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# Yearning to be modern? Dreams and desires of Ovambo contract workers in Namibia

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*Abstract*

*The article investigates the desire for modernity as represented by western commodities, Christianity and education, among Ovambo. It addresses the reasons why Ovambo men in particular entered contract waged labour, the struggles they went through due to the work environment, and the different ways in which waged labour was integrated into their lives. Sources include elements of former migrant labourers' biographies. The article argues that the way in which Ovambo men set about acquiring European commodities was mediated by an existing set of motivations, which suggested disillusionment with their traditional leaders and headmen from the late 1930s to the early 1950s and that, while in most cases the immediate reason given for men becoming migrant labourers was the monetary benefit, young men were also attracted by the status symbols possessed by the elite such as clothing and consumer goods.*

## Introduction

The influence of long-distance traders and Christianity in the former Ovamboland was both symbolic and material.[1] The traders and missionaries nurtured a desire for 'modern' goods and thus actually groomed the Ovambo for waged labour. European clothing and other imports were adopted selectively, first by kings and elites and later by ordinary people. Thus, European traders and missionaries instilled in the Ovambo 'wants' that could only be satisfied through active participation in the colonial economy, and made them thoroughly familiar with the symbols and values of the Europeans'

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[1] The term 'Ovamboland' was used by colonial officials to designate the northern border area populated by groups speaking related languages, including Kwanyama. In this thesis I shall use the term 'Ovambo' to signify both people and area.

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modernity.[2] The initial contact with European traders and later with employers in the Police Zone produced a marked effect on the Ovambo in terms of their adoption of European commodities. Although these goods were available prior to colonialism, very few people could afford them. Desire for these goods was stimulated and grew under colonialism. As other scholars explain, as early as the 1880s small numbers of Ovambo men left their homes for labour contracts of six to nine months at a time, and throughout the late 19th century and early 20th century, this migration steadily increased. Most importantly however, this paper examines why Ovambo people adopted European goods, especially clothing. This is a key issue because the influence of economic capitalism on the social, economic and political space of Ovambo society led to a shift in the way young Ovambo men and women acquired symbols of modernity. Ovambo men sought to use wages from migrant labour to build up herds or to set up a household independent of 'patriarchal' restraints. The wages earned from migrant labour allowed young men to challenge the authority of their elders, by building up status and wealth on their own, mainly in the 1920s and 1930s.[3] While building up herds is not directly related to European commodities, wages from contract labour could also be used to acquire stock. Similarly, European commodities were bartered or exchanged for cattle which were also seen as a sign of power and status.

However, as a result of long term contracts, many Ovambo men had become partly urbanised by the late 1920s, in a process of gradual semi-proletariatisation.[4] Thus, many of the men who came back to their home areas had adopted western ways of living. This potential 'detribalisation' of Africans posed a threat to indirect rule. The colonial authorities tried to prevent 'detribalisation' by keeping the labourers' rural connections alive and providing a safeguard so that cultural affinities and respect for traditional authority were maintained when their labour was no longer needed. Thus, the Ovambo men's perception of the whole 'modern' process was mediated by an existing set of motivations, which suggested disillusionment with their traditional leaders and headmen. The roots of this disillusionment was to be found in the demands for cattle from the most vulnerable members of society made by kings and *omalenga* to compensate for the losses incurred through their involvement in long distance trade. One escape route from this process was migrant labour.[5] As this implies, the issues of disillusionment, migrant labour, money and western commodities, were inextricably linked to the colonial process, which divided the urban from the rural, and the industrial

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[2] Modernity in this case refers to the adoption of material elements of urban culture which were also linked to rural associations with long-distance trade, royal privilege, and Christianity. As discussed in the paper, elements of 'modernity' are also put to work in the interest of maintaining 'tradition'. Thus, wages, clothing and other consumer goods are appropriated by headmen as tribute; are used to marry, are given to fathers as gifts, and are used to rebuild cattle herds.

[3] Meredith McKittrick, *To Dwell Secure: Generation, Christianity, and Colonialism in Ovambo*, Portsworth, Heinemann, 2002: 17-179; Patricia Hayes, *A History of the Owambo of Namibia, 1880-1930*, unpubl. PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 1992: 279.

[4] Hayes, *History of the Owambo :* 336.

[5] Ibid.: 146f.

centre from the 'native' reserve. It also brought the Ovambo men and women to adopt and appropriate European aspects of modernity in their own economic, social and political consciousness, not only making possible the purchase of materials in the south and the acquisition of cattle, but also to signify status.

This increasing importance of waged labour, in conjunction with the growth of the colonial economy through farms, mines and industries in central Namibia led to the eventual impoverishment of Northern Namibia. This, in turn, facilitated central control, mainly through Native Commissioners, who could grant or deny access to local resources (such as hunting rights etc.) and push Ovambo men into the contract labour system as waged labourers. Many historians have examined the impoverishment and underdevelopment which deprived Ovambo people of productive resources such as cattle and forced them into migrant labour but Emmanuel Kreike, Patricia Hayes, William Gervase Clarence-Smith, Richard Moorsom and Meredith McKittrick question why young Ovambo men become migrant labourers when there was no external conquest, taxation or land dispossession to encourage wage-seekers to migrate?[6] The same question was posed and answered by Kletus Likuwa in his study of the contract labour system in Namibia.[7] He provides different views from the Kavango on labour migration, identifying colonial activities and their socio-economic impact on locals as a central agent of contract labour migration. Examining the reasons why the men went into migrant labour not only gives a better understanding of the disillusionment with traditional authorities, but also leads to a discussion on the Ovambo's eagerness for change and for access to western goods.

