Summary and Keywords

A pervasive system of migrant labor played a fundamental part in shaping the past and present of South Africa’s economy and society and has left indelible marks on the wider region. South Africa was long infamous for its entrenched system of racial discrimination. But it is also unique in the extent to which urbanization, industrialization, and rural transformation have been molded by migrant labor. Migrancy and racism fed off each other for over a century, shaping the lives and deaths of millions of people.

Keywords: migrant labor, South Africa, economy, racism and discrimination, urbanization, industrialization, rural transformation

Origins

The labor demands of a rapidly growing mining industry and the imposition of colonial control were enormously important forces in shaping the long-term trajectory of migrant labor in South Africa. But a still-deeper history of the wider region also played a significant part in the genesis of the system.

Trade networks that developed over more than 500 years linked centers that specialized variously in the production of grain, livestock, salt, ochre, skins, pots, tin, copper, and iron goods. The relative shortage of metal ores and work in the southern reaches of South Africa ensured a lively trade from centers of metal production at Soutpansberg, Messina, Phalaborwa, with the Pedi and Sotho Kingdoms and probably areas of the Transkei. This was a world connected to Arab, Portuguese, and other traders on the east coast for hundreds of years before the 1800s. From 1500 an economy already stimulated by an ancient gold trade was further galvanized by the growing demand for ivory at the coast, and the influx of imported goods of which beads and cloth were the most significant. It was a world of travel, cultural exchange, and economic innovation. It was also
increasingly a region of competition, conflict, and warfare. Pressures and possibilities radiating out of growing colonial centers in the Cape and Natal created cross-currents that buffeted this world, creating major political collisions and transitions in the interior in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

From the 1830s the movement of trekkers into the interior further forced the processes of conflict and change. The growth of wool production and exports from the eastern Cape, followed in rapid succession by the discovery of diamonds and gold, created new markets and especially a rapidly expanding demand for labor.

Some roots of the forms of migration that developed from the 1820s lie in ancient forms of mobility in African societies. For centuries, men from South Africa’s interior had sought income and employment away from home, traversing long-distance trading routes across southern Africa. Metal goods were carried from the Transvaal to Lesotho and beyond. These trade networks linked even farther eastward and northward, including to the Mozambican coast, where southern African traders exchanged mainly ivory for imported beads, cloth, ceramics, and metal ware. Some trading parties were small, but others were large organized groups traveling under the authority of kings and chiefs. These long-established trade routes were often the paths that migrant workers walked on their way to work.

From the 1850s onward, the growth of new economic centers, along with burgeoning demand for labor, added a new dimension to labor mobility. Commercial wool production in the eastern Cape and sugar plantations in Natal provided the initial upsurge in the demand for workers, attracting thousands of men primarily from the northern Transvaal, southern Mozambique, and the Sotho Kingdom. These men walked vast distances to and from centers of employment and braved many hazards en route. They spent as long as two years away from home and returned with guns, cattle, blankets, and iron goods. Firearms were especially prized by men from the Transvaal, where the Boers had attempted to ban trade in firearms with the African population.

The development of the Diamond Fields at Kimberley from the 1860s was an even more powerful magnet for migrants. Between 1871 and 1875, an estimated 50,000 Africans found work there. Better pay and lower prices for sought-after commodities like guns meant that they could work for much shorter periods of time—six months became the new norm. Most of these men came from effectively independent African societies. Chiefly power and regimental and other forms of youth organization and control of young men played a part in mobilizing groups of migrants.

Homestead structures also determined patterns of participation. A largely gender-based division of labor and the centrality of gender and generation in the distribution of power and property shaped the initial predominance of younger men and very low rate of female involvement in migrancy. But it must be noted that these dynamics played out in the context of high levels of threat to African societies from both black and white rivals as
well as the rapidly shifting opportunities and hazards of a hunting frontier. The possession of firearms became a necessity rather than a discretionary item for many.

