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**‘THE NATIVES’ EXTREMITY AND THE WHITE MEN’S OPPORTUNITY’?:
THE RINDERPEST AND THE SUPPLY OF AFRICAN LABOUR FROM THE TRANSKEIAN
TERRITORIES, 1897-8**

By

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In 1896 when a cattle pandemic of rinderpest threatened to unleash a rural catastrophe in Southern Africa, those that were involved in various ways with the supply of African labour hailed it as a Godsend. They expected its effects to reverse the chronic shortage of African labour in the labour centres, especially on the reef gold mines. With varying degrees of circumspection, later historians have also included the rinderpest among the factors that finally broke the back of African ability to resist thoroughgoing proletarianisation. They have sustained this consensus without any detailed and focused study of the precise effects of this unprecedented catastrophe.

This study challenges this tenet. Focusing on the largest labour-supplying reservoir in the entire Cape – The Transkeian Territories¹ – it finds that the effects of the rinderpest on African labour supply were more complex and uneven. They were apparently not dramatic, certainly in the short term. Instead, the inability of the rinderpest to flush out African labour to the various labour centres in any significant numbers disappointed those who sought to exploit it.

The Transkeian Territories awaited the arrival of the pest for a year after it broke through the Zambezi River early in March 1896. Despite belated and foredoomed precautionary measures that colonial authorities devised to seal the Territories from infection, the epidemic arrived in early June 1897. It first broke out in the largest and richest Nqamakwe district, and then simultaneously established a second center of infection on the border of Elliot and Maclear. Both outbreaks now advanced on the rest of the territory in a flanking movement. From then on, none of the districts knew what had hit them, and from where. From the foci of infection, the disease traveled along the main road, ravaging both southwards and northwards. By the end of June, it had consolidated its hold in the districts of Cala, Mqanduli, Umtata, Xalanga, Tsomo, Idutywa and Engcobo. July ended with the disease ravaging Mt. Fletcher, Bizana, Tabankulu, Lusikisiki, Flagstaff, and Cofimvaba. By late August Matatiele, Umzimkhulu, Qumbu, Mt. Frere, Mt. Ayliff were in the thick of it. Port St. Johns bore the dubious fortune of being the last district where the outbreak of the pest occurred in the Transkeian districts.²

¹ For the purposes of this study, the term “Transkeian Territories” refers to the entire area between the Kei and Umzimkulu Rivers (See Map).

² Cape Archives (C.A.), Prime Minister’s Office (P.M.O) 249, reports on the outbreak and progress of the rinderpest in the Transkeian Territories

Map of the Transkeian Territories

On the eve of the outbreak of the rinderpest, the state of veterinary knowledge in South Africa was very poor. Authorities also lacked experience in the administration of an epidemic. In these circumstances, and confronted by an unknown and incurable disease, they had no alternative but to slaughter all infected cattle including those merely exposed to infection. The other method was to create cordons to restrict cattle from moving from infected areas.³

In the Transkeian Territories, colonial authorities feared that slaughtering infected cattle would ignite latent hostility and suspicions among Africans. This was amid widespread suspicion among Africans that the colonial administration and whites generally were in some way responsible for bringing and spreading the epizootic. Many Africans supposed that the purported intention was to reduce Africans to poverty, thus forcing them to work for white men. Colonial authorities thus eschewed the policy of stamping out the rinderpest by shooting infected cattle. Even a magistrate in a friendly Mfengu district, renowned for its friendship towards Europeans, warned: “should the disease once enter the territories, allowing it to take its course will be best”.⁴ In newly annexed Pondoland, the resident magistrate resolutely warned against intervention lest it led “to a great waste of money and probably to the stirring up of a great deal of ill feeling”.⁵

³ D. Gilfoyle, “Veterinary Research and the African Rinderpest Epizootic: The Cape Colony, 1890-1898”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29, 1 (2003), 133-154.

⁴ Archives of the Chief Magistrate of the Transkei (CMT) 3/59, RM, Butterworth, 28 May 1896.

⁵ CMT, 3/53, Resident Magistrate (RM), Bizana, to Chief Magistrate of the Transkei (CMT), 16 September 1896.