According to McKittrick, temporary migration to labour centres in the late 19th century was a way for young men to escape the devastation in Ovambo communities caused by raiding, rinderpest, drought and the concentration of wealth and political power that left many without basic resources for their livelihoods.[8] This is not to say that the young men's inclination towards waged labour was to be explained merely in terms of refuge from the political and ecological situations in Ovambo, rather, the wages earned from migrant labour enabled them to access goods which elevated their status in society. McKittrick claims that the new opportunities offered by colonialism – in particular migrant labour and Christianity – allowed young men to challenge the authority of their elders, by accruing wealth and gaining status outside the existing channels of age-based

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[6] Emmanuel Kreike, *Recreating Eden: Agro-Ecological Change, Food Security and Environment Diversity in Southern Angola and Northern Namibia, 1890-1960*, Portsmouth, Heinemann, 2004; Hayes, *History of the Owambo* ; William Gervase Clarence-Smith and Richard Moorsom, "Underdevelopment and class formations in Ovambo 1845-1915", *Journal of African History*, 16 (3), 1975: 365-381; Richard Moorsom, "The formation of the contract labour system in Namibia 1900-1926", in: Abebe Zegeye and Shubi Isheno, (eds.), *Forced Labour and Migration. Patterns of Movement within Africa*, London, Zell, 1989: 55-108; McKittrick, *Dwell Secure* .

[7] Kletus Muhena Likuwa, *Voices from the Kavango: A study of the Contract Labour System in Namibia, 1925-1972*, unpubl. PhD thesis, University of the Western Cape, 2012; idem, "Contract labourers from Kavango on farms in Namibia, 1925-1972", *Journal of Namibian Studies*, 16, 2014: 47-60.

[8] McKittrick, *Dwell Secure* : 14.

exchange and redistribution.[9] It was generational conflicts and patriarchal constraints which led to tension between young men and their elders, and which later motivated these men to become involved in migrant labour. McKittrick further claims that "workers sought from wage labour the means to become senior men within the existing terms of masculinity, as they used their small wages to buy manufactured goods, which in turn were bartered for livestock".[10]

The argument here is that the majority of Ovambo labourers sought to access the means of social mobility, with which to gain a sense of 'senior-hood'. Livestock for the Ovambo meant wealth and, more importantly, social recognition. And for the poor who did not have cattle, wage labour was viewed as the most stable source of income which could be used to acquire them. Hayes argues that "in the early period, wages were used to buy cattle following the Rinderpest epidemic of 1897 with which to set up homesteads and also towards the reconstruction of lineage social relations which were in constant tension with the centralising kingships."[11] Hence, it became imperative for many young men to undertake waged labour in order to replenish herds and set up homesteads. This implies a local version of modernity, or a vernacular modernity, which involved the appropriation of elements of 'western lifestyle', reproduced in indigenous form. The desire to set up a homestead and the consciousness of local social relations and values meant many young men were attracted to contract work in order to acquire possessions that denoted modernity such as clothing and other goods. As Hayes maintains, "the purchase of cattle, however, was the main long-term aim of labour migrancy. While wages were used later in the colonial era to pay for stock, pre-colonial migrant labourers probably purchased materials in the south and exchanged them for cattle."[12] Hahn's study also maintains that cattle were an extremely prestigious commodity, reflecting the wealth of the lineage.[13] Thus cattle denoted modernity even though they suggest traditional cultural status.

While, in most cases the immediate reason given for becoming migrant labourers was cash wages, young men were also attracted by symbols of status possessed by the elite such as clothing and consumer goods. Thus, their wages were also spent on clothing which not only served as exchangeable goods but also signified status. Clothing was a powerful status symbol and was associated with European modernity. On the other hand, Likuwa argues that although it was the contract labourers' own decision to leave home for work, they did so because of the compelling social and economic hardships caused by the colonial administration. He further claims that contract labourers sought to purchase clothing which was not available locally as a result of the stringent colonial

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[9] Ibid.: 123f.

[10] Ibid.: 125.

[11] Hayes, *History of the Owambo :* 150.

[12] Ibid.: 151.

[13] Hahn, Carl Hugo Linsingen Hahn, "The Ovambo", in: Carl Hugo Linsingen Hahn, Heinrich Vedder and Louis Fourie, (eds.), *The Native Tribes of South West Africa*, Cape Town, Cape Times Ltd, 1928: 1-36 (35).

laws. The social and economic hardships here are referred to by many informants in Likuwa's thesis as *oruhepo* – 'poverty' – which is defined as a lack of both livestock and European manufactured. Many of the informants referred to European clothes as the most desired commodities as they were regarded as one of the signs of modernity or civilization.[14]

The desire for European commodities kept contract labourers in a cycle of entrapment where they constantly returned to migrant labour in order to fund their insatiable hunger for commodities of 'modernity'.[15] Examples from former migrant labourers' biographies show that although there were benefits in terms of acquiring these modern commodities, they were often beyond the reach of many contract labourers. Vinnia Ndadi recalls his childhood and earlier primary school days, by stating:

> most of us didn't have shoes or warm clothing. I remember in winter my feet usually got very sore and cut – and a few times I became sick from the cold. When my father was working on contract he didn't have enough money to buy us good clothes as he worked for five or six shillings a month, which was barely enough for bread, much less clothes and cattle or things for the kraal.[16]

This confirms the experiences of many contract labourers who invested many months working on contract but did not earn enough for the basics necessary to maintain a rural way of life quite apart from goods that signified modernity.