Overall the system did not emerge because it was the form of labor favored by mine owners, and it was not initially a form of cheap labor as wages were relatively high in both national and international comparison. It was, rather, the only way in which mine owners could secure sufficient workers to meet their needs.²

Another crucial element in the system developed at Kimberley—the male-only closed compound. Closed compounds were initially seen as crucial to control the theft and illicit buying of diamonds. But over time they proved effective in cutting the costs of feeding and housing workers, and increasing the monitoring and control of workers. It was only black workers who were housed in these barrack-like structures, separating them from white workers, deepening the gulf between skilled and unskilled workers, and further reducing the likelihood of a class-based form of organization and action. As a result of these “advantages,” the compound was adopted as a core element in the gold-mining industry, which developed on the Witwatersrand from 1886 and soon dwarfed diamond mining in its economic returns and the demand for labor.³ Compounds on the gold mines were not entirely closed but used “tribal” principles of both residence and control to keep workers divided.

Initially gold mining involved a multitude of individual diggers exploiting the exposed sections of the reef. But it soon became evident that this came with severe limitations. Firstly, while the gold ore was abundant, it was of relatively low grade. Secondly, the reef ran ever deeper underground, reaching depths never previously exploited by the gold industry. Thirdly, until the 1930s the price of gold was not determined by supply and demand but fixed at a relatively low level by international agreement to ensure that gold could be used as an international currency for settling debts. In order to exploit this potential wealth, large amounts of capital, sophisticated technology, and, most of all, abundant labor was required. As Jeeves et al. have pointed out,

> There is little doubt that if large numbers of low wage unskilled migrant miners had not been recruited from throughout the subcontinent, there would never have been a deep-level golds mining industry in South Africa. The world largest supplier of gold [until the 1980s] would have been, at best, a minor producer pecking away at the surface outcrops of enormous deep-lying reefs. If an ore body similar to South Africa’s had been discovered in Australia, Canada or the United States it would almost certainly have been left lying in the ground because of an inability to mobilize the right type of work force.⁴

Large mining houses emerged that, with far-reaching state support (especially after the South African War of 1899–1902), were able to mobilize both capital and labor on a massive scale. By 1899 the Rand produced 27 percent of the world’s gold with over 100,000 workers. By 1913 it produced 40 percent of world’s gold with 200,000 workers.
By the 1960s well over 40,000 black workers were employed on the mines, and South Africa was the largest producer of gold in the world.

Migrant Workers and Cheap Labor

A central struggle for the industry was to secure vast numbers of workers at low wages. But, as we have seen, in its early phases migrant labor was not cheap labor. Crucial to the development of gold mining was the process of turning migrant labor into low-wage labor. Migrant workers, who initially were able to return or stay at home if wages were forced down and therefore had some economic and political autonomy, lost much of their room for maneuver. The major independent African kingdoms were conquered in the period 1870–1890. With defeat came the loss of large areas of land, the imposition of effective pass laws, and heavy taxation in cash. Two cattle diseases, Rinderpest in 1896/1897 and East Coast Fever 1904–1913, destroyed up to 80 percent of African herds. By the 1900 earlier levels of economic self-sufficiency in many rural areas had been thoroughly undermined, although agriculture offered some degree of economic support to many rural families until the 1950s. It was, however, far from able to meet their cash needs.

After the South African War, labor shortages did not lead to an increase in wages but to the recruitment of more than 63,000 laborers from north China. Most were repatriated by the Union of South Africa in 1910 as changing race politics in British colonies and the newly stabilized mining economy reduced their value to the industry.

