

Migrant Labour and the Peasantry in the Bechuanaland Protectorate, 1930–1965

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This article grapples with issues that have largely remained outside the realms of migrant labour studies in colonial Botswana: the positive input of migrant wages to agricultural production and the effects of migrant wages on the differentiation of the peasantry. Although this article endorses the conventional view that migrant labour had detrimental effects on crop production and animal husbandry, it departs from previous studies in that it argues that the extent to which migrant labour led to 'underdevelopment' has not been sufficiently demonstrated. It is also argued that migrant labour made it possible for those at the lower level of society to rise through the emerging stratifications of the Tswana, and contributed positively to the general economies of the peasantries in Botswana's reserves.

A study of the agrarian history of Botswana would remain incomplete without an examination of the role played by peasant labour migration. There are numerous, valuable studies of migrant labour in Botswana, but almost all have a similar perspective and neglect or downplay crucial aspects of labour migration and agriculture which this article intends to explore.¹

Migration has everywhere been a complex and controversial issue, and scholars have laboured to explain its causes and consequences for both the contributing and receiving societies.² In Botswana, the major issues that dominate the literature on migration are its causes, the recruitment of migrant labourers, and the socio-economic effects of the withdrawal of many able-bodied young men on the peasant economies of the country.³ The

major authoritative scholar on migration from Botswana to the South African mines during Botswana's colonial period is Isaac Schapera, who was requested by the colonial government to carry out a comprehensive field study of its causes, trends and effects in the early 1940s after numerous complaints about the negative effects of migrant labour on the territory. Almost all studies on the subject covering this period rely heavily on Schapera's findings, especially on his 1947 publication, *Migrant Labour and Tribal Life*. It is a study that is utilised here also, as it remains the only extensive field research undertaken on the subject in colonial Botswana. This study will also address features of migrant labour which are likely to attract criticism since it adopts, to some extent, a different perspective from previous works. In essence, it is argued here that although migrant labour did have some negative effects on rural areas, it also contributed positively to agriculture and the economy of the country in general.

The conclusion drawn by previous studies on the effects of labour migration – that it was disruptive to the peasant livestock economy – is largely valid. I also accept, to a certain extent, the argument advanced by previous works that migrant labour had some negative effects on crop production.⁴ However, my major point of departure lies in the argument that it is exceedingly difficult to quantify the effects of migrant labour on crop production, and the existing scholarship has failed to do this sufficiently systematically. This study maintains that the withdrawal of young men's labour through migration did not lead to 'underdevelopment' in agriculture and cattle husbandry because there were mitigating factors, such as inputs from migrant earnings into agriculture and the role played by peasant women. Furthermore, negative factors affecting crop production in Botswana, such as low rainfall, recurring drought and lack of state support in crop production, have been given scant attention by scholars of labour migration. A crucial argument of this article is that only after a comprehensive study of these factors and their effects on crop and animal husbandry can the role of migrant labour on agriculture be assessed with some realism.

Other aspects of migrant labour that have a bearing on previous studies are its effects on peasant differentiation and its contribution to the economic welfare of the territory. Here, my main argument is that, despite low pay and its exploitative nature, migrancy contributed to the acquisition of production inputs on the part of poor peasants, with the result that it raised their economic and social positions above those of their contemporaries who did not migrate. During the period under study, migrant remittances and deferred pay maintained and sustained the economies of numerous reserves and households in a country where there was no visible alternative. Finally, the article will briefly discuss the effects of tuberculosis on Botswana societies.

Labour Migration and Peasant Agriculture

The impact of the withdrawal of able-bodied young men on agricultural production has been analysed in almost all the studies of labour migration from Botswana. Many of these studies, as already noted, have emphasised the adverse effects of such a withdrawal on the agricultural cycle.⁵ This section seeks to appraise the findings of these studies and to

analyse the positive inputs of migrant labour to agricultural production. It will also highlight other factors which have hindered agricultural production, and which have been downplayed in earlier works.

Michael Todaro has provided an important conceptual framework which can be used to analyse the impact of labour migration on agricultural production. He postulates that the effects of labour migration on the organisation of agricultural pursuits are related to such factors as the duration and volume of migration waves, and the extent to which the loss of migrants could be made up for or compensated through other factors.⁶ Todaro argues that, in some instances, the absent labour of young men of 'above average dynamism and education' can be substituted with the labour of members of an extended family or through an 'exchange labour system, that is, by intermittent labourers, especially women and children doing extra work'.⁷ In other instances, labour migration may be seasonal or it may be synchronised with the cycle of agricultural production and thereby be of less importance.⁸

In Botswana, the literature on labour migration has not taken into account the factors mentioned by Todaro, but has generally concluded that migrant labour contributed immensely to agricultural decline, and in some cases to underdevelopment.⁹ The alarm regarding the negative effects of migration in the country was first raised by Schapera in the 1940s, when he noted that migrant labour 'acted as a powerful brake upon progress in agriculture'.¹⁰ The mere absence of large numbers of young men from home meant that their attendance to 'tribal' functions was curtailed and the ill-effects could be seen in both crop and animal production.¹¹ Schapera lamented the fact that methods advocated by the Department of Agriculture, such as crop rotation, row planting, the use of improved seeds, variable cropping and winter ploughing, all regarded as essential to increased yields, were neglected principally because labour migration deprived rural households of essential labour power.¹² But, while labour migration may have contributed to less land being brought under cultivation, it might be suggested that the failure to adopt these 'modern' methods which were the hallmark of agricultural policy was a result of other factors such as the stringent requirements for enlisting in progressive farmer schemes demanded by the Department of Agriculture: peasants hoping to join agricultural schemes often lacked adequate resources, there was inadequate funding of the crop production sector by the state, and there were shortages of agricultural personnel.¹³ Moreover, contrary to Schapera's suggestion that labour migration hampered the adoption of 'modern' methods of farming, it must be emphasised that some farmers who enlisted in the 'progressive' farmers' scheme had earlier worked as mine labourers, and that wages saved from the mines enabled them to acquire key implements.¹⁴ (It was not possible to establish the actual number of 'progressive' farmers whose initial capital came from mine wages, but the desire to purchase ploughs was one of the reasons given for migrating.) The failure to adopt new methods in agriculture could also have been due to the prevailing gender prejudices. Women were regarded as