The rinderpest reached the Transkeian Territories after a vaccine that promised efficacy had been discovered – the Koch Bile vaccine.⁶ Still, Africans initially refused to have their cattle treated because they distrusted all colonial anti-rinderpest measures. Among many other factors, their suspicions arose largely from the death of inoculated herds that were treated after they had already become infected. This weakened their faith in the veterinarians and their prophylactic; they stood to bear the blame of poisoning the cattle.

Just as inoculation in England was viewed as a vehicle for the transmission of syphilis in the 1880s,⁷ it was similarly suspected in South Africa in the 1890s. Given the colonial and racial divide in South African society, African apprehension of the intentions of colonial officials and Europeans generally is understandable. Many denounced inoculation as white men's deliberate poisoning of African cattle and refused to treat their herds. They also threatened those who were willing to inoculate their herds, charging that should their neighbours' cattle get sick from the inoculation, they would infect theirs. The magistrate of the Transkeian district of Willowvale reported a typical example. Africans there believed that "inoculation was merely a device for its [the rinderpest's] more rapid propagation".⁸ Even the former allies of the colonial administration, the Mfengu, were apprehensive. Colonial officials reported that the Mfengu suspected that their cattle were being treated with bad bile, whereas European cattle were being inoculated with good bile. The purported intention was to save European-owned cattle to sell them later at enhanced prices to Africans once their cattle were all dead.⁹ The magistrate of Kentani dramatically revealed the anti-inoculation rumour current among the Mfengu:

The government being jealous of the rising strength of the Fingo had decided to introduce rinderpest and then, under the plea of helping the people, to inoculate. The first inoculation was to be done well with good bile in order to encourage the mass to agree to inoculation and then, when they had all agreed, the cattle were to be poisoned and in this way, the government was to weaken the native tribes by reducing them to an abject state of poverty, making it necessary for them to work for the white man at the low price of 6d. a day.¹⁰

These responses contributed to the massive toll of the disease. The precise rates of mortality are, of course, hard to tell for various reasons. Like other pastoral and colonized societies, Transkeian cattle owners

⁶ For reports of Koch's experiments, see C.P.P., G.70-'97, Reports by Professor R. Koch Upon His Investigation into Rinderpest at Kimberley, 1897; "Dr. Koch's Reports on Experiments Conducted at Kimberley for Discovery of a Cure for Rinderpest", Agricultural Journal, 14 January 1897 & 18 February 1897.

⁷ D. and R. Porter, "The Politics of Prevention: Anti-vaccinationism and Public Health in Nineteenth Century England", Medieval History, 32 (1988), 231-52.

⁸ Blue Book for Native Affairs (BBNA) G.42-'98, report of RM of Willowvale, 1898, 88.

⁹ ibid., report of Nqamakwe RM, 1898. 76.

¹⁰ CMT3/106, report of Kentani RM, 22 September 1897; For a more detailed discussion of these responses to the rinderpest, see P. Phoofolo, "Epidemics and Revolutions: The Rinderpest Epidemic in Late Nineteenth Century Southern Africa", Past and Present, 138 (1993), 112-43.

evaded the counting of their bovine stock by colonial officials and their agents. This apprehension was more pronounced during an epizootic, especially the one in which cattle-owners ascribed the origin of the panzootic to the same people who now wished to know the size of their herd. Further, as the extensive comparative studies of epidemics in the western world have shown, the emergencies that epidemics created almost everywhere inevitably justified massive state intervention in civil society.¹¹ The same was true with rinderpest. Africans felt the glare of the colonial eye as it penetrated deep into their private lives. They felt it violating their beliefs, eating and drinking habits, all their cultural norms. They detested especially its violation of their sacrosanct bank in cattle, which was now, more than ever, exposed to intense scrutiny.