Ndadi further recalled when he went on contract for the first time at a farm in Mariental:

> I left Jooste's farm with less than two pounds...after three whole years! Once my father wrote saying the family needed money so I sent some through the post in Mariental. I also bought a jacket for my father and a few things for the rest of the family – as well as some trousers for myself. I had just enough money left for the long trip to Ovambo.[17]

According to his account, he did not return to Ovambo immediately, as he looked for work in Windhoek to get more money. Ndadi got to see how Africans lived in Windhoek because a friend showed him around, thus he related: "It was very strange seeing all those nice clothes and other things in store windows".[18] He further claims that a friend advised him to discard the shorts he wore in Mariental when he worked on a farm, stating: "You are in town now; they don't wear those things here".[19] Apparently all the men in Windhoek at that time wore nice clothes – long pants, sports jackets and even suits. After working in Café Zoo in Windhoek, Ndadi recalled:

> I was now able to buy nice things for my family and good clothes for myself. At that time I wanted very much to 'fit in' with the well-dressed Windhoek Africans. I

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[14] Likuwa, *Voices from the Kavango* : 76-78.

[15] Ibid.: 175.

[16] Vinnia Ndadi, *Breaking Contract: The Story of Vinnia Ndadi – Life Histories from the Revolution – Namibia SWAPO,* South Africa, Mayibuye Books, 1974: 15.

[17] Ibid.: 16.

[18] Ibid.: 24.

[19] Ibid.

> remember buying a black pin-striped suit the first chance I got. I was so caught up in this clothes thing that sometimes I even dreamed about it.[20]

This clearly shows that without the money earned in contract labour such people could not afford to buy livestock and household goods.

In this context, it is not surprising that Sam Nujoma, who worked as a contract labourer in Walvis Bay at the end of 1947 narrated his experience in similar terms:

> My Norwegian employer had a shore station for repairing small boats, and there I earned a little money to buy clothing for my brothers and sisters, and later on a sewing machine for my mother, which pleased my parents very much.[21]

After getting a job with the South African Railways in Windhoek, Nujoma explained that with a starting salary of £5 per month, he continued to support his parents, brothers and sisters who were at school, as they still lived outside the 'cash economy', and it was hard for them to obtain money.[22] This was typical of colonial Namibia which was divided into the 'cash economy' of the former police zone and the 'labor economy zone', the communal areas that supplied the colonial cash economy with cheap African labourers.

Many Ovambo labourers came to crave western commodities for themselves and their families as a result of their exposure to Christianity and to cities. Most people also used their wages to buy agricultural implements such as ploughs with which they could increase the yields from their land. These were bought at the SWANLA store at Omafo or Ondangwa. A number of ploughs were obtained through the Administration, for example in Oukwanyama where they were used by the leading headmen who also had their own trained oxen.[23] Ndadi, like many other contract labourers, always had to seek a new contract as soon as one ended because of the constant need for money to pay taxes and other liabilities. He explains:

> [W]e needed many things at home, including tools and cattle. Also, I was thinking of getting married someday, although I had no steady girlfriend yet, or any savings, I looked forward to having a modern wedding like some of my friends. But that would remain a dream until I earned enough money on contract.[24]

Overall, it seems that contract workers, despite all their other social responsibilities, such as looking after their families, and paying taxes, were still attracted to the modern things and were willing to accept work under harsh conditions to acquire the goods which they believe would enhance their local status.

Finding a fiancée became much easier for those employed as contract migrant labourers, as Ndadi's account implies. At the time (1950s), for a man to succeed in

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[20] Ibid.: 28.

[21] Sam Nujoma, *Where Others Wavered: The Autobiography of Sam Nujoma*, London, Panaf, 2001: 31.

[22] Ibid.: 36.

[23] National Archives of Namibia (NAN), Native Affairs Ovambo (NAO), 20, 11/1, Vol. 10, monthly and annual reports 1937.

[24] Ndadi, *Breaking Contract* : 52.

marrying, he had to offer gifts such as clothing items and soaps.[25] Modern weddings were growing in popularity. Most Ovambo men's weddings combined old and modern aspects. For example, marriage vows were taken in a church ceremony with identically dressed bridesmaids and groomsmen. They then proceeded to the bride or bride-groom's homesteads, where a feast would have been prepared for guests. People would ululate, dance and wave horsetail whisks. Such a wedding was only possible for those receiving contract migrant wages. And although contract wages were low most labourers still managed to send money home and bring back the appliances, blankets, utensils, clothing and other items they had bought to their families. While many contract labourers in both former Ovambo and Kavango gave finding a wife as a reason for migration, Likuwa reveals that men who had never gone to contract work still found wives.[26] He provides archival evidence to show that the Native Colonial Commissioners strongly discouraged parents from allowing their daughters to marry men who had not been involved in the contract labour system. In other words, this was a colonial strategy imposed on the elders as a means of increasing labour migration from their localities. I believe the elders cooperated because they received gifts or tributes from the returning contract labourers.

