

ABOUT AFRICAN WORKERS IN RHODESIA

by B. Mothobi

My concern in writing this paper is to reflect briefly on one of the techniques employed by management to maintain the colour-line and the exploitation of African workers in commerce and industry, in a country where there is no legislation which directly enforces the colour-line in jobs.

RACISM AND MANAGERIALISM

A great deal of attention and comment has been devoted in recent years to the employment problems of Africans. In order to account for the low wages, racial discrimination and lowly position of African workers, observers and commentators have attempted to discover what kind of disadvantages and defects they are suffering from. The viewpoint that appears to be widely accepted and used extensively by white management (and white workers) is that African workers suffer from a cultural deficiency as a result of their tribal background. Africans are said to belong to a tribal, rural and agricultural culture, which is characterised by social values, beliefs, behaviour patterns and motivations which are radically different from and dissonant with those of industrial society; as a result the African contributes very little to, and needs very little from industry.

While there are other factors that are also responsible for the situation of the African worker, these managerial beliefs about the African are in themselves important, because it is not so much the facts about the African worker, as what management and white workers believe to be the facts, which determine in what jobs Africans will be employed and how much they will be paid. The facts of actual ability to do the job, of intelligence are, at best, of very secondary importance.

SOME MANAGEMENT BELIEFS

The Personnel Manager of a large manufacturing concern in Salisbury: 'Europeans are better equipped to work in industry but not on repetition work. He is better in managerial and directive positions. This is because of history, i.e. the European's long association with industry. First regarding interest, the European has more association with people who are interconnected with industry on the level where he is employed, whereas the African only comes into such contact during his daily stint at the factory. The European has been used to seeing and hearing this from a very early age of environmental upbringing. The African confines himself to the vernacular and so is limited - he has to break down this mode of thinking - i.e. the European starts learning early on, while the African starts later. Thirdly, the European is more favourably disposed through language. As regards intelligence, I assume that, with equal qualification, they have equal intelligence. But I quote: 2 men, equal qualifications, started same day as apprentice fitters and turners, but the white is far ahead of the African. This is because of background - the European is accustomed to using tools, assisting his father etc., while the African has been limited to spanning oxen or making jukskeis'.

According to the chairman of the Rio Tinto Group: 'The necessary level of efficiency in an organization could only be achieved by a community within which, among other things, the different levels of responsibility and remuneration were established according to individual ability and suitability to exercise responsibility according to Caucasian customs, but that within the structure of industry it must be recognised that for a considerable time African candidates for promotion with the necessary Caucasian approach to organization and responsibility would be rare.'

White artisans in a manufacturing establishment in Bulawayo: 'Africans under me can make machine adjustments but not fine adjustments because they don't have an enquiring mind'.

'Africans lack versatility and they have no mechanical background or ability to be trained to be as good tradesmen as Europeans'.

'The first year apprentice (European) who has mechanical aptitude and interest is nearly as good as the fourth year 'battler' (European) and the African would be of the same 'battling' type.'

'The African apprentice wants to learn but cannot'.

COLONIAL NOTIONS OF 'TRIBALISM' AND 'TRADITIONALISM'

Unfortunately, the beliefs are based on the thoughts of people who know very little about the nature of this society and care even less about the situation of the African worker. The theory of the 'tribal man' has no basis in social reality. Certainly, anyone who knows and cares about the African workers would not accept this hideous caricaturing of a people.

Without doubt, new workers coming into industry from rural and agricultural environments have of necessity to learn new forms of behaviour and acquire new values, but, to argue that rural and agricultural values are innate in these workers, that their societies are tribal by nature, and to impute such characteristics as 'loafers', 'idlers', 'ignorant' etc., requires a violent distortion of historical and contemporary facts and a drastic limitation of one's field of vision.

SOCIALLY PATTERNED DEFECTS

These beliefs are part of white mythology developed since the 19th century about the African people and workers. They have become what Erich Fromm has called 'socially patterned defects' which arise when members of a society confuse consensual validation with rational justification. That is to say, 'it is naively assumed that the fact that the majority of people share certain ideas and feelings proves the validity of these ideas and feelings.' Thus the employers are not aware that their ideas and feelings are defective, and their security is not threatened

by the experience of being different and outcast as would happen to them if they lived in a society where such ideas were not considered normal. They are secure in the knowledge that they fit in with the rest of the business community and society and as a matter of fact their very defect is raised to a virtue by their society.