Despite their fallibility, the official estimates of between 50 and 95 per cent were not too far off the range of cattle losses.¹² Of course, mortality in some districts was higher than in others, depending on the timing, extent and success of intervention. Even within a single district or village, the impact was uneven. In Butterworth, for example, the northern half of the district was well disposed to inoculation while the southern half was “possessed by a spirit of stubborn indifference and obstinate opposition”.¹³ Those farmers living in and around mission stations listened readily to advice, and treated their herds. They thus saved some of their stock.¹⁴ Some enlightened chiefs, the Thembu chiefs Dalindyabo and Matanzima among them, also inoculated their herds and encouraged their subjects to follow their example.¹⁵ Even within one household, attitudes towards inoculation might differ. In the district of Mount Fletcher, for example, chief Zibi opposed inoculation “tooth and nail” – he lost his entire herd. One of his sons, “an intelligent man”, inoculated his own herds, saving some.¹⁶

Thus, aggregate estimates of cattle deaths mask the extent of individual losses. Some individuals were totally ruined. In Pondoland, for example, many men who were wealthy before the outbreak of the disease found themselves with “next to nothing left.”¹⁷ From Thembuland, a missionary reported that a local headman who had possessed 300 head of cattle some few weeks earlier “had not ten” left. He observed that his fate was

¹¹The literature is too extensive to attempt to list here. Important studies, however, include J. Biraben, Les Hommes et la Peste en France et dans les Pays europeens et mediterraneus, vol. 2 (Paris, 1975-76); W. Bowsky, “The Impact of the Black Death upon Sieneese Government and Society”, Speculum, 39 (1964), 1-34; A.G. Carmichael, “Plague Legislation in the Italian Renaissance”, Bulletin of the History of Medicine, 57 (1983), 508-525; C.M. Cipola, Fighting the Plague in seventeenth-century Italy (Madison, 1981); Evans, “Epidemics and Revolutions”; Flinn, “Plague in Europe”; B. Luckin, “States and Epidemic Threats”, Bulletin of the Society for the Social History of Medicine, xxxiv (1984), 25-7; McGrew, Russia and the Cholera; P. Slack, The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England (London, 1985).

¹² For various district reports, see BBNA, G.42-'98, 75-140; Also (P.M.O), 249, rinderpest reports; Also CMT, 1897 and 1898, reports on Rinderpest.

¹³ P.M.O. 249, rinderpest report by the CMT, 6 September 1897.

¹⁴ E.g., see BBNA, G.42-'98, report for Tabankulu, 115.

¹⁵ Ibid., report for St. Marks, 101; P.M.O. 249, rinderpest report by CMT, 6 September, 1897.

¹⁶ BBNA, G.42-'98, report for Mt. Fletcher, 125.

¹⁷ CMT 3/53, report for Bizana.

“typical of many.”¹⁸ While contemporary observers identified some wealthy owners, they ignored those lower down the scale. These would have suffered the most as they lost even the few herds they possessed. Observing for East Griqualand, for example, Archdeacon Chamberlain remarked that “some poor people have lost everything.”¹⁹

This obliteration of African society’s economy compounded a rural crisis that had been unfolding in the preceding three decades, and even beyond. The Transkeian Territories had been battered by waves of unrelenting ecological, climatic, pestilential and man-made disasters that preceded the rinderpest and were to follow it. A severe drought dried up entire Thembuland in 1877, only a year after colonial incorporation of the Transkeian Territories. The prospects of the harvest were bleak and stock died in large numbers at the onslaught of the drought and lung-sickness. The latter was due to a massive, unregulated, influx of livestock that colonial forces captured from communities, especially the Gcaleka, who resisted the colonial harness. This both spread bovine diseases and imposed onerously on the already drought-stricken pasturage.²⁰

The drought of “unusual and almost unprecedented continuance” persisted into 1880. It rendered the harvest a complete failure and ensured late ploughing.²¹ It continued viciously during the succeeding ploughing season. In September, the Thembu paramount chief, Ngangelizwe, was moved to request “special prayers for rain” – but still the heavens would not smile.²² This was only a month into another man-made disaster – the devastating “Transkei Campaign”, October 1880 – April 1881, against Africans who resisted government policy outlawing ownership of firearms. Colonial forces destroyed fields belonging to the rebels, burning crops that had been cultivate late due to the long pre-ploughing drought. They also captured and confiscated “rebels” stock.

Very little cultivation occurred in the 1881 season owing to the continuing drought. The rains came in 1882, yet too late for seasonal cultivation. As late in the growing season as in January, long past the planting season of the mealie and millet staples, “nothing whatsoever had been planted”. When late planting did occur, the harvest that followed was already doomed – the maturing crops were withered by the early frost.