Although the question why Ovambo people accepted Christianity the way they did is central for McKittrick, her analysis also provides a useful perspective on migrant labour, colonialism and social change which is linked here to modernisation. She claims that the three cannot be understood without reference to Christianization and its causes. According to McKittrick, Christianity created a desire for goods which could only be obtained through wage labour, while migrant labour gave many men sustained exposure to Christianity for the first time. She further claims that it was clothing and what it meant for a young labourer to wear clothing that drove Christian converts to also engage in wage labour. Converts not only saw clothing as a sign of power and status they saw something more, an intangible connection between foreign goods, foreigners who offered security and a way of life that promised less of the uncertainty inherent in volatile local social relations.[27] Besides the European clothes, migrant labourers also adopted new haircuts and 'town' manners speaking 'broken' Afrikaans or German which they picked up from their employers.[28]

Although mistreatment and dehumanisation were constant features of waged labour migrant labourers played down their humiliations at the hands of their employers in the mines and farms. They preferred to show off the clothing and imported goods they brought back home which were seen as sign of the culture of urban areas in which they worked, and of their new prosperity.[29] Hayes referring to an earlier period, 1880–1914,

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[25] Lovisa T. Nampala and Vilho Shigwedha, *Aawambo Kingdoms. History and Cultural Change: Perspectives from Northern Namibia*, Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2006: 209.

[26] Likuwa, *Voices from the Kavango* : 169.

[27] McKittrick, *Dwell Secure* : 125f.

[28] Nampala and Shigwedha, *Aawambo Kingdoms* : 217.

[29] McKittrick, *Dwell Secure* : 127.

also points out that a distinct subculture developed amongst Christianised migrants, especially in Oukwanyama where young men paraded their foreign clothes after church service and impressed others with their accounts of life in the south.[30] The relative affluence of the returning men meant that their habits also influenced others who had not left the community. In this way, more and younger Ovambo were persuaded to go to the south to earn cash to buy the herds or clothes that denoted status or helped them to free themselves of patriarchal constraints. Thus the 'modernity' was built on a combination of cattle, new goods, and male authority shifts.

## Modernity and colonialism

It would be simplistic, however, to assume that the young Ovambo men's adoption of modern European goods was solely down to a 'love for modernity' as there were much more powerful forces at play here. Furthermore, it is questionable whether 'modernity' could be maintained in the face of the continuous lack or shortage of money. According to Likuwa, the benefits of the labour system were modest, short-lived and necessitated returning to contract employment.[31] While waged labour allowed Ovambo men to access European commodities and participate in economic capitalism in Ovambo, the inhabitants of the Ovambo floodplain on both sides of the Namibia-Angola border had been exposed to long-distance mercantilism and commodity exchange with African and European traders before the missionary influence and the colonial occupation in 1915. Why then did European goods so quickly assume such an important role in the lives of Ovambo? Research on Ovambo migrant labour and motives for participating in the labour trade has so far neglected the part played by the scarcity of European commodities and its importance as an incentive for contract labourers to continue leaving Ovambo. European goods came to play such an important role in the lives of Ovambo so quickly because they were widely regarded as symbols of their status locally.

Carlos Estermann in his analysis of the attitude of the Ovambo 'in *La tribu Kwanyama en face de la civilisation européenne*', claimed that unlike the Nyaneka in the regions of Huila and Gambos, whose country had been occupied for many years by white settlers, and who had maintained their ancestral customs, the Ovambo, despite being under far less direct influence of the whites, changed greatly.[32] In the mid-19th century, Estermann further claims that while the Nyaneka maintained their traditional way of dressing, the Kwanyama began at first contact with white people to introduce changes in their costumes. The *eshongi* (a piece of leather ending in a horn that young men wore

[30] Hayes, *History of the Owambo :* 152.

[31] Likuwa, *Voices from the Kavango* : iv.

[32] Carlos Estermann, "La tribu Kwanyama en face de la civilisation européenne", *Africa*, 7 (3), 1989: 431-443. Estermann's analysis of "La tribu Kwanyama" is considered here because he was simply surprised about how positive the Kwanyama people were toward change, more so than many other missionaries who have written about the Ovambo/Kwanyama such as Charles Duparquet, Ernest Lecomte, Alfred Keiling, and Charles Mittleberger.

attached behind to their belts) had disappeared, as the Kwanyama loved fabrics and had the means to dress completely in European clothes.

