

**“African family life is adversely affected not so much by migrant labour as by the laws which reduce Africans . . . into mere labour units.”**

## **SOME SOCIAL EFFECTS OF MIGRANT LABOUR ON RURAL AFRICANS**

By JOHN BLACKING



**I**T IS NOT EASY to speak with authority on the effects of migrant labour on the family life of rural Africans in the Republic, because too little research has hitherto been done on the subject. In his book on “Migrant Labour and Tribal Life in Bechuanaland”, published in 1947, Schapera reported that most of his African informants painted a very gloomy picture of the adverse effects of migrant labour. On the other hand, migration was by no means the only cause of the changes that had occurred in Tswana life: “the activities of the administration and of the missionaries, traders and other Europeans living in the Reserves (had) also interfered with ancient tribal institutions, sometimes deliberately.”

Migrant labour is, in fact, only one aspect of the general treatment of labour which exists under the prevailing economic system, and especially in one without effective African trade unions. The remedies suggested by Schapera, and later in the Fagan and Tomlinson Reports, and the policies advocated by both the Government and the parties in opposition, are therefore at best only temporary solutions to a situation which is destroying the integrity and morale of large sections of the South African population, and incidentally making a mockery of Christianity in a supposedly Christian country.

### **No rural paradise**

When cheap labour was first needed on a large scale to develop South Africa's economy, very few rural Africans were interested in joining the industrial economy. But by the time that the poll tax had been introduced as a device to bring them into the labour market, conditions in the rural areas had begun to deteriorate, so that increasing numbers of peasants were, in fact, anxious to migrate to the urban centres.

To their inhabitants, the rural areas were never the paradise that they are to the romantic tourist: people often had to walk miles every day to collect water, firewood, or wild vegetables for cooking; in many areas, crops and livestock were in constant danger from the ravages of wild animals; and during the nineteenth century there was for many the threat of invasion and upheaval by the imperialistic ventures of Chaka and his successors, or the encroachment of land-hungry White farmers.

Nevertheless, in spite of the general level of poverty of their subsistence economies, life was tolerable, and even pleasant, for rural Africans,

because of the essentially democratic nature of their social systems, in which chiefs and headmen were simply distributors of land, and organizers of labour and ritual, for autonomous territorial groups; and in which much authority was vested in corporate descent groups, composed of people whose active co-operation was based on the theory that they were united by unilineal descent from a common ancestor.

### **Rural African family life**

It should not be assumed that because clans, lineages, extended families, and families are based on recognition of the biological facts of procreation, they are necessarily any more fundamental than groups based on other theories, such as common occupation, common religion, or common language. The family presupposes the lineage; and lineages and clans presuppose groups of people living together and working to enjoy the products of certain areas of land. Thus social organization by means of families and lineages is simply one method of organizing economic production, and by no means the only method, nor necessarily the best.

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For a time Mr. Blacking was a school teacher in Singapore, and then came to South Africa as a musicologist for the International Library of African Music. He did two years' field work on the Venda people in the Northern Transvaal and has also done field work in others parts of Africa.

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Furthermore, it should not be assumed that rural African family life was and is automatically harmonious: for instance anthropologists have shown that in many parts of Africa witchcraft accusations, which are signs of tension and friction, are most frequently made by people against members of their own lineages. Thus it may be argued that even in the traditional environment kinship-based social and economic organization was not ideal; that other and better methods might be devised; and that migrant labour, by destroying certain aspects of traditional African family life, may in the long run, have contributed, in some indirect way, to the ultimate welfare of the people of South Africa. This may sound like unscrupulous casuistry; but it is essentially the same argument as that taken by most Christian missionaries and evangelists, who are concerned with long-term results when they divide families in order to secure the church loyalty of one of their members.

