Contract labourers from Kavango on farms in Namibia, 1925–1972

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Abstract
This article is about the experiences of contract farm labourers from Kavango in Namibia from 1925 (when the contract labour system became institutionalised) to 1972 (when the system ended) and focuses on the subjectivity of oral sources. About 30 former contract labourers were interviewed from July to September 2009 but for this paper only 11 interviews were used as they relate primarily to farm labour experiences. Based on recorded oral interviews supplemented with archival and written literature the article explores the labourers’ experience of the migration process and their intra-personal relations at work and sleeping places. Furthermore it explains the social and economic impact of contract labour system on workers and their perceptions of the contract labour system. The aim is to explain how contract labourers present their personal experiences under the contract labour system and what their opinions about the contract labour system are. The significance of this article lies in the fact that it explores contract farm workers’ perceptions and subjectivities which have so far been neglected in efforts to understand the experiences of contract farm workers in Namibia. Furthermore, the focus on Kavango will expand our knowledge of colonial farm work on a wider Namibian spectrum.

Introduction
Many scholars have written on the contract labour system in Namibia but in seeking to provide facts have failed to explore the subjective testimonies of the contract labourers.1 Furthermore, many of the previous studies have focused on mines and compounds and

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have neglected farm labour experiences. While there is an understanding of the contract system in general, the Kavango contract labour system has been neglected as the historiography has largely focused on labour from the region known as ‘Ovamboland’. However, the area now referred to as Kavango East and Kavango West Region also played a significant role in the history of Namibian contract labour especially on farms and there is an opportunity to reassess the system using a different regional context. This article explores contract farm workers’ perceptions and subjectivities which have thus far been neglected in understanding the experiences of contract farm workers in Namibia. Furthermore, a focus on Kavango will expand our knowledge of colonial farm work on a wider Namibian spectrum.

About 30 former contract labourers were interviewed in Kavango from July to September 2009 about their experiences but for this paper only those 11 interviews which dealt with farm labour experiences were used.2 This article focuses on subjectivities of these oral sources. Alessandro Portelli has indicated that ‘subjectivity’ is very much the business of history as are the more visible ‘facts’ and that written and oral source have both common and autonomous characteristics, and specific functions which only either one can fill.3 For example, the sole reliance on the rich archival material on the contract labour system in Namibia has led to the production of “history from above”.4 The colonial archives cannot represent the feelings, beliefs and interpersonal relations of ordinary people. In South Africa, historians have been wary of relying on government records due to the colonial and later apartheid bias of such records. Archival material may have been subjected to editing, selectivity and omissions. The official state archive as a source of knowledge has been questioned and the need for additional sources recognised.5 These alternatives include literature, landscape, dance, art and oral interviewing. This article uses recorded oral interviews to explore contract farm labourers’ experiences of the labour migration process, their intra-personal relations at work and sleeping places and the social and economic impact of the contract labour system on contract labourers and families.

The aim is to explain how contract labourers speak or present their personal experiences under the contract labour system and what their opinions about the contract labour system are. The paper asserts that labour migration from Kavango was different

2 These include: Kamenye, Ludwig Kudumo (born +,-1938), Kamenye Likuwa (born +,-1943), Bernhard Lipayi Linyando (born 1936), Bernhard Matamu (born +,-1919), Kapinga Muhero (born, +,-1942), Bernhard Limbangu Shampapi (born 24 August 1946), Frans Tuhemwe Shevekwa (born 18 August 1946), Shampapi Shihungu (born 1932), Mathias Ndumba Shikombero (born 4 August 1933), Ndumba Shirengumuke (born 1921) and ShiKiri WaNkayira (born +,-1918).


to that from Ovamboland and that there was never the same value attached to it. Contract labourers experienced hardships on the farms where they worked but they were careful to avoid trouble with the farmer unlike some other labourer. Although there were benefits under the contract system, these were modest and short-lived and insufficient to make further participation in the system unnecessary. Therefore, the paradigm of exploitation; suppression and entrapment under the contract labour system is dominant in the narratives of Kavango contract labourers as it fell short of expectations in addressing the social and economic issues which were central to their reasons for migrating as discussed in the next section.