minors in Tswana law and they could not be instructed by demonstrators without permission from their husbands; the efforts of the Department of Agriculture were solely directed at men. The fact that not a single Motswana woman became a 'progressive' farmer points to this neglect of women, the main producers of food.¹⁵

In some reserves, however, the withdrawal of a sizeable section of adult males may have contributed to less land being cultivated, and hence to a decline in crop yields. Certainly, concern about the negative effects of labour migration on agricultural production came from many different parts of the country, especially in the mid-1930s and 1940s. The *Dikgosi* (Chiefs) raised the alarm on numerous occasions during sessions of the African Advisory Council (AAC). *Kgosi* Kgari Sechele of the Bakwena voiced his dismay:

In 1935, 1500 men left the Kwena reserve on a nine month contract. There are approximately 6000 male taxpayers in the reserve. Out of these about 2000 are unfit, either due to their age or by illness, to do manual work. Therefore, there are 4000 fit men in the tribe. Thirty seven percent leave for the mines every year.¹⁶

The *Kgosi* proceeded to enumerate the effects of labour withdrawal on the Kweneng economy. He asserted that male labour migration had resulted in a complete lack of manpower to cultivate the land and perform communal labour; that migration had contributed to a decline in the supply of food as the elderly men and women did not possess enough physical strength to cultivate all the land; that tuberculosis would (soon) become a major problem because out of the 400 men who were recruited for the mines in the first four months of 1935, 24 came back with chest problems.¹⁷ He went on to suggest that a minimum percentage of manpower which would remain in the reserves be agreed upon. In his view, those who had come back from the mines should be forced to stay home for at least six months before taking on another contract.¹⁸

Some colonial authorities, especially District Commissioners in the Protectorate, were similarly perturbed by what was referred to as 'excessive' recruitment of labour. With reference once more to the Bakwena Reserve, the District Commissioner stated that, in the first six months of 1942, the NRC recruited 1,029 men, while in 1941 it had sent 1,362 and in 1940, 2,278.¹⁹ In the same year, the District Commissioner at Gaborone expressed similar concerns about large-scale absenteeism in his area, with very few men returning home. Most of those in the Union stayed there to avoid enlistment for the War, while those in the African Auxilliary Pioneer Corps (AAPC) obviously could not come home. He warned that: 'If this position continues very long it would seem almost certain that serious consequences to the social and economic life in the reserves will result'.²⁰ As the Maun District Commissioner informed the Government Secretary in 1947:

The position needs watching in the southern Protectorate in the reserves such as Ngwaketse, Kgatleng and Kweneng. Over-recruitment is undoubtedly one of the factors bearing on our ever recurring crop failures – less lands are being ploughed and less attention is being paid to the care of growing crops.²¹

It was not, however, only from the southern areas that the warnings of the 1940s came. From the Tati Reserve in north-eastern Botswana, Schapera's survey indicated that 37 per cent of males were absent in 1943. The result, he argued, was that the workload of women increased and this meant inefficient ploughing, and a lack of interest in crop growing. Moreover, as a result of being overburdened, the women were not prepared – he alleged – to adopt the gospel that was being preached by agricultural demonstrators concerning winter ploughing, summer ploughing and weeding.²²

If the 1940s were a decade in which the alarm was raised, it could still be heard in the following decade. In the 1950s, G.C. Ryan, who was requested by the colonial government to investigate and report on the position of the cattle industry, stated that the WNLA and the NRC sent between them 17,360 Africans to the mines and there had been considerable recruitment by the Transvaal farmers and other organisations as well. He was concerned that the absence of over 20,000 men from a total male population of about 75,000 would have considerable negative consequences.²³

The proposition that labour migration had negative effects on crop production was carefully argued by Schapera who maintained that, before the adoption of the plough in the late nineteenth century, cultivation was largely a woman's occupation, but that the increasing use of the plough in Botswana from the 1930s made cultivation of the soil largely a man's job. Furthermore, in the 1920s and 1930s when the standard contract on the mines was four months, men mostly arranged their absence so that it did not interfere with ploughing. This, according to Schapera, was still the practice in the 1940s because men 'either continue to return in time to plough, or else postpone their departure until the ploughing season is over'.²⁴ This desire to return and plough, or to make arrangements to have the ploughing done while away, was revealed by many of my informants. Indeed, *Kgosi* Kelemogile Mokgosi of Balete, like other informants, said that labour migration had little effect on crop production because men usually returned during the ploughing season.²⁵ A few of the people interviewed, however, held that crop production suffered because the handling of cattle needed the experience of men, especially in preparing such livestock for ploughing.²⁶ However, although not all men returned to plough, those who did return offset the shortage of labour power in the brief rainy season which normally runs from October to the end of January. Thus the total manpower absent during a particular year was not altogether lost to cultivation.

