

Chapter Seven

The Migrant Labour System

This chapter discusses how the mines used migrant workers to provide cheap labour. 'Migrant' workers were those who left their homes in various parts of southern Africa and travelled long distances to the mines. They worked for a certain time, then they went home again. This system of using migrant workers on a mine (or a farm or a factory) is called the *migrant labour system*.

The Migrant Workers

When the gold mines started, migrant labour was not new. In South Africa there were many migrant workers before the discovery of diamonds and gold. In the summer time, farm labourers used to travel from their homes to the white farms to work there. They would go home again when the season was over. In Natal, many Indians were brought from India to work on the sugar farms for five or ten years. Some went home again. Others stayed in South Africa.

When diamond and gold mining started, thousands of men became migrant workers. Most of them were black farmers. They left their land for a while to work for wages in the mines.

At first, only the young, unmarried men left. They were sent by their chiefs who needed their wages to pay taxes. These taxes had been imposed on the people by the government. A few young men left of their own accord.

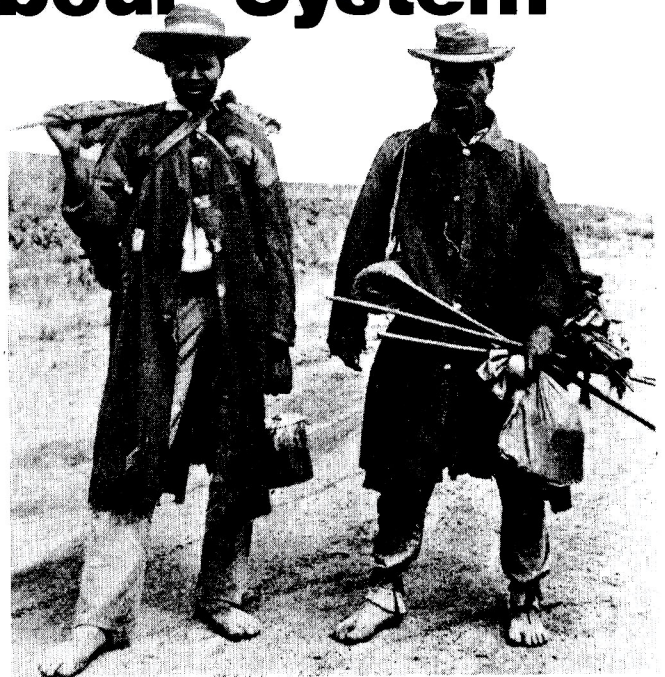
As time went by, people needed more and more money. Married men, too, became migrant workers. They were forced to earn money for their families — just as, before this, the young single men had worked to earn money for the chiefdom. The identity of the chiefdom was breaking down. Soon the family unit was also threatened. The time the men spent away from home became longer. It took them longer to earn the money that their families needed.

Each time they went back to work, they would hope it was for the last time. They hoped that *this* time they would save enough money to support the family so that they could stay at home and go back to farming.

But most men remained migrants until they were too old to work for themselves again.

ANOTHER BLANKET

For many years Sotho migrants have sung a song as they crossed the Caledon River (Mohokare) and come to work on the Rand mines. The song expresses their feelings as the journey changed them from farmers to workers:



Another Blanket

*Mohokare, now I put on another blanket,
Now that I have crossed you,
Wash me from the touch I have had
With woman at home.
Here I cross to the other side.
And I do not know what dangers face me.
Perhaps this is the last time I cross you here.
And if ever I have the chance of crossing you again
Wash me clean, Mohokare, and make me a pure
man*

*Make me a man who is fit to go to heaven
Cleanse me from my sins because I am going to
The dangerous place where I may lose my life.*

*Now if ever I do not come back it will be just
unfortunate.*

*But now that I have crossed you,
All the evil things I have done
May they move with you and go down.*

*In crossing the river I become a new man,
Different from the one I was at home.
At home I was secure
But now that I am on this side
I am in a place of danger,
Where I may lose my life at any time.
So prepare me for my death.*

*Now that I am this side
I assume a different attitude from the one
Where they are soft with other men.
This side they have to be tough to assume
manhood*

Not be soft like the women at home.

(from *Another Blanket*, published by AIM)

TWO LIVES

Most migrant workers had two very different lives:

* One life was at home on the land, working with the family and with friends.

