebungwe districts which preferred longer-contracting foreign labour. In 1933 it was reported that very few local Africans were employed by the Wankie Colliery for this reason. Similarly it was revealed that the Timber Concessions in the Wankie District also preferred foreign labour. The European farmers were in a particularly vulnerable position as far as reliance on local African labour was concerned because during the planting and reaping seasons, when they most needed African labour, the Africans preferred to remain in their villages and attend to their own fields (S235/511-513, Annual Reports, NC Wankie, 1933-1935; S235/505-513, Annual Reports, NC Sebungwe, 1927-1935).

The resultant preference for immigrant labour led to rapid growth of the foreign African population in all the labour centres of North-western Zimbabwe. The Wankie Colliery became the largest employer of foreign labour in the whole region, followed by the Rhodesia Railways and the RNTC. This significantly increased the foreign population in the Wankie District. By 1928 many of the foreigners employed in the Wankie District had women and children living with them more or less permanently, and these dependents, when added to the male employee population, almost equalled the total indigenous population (S235/501-518, Annual Reports, NC Wankie, 1923-1946). A comparative Table of African population sizes in the Wankie District between 1923 and 1939 is provided below.

Table 2: Comparative African Population Sizes: Wankie District, 1923-1939.

Year	Foreign African Popn.	Indigenous Popn	Total
1923	3,276	9,850	13,126
1924	4,100	10,106	14,206
1925	4,300	11,044	15,344
1926	6,000	11,640	17,640
1927	6,000	11,750	17,750
1928	6,550	12,507	19,057
1929	7,736	12,428	20,164
1930	8,371	12,456	20,827
1931	8,520	12,866	21,386
1932	3,451	13,308	16,759
1933	2,634	13,212	15,846
1935	4,834	12,729	17,563
1936	4,353	12,845	17,198
1939	6,070	14,351	20,421

Source: S235/501-518, Annual Reports, Wankie (1923-1946)

However, the figures for the foreign population given in the table above do not give the complete population picture because they only refer to male employees in the district, whereas, many of these employees had women and children living with them at their work places. In 1928 these foreign women and children numbered about 5,875, and if this figure is added to the male employee population for that year of 6,550, it is clear that the actual foreign population in that year was 12,425 (S235/506, Annual Report, NC Wankie, 1928). The population figures compiled by the colonial officials not only under-estimated the foreign population but also led to a misleading grand total. In the case of the year 1928, the grand total for the African population in the Wankie District, both indigenous and foreign, should have been 24,932.

The Effects of the Great Depression on Migrant Labour in North-western Zimbabwe, 1929-1933

The adverse economic conditions created by the Great Depression of 1929-1933 had serious repercussions on the employment of labour in North-western Zimbabwe. Almost all branches of industry found it necessary to economize by reducing their African labour force. From 1930 onwards large numbers of Africans were retrenched leading to a large surplus of labour and a general lowering of wages in many labour centres. All Africans experienced great difficulty in finding employment even at the large labour centres, and many returned home without having worked. The Wankie Colliery began to feel the effects of the Great Depression in 1930 through a drop in coal orders and it consequently instituted retrenchment of its African labour force. In 1930 the Colliery retrenched 1,291 employees, throwing the majority of these into the labour market. In April 1932 the No. 2 Mine of the Colliery closed down and about 800 foreign migrant labourers were retrenched. In the same year the No. 1 Mine also reduced the number of its African employees (S235/508-510, Annual Reports, NC Wankie, 1930-1932; S138/1, CNC Salisbury, Monthly Reports, 1930 / CNC's Report to Legislative Assembly 1932).