However, Estermann claimed, it was only the women' costumes – at least for those who did not belong to the Christian community – that were less prone to the influence of foreign fashion. But although Kwanyama women adopted a variety of beads, they still made use of the shell beads made of ostrich eggs. This was probably because they lacked independent access to cash as "the migrant labour system was gender-specific and colonials forbade Ovambo women from leaving the region for wage employment".[33] Estermann further argues that ordinary Kwanyamas introduced changes in their manner of dress in imitation of their noble and wealthy chiefs. Father Duparquet, for instance, during his first trip to Oukwanyama in 1879, met Kwanyama King Mweshipandeka who was dressed completely in European clothes. Estermann also argues that European influence was noticeable in the way Kwanyama people built their homesteads. The 'natives' of the district of Huila usually did not gather in large villages as their northern neighbours, the Mbundu and Ngangela, did but lived in small isolated circular homesteads, each comprising between one and three families, living in huts with conical roofs. On the other hand, the last great chief of Kwanyama, Mandume ya Ndemufayo had a home constructed in a European style, but there were few imitators of his example of square construction.[34] Thus the elite and kings, such as Mandume and Mweshipandeka, were wealthy enough to acquire European goods, and as leaders, they popularised these goods as their people sought to emulate them.

Estermann's analysis, however, features many generalisations. Not all Kwanyama people adopted or could adopt the fabric as a form of dress, or behaved like Europeans. He often generalises and implies that the changes in Kwanyama life through contact with European civilization were very deep, but it is not clear whether they had an impact on the customs that were much more deeply ingrained in people's lives, especially those relating to social and family organization. He further concludes that although there were a few European inhabitants in Oukwanyama area at the time, it was the many young men that left the area each year for contract migrant labour in the mines and farms who introduced many of the new elements.

While this is possible their contribution was too small to exert such a profound influence on the people. As almost everywhere in Africa, for a more far-reaching transformation, it took a great deal of missionary activity. There is evidence that many aspects of Ovakwanyama culture changed rapidly during the initial period of contact and subsequent conquest by South African colonial forces in 1915. A possible response to the frequently posed question, why young men became migrant labourers when there was no external conquest, taxation or land dispossession to encourage wage-seekers to migrate is that colonial laws denied or restricted local people's access to and control of local resources, eventually causing economic and social hardships for them and pushing

[33] McKittrick, *Dwell Secure* : 11.

[34] Estermann, "Tribu Kwanyama".

many of them into contract migrant labour. However, it is important to note here that the causes of impoverishment are more complex. The Tribal Tax of the 1930s required all able-bodied men on contract labour from areas such as Ovambo and Kavango to pay tax.[35] Thus, even though there was no clear external legislation to force Ovambo men into waged labour, there were several mechanisms by which the South African colonial government could pressurise young men into leaving Ovambo to find waged labour.

Firstly, with colonial occupation, long-distance traders were prohibited from entering Ovambo, thus restricting access to western goods and to the trade in fire arms, cattle, ivory etc. that existed in the area at the time. Instead, there is evidence to show that South Africa encouraged trade in European commodities in Ovambo by opening a shop. According to the Annual Report of 1925,

> A trading Station has been established at Ondangwa and although it may not up to the present have stimulated recruiting noticeably, it is creating demands for various classes of merchandise, food stuffs – such as household utensils, wearing apparel, coffee, sugar, tea and pepper.[36]

This would indicate that the colonial administration was encouraging Ovambo men to enlist for contract migrant labour by introducing shops which sold European goods. Two more shops were later established at Endola and Omafo. Secondly, the adoption of European clothing cannot be attributed solely to the desire for status, but could also point to the fact that Ovambo traditional skin costumes had become scarce.

The local environment also played an important role in determining what materials were used in making costumes, as did famines and colonial disarmament. Lovisa Nampala and Vilho Shigwedha argue that as huge numbers of cattle, the main source of leather, died during the periodic famines (the Great Famine from 1915 to 1916 and the famine of the dams from 1929 to 1930), it became impossible to manufacture traditional costumes. Furthermore, it took many years to replenish cattle herds and those who owned them were reluctant to slaughter them to provide materials for new costumes.[37] The end to hunting and disarmament (in the 1920s and 1930s) meant there were fewer wild animal skins available to make costumes. Control over hunting was now in the hands of colonial officials together with local Ovambo kings and headmen.[38] Thus as a result, I argue that, Ovambo people had no choice but to turn to European clothing, even if it was only for the fabric to make a loincloth and that this was only affordable to those on waged labour or had to be provided by missionaries. This does not mean that Ovambo people did not readily adopt European clothing and consumer goods,

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[35] Likuwa, *Voices from Kavango* : 51.

[36] NAN, JX/0220, Union of South Africa, Administrator's report, 1925.

[37] Nampala and Shighwedha, *Aawambo Kingdoms* : 204.

[38] Patricia Hayes, "Northern exposures: the photography of C.H.L. Hahn, Native Commissioner of Ovambo from 1915-1946", in: Wolfram Hartmann, Patricia Hayes and Jeremy Silvester, *The Colonising Camera: Photographs in the Making of Namibian History*, Cape Town, University of Cape Town Press [u.a.], 1999: 171-187; Kreike, *Recreating Eden* .

compared to other indigenous groups, but it is important to show the underlying forces that contributed to the process of 'European' influence.