* The other life was in the towns or the mines, working with machines and with many strangers, often in a hostile atmosphere.

In one life they were family men, loved and respected as sons, husbands and fathers.

In the other, they lost their dignity and even their humanity. Young or old, black workers were referred to as 'boys'; one mine-owner called them 'mere muscular machines' – there only to produce wealth for their employers.

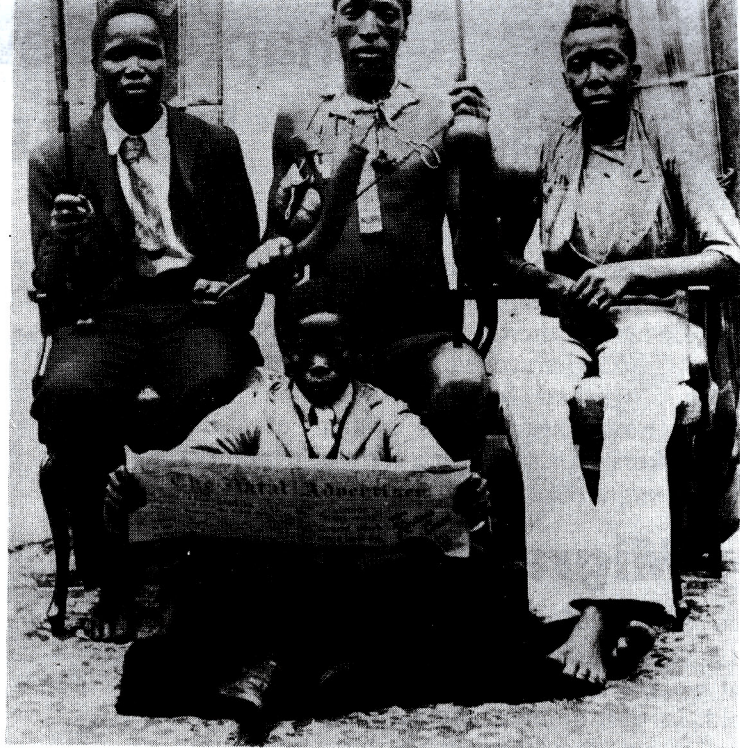
Work lost its old meaning. As migrant workers they worked for strangers – they worked for a wage.

WHITE TOWNSPEOPLE BUT BLACK MIGRANTS

Not all migrants were black. There were also white mine-workers on the mines. Many of them came from other countries, others were struggling white farmers looking for jobs. They were all new to the Witwatersrand, and most of them hoped to earn enough money to be able to go home again. Most of them never went back. They sent for their families to join them and became full-time wage-earning workers. They became the



White immigrant workers were able to settle in the towns with their families.



One family – two worlds.

townspeople of the Witwatersrand.

But black migrants could not settle with their families in the towns. There were a number of reasons for this:

* Firstly, their wages were too low. Black miners were paid just enough to support a single man in town and not a family. The land in the Reserves had to support the migrant's family.

* Secondly, there were no houses for black miners' families on the mines. The miners themselves slept in compounds.

* Thirdly, the Pass Laws would not allow migrant workers to settle with their families in the towns. (We shall be looking at the Pass Laws in Chapter 10.)

THE MINE-OWNERS AND THE MIGRANT LABOUR SYSTEM

In the early years of mining, the mine-owners did not like the migrant labour system very much. They complained because men would come to work for a short while in the mines and then they would leave. *'The native... reluctantly offers himself or one of his family as industrial worker for just so long as the hut tax can be earned,'* grumbled a President of the Chamber of Mines.¹ The mine-owners at first preferred black farmers to be cut off from the land completely, so that they could become full-time workers. Rhodes, as prime minister of the Cape as well as a leading mine-owner, passed the Glen Grey Act in 1894 to try to force people off the land. He told his government that the law *'removed Natives from that life of sloth and laziness, taught them the dignity of labour and made them contribute to the prosperity of the state. It made them give some return for our wise and good government.'*²

Although this particular law was not too successful, its aim was clear; to provide labour for the mines.

CHEAPER FOR THE MINES

As the years went by, the mine-owners began to see that the migrant labour system suited them very well. It was cheaper to feed and house just one worker instead of paying wages to support a whole family in the towns.