The 1913 Lands Act was less significant in the economic decline of the rural areas than is often suggested. But it did entrench territorial segregation based on a system of reserves and underpinned policies designed to inhibit permanent urbanization. Initially competition among recruiters and employers had provided some upward pressure on wages. But the creation of the Native Recruiting Corporation, which operated in South Africa, and the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association, which operated beyond its borders, created a monopoly of recruitment and swung the balance of power even further toward employers. The industry and its recruiting agencies were able to create a vast "labor empire," stretching as far north as Tanzania and channeling southward large numbers of workers prepared to work for lower pay than most South African migrants. By the 1970s foreign workers made up 70 percent of the workers on the gold mines with men from Mozambique, Malawi, and Lesotho predominating. All these factors enabled employers to keep migrant workers’ wages low and almost static in real terms from 1897 to 1970. Still more constricting was the progressive entrenchment of a color bar from 1911, which restricted better-paying jobs to white workers and blocked black workers from translating long experience into enhanced skills and higher wages.

By 1920 the essentials of a cheap labor system where in place, and it endured for the next fifty years. Workers, far from their homes and families, were penned for achingly long periods of time in soulless, single-sex compounds where they were subject to a tribalized
and authoritarian system of administration. These prisonlike structures were also designed to minimize workers’ contact with trade unions and political organizations. The impediments to worker organization, collective consciousness, and action under these conditions are a much more credible explanation for a low-wage economy than continuing access to rural resources, often used as an explanation for a low wage by analysts both sympathetic and hostile to the system.

Social and Economic Dynamics

Although migrant workers lost a good deal of their economic bargaining power, the values, economic resources, and forms of social organization that existed within migrant and rural societies did not lose significance. To give one example, the first Pedi workers had partly seen migrancy as a way of protecting the independence of the kingdom. By the 1930s most men still regarded working in the city primarily as a means of maintaining a rural way of life, a necessary evil that had to be undertaken, not only in order to pay taxes but also to secure the resources to marry, build a homestead, accumulate cattle, and ultimately allow for a rural retirement. Towns were regarded as Makgoweng (the place of the whites) or Lešokeng (a wilderness). Part of what defined them as such was the absence of core institutions like initiation and chieftainship, and what many saw as the corrosion of appropriate relationships of gender and generation.6

This broad description should not gloss over the many deep differences of practices and aspiration that existed among migrant groupings. Perhaps the most vividly described of these is the divide between Red (Traditionalist) and School (Christian) identities in the former Transkei and eastern Cape.7 But this dichotomy also fails to capture the diverse forms of identity and organizations crafted by migrants to sustain themselves in a maelstrom of change. There was a range of groups on the mines, often held together by a common ethnically defined masculinity, such as the Mpondo-based Isitshozi and the AmaRussians from Lesotho. These provided security for men against other often quite violent organizations, and also created networks of socialization far from home. Migrants in need of systems for saving and transmitting money invested money in savings clubs forming what are known locally as stokvels, itimiti, or megodišano—South African variants of a worldwide phenomenon—in which workers group together to put aside some of their wages for specific purposes. Among Sepedi and Ndebele speakers, for example, groupings of men, mostly from the same village, formed rotating-credit clubs on the mines or, less formally, collected money to help return migrants’ bodies home for burial.8

Migrancy, Secondary Industry, and Hostels
There were, however, important shifts in the nature of the system from the 1930s. A new labor market created by the rapid expansion of secondary industry and office employment offered significantly better wages and working conditions. This market was dominated by South Africans who were able to draw on more effective social networks, better quality of information, mobility, and language skills. They also found new forms of accommodation. Some parastatals and municipalities built their own compounds, while “locations in the sky” were created by men moving into the servants’ quarters on the top of blocks of flats in white areas. City councils also established hostels to house migrants who were not in their employ. These were initially situated relatively close to city centers and new nodes of economic growth. In Johannesburg, for example, Wemmer, Jeppe, Mai, and Denver hostels were built between 1924 and 1946.

While these institutions had much in common with the mine compounds, there were also significant differences. Ethnicity was not the official organizing principle, although clustering on the basis of village and district ties was widespread. The world of the hostel dwellers was considerably less regimented and controlled than that of mine workers, and there were much lower barriers between these men and the wider urban world, including unions and political parties. Burial societies evolved to allow migrants from the same village and area to retain close links with each other and home. But considerable social distance and tensions remained between hostel dwellers and more fully urbanized households and settlements. Large concentrations of single men with predominantly rural backgrounds were also often seen as an alien and threatening presence by their neighbors. Some urban youths mocked and robbed migrants. They, in turn, viewed city youths as uncivilized *tsotsis* (thugs). These tensions provided ample ammunition for wider conflicts.