Reasons for labour migration

No composite economic history has been produced for Namibia which would put into context labour migration. But the main colonial concern, especially during the South African colonial period, was that Namibian economic development should be subordinated to that of South Africa. Initially, during the German colonial period, economic activity in Namibia was limited to the existing stock trade but later as minerals were discovered in the 1900s the development of the infrastructure became necessary and this required local labour. Significant white settlement in rural areas only took place after the 1904-1907 war and this increased the demand for farm labourers. Although the German administration made use of the Nama/Damara and Herero people as labourers in the south, there was a labour shortage crisis after the 1904-1907 war. As the war had decimated the number of potential Herero and Nama labourers, the administration looked to Kavango and Ovambo regions to procure migrant labourers. Although men were recruited from Kavango by visiting officials during the final years of the German colonial period, it was not yet institutionalized labour. It was only after the conquest of Namibia by South African forces in 1915 that a literal redirection of the economy occurred. An organized recruiting system was later put in place which eventually saw large numbers of men from Kavango and former Ovambo lands recruited and migrating as institutionalized contract labourers to the farms and mines in Namibia.

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10 Silvester et al., “Mobility & Containment”: 27f.
The reasons for labour migration from Kavango were different from those in Ovamboland and it was not seen in the same way. In Ovamboland labour migration was a result of the process of pauperization combined with severe problems in the colonial economies. An era of intensive raiding and impoverishment is said to have resulted in a generational conflict and labour migration became a way for young men to escape subsistence economies devastated by rinderpest, famine and raids by armed gangs seeking slaves and cattle. Drought and the kings’ taxation robbed people of their cattle and a process of pauperization among the Ovambo was set in motion which the society was incapable of relieving. As raiding and trading were increasingly curtailed by the expansion of the colonial system a form of culture transfer in favour of migrant labour occurred. Moorsom provides an analysis of how workers from Ovamboland accounted for their movement into contract labour: 59% said it was because of poverty, 20% said it was to help family and 8% wanted cattle, 1% land, 4% wished to marry and 1% wanted adventure. In enumerations from Kavango only very limited numbers of labourers chose migration during most of the German colonial period. Although an epidemic infected and killed many cattle, the population refused to have their cattle vaccinated and killed a squad of soldiers that was sent to convince them. The epidemic also killed wild animals which provided meat for people as Mangondo recalled:

Innumerable of them were found everywhere even along the river lying dead. The sick animals would be found everywhere easy to be killed even by a child. The plague provided meat for the people who were suffering the loss of their cattle. Those of Gciriku were attacked by this disease at ‘eperamba’ (harvest) at the season of the new fruit and those of Ukwangali during winter.

During most of the epidemic period, Kavango people therefore continued to hunt the game for meat which became easy prey; they ate from their harvest and collected wild fruits from the forest. Thus they were able to survive without relying on employment in the colonial labour economy. Unlike in former Ovamboland, where labour migration resulted from underdevelopment and poverty, in Kavango lack of clothing was considered to be a sign of poverty and became a central reason for migration for contract labourers. Labour migration from Kavango was always low compared to that

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14 Mangondo, a member of Vakwangali royal family, was born in 1878 and was the daughter of Nasira who in return was a maternal granddaughter to King Himarwa Ithete of the Vakwangali. By April 1956 when Mangondo was interviewed by Romanus Kampungu at a mission station of Tondoro she was already old and blind. The epidemic of the 1890s in Ukwangali area of Kavango which she narrated to Kampungu was her personal experiences of the epidemic.
16 Interview Mathias Ndumba Shikombero, (born 4 August 1933), Rucara village, 28 July 2009.
in the former Ovamboland. Migration from Kavango totalled a mere 188 men from 1910 to 1913.\textsuperscript{17} This contrasts with former Ovamboland which recorded 9,295 migrants in 1911, 6,076 in 1912 and 12,025 in 1913.\textsuperscript{18} The table below, while not a comprehensive statistical compilation, shows the extent of the disparity in migration from Kavango and former Ovamboland in the 1920s, 1940s and 1950s during the South African colonial period.