Mine-owners wanted black workers, but they did not want black families. They wanted the families to stay behind in the Reserves. They wanted their black workers to have just enough land in the Reserves for their families to live on. But there must not be enough land to support them fully. 'The surplus of young men must earn their living working for a wage,' they said.³

So the black migrant labour system was cheaper for the mines. The Chamber of Mines did not have to worry about building houses for the families of unskilled workers. It did not



Children without fathers.

have to worry about building schools and hospitals for old people, women and children. The people in the Reserves would have to look after themselves. Reserves would support them, with some help from the black miners' wages. **The system of migrant labour saved the mine-owners millions of rands every year.**

*In the midst of trouble and sorrow
We left our children at home
Children full of tears,
Crying tears: 'Father is gone, is gone,
God, help fathers to return.'
Happiness is returning with spears.*

(Sotho song.)⁶

The 'Reserves' Support the Mines

1893: 'Man for man, blacks are better farmers than the Europeans.' (Traveller in the Cape.)⁴

1932: 'Actual desert conditions have in fact been created where once good grazing existed.' (Government report.)⁵

We have seen that black farmers were forced off the land into wage labour. This did not happen because they were bad farmers. In fact, in the early years of the mining towns black farmers in different parts of South Africa produced a surplus of food which they were able to sell to the towns.

Yet we find that the picture had changed forty years later. Black farmers by then were struggling, producing less and less from the land. In this chapter we try to understand what brought about this change. We look at the 'reserves' — the other end of the migrant labour system.

The basic problem was that black farmers no longer had enough land. The 'reserves'

*Ai-ye! Ngana yakabona —
Ai-ye! Famine has come.
The rabbit has lost its child.
(Tonga song)⁸*



The crowded reserves

which had been created in different parts of the country were too small. We have already seen that most of the land had been lost through conquest. Laws such as the Land Act of 1913 'squeezed' the black farmers even more, by preventing

them from using land outside the reserves. As a result the reserves became very crowded. There was simply not enough land to support the people living there. And there was even more pressure on the men to become wage-earners — migrant workers.

PEOPLE OF THE RESERVES

As more and more men left home to become migrant workers, life changed for those who stayed at home. Women, children, the sick and the old remained at home. They had to take over the men's jobs and look after the affairs of the family.

The land had to be cultivated.

Taxes had to be paid.

Children had to be cared for.

The sick had to be nursed.

The dead had to be buried.

The women worked the hardest. But it did not matter how hard women, old people or children worked — there was too little land. The soil got poorer and poorer.

To make things worse, as soon as the young boys were old enough to take over their fathers' work, they, too, left home to look for work in the towns.

THE CIRCLE OF POVERTY

As the years passed, the reserves did not develop. Factories, big shops and cities did not grow in the reserves. Neither did rich farms. In fact, the reserves became poorer.