Another important development was increasing levels of female migrancy. Women had largely been held back from urban South Africa by rural patriarchs, but, during the first quarter of the 20th century, rural society had changed so dramatically that women were increasingly able to break these restrictions and enter urban South Africa. Often their passages out of rural society involved escaping patriarchal control and required ducking under the state’s radar. Many women also set out in the hope of finding lovers and husbands who had failed to return home and/or provide support to their families. Many of these women settled permanently in urban areas, while some oscillated between town and countryside.

By the 1940s, with women streaming into the cities en masse and increasingly seen as evidence of a growing, permanent, urban black population, the value of strict control over urbanization came under question. There were suggestions from the Fagan Commission and others that the reality of black urbanization should be recognized by policy makers. But the electoral victory of the National Party in 1948 and the expansion of its apartheid policies, limiting (or even reversing) urbanization and restricting black people to the reserve areas, saw the system maintained and extended. As Francis Wilson observed,
Instead of the mining and industrial employers having become less dependent on migrant labour by building family houses for their workers in town, the manufacturing and service sectors of the economy have become more dependent on oscillating migrants who are being housed on a temporary basis in gold mine-type hostels and compounds which are mushrooming in the industrial centres of the country.10

Post-1948, in line with wider policies of enforced segregation, the new hostels were built away from urban and industrial centers and on the margins of newly established townships. Their separation from wider urban society and the enforced juxtaposition with the burgeoning world of matchbox housing ensured that the interaction between migrants and townspeople became even more, though not uniformly, corrosive.

Rural Restructuring and Resistance

In the 1940s and the 1950s, migrant workers found themselves under mounting pressure in both their rural and urban worlds. State intervention in the countryside intensified after the 1936 Native Trust and Land Act. Concerns about environmental degradation led to the imposition of “betterment planning,” aimed initially at communities living on land acquired by the South African Native Trust. Betterment included cattle culling, and the demarcation and reduction of residential, arable, and grazing areas. These measures met with intense opposition especially in the extensive “Trust” lands of the northern Transvaal in the 1950s and early 1960s. As the area of implementation expanded, resistance spread from the Soutpansberg to the Ciskei. The Bantu Authorities Act of 1951, designed to entrench chiefs as the rural foundation of the apartheid system, poured petrol on the flickering flames of revolt. Migrant workers were central to the conflagrations that resulted fearing that co-opted chiefs would no longer represent or protect their interests—particularly in relation to betterment,

Burial societies along with other forms of migrant organizations provided a mobilizing network and a link between town and countryside. More-educated migrant workers based in hostels in urban areas sometimes provided key linkages among these associations, trade unions, and political organizations. For example, Sebatakgomo, an initiative of the Communist Party and the African National Congress (ANC), played a critical role in the Sekhukhuneland Revolts of 1958, and there were links between the ANC in Durban and the Pondoland Revolt of 1960. But while these links existed, they should not be overstated. Many migrants saw their resistance in more local terms, as one leader in the Sekhukhuneland Revolt commented when recalling suggestions for closer identification with the ANC:
We said no, we are fighting for our own place not on the side of the ANC because they will involve us we don’t know where, we said we are only talking about Sekhukhuneland that is our own place.¹¹

Migrant workers won some battles along the way but in the end lost the war. Betterment programs were often delayed and diluted. But heavy-handed state repression, divisions within rural communities, and the fact that many chiefs and headmen succumbed to material blandishments and political elevation resulted in a thorough reconstruction of society in both the old reserves and the Trust farms. At the same time, broader processes of structural change comprehensively undermined what remained of agricultural production in African areas. Tightening influx control and relocating of millions of people from farms and urban areas onto reserve lands resulted in massive population growth and mounting pressure on land in African areas. Simpkins has pointed out how the already insufficient subsistence that families secured from the land went into steep decline from 1955 to 1969.¹²