## The sense of shift: disillusionment with Ovambo traditional leaders

What then led to migrant men becoming disillusioned with their kings and headmen, and why did they start to look for something else? I agree with McKittrick's argument that colonialism undermined the religious authority of chiefs, prompting people to look to other sources of authority and meaning, which in turn further undermined the religious authority of chiefs.[39] Overall, the South African colonial government's control over Ovambo elders and traditional leaders through indirect rule weakened their position of authority in their communities. These leaders controlled the movement of migrant labourers and sought to extract gifts, which often led to generational conflict. In time, headmen were no longer able to make the migrants return to their rural homes when their contracts were finished. Ovambo leaders had long ago brought European goods under the umbrella of 'tribute' payments. With colonial officials urging them to support male labour migration, those leaders reaped enormous benefits from the migrant labour system. Hence, young men sought other sources of authority, as their leaders were unable to explain or change transformative interferences by colonialism and in fact had become collaborators with the system. This is important when analysing who was controlling the migrants' wages.

Kreike argues that engaging in migrant labour was not without its costs. Transport between home and the workplace, purchases at the workplace and at home (food, clothes, and liquor), colonial taxes, travel pass fees, and gifts to kings, headmen and missions all cut into a migrant labourer's disposable income.[40] In Ondonga, according to Leonard Nghipandulwa,

> one's arrival home from a contract, meant that, one had to go to the king's palace to report their presence at home and also to give some gifts to the king. But in Oukwanyama area, this practice was only done by a few people according to their own will, and they only did so in order to be on good terms with the headman so that one day he (the contract labourer) might be promoted to become a village headman.[41]

This indicates that the rising importance attached to wage income nonetheless, gave younger men an advantage over elders (family, chiefs and headmen) and men over women, because only young men could earn migrant labour wages. Therefore, when Ovambo men went to work in the south, their social responsibilities meant they were denied the freedom to use their wages as they would have wanted. Ultimately – with the formation of political movements in the late 1950s – it is not surprising that these men

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[39] McKittrick, *Dwell Secure* .

[40] Kreike, *Recreating Eden* .

[41] Interview Leonard Nghipandulwa, Ondangwa, 1995. Nghipandulwa is recalling his own experience. He was one of the organizers of the General Workers Strike of 1971/72 in Katutura.

viewed traditional leaders as an integral part of the repressive colonial system which facilitated the survival of the contract migrant labour system, even though at some point they too aspired to become village headmen.

There was also a weakening of social control over youths. Hayes points out that during the time of famines in Ovambo, migration became more common among much younger Ovambo. She claims that this had implications for the later transformation of contract labour into a highly regular pattern in the lives of Ovambo men, for these youths became conditioned to the system from an early age.[42] The initial recruitment process relied on the Ovambo leaders who according to Hayes, were to be awarded a fee for each migrant recruited. However, this did not work out as the system of quasi-tribute that already operated in Ovambo remained intact.[43] Chiefs and headmen were thus able to extract benefits from labourers and could regulate the behaviour and compliance of their subjects by setting conditions for them. However, it is difficult to quantify the portion of wages that were given as tributes to chiefs or headmen because although they had a certain level of control over the labourers, the latter had methods of escaping these practices. Hayes further argues that with the modernisation of infra-structure in Ovambo, and the introduction of motor transport to take labourers to Tsumeb in mid-1920s, increasing numbers of contracts were taken by the same migrants. This, she further argues, resulted in their being more firmly displaced into the formal migrant labour system through recurring contracts which in turn intensified the process of permanent semi-proletarianisation.[44] However, colonial legislation sought to prevent semi-proletariats from developing in the cities and the contract system pushed the labourers back to their home areas.

According to Hayes, kinship obligations and authoritarian pressures also drew men back to Ovambo. Additionally, pressure was particularly exerted by headmen to prevent migrants remaining in the south and punishments were meted out to those who remained for long periods.[45] Even so, Ovambo men came back to their home areas changed, as they adopted western ways of living. This threatened the system of indirect rule, which sought to prevent the 'detribalisation' of the 'native' by keeping the labourers' rural connections alive to ensure that cultural affinities and respect for traditional authority were maintained even when they were no longer of use. Colonial officials had not counted on the tenacity of Ovambo men's enthusiasm for social change. Labour migration to the cities brought unintended innovations. Men became more modern. The colonizing administration claimed to be upholding the cultural integrity of 'tribal' societies while slowly modifying them as a way of legitimizing their rule. Thus, retribalization was a colonial strategy to maintain labour in the sending areas and therefore traditional leaders were enlisted as collaborators to make it succeed.

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[42] Hayes, *History of the Owambo* : 276.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid.: 336.

[45] Ibid.: 337.

However, in the early 1930s, with the increasing evidence of modernization, especially among the wage labourers, officials feared that the system of colonialism could collapse. As a result, they started to advocate both the preservation of "custom" and "tribal discipline" and the alteration of social and political structures to strengthen and maintain European control.[46] It was feared that detribalisation would upset the delicate balance of Ovambo societies and the delicate relations between colonial officials and Ovambo traditional authorities. The policy of indirect rule allowed colonial administrators to operate within the structures of kinship and councils of headmen. This relationship which initially made the recruitment of young Ovambo men into migrant labour easier, while maintaining customary law and land tenure, was expected to resolve the issue of 'detribalisation' by repatriating migrant workers after their contracts had expired. In this way, the colonial system used traditional leaders to control the Ovambo migrant workers and this led to their disillusionment with those leaders.[47]

As indicated in Leonard Nghipandulwa's interview, many young migrant labourers wanted to acquire land and set up a homestead, and their wages provided the initial investment.[48] The traditional leaders threatened that migrant workers who stayed too long in the south would be ejected from their kraals immediately upon arrival in Ovambo and that they would not be given permission to settle elsewhere in their 'tribal' area.[49] They were also told that they would forfeit their access to farmland if they did not come back to their rural areas and contribute to the 'Tribal' Funds. As Leonard Nghipandulwa who was also a migrant labourer in the south claimed: "For the land whose owner had passed away or land whose owner had moved somewhere, you had to give a cow or two, it depended upon what the headman would ask you to pay." Thus, more Ovambo men went into migrant labour because the headmen (local intermediaries) increased land pressures and wages were needed to pay taxes following the establishment of Tribal Funds in the 1930s.