Similarly the Rhodesia Railways was forced to reduce the number of its African employees involved in railway construction work in the District. The railway construction work on the Deka-Victoria Falls railway line, which had begun in 1930 and had provided employment to more than 8,000 African labour migrants (about 5,000 of them non-indigenous), ended in 1932, throwing all the 8,000 Africans onto the labour market. This contributed quite significantly to the very large numbers of unemployed Africans who flooded the Wankie district with no

hope of obtaining work locally. Also due to the Depression, Dett Quarries closed down in 1933 and threw about 300 non-indigenous Africans onto the already saturated labour market. The Rhodesia Native Timber Concessions (RNTC), which had employed 475 foreign labour migrants, also closed down in 1933 and moved to Mpindo in the Nyamandhlovu area, leaving only 60 African workers to dismantle its plant at Intundla in the Wankie District. Another timber company, the Susman Brothers Timber Concessions, also reduced the number of its employees in 1933 and indicated its plans to close down and move to Botswana. In January 1934 the company finally shut down its operations in the Wankie District and relocated to Botswana with its 300 non-indigenous African labour force (S235/509-512, Annual Reports, NC Wankie, 1931-1934).

By 1933, therefore, the number of African foreign labour migrants employed in the Wankie District had fallen drastically from 8,520 in 1931 to 2,634 in 1933. Because the district was flooded with unemployed foreigners (most of them from Northern Rhodesia), who had no hope of obtaining work in Southern Rhodesia, many of the foreign labour migrants were issued with passes to leave the country and return to their homes. In 1931 3,826 foreign migrants were issued with passes to leave Southern Rhodesia after encountering difficulties in obtaining new employment. The majority of them (3,141) were Northern Rhodesian (S235/509, Annual Report, NC Wankie, 1931). This repatriation exercise explains the drastic reduction in the foreign population in the region by 1933, which had been reduced to 2,634, as indicated in the Table 2 above. The subsequent increase in the foreign population indicated in the Table 2 is an index of the stabilizing economy after 1934.

Conclusion

Wage labour was never meant to be a lucrative occupation for Africans. The Southern Rhodesian capitalists deliberately established a low-wage tradition in the country by opting for migrant labour over stabilization because migrant labour equalled cheap labour. They deliberately discouraged permanent town settlement by African workers and only encouraged short work contracts so as to maintain a perpetually unskilled workforce. An unskilled workforce kept overhead costs low because no provision would be made for workers' retirement or social security and little investment would be made in training or educating the workers. An unskilled workforce ensured that wages would be kept low (Lancaster, 1981, 240; Stichter, 1985, 7; Van Onselen, 1976, 76-77). Since African workers periodically returned to their subsistence economy, they were considered to be subsidized by

the subsistence economy. As a result they were considered single and were paid a 'bachelor wage'. In the capitalists' view, the 'bachelor wage' supported a single male during his working days, while the rural economy supported his parents, wife and children and the worker himself in his old age (Lancaster, 1981, 239; Van Onselen, 1974, 279). The general experience of African workers was that this wage was insufficient to provide all their basic needs.

An assessment of early worker consciousness in colonial Zimbabwe shows that its earliest manifestations among both the indigenous and foreign labour migrants were patterns of market intelligence which manifested themselves in the avoidance of 'bad' employers, desertion, and labour mobility. Before the creation of labour recruiting systems, the labour migrant's chief weapon against wage exploitation was this market mobility (Stichter, 1985, 190-195). As shown above, all the mines, farms and other companies which paid low wages, or had reputations of worker ill-treatment, or high accident and sickness rates suffered shortages throughout the era of labour migration and often had to turn to the state for provision of forced labour. The labour shortages and uncertainty that the European employers experienced in Southern Rhodesia and other regions in the early years were in themselves barometers of the unwillingness of indigenous African societies to submit to wage exploitation, as long as the rural economy provided an option. When it became necessary and unavoidable for indigenous Africans to engage in wage labour, they opted for seasonal work as a compromise, and the agricultural cycle determined how long they worked before returning to their peasant economy (Stichter, 1985, 192-193). As the process of proletarianization increasingly undermined the peasant economy, and African dependence on wage work increased, there was an observed change of African tactics from escaping the wage system, to various tactics of survival within it, and the evolution of labour protest and strikes.