![Figure 1: SWANLA recruitments\textsuperscript{19}](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Kavango</th>
<th>Ovamboland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>346</td>
<td>3273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>3269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>4033</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>639</td>
<td>4060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>351</td>
<td>3137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>539</td>
<td>6659</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>1033</td>
<td>14960</td>
</tr>
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The number of contract workers in Namibia employed in the farming sector exceeded the number in mines for the first time in 1934 and was greater during most of the 1940s.\textsuperscript{20} This was a result of the strategy adopted by SWANLA after 1948 to meet the demands for farm labour by making it compulsory for all new recruits to enlist for at least one contract as a farm worker before they could travel to the mines.\textsuperscript{21} Ovamboland predominance among labour migrants and recruitment continued throughout the whole period of the contract system and by 1971 it was reported that there were 43,000 contract labourers in Namibia of which 3,000 were from Kavango and the rest from Ovamboland.\textsuperscript{22} Although the table above indicates that recruitment from Kavango remained lower than from Ovamboland it also shows that the activities of the South West

\textsuperscript{17} Andreas E. Eckl, Herrschaft, Macht und Einfluß. Koloniale Interaktionen am Kavango (Nord-Namibia) von 1891 bis 1921, Köln, Köppe, 2004: 227.
\textsuperscript{19} Compiled from, “The annual report of SWA Administrator of 1938-40 on labour recruitments from Kavango”, NAN, AKA 552, N1/15/6-2 and from “The Union of South Africa report on labour recruitments”, NAN, JX0220, 1924, 1925 & 1926, “labour recruitments 1938-1940”, NAN, AKA 552, N1/15, 6-2 and from NAN, SWA 1/1/46, A521/26, v.5.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Kane-Berman, Contract Labour : 5.
African Native Labour Association (SWANLA 1943–1972) in Kavango were more effective than of its predecessor Northern Labour Organisation (NLO 1925–1942).

Contract labourers were subjected to all manner of controls, exploitation and humiliation as they embarked on the journey to recruitment sites. To be recruited the men had to travel to Rundu from where they were taken to Grootfontein. The journey to the work destination was a strictly controlled process and involved overt checks on labourers. For example, all their personal and family details were recorded at Rundu by either colonial officials or recruiting agents and reproduced and kept at Grootfontein recruiting centre.

The colonial administration took various measures to ensure that the labourers were delivered to their work destinations in the police zone. In the early South African colonial period migrants from Kavango were escorted by visiting colonial officials, later by labour escorts and eventually by organized recruiting agencies. After 1936, when the office of the Native Commissioner was operating from Rundu, all new labour recruits reported to his office. The contract labourers slept at a labour compound that consisted of thatched roof houses and was situated near the river. In the late 1950s another compound was constructed further away from the river with permanent brick structures.

The accommodation of contract labourers in compounds at Rundu ensured that the administration had a readily available pool from which to draw labourers who passed the medical tests. The medical testing procedures which the labourers in Rundu underwent were degrading. While in Rundu, for example, labourers were stripped naked and taken to a hall surrounded by a low wall made of reeds near the SWANLA shop. There they were examined and then sent to the hospital to what they called the wahahesera (don't breathe) x-rays machines to be tested for tuberculosis (TB). The x-ray machine was thus known because the labourers were usually asked hold their breath for several seconds while an x-ray was taken. The metal alphabetic tags that were put around the hands of labourers after the medical testing process ensured that they were aware of their job categories before they left Rundu. The B symbol indicated that labourers were fit for heavy farm work such as extensive milking, dam-building, herding of large flocks of sheep or goats while the C symbol was given to labourers who were fit for light farm work such as milking a few cows, herding small flocks of sheep or goats and other light herd work. The provision of symbols to labourers at Rundu was for classification purposes only and the labourers did not know to which employer they would be assigned or where they were going until they arrived at the Grootfontein recruiting depot. From there they were sent to the various farm destinations. Contract labourers were exposed to personal hardship and danger during the journey. For example, in the earlier periods, they carried their loads on their shoulders, provided for their own meals and were also plagued by Bushmen attacks and by thirst. Transport was not introduced by NLO from Kavango to the south until 1938 but the deep sandy road made...
progress by lorry slow and the journey to the Grootfontein recruiting depot very long and tiring.26 A key image of recruitment constructed by contract labourers is that of sale or purchase. The white men (employers) placed an order for their required number of people at SWANLA for a fee that went to the colonial administration and this practice was seen as a sale by labourers.27 Each labourer was provided with a train ticket attached to a permit of employment which indicated their names, the name of the area where they were to work and that of the employer. Contract labourers travelled by the kataghura (the cutter/breaker) coal trains to their work destinations but dreaded the degrading conditions on these stinking cattle transporters.28 The confiscation of their personal documents which where only returned by employers after the contract period had expired ensured that labourers could not travel elsewhere without the permission of the master and could not change work, without breaking the contract and leaving without the papers. Thus extreme control was exercised over the labourers’ mobility by colonial officials under the system and was part of the contract farm workers’ experience.