**Trade Unions and Unemployment**

From the early 1970s, however, the accelerated erosion of economic autonomy rooted in rural resources was partly compensated for by developments in the urban areas. The 1973 worker strikes in Durban gave rise to an independent black trade-union movement that drew on home-, residence-, and work-based networks and was strongly shaped by militant migrant laborers. Grassroots rural networks and forms of migrant organizations (such as burial societies) both informed and were compatible with the bottom-up and participatory practices of many of the independent unions. These unions helped to win important economic advances and organizational spaces.

By the 1970s many migrant households had neither land nor livestock, and even those that retained these resources battled to secure meaningful returns from them. But jobs—badly paid and hazardous as many were—remained relatively freely available. Imperfect estimates put the national unemployment rate in 1970 at 6.7 percent.¹³ Major reductions in the numbers of foreign workers, especially from Malawi in 1973 and Mozambique in 1975, saw the proportion of foreign workers dropping from 80 percent in 1973 to 40 percent in 1975. (The proportion of foreign migrants did edge upward in the ensuing years.) While these cuts had deeply damaging effects on the economies in the supply areas, they increased the demands for local migrants.

A combination of labor shortages and the emergence of black trade unions in the early 1970s led to significant wage increases, boosting remittances to many rural households. This decade also saw a substantial increase in the level of state pensions. However, tragically, from the end of the decade, unemployment levels soared. In Charles Feinstein’s calculation, in the period 1980 to 1996, the potential labor force increased by 4,500,000, of whom 4,170,000 became unemployed. If the 1,400,000 individuals who had abandoned
the search for employment are added into the equation, the total unemployment level rises to a staggering 5,570,000 by 1996. In percentage terms, the unemployment rate increased from 7 percent to 33 percent in these years. While these percentages are probably not entirely reliable—especially for the earlier period—they point to a massive and rapid transformation in the political economy of rural areas that has yet to be fully appreciated and analyzed. Job losses were particularly severe in mining, industry, and agriculture; unskilled migrant workers were at grave risk. A storekeeper in Limpopo recalled,

In the late 70s and early 80s business was good. People were working and sending money home until [after] 1983 when I realised that most of my customers were blue card people waiting for unemployment insurance claims ... they had been laid off ... it was all-over, people working in the firms, factory workers were retrenched.¹⁵

These developments had a particularly severe impact in the regions that had long depended on migrant remittances for their economic survival and to underwrite key social processes, such as marriage. Many older individuals who lost their jobs would never find another, and their hopes of a dignified retirement were dashed. The prospects for the youth were as dismal. Unable to find work or accumulate resources to pay bride wealth, marry, and establish their own households, many young people in rural areas were trapped in social limbo. They were no longer children, and, while some had passed through a daunting process of initiation, they could not make the transition to full adult status.¹⁶ The 1980s also witness a rapid growth of both primary and secondary education in the homelands, which led to heightened expectations among school leavers about the kind of work they could and should secure. Working neither on the land nor in the mines and heavy industry featured in their aspirations.

Transition to Democracy and After

A tragic irony of modern South African history is that the advent of democracy, with all the hopes it brought for a better future for all, came when the economy was losing its capacity to provide jobs for a third or more of those aspiring to employment. The failure of successive ANC governments to reverse this trend, despite broad-based local support and international legitimacy, has provided a grim backdrop to the most recent transformations in migrant labor worlds.