On the other hand, Schapera held that the tradition of arranging home visits to coincide with the needs of agricultural seasons was becoming less frequent and thus agricultural production was suffering. Indeed, he held that the conditions observed in the Union of South Africa regarding the injurious effects of male labour migration were similar to those found in the reserves of Botswana. And, although Batswana mine labourers took measures to be available for the ploughing season, Schapera argued they were not always there in time, and losses were incurred due to a failure to utilise early rains. Among the Batlokwa, at the end of the 1943 ploughing season, approximately 97 per cent of married landholders who were at home ploughed. But of the 81 who were absent not more than sixteen, that is just under 20 per cent, managed to plough their lands, and this clearly demonstrated for Schapera how agriculture was neglected through labour migration.²⁷

While it is probable that labour migration contributed to less land being brought under cultivation, how precisely this contributed to declining yields, recurring crop failures and the underdevelopment of agriculture in Botswana is somewhat unclear, and difficult to quantify. Overall, the effects appear to have been exaggerated,²⁸ and other factors affecting agricultural production have been overlooked. Migrant labour can, after all, also make positive contributions to the political economies of rural areas, including agriculture. Michael Burrawoy argues that, whereas the erosion of a subsistence economy can accompany migrant labour, in some instances such an economy can be strengthened by the process. For Burrawoy, the nature of the impact of labour migration depends on the extent to which a subsistence economy relies on able-bodied males:

Where the economy is such that the absence of males does not prevent the cultivation of crops, the earnings remitted by those absent serve to bolster the rural political economy and by contrast those economies relying on male labour for cultivation ... have tended to be adversely affected by the system of migrant labour.²⁹

Burrawoy adds that, in some parts of Africa, women were responsible for much of the agricultural work (except the clearing of land once every few years), and the absence of men for long periods did not affect agricultural production.³⁰ In Botswana, it should also be noted that *letsema* (work parties in which the participants receive food and beer) was a factor that mitigated the effects of labour migration on crop production. It was customary for the Tswana to brew beer and cook food, then invite relatives and neighbours to assist in more labour intensive tasks such as land clearing, destumping, weeding, ploughing, harvesting and threshing corn.³¹ Although Schapera suggested that such communal activities were on the wane, they may have contributed in some ways to offsetting manpower losses through migration.

In the studies of labour migration in Botswana, the role and contribution of male labour to agricultural production have not been fully assessed. According to the traditional Tswana division of labour, men cleared fields and also ploughed. It was also men's duty to fence the fields. The bulk of agricultural work was, however, performed by women. Women participated in the ploughing and, after that, they were largely responsible for the remaining work. The crucial role played by female labour in crop production was confirmed by my male informants. When asked who did much of the work after cultivation (such as hoeing, bird scaring, harvesting, threshing and storage) Joel Tlhalefang in the Tuli Block was emphatic: '*honne, honne, honne*' (women, women, women).³² Women whose husbands worked in the mines during the period covered by this study also maintain that they performed the bulk of agricultural tasks, even when the men were present. Ngele Nganunu stated that ploughing, weeding, bird scaring, threshing and corn storage had always been her main responsibilities, and she used to produce a surplus in good years.³³ Mboni Sadikwa asserted that her relatives used to assist her when her husband was away and that she never experienced any problems with labour. The factors that she regarded as having contributed to poor harvests were low rainfall, soil erosion and constant drought.³⁴ A Sub Chief from

the 1930s to the 1950s stated that the absence of males did not disrupt crop production significantly since the bulk of agricultural tasks was at any rate performed by women and children. He emphasised that it was constant droughts and serious land shortages that had had negative effects on agricultural production, and not migrant labour.³⁵ The fact that women have always been central to agricultural production and that the absence of men did not make a significant difference to production has been further confirmed by the work of Onalenna Selolwane.³⁶ This, then, suggests that the withdrawal of some men from agricultural production would not have had crippling effects on it.

In addition, migrant labourers unquestionably contributed to the economies of the reserves in Botswana through their remittances, and these inputs aided crop production. Between 1934 and 1938, the annual average cash total that the migrants brought home was £135,304.³⁷ Although data could not be found for the 1940s and 1950s, evidence from the 1960s is suggestive. In 1962 deferred pay alone amounted to R738,000, while the combined deferred pay and money paid to miners at the end of contracts came close to R2,000,000.³⁸ In terms of agricultural implements, the only figures available indicate that, in 1932 in the Bakgatla Reserve alone, migrants sent home 24 ploughs.³⁹

From the 1930s to the 1950s, statements from many quarters indicated that the wages of migrant labourers remained one of the most important sources of income for peasants in the colonial period. It is also held that some of the remittances were sent for the specific purpose of enabling a migrant's wife to hire cattle for ploughing. Some informants (as shall be revealed shortly) also stated that they had bought cattle with their wages from mine labour, and in a few years had managed to assemble a span. In a drought-prone territory such as Botswana, it is possible that the economies of several reserves would have collapsed without these infusions of capital from migrant labour. The purchase of ploughs and other means of production (such as wagons, scotch carts, and cattle) through remittances from the mines was thus a positive contribution to peasant production from migrant labour. Interviewees who went to the mines in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s confirmed that, after a spell on the mines, they had bought cattle (to replenish their herds depleted by droughts) and also agricultural implements. In areas of low migration such as Ngamiland and Gantsi, officials complained that the areas were poor precisely because of a lack of cash inflow in the form of remittances and deferred pay from migrants. People in these areas had difficulty in paying their taxes, and in some cases they had to surrender grain.⁴⁰ This may have affected regional differentiation as much of the cash inflow from migrants went to the southern, central and north-eastern regions of the country (where migration rates were higher).