### **Neighbourhood relationships**

Thus it was not so much the warmth of prescribed family life which made life tolerable in the rural areas, as the security of a relatively equal standard of living and of mutual co-operation in local economic enterprises, and the warmth of voluntary relationships between people who happened to live near each other. The importance which both rural and urban Africans attach to **neighbourhood** relationships and friendship is well illustrated by the regular borrowing and lending of domestic equipment and mutual assistance in entertainment, which takes place amongst neigh-

bours; and the fact that a visitor is welcome at any time of the day or night. During fieldwork in the Northern Transvaal, I found that the arrival of members of the family was not always greeted as enthusiastically as that of neighbours, because of the obligations involved in such relationships. In fact, it must be admitted that migrant labour has been welcomed by many rural Africans as an opportunity to escape from the fetters of prescribed family relationships.

### **Attractions of migrant labour**

Migrant labour has also been welcomed as an opportunity to escape from serfdom; or from the influence of tribal chiefs, who became increasingly autocratic as a result of the presence and support of foreign administrators and the introduction of money into an economy in which tribute had been paid in perishable goods, so that no one could amass exceptional wealth.

Migrant labour became a means of redressing the minor imbalances and inequalities of the traditional social systems, which had become exaggerated as a result of contact with Europeans. Europeans came to interfere with traditional life in one way or another: they wanted converts, consumers, or labourers, and their interference was inevitably selective and dependent on the interests of certain groups. If they won over a dominant group, they antagonized those who were opposed to it; and if they recruited the opposition, they estranged themselves and their recruits from the dominant group. Just as Europeans used Africans for their own devices, so Africans were generally interested in Europeans only if they could use them to improve their social position within their own society. But because of the disparity between European and rural African economies, many who had set out simply to improve their position in the tribal system soon found themselves economically and culturally separated from the system. The presence of some people with a noticeably higher standard of living was a novelty in tribal life, which made many dissatisfied with their own condition. Migrant labour therefore became a desirable means to the end of earning money to satisfy new needs.

Similarly, social life was affected by the control or destruction of ancestor-worship and initiation rites directly by missionaries and administrators, and indirectly by the local use of African labour, and by contact with an economy centred on profit rather than on human relationships, in which wealthy people, rather than the old or the

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## MIGRANT LABOUR AND RURAL AFRICANS (Cont.)

dead, therefore became important. A young man no longer had to abandon his sweetheart to an elderly polygamist, as he could impress her parents with the wealth he acquired in town. In Vendale, there is a certain salemore cloth called "Lamba Mukalaha", which means "Refuse the old man"; a song about it explains how young men can buy nice clothes for their sweethearts with money earned in town. Again, the excitement of urban life, in which things are constantly happening, even if they are not always pleasant, and the desire for adventure and change encourage young men to work in town; so that a period of migrant labour has in some respects become a substitute for the tribal initiations which were banned.

### Unbalanced economical structure

Thus, although the institution of the original poll tax was an unscrupulous act, and one of the causes of migration from the rural areas has been the economic necessity of paying this and other taxes, many other factors in time precipitated migration, and the seeds of the system were cultivated by the activities of traders, administrators, missionaries, and the other Europeans living in or near the Reserves.

I do not apologize for the length of this preamble to a brief outline of certain adverse social conditions in the rural areas, because I think it is by no means certain that these conditions are caused specifically or solely by migrant labour. Both the social conditions and the migrant labour are rather part of the structure of an economy which is unbalanced in terms of human relationships; and since traditional African economies were based on the principle that production and distri-

### AN EVIL CANKER AT THE HEART OF SOCIETY

*Migratory labour cannot suddenly be abolished, because the very survival of both White and Black depend upon it, but it should be recognized for what it is — an evil canker at the heart of our whole society, wasteful of labour, destructive of ambition, a wrecker of homes and a symptom of our failure to create a coherent and progressive economic society. But a realistic view should be taken and it must be recognized that for the foreseeable future some migrant labour is likely to remain.*

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bution should be managed primarily in terms of human relationships, it is not surprising that rural Africans should suffer most from the intrusion of an economy based on the profit motive.