When this market mobility was greatly curtailed by the recruiting systems and the oppressive compound system, the only means of labour protest left to the Africans was strike action. Ironically, while the compound system was effective in controlling desertion, it actually promoted coordinated strike action, and could not suppress or even prevent worker protest (Van Onselen, 1976, 237-244; Stichter, 1985, 138, 194). A perfunctory look at the history of labour unrest in Southern Rhodesia before World War II will show most of the early strikes to have occurred on mines where the extremely labour-repressive compound system existed. While the largest and best organized of these early strikes was that at Shamva mine in 1927, there many more similar strikes in North-western Zimbabwe, e.g. the strikes at the Wankie Colliery in 1903, 1912, 1918, 1919, and 1921; and the 1936 strike at the much smaller Tshontanda

mine in the Wankie district (S235/515 Vol.3, Annual Report, NC Wankie, 1936; Van Onselen, 1974, 279; Van Onselen, 1976, 218-226; Stichter, 1985, 135).

The 1912 Wankie Colliery strike offers an example of the nature and extent of worker consciousness amongst the African miners in Southern Rhodesia before World War II. The demands made during the strike transcended the more limited horizons of ethnicity and country of origin. The mixed group of indigenous and non-indigenous labourers, encompassing the Lozi, Tonga, Ila, Bemba, Nyanja and Sena migrants responded as *workers* who shared certain common grievances about their conditions of employment (Van Onselen, 1974, 287) The most common grievance was the poor wages paid to Africans. In 1936 a foreign African employee at the Tshontanda mine, which employed 400 foreign migrants, engineered a strike for an increase of wages but the mine's management and police were informed of it, apprehended the employee and discharged him, thus nipping the strike in the bud (S235/515 Vol. 3, Annual Report, NC Wankie, 1936).

What is notable about the early worker consciousness, especially as it emerged in the Southern Rhodesian mine compounds between World War I and World War II, was that it was spearheaded by foreign labour migrants. This suggests possible connections between immigrant ideologies and industrial action. Sources indicate that all the strikes at the Wankie Colliery between 1903 and 1950 were engineered by foreign migrants. This suggests possible connections between immigrant ideologies and industrial action. Of all the ideologies and organizations that were active in the Wankie Colliery between 1917 and 1950, none aroused greater fear and suspicion from the mine management than the Watch Tower movement (Van Onselen, 1976, 204). The Watch Tower movement had been introduced to the Rhodesian mining compounds by Malawian migrant workers in the early 20th century. The Wankie Colliery, conveniently located in the northernmost part of the country near the major ports of entry for most of the labour migrants from Malawi, became the most successful base that the Watch Tower movement developed in the country (Ranger, 1970, 145).

The ideology of the Watch Tower movement, though outwardly religious, was to a large extent political since it reflected growing African national consciousness and a revolt against Whites, not only in religious matters but in everything (Roux, 1966, 77-78). At the core of the Watch Tower message there was often a teaching which delivered a direct challenge to settler supremacy. The radical millenarian prophecies of the movement, with their implicit and explicit promise of a change in settler colonial society, attracted many African workers in the Colliery. 1923 seems to have marked the peak of the appeal of the Watch Tower ideology in the Colliery compound.

In this year the number of Watch Tower Society members in the Colliery was estimated at 1,000 (Ranger, 1970, 143-145; Van Onselen, 1976, 204-206).

After 1923 the Colliery management instituted measures for the suppression of the Movement because it held great fears of the possible connection between the Watch Tower ideology and industrial action. In November 1923 the leading Watch Tower preacher in the Colliery compound, a Malawian Tonga, was deported. This was part of a larger campaign orchestrated by the Rhodesian settler administration to limit the growth of the Movement. The administrative response included a vigorous campaign of deportations of the Movement's adherents. All known Watch Tower adherents were dismissed from their jobs and deported to Nyasaland or Northern Rhodesia (Ranger, 1970, 141, 146-7; Van Onselen, 1976, 206, 218). This repressive administrative response was successful to a large extent because between 1923 and 1929 the Watch Tower membership decreased considerably in the Colliery compound as many dropped out. After its containment, the movement was closely watched throughout the 1930s and 1940s as it petered out

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