During the period under study, some monies from the mines were also used to pay tribal levies, as in the Bakgatla and Balete reserve, and this went into public projects such as schools, clinics, roads and also the Tribal Treasury. Funds from the treasury were used to assist progressive farmers to purchase agricultural implements such as double row ploughs,

planters and cultivators.⁴¹ In Gantsi and other areas such as the Kgalagadi such levies did not exist, partly because of the lack of cash inflow into these areas, and this may have been one reason why these regions were often counted as the poorest in the Protectorate.⁴² As is well known, peasants weigh alternatives and maximise sources of income, usually deciding on the more remunerative alternative or that which involves the least outlay of labour. As Francis Wilson among others has noted, peasants might choose to earn wages rather than remain fully-fledged farmers as a result. Wilson also notes that, although the absence of men through migrant labour might lead to a decline in agricultural production, the fact remains that the aggregate income of the communities from which the labour is withdrawn might be greater than would otherwise have been the case.⁴³ In Botswana, crop production was a risky and often unremunerative venture due to erratic rainfall, poor soils and non-existent markets. Migrant labour wages, on the other hand, were certain, and through them peasants could purchase key farming implements and sustain their families.

Nevertheless, it is often held that in areas where migration was high in Botswana, underdevelopment, and even paralysis in agriculture followed. In the Tati Reserve, Kere Kobokobo maintains that underdevelopment resulted from the 'gradual weakening of the peasantry's competitive position on the produce market and even its subsistence produce'. This, she asserts, was due to the fact that migrants tended to be 'the young, strongest and the most productive males who should have played a major role in peasant production and the overall result was that the Tati peasant's economy was reduced to below subsistence level'.⁴⁴ Carol Kerven asserts that: 'The chronically low productivity of Tswana agriculture especially crop production can be historically ascertained with the penetration of wage labour migration into the economy'. This, she argues, created stasis and malnutrition.⁴⁵

However, it appears that the effects of land shortage have been confused with those of labour migration. It was land shortage in the Bamalete, Tati and Batlokwa reserves caused by white settlement that led to the high rates of migration, with some men having no fields to cultivate and a shortage of grazing land for cattle. It is likely that these factors, rather than labour migration, led to overstocking and erosion and consequently low crop yields. The effect of labour migration on crop production, therefore, remains unclear. There are no comprehensive data to prove that cultivated acreages declined significantly with the intensification of migrant labour. Furthermore, there are no available data showing the amount of land cultivated in Botswana in different years. Fluctuating acreages (if they did fluctuate) could also be explained by the varying rainfall in different years and droughts which, in some cases, weakened draught animals and made ploughing difficult. In the years 1946 and 1947 for instance, the territory imported the highest amounts of grain, but this was the period in which some 9,500 men in the African Auxiliary Pioneer Corps were reported to have returned from the War and were not willing immediately to re-engage with the mines.⁴⁶

Varying rainfall in different years seems to have played a crucial role and, although data

on rainfall for different years and regional variations could not be obtained, statements that the early 1950s were years of good rainfall and surplus grain production seem to emphasise its importance.⁴⁷ Furthermore, there were some years in which good harvests were reported, and yet migrants nevertheless left in great numbers.⁴⁸ In 1935, it was stated that the good grain harvests in the Barolong area in southern Botswana had not been affected by the significant labour migration, with there being no fall or decline in the supply of food.⁴⁹ Earlier, in 1934, it had also been reported that the Tati district had a bumper harvest and stacks of grain were seen at the trading stores. The Resident Magistrate for the area even stated that:

This departure of great numbers of natives has not affected local supply to date except where semi-skilled labour is required, there are always sufficient members of the families left behind to enable the work of ploughing and herding to be carried on while at the same time money is remitted home for the payment of taxes and for the provision of the necessities for the families.⁵⁰

It would appear that, among the many factors negatively affecting crop production and levels of yields in Botswana, migrant labour was not the main one. Long before migrant labour became a 'way of life' in the 1930s, droughts had been a recurring phenomenon. Alan Pim reported in 1933 that, 'It is frequently stated that only once in four years is a full crop obtained in the eastern and southern parts of the territory'.⁵¹ Casual references to the self-sufficiency of Batswana before the advent of migrant labour, or even before colonisation, as implied by Schapera,⁵² beg for further research and validation. Emery Roe catalogues the situation concerning grain production and maintains that, between 1895 and 1929, cropping activities fluctuated yearly because of prevailing drought conditions and, between 1905 and 1929, varying drought conditions were reported to have existed in some parts of the territory for at least fifteen cropping seasons.⁵³ The years between 1930 and 1939 were characterised by drought and locust attacks that prevented the realisation of any crop surpluses and resulted in a stagnant agricultural situation. A unique period in the history of the country was the period between 1953 and 1959 when farmers exported in sizeable quantities and imported less maize, but the trend in migration during this time remained generally upward.⁵⁴ This Roe attributes to people cultivating more land because the yields per acre remained the same.⁵⁵ The role played by migrant labour in declining crop yields is thus much more complex than is implied by some writers, and certainly there are other powerful factors that must be taken into account.