Colonial officials' concern over the breakdown of indirect rule due to the 'detribalisation' and disruption of Ovambo society grew as that society became more exposed to the forces of modernisation. The appeal of European modernity was always strong and had long been adapted to local tradition as the cumulative effects of access to a world outside of the traditional nexus of social, economic and cultural exchange was making it difficult for people to continue to lead their lives as they once had. The effects of having access to new markets and education were proving more disruptive, particularly among groups living in close proximity to these opportunities. The 'retribalisation' politics of the colonial government was an attempt to enclose urbanized Ovambo within reserves. However, in the early 1950s, political activism had grown more strongly among

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[46] McKittrick, *Dwell Secure* : 185.

[47] NAN, Native Affairs Ovambo (NAO), monthly and annual reports 1943, quarterly report: April, May and June 1943.

[48] Interview Leonard Nghipandulwa, Ondangwa, 1995.

[49] NAN, NAO, file 1/2, 1937-38).

educated Ovambo than among other group in other areas of Namibia. Thus, educated 'modern' Africans in northern Namibia were negatively labelled 'detribalized natives'.[50]

## Modernity and control over mobility

While men became contract migrant workers with the possibility of developing skills, gaining prestige, and advancing their education, women continued to be assigned reproductive roles in the economic, biological and cultural sense. McKittrick argues that while Christianity was open to men and women, legal labour migration was an exclusively male institution.[51] Clearly, the colonial diversion of men into the migrant labour force reinforced the definition of women's place in the rural reproduction sphere and not urban areas. With colonial occupation, the movement of women away from Ovambo was greatly restricted, and this was later connected with the mandatory carrying of passes by men. According to Hayes, the two most 'managed categories' in colonial Ovambo, were the young men and women. This, she claims, represented an overlapping of pre-colonial systems and new measures under colonialism. Colonial constructions of gender – involving both men and women – built on and modified pre-colonial gender discourses and practices.[52] However, regardless of the measures put in place to limit their mobility, women continued to attempt to move from Ovambo and settle further south after the 1915 famine.

McKittrick claims that "during the Great Famine, both women and men moved beyond the borders of the floodplain in unprecedented numbers, seizing new survival strategies offered by the colonial economy".[53] Colonial officials together with male leaders and elders sought to prevent this, arguing that Ovambo women could not leave Ovambo as it was against custom. Hayes argues that this move represented a coming together of 'customary law' and western notions of immorality.[54] An ideal woman was depicted as being rural-based while urban, independent-minded women were considered immoral because they resisted patriarchal ideologies and control. Hayes posits that by the middle of the decade, women from Ovambo were both located at and attracted to employment centres which had 'native locations' and white residential areas. In the mid-1930s, new measures were again taken to control women's movements to urban areas including compulsory inspections for venereal diseases, and efforts to enforce the

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[50] Tony Emmett, *Popular Resistance and the Roots of Nationalism in Namibia, 1915-1966*, Basel, Schlettwein, 1999: 188.

[51] McKittrick, *Dwell Secure* : 172.

[52] Patricia Hayes, "The 'famine of the dams': gender labour and politics in colonial Ovambo, 1929-1930", in: Wolfram Hartmann, Patricia Hayes, Jeremy Silvester and Marion Wallace, (eds.), *Namibia under South African Rule, Mobility and Containment, 1915-46*, Ohio, Ohio University Press, 1998: 117-146 (119).

[53] McKittrick, *Dwell Secure* : 171.

[54] Hayes, "Famine": 125.

criteria for the issue of visiting passes so as to prevent women conducting their own independent economic activities.[55]

Another significant discourse regarding the mobility of women was the emphasis on 'tribe' as there were fears that women were becoming 'detribalised'. Hayes argues that women were increasingly becoming the real 'bearers of culture' for Hahn who was elaborating the parameters of the indirect rule system in SWA, especially through ethnographic photography, for international and local consumption. Hence, without the 'tribe', what was now confidently termed 'indirect rule' was not viable.[56] According to McKittrick, women had already formed nascent communities at urban and industrial centres when South African rule began and they helped to forge a population of urban Africans whose ethnic identities did not fit neatly into categories.[57] Thus, as this much more systematic discourse on tribe and cultural 'integrity' developed restrictions on women's mobility emerged.

Ovambo women's mobility also created a new class of people, modernised and possibly educated through the rudimentary schooling offered by the Christian churches. Education was strongly linked with urbanization. Colonial officials saw education for Africans as primarily functional in the production of skilled migrant labour to fill technical and administrative positions in the mines or urban centres. They believed that formal schooling for Africans only led to new orientations which shaped their perceptions, attitudes and values.[58] In the process changes came about which had a negative impact on the societal and 'traditional' cultural patterns. More specifically, formal education was expected to have a modernizing influence on the Africans, which fostered values and beliefs of independence from wider family and traditional authorities.