After the first democratic elections took place in 1994 and the congress alliance won an overwhelming popular mandate, many analysts expected the system of migrant labor, so fundamental to the architecture of the apartheid state, to be dismantled. With the formal desegregation of space, it seemed plausible, if somewhat idealistic, to hope that this system of racialized labor exploitation would disappear organically. But the bloody conflicts between migrants and the township residents that took place in the transition
period left deep scars on the attitudes of leaders and supporters of the ANC and its allies. These sometimes violent clashes where lubricated by a long history of tension, intensified by political rivalry and manipulation by elements in the security forces intent on weakening and destabilizing the ANC. Migrants were increasingly associated with the Inkatha Freedom Party and seen as instruments of a “third force.” In fact, many migrants were caught in this deadly crossfire, and even more fled the hostels and compounds. Many of the foot soldiers who sallied forth from the Inkatha strongholds were unemployed rural youth who occupied the spaces vacated by older migrants. These youth tragically entered into deadly struggle with their urban counterparts. After 1994 the bitterness and distrust engendered in this period, and the sporadic violence that persisted, fostered ambiguous attitudes toward migrant workers and probably militated against empathetic and systematic engagement with improving their circumstances.

One of the most significant shifts that did take place was the product of lobbying by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in the late 1980s. It was argued that single-sex compounds and hostels, the epitome of apartheid planning, could not remain. NUM held that providing mine laborers with a living-out allowance (LOA) would grant them the freedom and agency they desired, allowing them to move into the surrounding towns with their rural-based families. As a result, the character of migrant labor on the mines changed quickly. What policy makers failed to recognize was that migrant labor remained fundamental to rural economies, ideologies, and the fabric of southern African society. The demolition of single-sex accommodation and its replacement with limited married accommodation and LOAs had no prospect of transforming this reality. Instead it increased the number of migrant workers who had two sets of dependants—one in town, the other in the countryside. These policies simply allowed industrialists, politicians, and unionists to wash their hands of the matter, while migrant workers battled to overcome the additional burdens and pressures that these poorly thought-through policies engendered. The pervasive failure of effective service delivery at the local government level compounded the mounting problems that migrants confronted. The additional failure to develop or implement a meaningful rural-development strategy has ensured few new economic opportunities in rural areas, other than the rapid growth in social transfers.¹⁷

Successive ANC governments developed a range of black economic empowerment (BEE) laws and policies, leading to an increasingly cozy relationship among mining companies, the state, and sections of the new black bourgeoisie. The key debate in this context was how to increase black ownership, rather than potentially destabilizing reforms of labor supply. Some unions—perhaps most significantly NUM—also established an increasingly comfortable relationship with mine management, some of their officials becoming increasingly remote from and distrusted by workers.¹⁸ This has, in turn, provided an opportunity in recent years for new trade unions to win support among workers.

These changes, far from empowering migrant workers, have left them to deal with the harsh legacies of the system and the consequences of very high levels of unemployment on their own. One of the unintended consequences of the LOA has been the spiraling debt
cycles in which migrants, particularly on the mines, find themselves. The expansive post-apartheid credit industry preys on the lives of poor migrants, exploiting their need to maintain two families: one rural, one urban. Often as the only breadwinners, there is a particular pressure that burdens many migrant workers, pushing them into a “debt-bondage cycle” as they support multiple dependants. Despite the changes in the post-apartheid period, many migrants remain wedded to their rural homes and to maintaining rural livelihoods in some form.\(^\text{19}\)

The failure to understand and confront the history and dynamics of a deeply rooted and pervasive system of migrant labor that despite its destructive dimensions still provides a vital economic lifeline for many individuals and households has contributed to the lack of empathy, purpose, and resources characterizing policy formation and implementation since 1994.

The tragic events at Marikana on the South African platinum mining belt on the August 16, 2012, when police opened fire on striking workers, killing thirty-four and wounding many more, were partly molded by mounting pressures on migrant workers. All of the men who were killed were migrant workers, many of them from Pondoland in the eastern Cape—a region with history tightly tied to the export of labor.\(^\text{20}\) The process of attempting to establish the truth of what happened on that day and who bears primary responsibility grinds on. The widows of the slain men wait to hear if and when they will receive compensation. Meanwhile mining companies fearing worker militancy and hit by plummeting resource prices are curtailing their operations and shedding thousands of jobs.