The idyllic situation described by missionaries before colonisation does not mean that Batswana were completely self-sufficient in food production and that droughts did not occur frequently. What it suggests is that, at that time, certain redistributive mechanisms were in place, as yet not affected by colonial rule. These mechanisms enabled Batswana to surmount hard times whereas, with colonialism, such means were weakened. It seems that

historians should focus more upon this and other factors, such as inadequate land, low rainfall and inadequate state funding for crop production, rather than upon migrant labour, in analysing rural poverty.

Migrant Labour and the Livestock Economy

The livestock sector is probably the section of the economy that suffered most from the absence of young males. This was largely because in the Tswana division of labour, cattle tending was primarily a male occupation. The herding of cattle and driving them in search of better pastures, their branding, castration, dipping and watering, were some of the duties connected with cattle rearing and, although women were permitted to do some of them, they were not trained to perform others and were discouraged from attending to them because of societal norms. They could not, for instance, castrate cattle. Surveys carried out in the 1930s and 1940s revealed that Batswana in general regarded migrant labour as having been detrimental to their cattle industry.⁵⁶ They thought that labour migration had caused deterioration in cattle herding and that this had led to an increase in losses due to neglect and cattle straying.⁵⁷ This situation was due to the fact that, in the past, male youths were kept at the cattle post until they reached the age of maturity, while now they too migrated to find work in South Africa.⁵⁸

It should be noted, however, that the loss of labour to tend cattle affected various groupings within the community differently. The well-to-do Batswana could employ cattle-herds or servants while, for the ordinary man, younger sons were the ones who were left in charge. Strenuous tasks such as hauling water from wells for the beasts meant that the young boys left behind were unsuited to the work. They also lacked supervision and might neglect their duties. The situation was compounded by the fact that youthful migrants who returned from the Union appear to have adopted a negative attitude towards herding. They preferred to rest and resisted attending to cattle belonging to their parents,⁵⁹ an illuminating comment on how familial authority was affected by migrant labour.

It is not easy to measure the effects of male labour migration on cattle husbandry since not all things are quantifiable, but the effects seem to have been more pronounced than they were on crop production. The *dikgosi* of the Protectorate voiced their concern about 'excessive' recruiting and its impact on the deteriorating African cattle economy. At a session of the African Advisory Council in 1940, *dikgosi* unanimously blamed labour migration for the poor condition of cattle in the Protectorate. *Kgosi* Tshekedi Khama called for intervention to ameliorate the situation by:

consider[ing] what action might possibly be taken to protect the cattle industry from the harmful effects of excessive native labour recruiting in the country, which removes the most active and vigorous section of the population and the beneficial effect exercised by this section on the cattle industry.⁶⁰

Kgosi Khama's sentiments were shared by his colleague from the Batawana Reserve, *Kgosi* Kgosintwa Madisa, who asserted:

Young men have left the country and there is not a single person, small children, to look after cattle. The deterioration of the cattle industry in our area is due to two difficulties because in

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Table 1. Cattle population by year

Year	1939	1949	1951	1954	1959
Number	1,250,000	982,951	1,026,845	1,139,773	1,325,000

Source: *Basutoland, Bechuanaland and Swaziland: Report of an Economic Survey Mission* (London, HMSO, 1960), p. 182.

our area the young men leave the cattle unattended, which go astray and sometimes there is the total destruction of at least one hundred head of cattle, if they stray into the tse-tse area.⁶¹

A similar situation was observed by one of the representatives from the Bangwato Reserve, Kgosi Motsholakgetsi, who stated that much damage had occurred to cattle, and the absence of people to look after them was the principal cause.⁶² From the Tati Reserve, cattle straying also became a common problem and this was again attributed to labour migration: overburdened women could not give full attention to livestock.⁶³ Although *dikgosi* had earlier benefited from migrant labour and had therefore encouraged it, it appears that increasing rates of migration meant that the phenomenon had spun out of their control, thus giving rise to their concerns. However, the problems were not quite so bad for the *dikgosi* themselves who were wealthy members of the community and who could loan cattle to poorer peasants under the *mafisa* system, or hire herdboys and thus avoid the problems of labour shortages caused by migration.

It was not, in any case, only labour migration that contributed to the deterioration of the cattle industry. From his acquaintance with conditions in Botswana in the 1930s, Schapera felt that some men, who did not migrate, neglected their cattle, often leaving the work to herdboys at the cattle posts. They also, he asserted, depended on nature rather than seeking artificial means to improve their herds.⁶⁴ In this respect it seems Schapera was insufficiently cognisant of the access to resources needed for effective cattle husbandry. It is true that men in Gantsi did not migrate in large numbers, and the situation regarding cattle husbandry practices in that area was no different from that in other reserves. But in the 1950s, the Veterinary Department reported that it was *poverty* in the African areas of Gantsi that prevented peasants from adopting the husbandry methods, such as feeding phosphate and bone-meal to beasts, which white freehold farmers had adopted.⁶⁵ Cattle in the smallest, most crowded reserves died because of poor grazing conditions; many peasants could not afford to buy exotic but appropriate breeds or supplementary feed.⁶⁶ Thus, the poor cattle conditions in the reserves were not due mainly to peasant neglect as Schapera seems to imply, but to many factors, especially land shortage. It should also be noted that the deterioration of cattle seems to have been more in quality than quantity. Although cattle populations fluctuated, with significant drops in the years 1933–1934 as a result of foot and mouth disease and droughts (which destroyed about one third to 60 per cent of the herd in some areas), numbers generally grew after 1939 as Table 1 below shows. (The drop in the 1949 numbers was also caused by an outbreak of foot and mouth disease.)