### Varying social effects

Furthermore, just as I have suggested that the pattern of change in rural areas has invariably been influenced by pre-existing conditions, so it must be appreciated that the social effects of migrant labour vary according to the social background of the migrants. For instance, I have the impression that the family life of Nguni peoples is generally affected more adversely than that of Tswana peoples: Nguni social systems are more authoritarian and hierarchical, whereas Tswana systems are more democratic and segmented. Thus the family life of the Fokeng of Rustenburg does not seem to be very adversely affected by the migration of their women, who work in Johannesburg, usually as domestic servants, until they have had three or four children and have saved enough money to build a home. They then settle in Rustenburg, where their husbands visit them for one or two weekends every month, if they are working in Johannesburg. This is not an ideal situation, of course, but the kinship system of the Fokeng has always worked in such a way that children are frequently looked after and loved by mother-substitutes: I even know of cases where a woman has been brought up by relatives and been married from their home, because her parents were sorry that these relatives had few or no children of their own. Such a situation is perfectly acceptable in a society where individuals are essentially members of large, co-operative kinship groups; and the system can survive the temporary absence of several members, especially when the distances involved in migration are small.

On the other hand, reports from the Ciskei and Transkei, and other Nguni areas, where families seem to be more isolated in their relationships, demonstrate quite clearly the ill-effects that can follow the absence of the head of a household, or the able-bodied males who should be looking after the cattle or ploughing.

### Independent migrant labourers

Again, the kind of labour that migrants perform, the conditions under which they work, and the proximity of their work to their rural homes are other factors which affect their own and their families' welfare. For instance, the majority of the Venda whom I have studied in the Northern Transvaal refuse to work on the mines; but many

will work under contract for municipalities, or for manufacturers such as Kempton Park Potteries or Curtis Brickfields, Pretoria. Above all, they have preferred to migrate and find work independently: this has usually been achieved through relatives or contacts in town, and it was not difficult, because the Venda are a small and loyal group. Independent migration is almost impossible today, because of restrictive legislation.

My observations of the family conditions of migrant labourers in Vendaland were not detailed; but I am confident that further research will support my tentative conclusion that the **independent** migrant labourers and their families were better off socially and financially than both the contract labourers and those who found work locally in Vendaland. By far the worst off were those migrants who had been virtually "sold" by their headmen or chiefs to farmers, who come in trucks to collect cheap labour at various times of the year. Young Venda were only prepared to give farm labour a trial, in the hope that they might be able to run away or move on to town and find labour independently.

### **Deprived of self-respect**

**The Venda situation emphasizes the important point that African family life is adversely affected not so much by migrant labour per se, as by the laws which reduce Africans in general, and migrant labourers in particular, into mere labour units and deprive them of personal freedom. One might even allow that certain restrictive aspects of family life had to be disrupted to allow rural Africans to advance smoothly into a modern economy; but there is no justification for a system which has deprived people of their self-respect, and driven them to take refuge in customs and attitudes which have no place in a developing economy.**

It is a tragedy that a husband or a father should have to insist on asserting his authority over a member of his family, even when he knows he is in the wrong, simply because this is the only field in which he is allowed any authority. Anthony Barker has shown in his book, "**The Man Next to Me**" (originally published as "**Giving and Receiving**"), how lives can be lost as a result of such obtuse, but understandable, behaviour (p. 123). Similarly, families may refuse to act in an emergency without the consent of an absent household head, and by the time his permission is obtained, it is too late: such tragedies occur partly

because the head of the household is absent as a migrant labourer, and partly because families have become almost destructively conservative as a desperate response to legal restrictions on their freedom and self-respect. Again, the custom of *lobolo* is both a cause and a result of migrant labour. The desire to marry, the rising "cost" of marriage, and the increasing poverty of the rural areas, have driven men to town to seek money to marry. On the other hand, the legal deprivation of self-respect has caused Africans to attach undue importance to *lobolo* as something specially African and worthwhile, whereas in the normal course of events it should have become redundant in the context of a modern economy. There is a distinct difference between the positive *négritude* of West Africa, which represents a fusion of ancient and modern in the language of African culture, and the negative tribalism which has increased in Southern Africa as a response to restrictions on personal freedom: one is an advance, and the other is a retreat.