The transition to democracy has thus had very little positive impact on a fundamental part of the system of economic and political discrimination that disfigured the history of South Africa for much of the 20th century. Migrant workers and youths living in the rural areas have suffered particularly severely from the job losses and intractably high levels of unemployment, casting a long shadow over our new democracy. This reality also highlights key limitations of the process of transformation for those segments of society excluded from the opportunities that have expanded for the burgeoning middle class.

**Discussion of the Literature**

Initial explanations for the migrant labor system stressed the appeal of wages and new commodities; some even invoked a wanderlust and spirit of adventure. In 1970 the temperature of the debate was raised when Giovanni Ariighi, a left-wing economist writing in the context of debates about labor supplies in colonial Rhodesia, launched a comprehensive critique of models that invoked market forces in the context of backward tribal economies as the primary motor drawing men into migrant labor.\(^\text{21}\) His work had considerable impact on new revisionist historians who were also influenced by the expanding reach of underdevelopment theory, which maintained that African economies
had been impoverished by distorting economic interactions and extractive political systems. Against this intellectual backdrop, the revisionists developed a sustained assault on “voluntarist” explanations of labor mobilization in South and, more broadly, southern Africa. They stressed the primary role played in the development of migrant labor by conquest, dispossession of land, increasingly systematic forms of taxation, and the destruction of a peasantry. These pressures were bolstered by draconian pass laws, centralized recruiting organizations, compounds, and a variety of forms of divide and rule.

A second strand in revisionist analysis stressed that migrant workers’ low wages were supplemented by the returns from agricultural production in the rural areas. In a widely cited article, Harold Wolpe drew on this explanation—which had a long lineage in the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA)—to argue that the need for this system of cheap labor lay at the heart of the systems of segregation and apartheid.

At broadly the same time, writing within a radical liberal rather than a neo-Marxist paradigm, Francis Wilson published by far the most deeply researched and comprehensive critique of the system thus far. He detailed the role of the recruiting agencies and compounds, and the legal framework. For the period 1910 to 1969, he showed how the profit margins in the gold-mining industry fluctuated between 23 percent and 17 percent while the proportion of wages paid to black workers declined from 16.4 percent to 8.8 percent. He concluded that, at its heart, the migrant labor system was a cheap labor system that allowed the industry to enjoy substantial profits. He pointed out that the development of the migrant labor system was accompanied by a decline in agricultural production in the reserve areas, undermining suggestions that the system was effectively underpinned by subsistence production in the supply areas.

This combined assault on conventional accounts of the origins and rationale of migrant labor marked a major shift in analysis, and, indeed, this critique has deepened in the intervening years. There are few commentators today who dispute that the system was shaped by high levels of coercion or that it has had profound consequences for virtually every aspect of the lives of black South Africans. It has been long recognized that it had deeply destructive consequences for family life, as well as for peer group forms of socialization. To this day, this toxic and intractable legacy remains a major impediment to positive processes of social and economic change. The connections between migrancy and the incidence and spread of death and disease have been relatively well documented. It is now widely acknowledged that the migrant labor systems in and beyond southern Africa have played a critical role in the evolution and intensification of the HIV and AIDS pandemic. The terrible toll that silicosis and tuberculosis took on the health of mineworkers has also been underscored by recent research that also laid bare the cynical and systematic fashion in which mining companies sought to shuffle off responsibility for workers who had contracted these diseases at the workplace.
These analyses highlighted the coercive and destructive impacts of migrant labor, providing keen insights into the nature of the system in the subcontinent. But an emphasis on the collusion of capital and the state, and a focus on compulsion and underdevelopment, left little room for an analysis of the lives, experiences, agency, and consciousness of the men and women at the heart of the system.