These increases were in part due to effective vaccination campaigns by the Veterinary Department which offset the effects of diseases. This was one area where the colonial state

intervened actively, but, as in other areas of positive intervention, this promoted disparities between the relatively well-off Batswana and poorer peasants.⁶⁷

It is interesting to note that the widespread concern over 'excessive' recruitment and its impact on crop and animal husbandry, strongly expressed by the *dikgosi*, occurred mainly in the 1930s and 1940s, though migration rates continued to rise in the 1950s and 1960s. This could be explained by the fact that the 1930s were one of the most difficult decades in the economic history of Botswana,⁶⁸ as elsewhere. As this period of hardship coincided with an increase in labour migration, it was labour migration itself which appeared to the *dikgosi* and some officials as the cause of the country's woes.

Labour Migration's Contribution to the Economy and to Differentiation

Inequalities in Botswana have largely been reflected in skewed cattle holdings which were a feature of Tswana life from pre-colonial times. The ruling families traditionally held large stocks obtained from the so called *matimela* (stray cattle) tribute and war booty, while some people inherited sizeable stocks from their parents. The *mafisa* system (whereby a well-off man could loan his poorer kinsmen some cattle for use) was another way in which cattle could be acquired.⁶⁹ Herds could also be built up through the purchase of cattle with savings from mine wages or from other sources, something not sufficiently stressed in the literature. Indeed, the emphasis on the migrant labour history of Botswana has largely been on its negative effects, such as the decline in agricultural production, the spread of venereal diseases, problems resulting from the separation of spouses and the collapse of 'tribal' discipline.⁷⁰ The main beneficiaries of the migrant labour system have been seen as the colonial administration (through the collection of taxes and attestation fees), mining magnates in South Africa and the Protectorate *dikgosi*.

Recent studies have tended to downplay the role of migrant labour wages in family economies, arguing that mine wages merely supplemented subsistence agriculture.⁷¹ These findings have much validity, but the history of migrant labour and its impact would remain incomplete without an assessment of other salient features, one of which is its role in promoting peasant differentiation. Some savings were evidently made from mine wages, and such savings, besides supplementing subsistence agriculture and keeping reserve communities alive during periods of stress, were used to purchase ploughs, cattle and other items that enhanced productive capacity. This enabled some poorer peasants to rise and close ranks with the well-to-do, as noted by Schapera:

Labour migration ... has made it possible for even the lowest commoner to earn money with which to purchase trade goods. This has helped to break down the old correlation of rank and wealth, and has given more scope for individual enterprise in the attainment of riches.⁷²

Due to lack of data, it has not been possible to discover the number of implements or cattle purchased by migrants either in a particular reserve, or in the territory at large. The available sources merely mention generally that such items were purchased, except in one

case (that concerning the Bakgatla Reserve noted earlier). Since some of the reasons given for migrating included the acquisition of stock for ploughing, and mention is constantly made of the purchasing of ploughs,⁷³ there are reasonable grounds to believe that the purchases made a considerable impact. Although some of the remittances went on the payment of taxes, migrant wages were thus also used to acquire the means of production and maintain lives in the reserves.

The Protectorate administration relied heavily on migrant labour for taxes because wage labour opportunities within the Protectorate were few.⁷⁴ For much of the colonial period, hut tax (which was called Native Tax from 1940 and, later, African Tax) collections contributed significantly to the total domestic revenues of the Protectorate. Until the Second World War, they constituted as much as 60 per cent of such revenue although that declined to 20 per cent and 12 per cent in the 1940s and 1950s respectively.⁷⁵ Migrant labour was thus crucial to the economy of the Protectorate as a whole. As the Gaborone Resident Magistrate stated in the mid-1930s:

Were it not for the Union market for our native labour, the Government would long ago have ceased to collect any tax, the trader ... gone out of business and natives, whilst the least affected, would be depending more than ever on providence.⁷⁶

The Resident Magistrate's reference to tax collection, and the contribution made by migrant labour to tax, is backed by the fact that – in the 1930s – between a quarter and a third of all the revenue accruing to the Protectorate came from migrant labour through remittances and deferred pay.⁷⁷

Reserves in the Protectorate also obviously drew sustenance from migrant labour. In 1938, the annual cash that went into the Bakwena Reserve alone was £20,000, although half of it went in the payment of taxes.⁷⁸ The Resident Magistrate of the Batlokwa Reserve stated in 1935 that a great deal of money had been put into circulation in his area: 'In the past seven and a half years an amount of slightly over £1,350 (as distinct from deferred pay) was sent or remitted to relatives by mineworkers'.⁷⁹ In Molepolole, the acting Resident Magistrate informed the Government Secretary that the Bakwena Reserve was kept alive by mine labour during the depression of the 1930s: in the mid-1930s, an average of £400 to £500 in deferred pay was provided monthly to labourers returning from the mines.⁸⁰ In 1935, the Resident Magistrate from Serowe intimated that an amount of £1,000 would be paid out monthly to migrant labourers in the Bangwato Reserve, and that many prudent men from the Bukalanga and Tswapong areas were purchasing cattle from their friends.⁸¹ The Bakalanga and Batswapong were some of the groups that were regarded as subject or minor 'tribes' in Botswana and they did not own as many cattle as the Tswana proper. Evidence also suggests that the majority of those who migrated were from poorer families, those with few or no cattle at all.⁸² Migration wages thus provided the key means through which the poorest, many from subject 'tribes', could advance in the emerging structure of differen-

