

# Conclusion

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The migrant labour system in southern Africa and the particular form it took were not predetermined outcomes of the forces of colonialism and the greed of the Randlords for cheap labour. They were largely the product of the struggles between the state, mining capital and labour. By the 1920s, this system was a well-established form of labour supply for the mines, thanks to the processes leading to the passage of the Native Labour Regulation Act in 1911. This fact aside, pre-existing socio-economic and political conditions in the rural areas also mediated the process of the integration of these peripheries into the regional capitalist market as suppliers of cheap labour. These factors determined which gender group, age group and class would first migrate to the labour centres and even mapped the pattern of migration. Above all, however, as this book has sought to demonstrate, individual Basotho migrants, including the 'undesirable' women, struggled to take control of their own lives in order to shape their own experiences and determine the outcome of their endeavours. These Basotho migrants consequently developed their own complex 'world' which outsiders – be they the Basotho elite and chiefs, colonial and mine officials, or missionaries and their African evangelists – dismissed as 'undesirable', 'irrational', 'evil' or a 'disgrace' to the Basotho 'nation'.

The period covered in this study, c.1890–1940, is indeed essential to understanding Lesotho's present predicament. It was during this period, especially the 1920s and 1930s, that Lesotho's present position as a dependent labour reserve was firmly established. It was during these decades that the balance of power increasingly shifted in favour of the colonial state, as well as towards chiefs, traders, labour recruiters and, especially, mine employers. Although Basotho men had earlier oscillated between their homes and South African labour centres to rebuild their stock in the aftermath of wars and ecological disasters, by the 1920s growing numbers were migrating to the mines out of sheer necessity because of the worsening socio-economic situation at home. Mounting dependence on migrants' wages also led to intensified struggles over these earnings within homesteads, as well as between chiefs and the colonial government on the one hand, and migrants on the other.

A particular feature of the 1920s and 1930s, was that Basotho migrants gradually became concentrated on the Rand gold mines, as distinct from the diamond mines and other employment centres that were formerly important to them. In the course of this transition, Basotho men accepted longer and longer contracts that kept them on the mines even during ploughing and harvesting seasons; while those returning home stayed for shorter periods before taking new mine contracts. Over much the same period, Basotho migrants ousted other African migrants from several better-paying job categories. They turned to more dangerous jobs and worked in the deepest mines; and by the mid-1930s were already established as the best shaft-sinkers on the gold mines.

But Basotho migrants did so with their eyes open to the dangers of labour migrancy and mine work. More than this, they devised ways and means of coping with and rationalizing their experiences of migrancy and underground labour. Going to the mines was equated with going to war, and wages were regarded as 'cattle'. In this way, a *koata* culture emerged and became entrenched in Basotho society.

On the mine, Basotho workers devised ways of dealing with industrial forms of death, sickness and destitution. Not only did they form mutual aid associations, but they also created their own cultural space for mourning for their dead and treating them with dignity. Furthermore, for a significant number of Basotho miners, conversion to Christianity was an important aspect of coping with compound and mine life. Although South African mine compounds never experienced the conspicuous presence of independent religious sects such as the Watch Tower Movement, which briefly flourished in Southern Rhodesian and Copperbelt mines,<sup>4</sup> conversion to Christianity had multiple and contradictory significance for African miners. Church forums and activities not only provided leisure and space, but could also be harnessed by workers and used as one of several survival strategies. Migrants, Basotho included, also introduced recreational activities from their rural homes, especially dances that were performed on Sundays and other mine holidays. They discovered and adopted new sports, especially cricket and soccer, and established mine-based teams and tournaments. To a significant extent, therefore, Basotho, together with other African miners, transformed the mine compounds which were intended to control them into homes in which they lived with at least some humanity and dignity. These initiatives of the workers aside, however, compounds remained an inhuman and oppressive form of accommodation. All major attempts to 'modernise' this institution – first from the 1920s to 1940s (in response to the growing African political militancy and post-war urbanisation), and later in the 1970s (as part of the 'internalisation' labour-recruitment strategy) and in the 1980s (in response to pressure from

the newly formed National Union of Mine-workers) – have failed to address a more central question: the permanent settlement of African labour. By 1990, less than three percent of the total African mine workforce lived with their families on the mine.

This study has sought to demonstrate at every stage that labour migrancy was more than simply the movement of men to the labour centres. The other leg of this process was the return of migrants to their families in Lesotho when their contracts expired, and the impact of labour migration more generally on Basotho society. Diseases brought from the mines, as well as the cynical repatriation of miners suffering from syphilis or TB, all of which transferred the cost of caring for the sick onto the rural areas, placed enormous pressure on Basotho families and the country's declining economy.<sup>6</sup> One reason that these diseases, including smallpox, were rarely controlled during the period under review, was not the 'ignorance' or 'indifference' of Basotho as the colonial authorities claimed.<sup>7</sup> Nor was the spread of syphilis due to 'personal hygiene' and 'immorality' as the Basutoland Principal Medical Officer thought.<sup>8</sup> The most critical factor was the constant arrival of newly contaminated Basotho migrants from the mines and other employment centres. Some of these diseases, especially syphilis, TB and, recently, HIV/AIDS, continue to pose serious social problems to Basotho to this very day.