The same pattern repeated itself in the 1883 ploughing season. The year was described prematurely as “the most disastrous ever experienced in the country.”²³ This is because the succeeding two years – 1884-1886 – saw an unbroken drought that seemingly hit the entire African continent. An outbreak of red-water among

¹⁸ Missionary Chronicle of the Scottish Episcopal Church, no. v, January 1898, report from St. Alban’s by Rev. S.J. Wallis, 147.

¹⁹ Mission Chronicle, 1, vi, April 1898, Archdeacon Chamberlain.

²⁰ BBNA, G.33-’79.

²¹ Ibid., G.20-’81.

²² CMT 1/UTA 5/1/1/3, RM, Umtata, to Rev. E.L. Coakes, St. John’s, 16 September 1880

²³ A. Mabin & B. Conradie (eds.), The Confidence of the Whole Country: Standard Bank Reports on Economic Conditions in Southern Africa, 1865-1902 (Johannesburg, 1987), 151.

stock, and a smallpox epidemic among humans accompanied the drought.²⁴ When the spring rains came, there were very few cattle left to pull the plough. With people sick, little energy was left to resort to plough-cultivation. As the 1884 harvest was mediocre, there was little seed left to sow in the 1885 ploughing season. Only a few farmers could afford to buy seed at the current forbidding prices. Some cultivation did occur in the spring of 1885 leading to promising crops. “Almost unprecedented” hail storms, however, arrived in the summer, destroying almost the entire standing crop.²⁵

This oppressive pattern of natural, pestilential and man-made calamities ended in the early part of 1886. The harvests of 1886 and 1887 were abundant in most districts, indeed throughout South Africa.²⁶ This, however, led to a glut on the market, depressing the exchange value of grain. It occurred after African peasants had accumulated massive debts to obtain bare necessities during the preceding famine years.²⁷ Until 1888, debts with local traders were still outstanding and colonial officials were bewailing the loss of 3379-pound sterling in hut-tax arrears.²⁸

These two “feast” years were to be only a short respite. The rains came late in November 1887, and, by the end of the ploughing season in October, there was “little or no ploughing.” Planted so late, the millet crop had little chance of ripening before the onset of the winter frost. By May 1889, close to the harvest season, there were bleak prospects for a sufficient harvest.²⁹

The first four years of the last decade of the century produced reasonably good harvests. The rinderpest, however, was preceded immediately by an especially severe drought. Credited as “one of the longest and severest experienced for many years”³⁰ it persisted unbrokenly through the next seven years. It was also the year of the locust “over almost the entire country”.³¹

From Mqanduli, the magistrate reported general starvation and distress resulting from the inability of peasants to reap a sufficient crop during the last harvesting season. Swarms of locusts arrived in November and December. They devoured the young crops as they struggled to sprout and destroyed the mealie crop. What the drought spared of the sorghum crop was withered by the early autumnal frost as it had been planted late.³²

²⁴ CMT 1/37, CMT to secretary for native affairs, 14 August 1884.

²⁵ CMT, 1/UTA 5/1/1.6, colonial annual reports, 1885; RM, Umtata, to CMT, 11 December 186.

²⁶ Mabin and Conradie, The Confidence of the Whole Country, 191, 219, 239-40.

²⁷ CMT 1/37, CMT to secretary for native affairs, 19 January 1888; also 30 April 1888.

²⁸ Ibid., colonial annual reports, 19 January 1888.

²⁹ CMT, 1/UTA 5/1/1/7, RM, Umtata, to CMT, 24 November 1887; Also 15 May 1889.

³⁰ BBNA, G.5-'96, 6.

³¹ Mabin and Conradie, The Confidence of the Whole Country, 390; Also the unanimous reports of colonial officials for 1896 in BBNA, G.5-'96.

³² CMT 3/135, RM, Mqanduli to CMT, 12 September 1896; Also, 23 January 1897.