Table 2. Sources of income

Source	Amount (£)	% of total
Sale of agricultural produce	242,500	31.5
Employment inside territory	135,800	7.7
Allotments from army pay	61,000	7.9
Employment outside territory	330,000	42.9
<i>Total</i>	769,300	100

Source: Schapera, *Migrant Labour*, p. 161.

tiation in Tswana society. For them, Schapera rightly concludes that migration was ‘virtually the only method by which a man could earn the money he needed’.⁸³

It should be noted, however, that much of this money was siphoned away. What the Protectorate administration gained through taxation was, obviously, lost to peasants. If half the money sent home through deferred pay went on the payment of taxes, as the example of the Bakwena Reserve indicates, and if that was a reflection of what occurred in the country at large, then tax significantly depleted potential investments in agricultural inputs by peasants. This suggests that historians and social scientists should place more emphasis on the role of taxation, rather than simply migrant labour, in impoverishing rural communities in colonial Botswana.

Conditions in Botswana were not conducive to the acquisition of the means with which to satisfy peasant needs and wants in any other way than through labour migration, and the reliance on migrant labour thus grew. Regarding the centrality of migrant labour to Tswana lives, Schapera observed in the late 1940s that: ‘The export of labour has become an outstanding feature of the Tswana economy. Without the income that it produces, the Tswana could not possibly maintain their present standards of living.’⁸⁴ He estimated that about half the annual cash expenditure by Batswana was met through income from migration.⁸⁵ Batswana working in the territory earned about £54,000 from European areas, while migrant labourers accumulated £333,000 which came back either in cash or in the form of goods. Together the two sources made up about 54 per cent of the total income of the territory.⁸⁶ Labour migration clearly became the major single source of income for the majority, as shown in Table 2, which illustrates the contribution made by migrant labour wages to the total income of Batswana in one year in the 1930s.

Generally, the literature on Southern Africa emphasises the fact that mine labourers received wages below subsistence levels, with the costs of social security and reproducing labour carried by the rural population.⁸⁷ Nonetheless, evidence from Botswana suggests that some savings, however modest, were made and that they made positive inputs to the reserve economies and peasant households. In the 1940s, Schapera noted that ‘although some men spent recklessly on liquor, women and other temptations the great majority managed to return home with goods that they have bought for themselves or their family’.⁸⁸ Deferred

pay was also taken home and part of the lump sum was often used to purchase valuable goods.

The assertion by the Gaborone Resident Magistrate in 1935 that migrants usually remitted one to three pounds to relatives to pay tax, purchase seed grain and ploughs, or to hire oxen to plough with,⁸⁹ signified the fact that migrant labour, while supporting the exploitative burden of tax, could have a positive input to the agricultural economy of the territory and individual households. Similarly, the Resident Magistrate in the Bakgatla Reserve observed in 1935 that migrants, in addition to paying tribal dues and taxes, acquired stock and agricultural implements and improved their economic conditions. For some, he said, this was the way to build up herds. The Magistrate also had reports from traders that returning migrants were purchasing ploughs. With these developments in mind, he wrote to the Government Secretary that 'the advantages of recruiting were ... obvious'.⁹⁰

Oral testimony also reveals that in the late 1950s and early 1960s men bought cattle by exchanging them for bicycles brought home after a spell on the mines: a bicycle was usually exchanged for a heifer and one could get one or two in this way in a year. Mpondo Masole from north-eastern Botswana said: '*Banjinji ba ka tenga pholombe njinji ba ka baka matanga ne mabaisikili*' (Many bought many heifers and built herds with bicycles). From the southern part of the country, Tsurupe Kokwe concurs: '*Monnal Bantsi ba rekile dikgomo mme ba tshela sentie*' (Man! Many bought cattle and lived well).⁹¹ Thus did some migrants build up sizeable herds. (It might be remarked that a situation similar to that in colonial Botswana was observed in western Kenya in the 1960s, where migrant labour remittances played an important role in peasant households and promoted differentiation, enabling some families to invest, for example, in their children's education.)⁹² The very fact that not all was lost to agriculture due to the withdrawal of young, able-bodied males is crucial to understanding the role of migrant labour in agriculture in the territory. Emery Roe holds that agriculture never really became a cash-generating alternative for many Batswana,⁹³ and Schapera argues that the majority of migrants tended to be non-stock holders or smallholders whose livestock sales could not meet their cash expenses.⁹⁴ What emerges from this is that many simply could not have cultivated sufficient land. What else could they have done in a country with such limited employment opportunities and significant rural inequality apart from migrating to the mines? For many poor peasants then, migrant labour was the only way in which they could improve their position in society. Francis Wilson has argued that some rural dwellers became worse off than they would otherwise have been because they did not migrate.⁹⁵ It would appear that this was so for the poor non-migrating peasants in Botswana, such as those in the Gantsi district.

Health and Migrancy

A salient feature resulting from migration, the extent and effect of which is difficult to assess accurately, but one that had some negative effects on Tswana peasant society, was the incidence of lung disease, particularly tuberculosis. In 1930, Medical Officers noted that there were 165 known cases of tuberculosis and, in 1932, the disease was reported to be

on the increase as indicated by an increasingly large number of cases noted among dispensary outpatients.⁹⁶ Many of those affected by the disease were said to have been men 'who developed evidence of infection after their return from working on the mines' and those with a history of mine service. The disease was more frequent in the southern districts from which labour for the mines was largely recruited, and less so in the area north of 22 degrees latitude which was not opened up for recruitment until 1933. The fact that some women and children who had never been to the mines, but who were in contact with infected relatives and friends from the mines, were also showing signs of the disease indicates that the lung disease was, in some ways, beginning to affect the vitality of peasant society.