Basotho women, very largely excluded from formal employment and with their labour power used to subsidise migrant earnings, were also affected in a number of ways by the prolonged absence of their men. For some women, particularly younger ones, the erosion of chiefly and patriarchal power occasioned by the social changes of the 1920s and 1930s, provided an opportunity to escape to the towns. The majority of women in Lesotho itself, however, appear to have experienced a significant worsening of their material conditions of existence. A smaller, yet significant number were drawn into prostitution and commercial beer-brewing. And as commercial beer-brewing and prostitution flourished in Lesotho, especially from the 1920s, these phenomena became an essential part of the *koata* experience.

Indeed, the pattern of migrancy and labour conditions on the mines did not remain the same at all times. Particular to developments in the pattern of migrancy were the changes in the proportion of 'foreign' migrants (as part of the total African labour contingent) whose labour was so essential to the needs of the mining industry during the first hundred years dating from the early days in Kimberley. While the migrant labour system was firmly established by the 1920s, the 1930s saw the acceleration of this process, thanks to the combined impact of economic depression and a severe drought in southern Africa as well as the increase in the price of gold (following England's abandonment of the gold standard in 1932). It was largely due to these factors that the

proportion of migrants from within South Africa increased on the mines (in comparison to 'foreign' recruits). Nonetheless, the Chamber of Mines, with WNLA, also devised ways to use its new strength to expand its recruitment frontier beyond the north of the Limpopo. Using Bechuanaland to launch its operations, WNLA developed facilities and the transport infrastructure to attract labour and channel it to the mines in the south.<sup>9</sup>

But the immediate post-war period saw another labour 'shortage' crisis, as many South African-born migrants turned to the newly developing secondary industry where wages were higher. This crisis, and not least the opening of the Orange Free State gold mines in the 1940s, underlined the importance of the 'northern frontier' to the labour needs of the mining industry. By 1973, thanks to WNLA's campaigns in the 'north', 'foreign' migrants, including Basotho, constituted almost 80 percent of the total African labour force on the gold mines.

The withdrawal of Malawian migrants following a plane crash in April 1974, and the collapse of Portuguese power in Mozambique during the same period, opened another era for the mines. For the next ten years, the Chamber of Mines turned to the 'internalisation' labour-supply strategy, which involved tapping labour from South Africa's homelands and urban centers. While reducing reliance on neighbouring countries for labour needs was the target of these recruitment campaigns, Lesotho was treated as an exception; the country became the leading 'foreign' supplier of labour – a position once held by Mozambique.

However, while other labour-supplying countries such as Mozambique and Botswana were partially rescued from South Africa by political circumstances (as in the case of Mozambique) and economic break-through (as in the case of Botswana), Lesotho's labour-reserve position persisted, thanks to the policies of successive post-colonial governments. Instead of experimenting with alternatives to dependence on the export of cheap labour, post-colonial Lesotho was developed as one of South Africa's homelands – an approach which was consistent with the policies pursued by the colonial government. With no substantial industrial base and with agriculture marginal in the economy (only 13 percent of the country's land is arable, 10 percent of which is depleted by soil erosion), Lesotho of the 1980s relied on foreign aid (which accounted for 15 percent of GNP), earnings from the South African Custom Union (which accounted for 70 percent of the total government revenue) and migrants' remittances (which accounted for over half of the GNP). It is this fact which explains why in 1976 the Jonathan government (1966-86) had to resort to authoritarian means to put an end to the struggles over migrants' earnings discussed in Chapter Three. In that year, Chief Jonathan made it compulsory for part of the earning of every Mosotho migrant to be remitted

to Lesotho; a demand that Basotho chiefs had unsuccessfully tried to push through the colonial government for decades.<sup>10</sup>

Overall, then, this book has attempted to recover at least part of the social history of the Basotho labour migrancy, and in so doing, contribute to a more rounded understanding of Lesotho's past and, thus, to finding lasting solutions to its current problems. Yet, it has also tried to be more than just another case study, however important that aspect may be. Throughout, I have argued, implicitly and sometimes explicitly, that the historiographical pendulum has swung too far in the direction of broadly cultural studies. While never arguing in favour of economism, this study does suggest that an historically informed combination of materialism and idealism offers a valuable perspective on the past. The widespread adoption of post-modernism in Europe and North America is, rather, an expression of the weakening position of the intelligentsia in those countries. Denouncing historicism and 'grand narratives' – brandishing and celebrating nihilism – challenges the very basis of scholarly reflection. Moreover, social historians cannot operate only at the intellectual level; their researches and theories should also serve the struggles of the very subalterns whose 'voice' they are attempting to capture. For many Basotho, labour migrancy is more than the processes, struggles and experiences detailed in this work; it is a matter of survival.