The same pattern of drought, locusts and poor harvest recurred in the other districts. In Idutywa, the 1896 crop failed totally. A general scarcity prevailed, broken only by a fair harvest of sorghum and maize in 1897.³³ Butterworth, in its turn, experienced a critical scarcity of food resulting from the locust devastation in 1896. The magistrate suggested that the colonial government consider buying grain seed from Argentina to sell to the distressed peasants at cost.³⁴ His annual report painted a gloomy picture of the privations of the last two seasons: “the crops”, he repeated a familiar story, “were a complete failure”.

Then the rinderpest arrived in the 1897-harvesting season amid the persisting drought. Without draft oxen to re-plant their fields, the peasants had to resort to hoe-cultivation. This threatened to limit cultivated acreage. Thanks to general insufficiency of food and the consequent incidence of deficiency diseases, human energy was at its lowest ebb just when cultivation demanded more intensive expenditure of labour. Because of the prevailing drought, the ground was hard, rendering hoe-cultivation difficult and arduous. The drought also withered the few crops that had been planted with the hoe. It dried up the pastures, killing small stock to which peasants turned after their cattle were dead. The rinderpest crisis also limited animal movements, rendering it difficult for peasants to take their animals to water sources, almost the only places at which any grass was to be found during a drought. The ubiquitous locusts descended on the crops, devouring the few that had been planted with so much difficulty without draft animals. The December 1897 report of the Bizana magistrate captured the essence of this pattern of onslaught on the rural economy:

At the present time, rinderpest is destroying their cattle, drought threatening their crops and straggling locusts, which may be the fore-runners of large swarms, appearing all over the country”.³⁵

This gloomy picture continued in 1898. People were without draft oxen to plough their lands. The maize crop failed in most districts owing to the persisting drought and only the millet could be harvested. Magistrates’ reports bewailed the serious scarcity of food with tedious repetition, and expected general starvation.³⁶ To crown it all, swarms of locusts devoured the few crops that came to the surface in the 1898 growing season. The Agricultural Journal of September and October 1898 carried unanimous reports of wholesale failure of crops throughout the Territories.³⁷ Peasants could only purchase food by selling their surviving herds to traders at enhanced prices. Prices of food, including all goods, skyrocketed owing to the effects of the rinderpest on the transportation system that had depended almost entirely on the now dead oxen. Mealies, for example, fetched a record sum of 30 to 40 shillings a bag.³⁸ Those that had lost all their herds, and had no

³³ CMT 3/100, report for Idutywa, December 1896.

³⁴ CMT 3/59m RM, Butterworth, to CMT, 5 February 1896; Also annual report, Butterworth, 1 January 1897.

³⁵ CMT 3/53, report for Bizana, 31 December 1897.

³⁶ BBNA, G.31-'99; Also running commentaries in successive issues of Agricultural Journal, xii, 1898.

³⁷ Agricultural Journal, xii, 1898, nos. 5, 6, 7 and 8.

³⁸ Ibid., 82; also report for Libode, 118.

security to obtain credit from local traders, had to survive on edible weeds and the locusts.³⁹ Nqamakwe, considered the best grain-producing district in the Transkeian Territories, reported unprecedented starvation.⁴⁰

The more vulnerable members of the community – especially babies and weaned children – were the most severely affected. They hovered between life and death. The weaned children suffered the most in the absence of the essential milk. They contracted diarrhoea, dysentery, pulmonary disorders and famine oedema, and many died. A sympathetic magistrate observed that “one of the most painful effects of rinderpest is the miserable state of the children between the age of weaning, say about eighteen months, and ten years”. “After this age”, he continued, “they seem to thrive on ordinary food, but during the period specified they require milk, and in many of the kraals there is no milk to be had. The consequence is that the children grow pot-bellied and spider-limbed, and in case of being attacked by any sickness have not strength enough to rally...”⁴¹

Amid this desperation and looming famine, Europeans predicted that Africans’ “extremity would be the white men’s opportunity”⁴² and that the present bleak conditions would unleash a bonanza of cheap labour to the labour centers. Chronic shortage of cheap African labour had been a perennial feature of all labour centers in South Africa. It was especially acute on the reef gold mines. This inability of the available labour to satisfy the insatiable demands for it peaked in the period leading up to the outbreak of the rinderpest. Pride of place among contending theories seeking to explain this phenomenon belongs to the ability of rural means and forms of production and social relations to persevere.⁴³

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁰ *Agricultural Journal*, xii, 13, June 1898.