In 1934, there were 348 cases of tuberculosis and this was viewed as a 'very disturbing state of affairs'. In 1935, Resident Commissioner Charles Rey warned that 'there is a risk of the Protectorate becoming a hot-bed of the disease if preventative measures are not taken'.⁹⁷ In the first five months of 1940, 1,446 new cases of tubercular infection were reported,⁹⁸ while in 1956 there were 1,673 new cases. By 1959, the number of new cases was reported to have gone up by 148 per cent over the 1956 figure.⁹⁹ A 1958 report by World Health Organisation consultant Anton Geser indicated that there were about 3,000 cases of highly infectious tuberculosis in a country of approximately 300,000 people¹⁰⁰ – that is, about 1 per cent of the population was infected. However, the situation seems to have been more alarming than the figures suggest, because many cases of infection went unrecorded. The Medical Officer indicated in 1940 that facilities for the exact diagnosis of the disease did not exist and he doubted the figures given. Recorded cases were only of those sufferers who were seen by Medical Officers. As in other parts of Southern Africa, many infected migrants returned from the mines and melted into the rural populace, and others did not seek aid from European doctors.¹⁰¹

Tuberculosis had crippling effects on Botswana's peasant society. These were clearly expressed by the Medical Officer of Health in 1961 when he observed that:

It is true to say that tuberculosis is a disease which affects not only the patient, but the whole community. If a father becomes ill, then his whole family suffers from poverty and, in many cases ... starvation. If a mother is taken ill of the disease the family becomes neglected, and while there might not be ... starvation, they do suffer. In either event the village community loses a worker and the family becomes a liability and a source of infection, and thus a danger to all other people in the village.¹⁰²

According to health authorities, there were instances where people suffering from tuberculosis were dismissed from their jobs because they were weak and unable to work.¹⁰³ Between 1960 and 1963 colonial officials in the Protectorate considered tuberculosis to be one of the major socio-economic problems facing Botswana.¹⁰⁴ A medical historian, Rodgers Molefi, maintains that the scourge of tuberculosis was only controlled in the 1960s

with the assistance of the World Health Organisation. On the origins and effects of the disease, he notes that:

Families welcomed mine repatriates ... little knowing that they welcomed uninvited visitors in the form of the new and lethal strains of tuberculosis that were to affect them later. While the demographic impact of tuberculosis is not easy to assess, there is no doubt that its severity arrested population growth and economic progress in various regions and in Botswana generally.¹⁰⁵

Thus tuberculosis, which was initially introduced by migrant workers from the Rand mines of South Africa, became established in the Protectorate. The precise effects of tuberculosis on crop production and animal husbandry are, however, difficult to measure because of unreliable statistics, but it can be assumed that those who were affected were no longer as productive as they had been. The spread of tuberculosis was to a large extent checked in the 1960s, although some cases persisted in various parts of the country, especially in the countryside where the health facilities were inadequate, and to where most of the mine repatriates retired.¹⁰⁶ In addition, as migrants were exposed to dust in the mines there is a likelihood that some contracted the fatal disease silicosis, as was the case with many South African black mine labourers.¹⁰⁷ Finally, it should be noted that although tuberculosis had some negative effects on the peasant economy, incidences of the disease did not reach epic proportions and, as stated above, it was largely brought under control in the 1960s.

Conclusion

Migrant labour from Botswana was initially motivated by the need to purchase firearms to defend Tswana chiefdoms. Other causes during the early phases of migration included the need to overcome hardships caused by droughts and the outbreak of cattle diseases such as rinderpest. The later introduction and subsequent increase in taxes by the colonial government also powerfully spurred men to migrate to the Rand mines. From the 1930s, a rapid spate of natural disasters (droughts, cattle diseases, locust plagues), combined with South Africa's imposition of the cattle weight restrictions, taxation, the colonial government's neglect of economic development (which might have provided wage employment locally), and the insufficient and spasmodic intervention in peasant agriculture, led to a huge increase in the number of migrants. Migration from Botswana to the mines increased throughout the period under study, though with significant variation among reserves (partly owing to relative land shortages).

This article has supported those who have argued that migrant labour deprived peasant agriculture of some of its most able-bodied labourers, resulting in losses in the cattle sector and – to a lesser extent – in crop production. The analysis has also highlighted the negative effects of the introduction of tuberculosis by migrant labourers. Though the precise effects and spread of tuberculosis from the early 1930s to the 1960s is difficult to measure, it can reasonably be concluded that the disease weakened labour needed for agriculture, and became a further burden upon the reserve economies due to the need to support the ill. Though labour migration certainly had costs, this study has also maintained that migration aided the production process in certain respects, and that poorer peasants benefited as a result of migrant remittances and farming implements purchased after the end of contracts. These inputs, together with the dominant role that women played in crop production,

indicates that the view held by some scholars – that migrant labour ‘underdeveloped’ peasant agriculture in Botswana – is difficult to sustain fully. The positive role played by migrant remittances in peasant economies has been neglected by many scholars. Its net effects might be assessed through a study based on the large-scale collection of oral data from the different districts of Botswana.

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