Some oral histories have found that when people endured trauma as a group, they tended to speak of the hardship of others but were silent about their own suffering.29 The discourse in the oral narratives that it was always others who were mistreated makes it worth asking why some people present others as the victims and themselves as the survivors and what this says of the politics of self-image construction. It is a narrative strategy to deal with pain and humiliation. This tendency to speak easily about others than oneself is also displayed among some Kavango contract labourers. They presented others as helpless victims but presented their individual stories as those of triumph. Ndumba Shirengumuke, for example, points out:

I was never part of the beating; it was rather my friends who always use to scream from the pain of the smacks. They were usually beaten that one did not know how to skim the milk or that he has split the milk from the bucket, then a Boer will surely beat you for that.30

The kitchen on the farm became a focal point for labourers as those who worked there felt closer to the farm authority in the sense that they developed a closer relationship with the mistress (this was the farmer’s wife who was also referred to as the ‘Missis’). Labourers point out that although some farmers were unlikely to cause them trouble their wives often incited them to do so. The ‘Missis’ usually reported every mistake the labourers made to her husband and expected him to act accordingly. The constant reporting of a labourer by the ‘missis’ left him likely to be victimized by his master. Most often the ‘missis’ in the kitchen became angry when a labourer broke a cup or plate or

26 Interview Ndumba Shirengumuke, (born 1921), Hoha village, 3 July 2009.
27 Ibid.
30 Interview Ndumba Shirengumuke, (born 1921), Hoha village, 3 July 2009.
spilt anything on the floor and her anger was aggravated if the labourer dared to speak back. Shirengumuke remained silent in such situations, a common survival strategy among labourers when they were being verbally abused. Silence was an act of agency on display. Responding with silence may also have been culture-related as parents generally conditioned their children not to challenge an elder or anyone senior. Silence as a survival strategy does not place contract farm workers in either category of victims or survivors as this binary way of categorizing their experience is not helpful. It may blinker one to the complex realities of their lives in a similar way as that of the migrant women of Johannesburg described by Kihato when he writes

the way they move, the mechanism they use to do so and the meaning they ascribe to these movements collapses binary conceptual frames that depict women either as victims or victors in the migration process as people at once may be victims and victors, visible and invisible, audible and silent.33

Although some contract farm labourers present survivor narratives in the sense that they avoided physical abuses then others, their continued suffering from poor wages and sleeping conditions blurs this survival agency image. Instead, fears of a contract farm worker of more reprisals from a farmer highlights real reasons why some contract farm workers refused to renew contracts to the same farmer (which was that they were tired of the cruelty and abuses of a farmer) and instead falsely promised him that they will return after a short period of rest in Kavango.

Social and economic impact of the contract labour system and the farm labourers’ perceptions of that system

There were but small rewards under the contract labour system. These were visible in what some returning farm contract labourers were able to purchase. Some contract labourers, for example, achieved the main aim of their migration which was to buy clothes to distribute among their extended families. The purchasing of clothes under the contract labour system led some labourers to change from wearing muromba to wearing clothes which they regarded as an improvement in their lives. Furthermore, contract labourers, especially those who worked in towns, often sent money home to their families through friends and as such their homecoming was celebrated not just because they had returned safely but also as a sign of appreciation of the material benefits they brought. Popular purchases among contract labourers were katishu (a small gun for shooting birds) and metal ploughs. For example, during the 1940s it was reported by colonial officials that the fields in Kavango had trebled in size and that.