### Postscript

The future of the South African gold mining industry is very bleak. Since 1987, this industry has been faced with a crisis which is neither of a technological nature like that of the 1890s nor of labour 'shortage', as was the case after the South African War and during the 1940s. Contrary to the claims of the Chamber of Mines that the industry is sinking because of rising costs due largely to wage increases won by the National Union of Mine-workers (NUM), the prime cause of the crisis is linked to the constantly dropping, real revenue. Not only is the lifespan of many mines coming to a close and the exploitation of low-grade marginal mines becoming less and less profitable, the price of the mineral is also going down the scale in the face of increasing competition from North American and Australian producers. Nor is the mythical prestige of gold as storage of value withstanding changing perceptions, as well as the financial and the stock market structure, which is increasingly becoming very complex to provide protection for investors. As a result, almost 200,000 African miners have lost their jobs since 1987 at times when many mines opted for downscaling, mechanisation and, inevitably, retrenchments. But, the managements targeted the Xhosa and Basotho miners in particular, because of their prominent role in NUM. The number of Basotho on the gold mines

consequently dropped by 17.5 percent between 1983 and 1993; from 96,409 to 79,530.<sup>11</sup>

The continuing wave of retrenchments on the mines and the political developments within South Africa itself, have now put a more serious issue on the table: should Lesotho be reincorporated into South Africa? This issue first came up in the two years leading to the 1910 Union of South Africa, because the latter's constitution had made provision for the incorporation of the three High Commission Territories (Lesotho, Botswana and Swaziland) into the new country. Successive Union governments unsuccessfully tried to pressure the British government into implementing this provision, thanks to active popular opposition in the territories concerned. The institutionalisation of Apartheid with the accession to power of the Nationalist Party in 1948 put a final end to this debate. But now, with the transfer of political power to a black government in South Africa, many in Lesotho, especially those outside the circles of the ruling elite, see reincorporation as an inevitable end. At the core of this debate is not simply the question of boundaries and economic dependency, but also the plight of thousands of Basotho women and men who work and keep families in South Africa.

It is unclear how the issue of reincorporation will finally be resolved. But the continuing political tension between the army, the monarchy, the government and the civil society in Lesotho, combined with the economic crisis, will keep this issue on top of the agenda.

### Endnotes

1. Cited in A. Lezard, *The Great Gold Reef: The Romantic History of the Rand Goldfields* (Bobbs-Merrill Co., New York, 1937), p.147.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 149. Crush et al., *South Africa's Labor Empire.*, p.1.
3. For these, see amongst others, van Onselen, Chibaro, pp. 204–209; S. Cross, 'The Watch Tower Movement in South-Central Africa, 1908–1945' (PhD, Oxford University, 1973); and T. Ranger, *The African Voice in Southern Rhodesia, 1898–1930* (Heinemann, London, 1970), pp.143–47.
4. W.G. James, *Our Precious Metal: African Labour in South Africa's Gold Industry, 1970–1990* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1992), pp.72–124.
5. Maloka, 'Basotho and the Mines', pp. 291–310; K. Jochelson, 'Tracking Down the Treponema: Patterns of Syphilis in South Africa, 1880–1940', History Workshop Paper, University of the Witwatersrand, February 1990; Packard, *White Plague, Black Labor*.
6. Maloka, 'Basotho and the Mines', p. 293.
7. N.M. Macfarlane, 'Some Observations on 28 Years' Medical Practice in an African Native Territory', *South African Medical Record*, vol.21, no.21, 1923, p.494.
8. *Ibid.*, p.39.

9. J.E. Bardill, and J.H. Cobbe, *Lesotho: Dilemmas of Dependence in Southern Africa* (Westview Press, London, 1985), pp.20–80.
10. *Mail and Guardian*, 26 January–1 February 1996; *Race Relations Survey*, 1994/95, p.483. For a general discussion of the predicament of the gold mining industry as well as the impact of retrenchments on Lesotho, see the contributions by N. Natrass, G. Seidman, K. Philip and M. Thabane, under the section 'Economic and Social Issues' in J. Crush and W. James. (eds.), *Crossing the Boundaries: Mine Migrancy in a Democratic South Africa* (IDASA, Cape Town, 1995).
11. R. Southall, 'Foreign Workers in South Africa: Comrades or Competitors?', *South African Labour Bulletin*, vol.18, no.6, December 1994; L. Swatuk, 'Troubled Monarchy, Troubled Country: What Future for Lesotho', *Southern Africa Report*, May 1995; G. Mills, 'Lesotho: Between Independence and Incorporation', in L. Benjamin and C. Gregory (eds.), *Southern Africa at the Crossroads? Prospects for Stability and Development in the 1990s* (Justified Press, Rivonia, 1992).