### **Proximity to area of work**

I have already stressed that the family life of independent migrants from some areas, such as Rustenburg and Vendaland, does not seem to have suffered greatly; and, of course, in cases where whole families have been able to migrate, their troubles are probably due more to the process of urbanization than migrant labour. The more satisfactory state of family life in Rustenburg may be the result of not only their social system, as I have suggested, but also their proximity to the area of work. In the Ciskei and the Transkei there seems to be a relationship between the pattern of family life and the distance of migrants from their work. Where migrants work near their homes and can visit their families regularly, adultery is strongly disapproved of and rarely takes place; but where they work far from home and can only visit their families once a year, adultery is accepted, and there are even associations which enable married women to meet their lovers socially. It does not follow that the former necessarily have a happier life than the latter; but it does mean that their family life is functioning better in the generally accepted manner.

### **Emotional needs of women**

The tolerant attitude towards adultery in areas far from the scene of the migrants' work has its positive aspects: it represents a growth of respect

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## MIGRANT LABOUR AND RURAL AFRICANS (Cont.)

for the status and emotional needs of women, who in the traditional tribal situation were victims of the theory, still popular even in modern European society, that a man can do what he likes sexually, but a woman may not. Married women, in fact, bear the brunt of the adverse effects of migrant labour. Children can get along well without fathers, especially in the communal atmosphere of rural African life; and fathers can manage without their wives and families — in fact in many parts of the world, men have devised an elaborate system of golf, fishing, Freemasonry, Rotary clubs, and so on, largely in order to escape their womenfolk. But it is hard for women to live without men in societies where the woman's chief functions are to be a wife and mother, and her self-respect is derived from her success or failure in these careers. Thus it is immensely important that a married woman should have children, and this is not always easy if her husband comes home occasionally, and only for a few days or weeks at a time. Amongst the Zulu, for instance, there is the tragic spectacle of women suffering from pseudocyesis, or hysterical pregnancy. As Anthony Barker writes, sometimes "the pseudocyesis goes on to spurious labour, a catastrophe of abdominal pains with no visible result: the stage is set for the great performance, the minor actors are in their places, the audience hushed and expectant; only the principal actor fails to appear, for he does not even exist".

### Children wanted

Children are wanted in the rural areas not only because they are loved and lovable, and because they bring prestige to men and women by making them parents and grandparents, but because they are economically important. Sons and daughters maintain and increase the wealth and security of a family by looking after its livestock and tilling its fields: when they marry, daughters bring in more wealth in the form of *lobolo*, and sons continue to increase the families' wealth, as well as providing a home for the aged and economically useless. The economy depends on the personal relationships of kinsfolk, so that it collapses when the economically important persons are absent; and the result is destruction of the land, and insecurity for the families who live on it. The money that they receive from town may exceed greatly the value of their traditional economic output, but

*The migratory labour system can be seen both as a symptom and a cause of most of the economic, social and political problems which beset our community; and this perpetual mass movement of people is a dramatic illustration of our failure over the past century to create a unified and coherent economy.*

D. Hobart Houghton — "The South African Economy."

it does not compensate for the loss of personal security. Furthermore, it is generally the poorer families who suffer most, because they cannot hire workers to help them cultivate their land, or herdsmen to look after their cattle, which are therefore more easily lost. There is also the dilemma of the migrant father who needs to have more children than would have been normal in the past, so that some can work at home and some can work in town; but who cannot spend enough time at home to ensure that these children are borne and reared. Again, both the fertility of men and the survival of babies is threatened by the spread of venereal diseases which, though adequately treated by some organizations who use migrant labour, are not adequately treated when the worker is at home or when he has ceased to be of use to his employers.

### No increase in lawlessness

The most remarkable and significant result of these and many other changes is that there has been no increase in lawlessness, nor any deterioration in the co-operation and fellowship which exists between neighbours in the rural areas. Migrant labour is not the sole cause of changes and new tensions in rural African families, and in some cases it may even have a good effect in helping conservative people to adjust to a new way of life. As long as co-operation between neighbours remains an essential feature of their life, changes in the family structure of rural African societies may in the long run be of great benefit to them.

At any rate, there is little that can be done about migrant labour and the plight of families who suffer from it, as long as Africans are content to remain an inexpensive item of the movable equipment of a profit-directed industrial economy.