⁴¹ *BBNA*, G.42-'98 reports for Bizana, 116, Mount Fletcher, 125, Matatiele, 133, Umzimkhulu, 136, Mount Ayliff, 139; G.31-'99, report for Bizana, 104; See also *Ibid.*, Umtata, 83, Mqanduli, 86, Elliotdale, 88, Lusikisiki, 102, Flagstaff, 103, Mount Curry, 114, Mount Ayliff,.

⁴² “Native Labour”, *South African Mining Journal*, vi, 306, August 14 1897.

⁴³ For turn of the century attempts to investigate and solve this problem, see *Report of The South African Native Affairs Commission, 1903-5* (SANAC), 4 vols. (Cape Town, 1905); also, *Report of the Transvaal Labour Commission, Together with Minority Report: Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence (T.L.R.)* (Johannesburg, 1903); for later-day historical debate, the volume of the literature bearing on this subject is too enormous, and well known, to be fully cited here. However, see, among others: W. Beinart, *The Political Economy of Pondoland, 1860-1930* (Cambridge, 1982), especially 41-69; Beinart, “Joyini Inkomo: Cattle Advance and the Origins of Migrancy from Pondoland”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 5.2 (1979), 199-200; F. Cooper, “Peasants, Capitalists and Historians: A Review Article”. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vii (1981), 284-314; J. Crush, A. Jeeves and D. Yudelman, *South Africa’s Labour Empire: A History of Black Migrancy to the Gold Mines* (Boulder, 1991); P. Delius, *The Land Belongs to Us* (Braamfontein, 1983), 62-82; E. Eldredge, *A South African Kingdom: The Pursuit of Security in Nineteenth Century Lesotho* (Cambridge, 1993), 182-94; P. Harries, *Work, Culture and Identity: Migrant Laborers in Mozambique and South Africa, c. 1860-1910* (Johannesburg, 1994); relevant chapters in S. Marks and R. Rathbone (eds.), *Industrialization and Social Change in South Africa: African Class Formation, Culture and Consciousness, 1870-1930* (London, 1982), especially 99-118, 142-66, 167-94, 195-211; A. Jeeves, “Control of Migratory Labour in the South African Gold Mines in the Age of Kruger and Milner”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 2 (1975), 3-29; Jeeves, “Over-reach: The South African Gold Mines and the Struggle for the Labour of Zambesia, 1890-1920”, *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 17 (1983), 393-412; Jeeves, *Migrant Labour in South Africa’s Mining Economy: The Struggle for the Gold Mines’ Labour Supply, 1890-1920* (Johannesburg, 1985); J. Kimble, “Labour Migration in Basutoland, 1870-1885”, in Marks and Rathbone (eds.), *Industrialization and social Change*, 130-160; I. Schapera, *Migrant Labour and Tribal Life* (London, 1947); E. Webster, “Background to the Supply and Control of Labour in the Gold Mines”, in E. Webster (ed.), *Essays in Southern African Labour History* (Johannesburg, 1978), 7-12.

Thus, those who stood to benefit from it predicted that the truncation of the rural economy resulting from the rinderpest would force Africans in greater numbers to the various labour centres.⁴⁴ Reporting typically, the missionary newspaper, The Christian Express, predicted that “undoubtedly the plague will act as a species of compulsion to the other acts and motives that are tending to drive native labour from the fields into the mines, the stores, the railways and the wharves”.⁴⁵ The chief magistrate of the Transkeian Territories was certain that the loss of stock “undoubtedly has given an enormous impetus to labour.”⁴⁶ Mining agents, especially, firmly believed in the power of the rinderpest to solve the perennial problem of labour shortage on the mines. In anticipation, they ended the persistent agitation to reduce the wages of mine workers drastically and to increase their working hours.