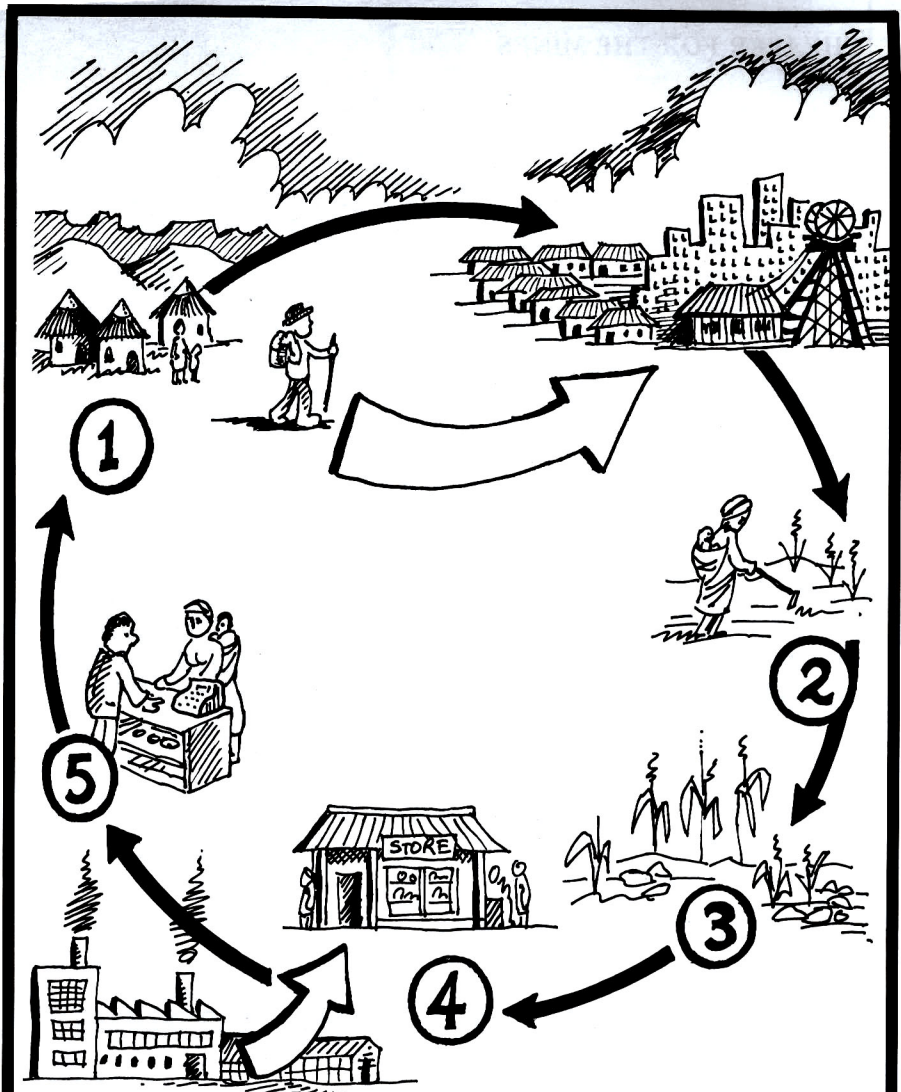
What happened to the reserves therefore was that:

1. Men had to get jobs as migrant workers outside the reserves, to help the families. They needed to do this because there was not enough land to feed the people.

2. The women and old people who were left could not farm as productively without the help of the strong, young and hard-working men.

3. The land they were farming was poor already because of overcrowding. The soil produced less food; thin cows produced less milk.

4. Families started to buy food, tools and clothes from the trading stores — 50 years earlier they would have produced these things themselves. Now they paid money to the storekeeper for them — and he paid the suppliers in the towns and cities. Apart



THE CIRCLE OF POVERTY IN THE RESERVES

1. The men leave home to work as migrants in the towns and mines outside the reserves.
2. Women and old people look after the land.
3. The land gets poorer.
4. Families start buying their food and clothes. Factories in the towns send manufactured goods to trading stores in the reserves.
5. The family rely more and more on money for their daily needs.

from the storekeeper's profit, money did not stay in the reserves for long.

5. So we can see why families began to rely more and more on money. When the men came

back from the mines (and some did not come back at all) they did not stay for long. They had to go back to earn more money. They were in the grip of the circle of poverty.

LABOUR RESERVES

What then were the 'reserves'?

1. They were places where the children were brought up. When they were old enough, many could find jobs in the mines or the towns as migrant workers.

2. The families in the reserves looked after the people who were too sick or too old to work for wages.

3. The reserves were places where men could live with their families — when they were not working for wages.

4. They were places where women lived in separation from their husbands.

5. The reserves were places for those who had no jobs. They were places of waiting for work. They were places of labour supply for the mines and the factories.

And so, as the mines and factories got richer from the system of migrant labour, so the reserves became poorer. The reserves were no longer the farming lands which fed all the people.

The reserves became reserves of labour.

EMAKHAYA

*Go, let us go my friends, go home.
Go, let us go to see our little hills.
We've long been working on the mines,
We long have left our homes for this, the place of
gold.*

*When we get home they will be waiting there,
Our Mothers happy when we come inside,
At Mazandekeni, home, my home.*

*Return my brother, from the place of gold.
Reject the town.
Cherish your mother, children and your own.
They'll clap their hands for joy
When you come home,
At home where they are waiting.
Come, come home.
(Zulu song).⁷*

*The two of us Mother, will pine on the mine
dumps.
But we will meet again at the Ntombela Pass.
(Zulu song).⁸*