From the very beginnings of 'Rhodesia' it has been common folklore among white employers, as with white society, that Africans are tribal, agricultural and backward and as a result, are by nature, prone to idleness, stupidity, irresponsibility and other such deficiencies. They have said and heard these things long enough, often enough and loud enough, without any contradiction, that they have come to accept them as indisputable truth.

ACADEMIC SUPPORT

Furthermore, academics have lent their support to these beliefs, thus giving them a pseudo-scientific basis. Professor J.L. Sadie, once advisor on economic development in this country, writes: 'A study of the Bantu peoples of Africa reveals the absence at this stage of most of those elements which are conducive to economic development as an indigenous process Breaking the fetters of tradition is a most difficult operation, and it may take a long time before the needed supply of individual entrepreneurship, and initiative and enterprise in modern trade and finance are generated, and a still longer time before the necessary know-how, experience and sophistication about exchange, budgeting, management, and the competitive spirit have been acquired.'

And Professor Reader of the University of Rhodesia: 'The rural African at any rate, far from learning items in his home culture which will be useful to him in the western industrial milieu, still absorbs values which actively disqualify him from competition in it against Europeans of comparable formal education'.

J.P. Dankwerts, when at the same university: 'anyone who grows up in African society acquires a set of values and ethics which are not only different

but frequently in conflict with those implicit in the European legal system. Africans must therefore operate in what is a strange or even hostile environment'.

SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

The managerial beliefs also benefit from the operation of the concept of the 'self fulfilling prophecy' which is in the beginning a false definition of the situation evoking a new behaviour which makes the originally false conception come true. In such a case the operant factor is not whether the image or the theory is true, but whether it is believed.

For example, most employers believe that the African is stupid and cannot exercise intelligence and initiative. As a result, the African worker is generally given menial and, at best, semi-skilled repetitive and routine jobs which call for very little application of intelligence, initiative and responsibility. This is then taken as conclusive proof that the African worker is indeed stupid and irresponsible. Where the African worker does a job requiring use of initiative and involving a certain amount of responsibility, this is either deliberately overlooked or the man is referred to as an exception.

As a second example, let us look at the argument that the African is by nature tribal and an agriculturist. As a result of this belief, the worker's wages are pitifully low and his conditions of living generally atrocious, so that he is compelled to maintain very close links with the rural areas which provide a supplement to his wages and security against unemployment and for retirement. However, these continued links with the rural areas are taken as conclusive proof that the African is indeed tribal and an agriculturist by nature.

Furthermore, a superficial observation of the African worker and his situation will reveal the fact that certain other aspects of the beliefs about tribal man do in fact *appear to correspond* to the reality. Not only do tribal areas, tribal organizations, tribal customs and laws, members of tribes, clearly developed tribal sentiments and tribal consciousness, and

appalling underdevelopment exist, but also, there are a great number of African workers who show the underdevelopment of character and aptitude said to be typical of all Africans.

However, a more perceptive analysis of the situation will reveal that since the 19th century there have been active processes in this country which have in fact produced the situation now to be observed. What is now observed is not pre-colonial structures but is the direct product of the imposition of white rule and capitalism in this country. There is conclusive evidence that the policy of the ruling class in this country to persist with 'Reserves' or 'Tribal areas' in which the overwhelming majority of Africans have been to live under so-called tribal chiefs, customs and laws, has been a deliberate attempt to mummify and truncate relics of pre-colonial structures in order to serve political and administrative ends. These are the structures which are now used to define the African worker and they do so without giving him the chance of appeal. 'Tribes', 'Tribal man', 'Tribalism' no longer exist in the objective sense. They are the creations of the present system and are diversions from the real situation of the African worker in this country.

THE FUNCTION OF MANAGERIAL IDEOLOGY

While these managerial beliefs about African workers have no basis in social reality, they do nevertheless serve an important function in commerce and industry. They are, in fact, an integral part of the ideology of the ruling class and the major function of these beliefs is to justify and rationalise the existing structures of privilege and wealth. As C. Wright Mills once wrote 'people with advantages are loathe to believe that they just happen to be people with advantages.'

What makes these beliefs particularly dangerous is that they divert attention from the real defects of management's policies and practices to the imaginary defects of the African workers. They make the African worker entirely responsible for his own condition. As one Works Manager told me 'The African is entirely responsible for his own ex-

ploitation'. Inevitably, of course, these beliefs have carried with them the insidious assertion that the African is inferior to the white worker, that his value to the economy and to society is minimal, and that his remuneration must be correspondingly minimal. Discrimination in wages and opportunities is justified in terms that the white minority is more fitted to run and direct the economy and contributes more to the creation of the national wealth.