31 Interview Ndumba Shirengumuke, (born 1921), Hoha village, 3 July 2009.
34 Interview Mathias Ndumba Shikombero, (born 4 August 1933), Rucara village, 28 July 2009.
hundreds of ploughs had been bought. Some contract labourers purchased cattle. Owning large herds of cattle was a sign of wealth in their communities and some contract labourers did indeed become wealthy and made life easier by using the cattle to plough the fields, provide milk for drinking and eventually meat for sale when the cattle died. Cattle ownership was, however, complex and in some cases it did not become an means of ensuring long term family survival as cattle herds were vulnerable to a number of problems. The use of local animal transport by contract labourers to carry their loads meant the local business people benefitted from the contract labour system. Some men used their earnings from the contract labour system to purchase items to prepare for their eventual marriage and the construction of their new households. Apart from the small benefits, the contract labour system impacted negatively on, for example, the way marriages were concluded among families in Kavango. Previously, a man who wished to marry had to stay in the homestead of his prospective bride’s parents to be observed before their consent was granted. This changed and a young man had to provide presents to his parent in-law paid for from his contract work earnings. Women had to endure much hardship filling the vacuum left by their absent husbands and often contracting diseases from them when they returned. In some cases they never saw their loved ones again as they had died or settled permanently outside Kavango. The long absences under the system led to alienation from families and even contempt for the area of birth which was often seen a boring backward place.

Many labourers returned to contract work more than once although possibly to different employers or employment and some like Ludwig Kudumo Kamenye were engaged in contract labour for eight consecutive years. Despite their constant re-contracting, the majority of the farm labourers felt that their engagement in the system did not represent progress in their lives as the rewards did not compensate for the exploitation and hardship they endured. Some of the hardship, for example, included poor sleeping arrangements which resulted in inadequate sleep. Labourers usually slept in small rounded houses called ‘pondoks’ that were mostly situated in the backyard of the main house of the farm. Some ‘pondoks’ were old with leaking roofs and cracked walls. They were not usually fumigated and became the breeding ground for ntjanya (bugs) which tormented the labourers at night, a situation which became worse when it rained. Although there were exceptions farm employers were generally considered cruel by their labourers. Oral narratives tell of physical abuse of contract labourers who were beaten for failing to greet the ‘baas’ as he passed by or were kicked in the buttocks by the mistress as they pushed the car of their master to start the engine. They were also beaten for beating a calf during the milking process, for the death of livestock and the

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38 Interview Frans Thuhemwe Shevekwa, (born 18 August 1946), Sharughanda village, 30 July 2009.
39 Ibid.
negligence of a fellow labourer, for not being able to operate water pump machines and for speaking out when the farmer was speaking. In some cases the farmer called the police to come and beat his contract labourers for what he believed was their cheeky and disrespectful attitude. A farm contract labourer might even be killed and it was believed that those labourers who disappeared without a trace under mysterious circumstances were in fact killed by their employers. It was useless for labourers to submit complaints against the farmers’ mistreatment as the law was always against the labourers and they were often severely punished for their insubordination. This mistreatment with no legal recourse usually made labourers regret ever coming on contract work and often led them to desert their farms. The estimated number of desertions from farms within the Police Zone over a period of 12 months ending in 1947 was over 600. At the end of this period 297 arrests had been made within the Police Zone and 21 beyond, but 282 of those who had escaped remained free. Labourers who were caught while escaping were beaten by the police before being returned to their former masters but in cases where the old master was no longer interested in such labourers, they were usually deported back to Kavango so as to be eligible for re-contracting.

During the Second World War the farm labour commission recommended farm work wages as follows: the first four months at 8/-per month, the second four months at 9/-per month, the third four months at 10/-per month, the fourth four months at 12/-per month, the fifth four months at 13/-per month and the last four months at 14/-per month. By 1966, it was stated in an official publication that a contract worker with no previous experience working on commercial farms in central and southern Namibia started at R7.50 per month, this rose to R8.25 per month after 12 months, to R9.00 six months thereafter, and to R9.75 another six month later. Labourers’ narratives indicate that wages were not fixed and they complained of low wages. While some were paid monthly, others only received their wages at the end of their contract. Others complained of not having been given their full pay and of having been dismissed unfairly afterwards as was the case for Kativitji in 1929. There was no difference between the wages of a contract farm labourer and a non-contract farm labourer and both of them lived on the farms and experienced the same treatment. Although the recommendations of the Labour commission report during WW2 shows that farm wages increased for a

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40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Silvester, Black Pastoralists : 350.
43 David Ausiku, My own life stories: is this God’s work or Satan’s scheme?, Canada, 2005: 31.
44 David Forsyth, “Recommendations of farm labour commission”, Windhoek, NAN, NAT 1/1/54, S/U14, file 13, 26 February 1940.
farm worker over the years, the narratives of farm labourers indicate that these changes were insignificant and many still regarded their wages as extremely low. Various perceptions of the contract labour system developed among labourers which the next section addresses.