The issue of consciousness was raised early on in the revisionist turn. Charles van Onselen published widely on this, grappling with the issue of worker consciousness on the Rhodesian mines. In his account, workers were not passive victims but employed a range of forms of resistance. His work had many admirers and imitators, but it also attracted sustained critical engagement that helped to advance the debate. As Patrick Harries has pointed out, he treated migrant workers arriving on the mines as cultural cyphers or blank slates on whom the experience of work left a common inscription … This reduced the motivation for social action to a single dimension and underestimated the range of experiences and cultural resources that shaped the view of migrating mineworkers.

Over the next twenty years, many important contributions to the history of migrant workers stressed the importance of understanding the interplay of the rural and urban dimensions of migrants’ lives. It was shown that in the interior of South Africa migrant labor preceded the discovery of diamonds and the imposition of colonial control by many decades. William Beinart concluded that “migrancy … arose initially out of the dynamic relationships of power and authority within rural society as much as from the specific demands of capital.”

Initially, migrants who had access to land, livestock, and diverse trading opportunities had considerable bargaining power. As a result, wages were relatively high, and homestead structures played a key part in determining patterns of participation. The dynamics of both gender and generation came into sharper focus; the initial predominance of younger men and the very low rate of female migrancy became foci of research. This body of writing made it clear that the system did not emerge as a form of cheap labor. In reality, it took a formidable and prolonged struggle to achieve by the 1920s. Many of the initial accounts tended to be rather reductionist in approach, placing strong emphasis on economic and political factors. But issues of culture and consciousness attracted increasing attention. The gathering of life histories of migrants brought a much wider range of factors to the fore, revealing that

The prevalence and institutionalization of migrancy meant that rural social forms, always changing but in some areas deeply embedded in the precolonial past, exercised a continuing influence on the perceptions of very many workers … Forms of consciousness, whether national, racial, ethnic or workers are not
necessarily exclusive; neither are they self-evidently and self-explanatory, or mere epi-phenomena of class categories.34

The oft-repeated assertion, expressed with particular force by Tom Lodge and Colin Bundy, that rural areas were remote from wider political perspectives and struggles was challenged in a number of studies.35

The still rather limited concepts of culture and consciousness that informed many of these contributions were enriched through ongoing oral research and by a number of key texts. Philip Mayer, for example, added dynamism and subtlety to a long tradition of anthropological research on the cultural and social forms among “red” and “school” communities in the eastern Cape.36 Harries stressed the interplay of environmental, economic, political, and cultural imperatives.37 Dunbar Moodie and Vivian Ndatshe provided important perspectives on the lives of migrant workers, in particular the role of mine marriages entered into between male migrants.38 Belinda Bozzoli, Cherryl Walker, and Deborah James deepened the analysis of gender dynamics and the experiences of female migrants.39

**Primary Sources**

The centrality of migrant labor to South African history and society has had the result that information is spread across a wide range of sources that cannot be detailed in this context. But a very valuable set of sources that cover much of the history of the development of the system and that can be relatively easily accessed by both locally based and international scholars are the Government Commissions of Enquiry. These are available in the National Archives in Pretoria, but copies are also held in many university libraries in South Africa and internationally.

**Key Commissions**


Yale University

- Evidence to the Bregman Comission 1987 (AAC/VR)
- Archives of Cheadle Hayson and Thompson

Chamber of Mines Archives, Johannesburg

- Including the WNLA and TEBA collections

Historical Papers Library, University of the Witwatersrand

This houses a wide range of useful material including evidence to commissions of inquiry, newspaper-cutting collections, collections on key union movements, and a rich collection of oral history in the main collected by historians and social scientists based at Wits, which deal with many aspects of migrant labor.

Further Reading


Notes:


(9.) Delius, *Lion*, 88.


(11.) Delius, *Lion*, 127.


(14.) Ibid., 239, 274.

(15.) Delius, *Lion*, 147.

(16.) Ibid., 160.


(18.) Ibid.

(19.) Ibid.

(20.) Reddy, “Post-apartheid Migrancy.”


The History of Migrant Labor in South Africa (1800–2014)


(37.) Harries, *Work, Culture*. 


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