The operation of these beliefs makes it quite unnecessary for management to pay much attention to the genuine problems of the African workers. These beliefs are like a piece of smoked glass which management and white workers hold in front of their eyes when they look at the African workers so that they will not have to see the real situation. Thus the very real problems of low pay, security against arbitrary treatment and dismissal, atrocious working conditions, boredom and the meaninglessness of work, opportunity for advancement, recognition of the full value of labour, proper selection and training, security for old age and retirement, transport, housing and welfare programmes, recognition of workers' organizations, and many others, are generally passed over or very inadequately dealt with.

Some employers are making particularly unscrupulous use of these beliefs to further exploit African workers who are increasingly being used in skilled and junior management jobs previously performed by white workers, but are paid at a much lower rate because, it is argued, they bring in less skill and have a lower standard of living to support.

SHORTAGE OF WHITE WORKERS

For quite some time now Rhodesian industry has been faced by an increasingly growing shortage of white workers especially in the skilled trades, and this has compelled employers to pay high wages in order to attract and retain artisans. At the same time management has introduced new devices aimed at making use of semi-skilled African workers to do the work that was previously done by white workers, but at a significantly lower rate. This has happened the most in the building trade and the president of

the Associated Mineworkers of Rhodesia has charged that similar replacement of skilled whites by lower paid African workers is also taking place in the mining industry. While a great deal of this replacement appears to be done illegally by employers, a good deal of it has been sanctioned by industrial agreements involving the white trade unions, although many of such cases that I am aware of appear to be in situations where the African worker is confined to an African area or clientele where, it is argued, the rate for the job does not apply.

'JOB FRAGMENTATION'

A related and increasingly popular device to cut costs and meet the labour shortage is 'Job Fragmentation' the process whereby the employer hires up to about five Africans, variously called 'journeyman's assistant', 'artisan's aide' and other such glorified titles, to do the work of one white artisan at a much lower rate than the white artisan commanded, while the white worker retains the most skilled and best paid part of the job. This is justified by the argument that the white worker is more qualified and experienced, than the African workers.

Under job fragmentation the assistants or aides are allowed to do the same work as the artisan but may not do the skilled part of a job, such as the use of machines. But in reality, in a number of cases I am aware of, the assistants do the whole job either because there is a shortage of artisans or because the white artisans prefer to let them do the whole job, only intervening when there are difficulties. However, the assistants continue to be paid less than 30% of what the white artisan is paid.

A number of observers commenting on these developments argue that there is a 'silent revolution' occurring in industry through which employers are gradually - admittedly very slowly - allowing Africans into the skilled trades even if not at the artisan level. This they see as a definite improvement in job opportunities for Africans. While I do not deny that job fragmentation and similar devices for using African workers in skilled jobs, but at lower

rates, may have increased the number and quality of jobs available to African workers. I am not at all convinced that this 'silent revolution' has brought any end at all to the exploitation of and discrimination against the African worker. The insinuations about the African workers' inability to do skilled work continue and some even argue that job fragmentation brings the skilled job to the level of the African's ability.

A SILENT REVOLUTION OR RATIONALIZATION?

All that this so-called 'silent revolution' has really accomplished is to move the colour-bar in jobs upwards while (and I am convinced this is its major purpose) enabling management to cut down on wage and salary costs, since four or five African workers employed on the fragmented jobs are much cheaper than one white artisan paid the rate for the job plus the premium that this group of white workers is able to command because of the shortage of their skills in the economy. In his Chairman's Review, dated 31st March 1974, R. Walker of the Rio Tinto Group made this rather interesting statement: 'While accepting the advisability of separate facilities for housing, education and hospitalization, the Group policy with regard to job opportunity and working conditions is to eliminate racial discrimination. The severe shortage of tradesmen has forced an abnormal increase in artisan wage rates together with the acceleration of plans to train Africans as artisans. At the same time the urgent necessity of attempting to curb inflation by increased productivity is to be met by providing greater incentives for semi-skilled workers by the provision of improved housing and facilities.'

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate that it appears to me that management beliefs about the nature of African workers have become an increasingly attractive technique for continued discrimination against and exploitation of African workers in a country where there is no legislated colour-bar to hold back ever increasing African demands for

advancement and equality. By using these beliefs management can and does argue that it is not being racist, but is interested in efficiency and progress which the African at present is not equipped to provide. These beliefs are in fact an essential tool in the modernisation of racial domination.

B. Mthobi
Centre for Inter Racial
Studies
University of Rhodesia.