The paradigm of exploitation, suppression and entrapment under the contract labour system remains dominant in the narratives of Kavango contract labourers because the system fell short of the expectations of farm labourers. The dominant feeling among Kavango contract farm labourers was that the contract labour system was an example of colonial exploitation at its worst. The labourers suffered extreme hardship through being treated as non-persons. This view of the inhumane treatment of contract labourers is similar to that of Ovambo contract labourers in the 1970s that saw contract labour system as the source of destruction of all that was human in a man.\textsuperscript{47} Many felt that contract labour system did not enable them to achieve sustainable prosperity as hoped and many of those who left home with great expectations ended up disappointed. Kavango contract labourers’ fear of embarrassing their families was similar to what was observed among the returning farm contract labourers in Ovamboland. A Kwanyama headman Weyulu testified that many of the farm contract labourers returned home crying with nothing to show from their long absence, were too shy to face their families and were usually compelled by the situation to return immediately on contract work.\textsuperscript{48} Referring to their employers with derogatory names became a therapy that helped the labourers come to terms with the mistreatment. While farmers are known to have given their farm labourers new European names for identification purposes and also informed the farm labourers of this, the labourers dared not mention name they had given the farmer as these were usually pejorative and humorous and would only land the labourers in more trouble with the authorities.

Many contract farm labourers stayed on contract longer because the poor pay made it difficult to save money or support their families. As they generally had no other choice they continued to work on the farms and made the best use of the modest wages.\textsuperscript{49} In general, therefore, contract labourers were always short of money and even when they extended their contracts they rarely managed to improve their lot substantially. The system thus trapped workers in a constant cycle of re-enlisting in the hope of achieving even a modest level of prosperity but never gaining anything of long term value. Kapinga Muhero, who went on his first contract in Namibia in the 1960s, similarly asserts that although the contract labour system was the only means of earning money one received nothing good out of it and compares it to gathering wild fruits:

\begin{quote}
I see contract work like the issue of collecting wild fruit. When your fellows are
gone to look for wild fruit in the jungle then you too begin to question why you
must stay. You then decide that you also have to go there regardless of
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{47} Voipo, “Contract Work”: 114.

\textsuperscript{48} Emmanuel Kreike, Recreating Eden: Agro-ecological change, food security and environmental diversity in southern Angola and northern Namibia, 1890-1960, PhD thesis, Yale, Yale University, 1996: 231.

\textsuperscript{49} Interview Shikiri WaNkayira, (born +-1918), Ndonga Linena village, 8 August 2009.
whether you will die there or survive. Those things [contract labour] was all about sacrificing and suffering and making up one’s mind and being aware that whether one dies there or returns alive was up to God to know. There were no benefits there.\textsuperscript{50}

The ‘wild fruit collection’ refers to long arduous journeys undertaken by contract labourers to work on dangerous farms in the hope of earning enough money and material goods which they could keep long after the contract had finished only to find that there was never enough of either and that repeated journeys were necessary. Thus the image of the contract labour system emerged as a cycle of hardship and poverty contract in which farm labourers were trapped and destroyed.

Conclusion

The paper asserts that although contract labourers chose to leave their homes to be recruited they did so under compelling social and economic hardships that resulted from the activities of the colonial officials in Kavango. However, labour migration from Kavango never occurred on the same scale that from former Ovamboland. It was not looked upon positively in Kavango and this is seen in the difference in the main reasons for migration and in the low migration figures from Kavango. While on farms, contract farm labourers experienced hardship but yet they were careful to avoid confrontation or trouble, turning the other cheek as a survival strategy rather than provoking further strife with the farmer. It was emphasized that although silence was a sign of agency, farm labourers cannot be pigeonholed in either category of victims or survivors as their experiences shifted across all categories. The paradigm of exploitation; suppression and entrapment under the contract labour system remains dominant which is evident in the contract farm labourers’ narratives on issues such as heavy workloads but low wages; physical abuse by recruitment officials and farmers; restrictions on the labourers’ freedom of movement etc. The article asserts that there were small rewards under the contract labour system as seen in the kind of goods returning labourers purchased. These small rewards from contract work were however of short term benefit and a return to contract were usually necessary. As such, contract farm workers felt they were engaging in an exploitative and self-defeating activity and were in a cycle of entrapment under the contract labour system.

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