## Conclusion

In examining why Ovambo migrant contract labourers embraced modernity with such enthusiasm, this paper has looked at the long-distance traders, the influence of Christianity, education and colonial processes, which introduced them not merely to waged labour, but also to other features of commodity production most notably, consumer goods, clothing and money. These processes nurtured a desire for 'modern' commodities and thus actually prepared the Ovambo for waged labour by instilling in them 'wants' that could only be satisfied through entry into the colonial economy, and made them thoroughly familiar with the symbols and values of the Europeans' modernity. The paper also focused on tacitly coercive processes used by the colonial officials to increase the numbers of contract labourers.

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[55] Ibid.: 142f.

[56] Hayes, "Northern exposures": 178.

[57] McKittrick, *Dwell Secure* : 171.

[58] NAN, NAO, 20, 11/1, Vol. 10, Monthly and annual reports, 1937.

This paper argued that examining the reasons why the men went into migrant labour does not only give a better understanding of access to European commodities, but also leads to a discussion about the eagerness to be modern. The wages earned from migrant labour enabled many men to access goods that distinguished them from other people in society. It also allowed young men to challenge the authority of their elders, by gaining status and wealth outside the existing channels of age-based exchange and redistribution. I thus argue that the majority of Ovambo labourers sought to access the symbols of social mobility, as well as a sense of 'senior-hood'. Following the Rinderpest epidemic of 1897 wages were also used to buy cattle with which to set up homesteads and also reconstruct lineage social relations. For poor men who did not have cattle, waged labour was viewed as the most stable source of income which could facilitate the acquisition of a herd. The possession of livestock was not only a source of wealth amongst the Ovambo it was also, more importantly, a source of social recognition.

Wages were also used to buy clothing which not only served as exchangeable goods but also signified status. The powerful elites were easily recognisable by their European symbols of modernity. Migrant labourers displayed the clothing and imported goods they brought back home to demonstrate their new prosperity. As a result, the relative affluence of the returning men also influenced those who did not leave the community. Thus, more and younger Ovambo decided to go to the south to earn the means to acquire the goods that denoted status. I agree that the Ovambo were easily seduced by European commodities compared to the other indigenous groups, but I also argue that there were particular reasons why modernity influenced them the way it did. I further argue that Ovambo people adopted European goods, especially clothing, as a result of the forces of colonialism that were encroaching on the social, economic and political space of Ovambo society. As Likuwa argues, the central view on the impact was that there were but few benefits under the contract labour system and that such benefits were not worth the suffering and exploitation endured. Ovambo men also sought to use wages from migrant labour in order to build up herds or to set up a household independent of 'patriarchal' restraints, thus gaining the wealth or status to challenge the authority of elders.

This paper further argues that due to long term contracts and the experience of urban life, many Ovambo men became urbanised, gradually giving rise to a semi-proletariat, and as a result, men came back to their home areas changed. I argue that this threatened South Africa's 'indirect rule,' which sought to uphold the cultural integrity of 'tribal' societies as a way of legitimizing its rule. South Africa, with the help of traditional leaders, strove to prevent the 'detribalization' of the contract labourers, by keeping their rural connections alive to ensure that cultural affinities, and exploitation and dominance by traditional authority remained when their labour was no longer needed. This strategy of 'retribalization', I argue, led to migrant workers' disillusionment with their traditional leaders and headmen, who were seen as instruments of the colonial government in controlling the locals.

As this implies, the discourses of 'detribalisation,' migrant labour, money and western commodities, were deeply linked to the colonial process, which divided the urban from the rural, and the industrial centre from the 'native' reserve. It also brought the Ovambo men to adopt and appropriate modernity in their economic, social and political consciousness.

Years later, Ovambo migrant workers' disillusionment with traditional leaders manifested itself in the general strike of 1971-72, demonstrations, election boycotts and violent attacks on headmen's homesteads and government structures throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The cycle of entrapment in the contract labour system also led to the mobilizing of workers. However, it is important to note here that this happened at a time of heightened political mobilization in Ovambo, and it was traditional leaders who later formed the Ovambo Legislative Council in the late 1970s.[59] One can also conclude, however, that attacks by contract labourers on colonial institutions which promoted modernity, came about because modernity fell short of their expectations in terms of impoving their social and economic conditions. And on realizing its failure they turned to SWAPO for the liberation of Namibia, hoping for true political, socio-economic liberation and where true modernization could flourish. This means that although many chose to leave for contract work and took great dangers upon themselves in the hope of earning enough to escape the social and economic hardships, many became disappointed with the scant rewards and short-lived solutions to their problems. The realization of their entrapment under the contract system and the eventual frustrations led to their political mobilization. Thus, set on liberating themselves from a repressive contract labour system and colonialism more generally, Ovambo men and women joined the nationalist movement SWAPO and the liberation struggle which represented progress and modernity in the form of education and training outside Namibia and supposedly guaranteed employment opportunities, upon which they based expectations of a good life in independent Namibia.

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