Accordingly, the labour-starved Chamber of Mines carried out this decision in September 1896.⁴⁷ The timing was deliberate, and was influenced directly by expectations of the impoverishment of Africans by rinderpest. The decision was implemented as the rinderpest was sweeping through the Transvaal, and amid the universal drought then prevailing and the devastation of crops by the biggest locust invasion yet experience. Smelling a boon, J.H. Johns, the manager of the Ferreira Gold Mining Company and president of the Mine Managers’ Association, urged the immediate implementation of the decision to reduce wages. “At the present moment”, he cheered, “the natives have to work because they cannot obtain food otherwise, and therefore I think we have a spending opportunity to bring this change into operation.”⁴⁸

Yet, evidence from the important labour-supplying region of the Transkeian Territories firmly suggests that there was no dramatic exodus of African labour to the labour centres. A conspicuous feature of magisterial reports prepared in December 1897, six months after the rinderpest had run its course in the Territories, is the absence of detailed comment on the influence of the rinderpest on the labour supply. This omission is curious given the prominence that the nexus of rinderpest and labour-supply had assumed in this year. Of the 25 district reports, 13 merely tabulated statistics of passes issued to Africans seeking distant labour in the present year as they had done before, without comparing them with the previous year’s figures and commenting on the pattern. These statistics included a mere 2,160 migrants out of a total population of 31,000 from Umzimkhulu, 1,405 out of 20,600 from Matatiele, 805 out of

⁴⁴ Among many such predictions, see, Agricultural Journal of the Cape of Good Hope, ix, 1896; G.42-98, Blue Books for Native Affairs (hereafter, B.B.N.A.), 1898, Reports from Elliotdale, 96, Umsikaba, 111, Griqualand East, 122, Willowvale, 82, respectively, for Natal, see N.D.R., 1897, B22; School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, London Missionary Society Archives (hereafter L.M.S.), in-letters, Box 53, Willoughby to Cousins, 29 June 1896; ibid., Willoughby to Cousins, 9 June 1897; African Review, ix, 19 Dec. 1896, p. 555; School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Archives (hereafter USPG), E. Mss, Rev. Charles Teberer, Keiskamahoeck, 31 Dec. 1898; Christian Express, xxvii, 323, 1 May 1897, p. 71; for full quotations from these citations, and a more detailed discussion of what lay behind them, see Phoofolo, “Epidemics”, 135-37.

⁴⁵ Christian Express, xxvii, 323, 1 May 1897, p. 71

⁴⁶ CMT 3/280, CMT to superintendent of Native Affairs, 1 April 1898.

⁴⁷ Report of the Chamber of Mines, South African Mining Journal and Financial News, 7 Nov. 1896.

⁴⁸ “Interview between Star representative and J.H. Johns, Star, 1 July 1896.

25,000 from Mt. Frere, 73 out of 23,000 from Flagstaff, 182 out of 30,000 from Libode, and a paltry 4 out of 16,000 from Port St. John's.⁴⁹

Four reports, including that from the capital district of the Territories – Umtata – gave no statistics on the topic of labour-supply that had become a permanent feature of the annual report's template. The only 8 reports that did contain some details, expressed disappointment at the pattern that was unraveling – there was no dramatic exodus of labour. For example, amid starvation in Mqanduli, the resident magistrate of the district could still vex that “the natives are habitually so lazy that only now and then will they leave the district.”⁵⁰ The report for the Mpondoland district of Lusikisiki is the most detailed. “At present”, the magistrate fumed:

The men dawdle about their own and neighbours' kraals day after day, drinking beer and practicing the worst of the heathen customs. When urged by officials and others to proceed to Johannesburg and other labour centers where wages are high and there take service, they generally reply ‘why should we work; is not the country ours, and have we not lots of land and many women and children to cultivate it? We prefer to remain as we are’.⁵¹

In his turn, the magistrate for Saint Marks bewailed the failure of Europeans to impart to Africans the philosophy of “thou shalt work.” He concluded by observing that the very “unusual and unfortunate events of the past year” had tended to “keep the [natives] at home [and had] combined to abate considerably their exodus to seek work.”⁵²

The following year, 1898, brought sustained hopes. The “captains of labour” predicted that a bonanza of African labour would be unleashed as the effects of the rinderpest and the accompanying drought impacted. Accordingly, an army of labour recruiters and touts invaded the countryside to gather the expected fruits of the rinderpest - desperate migrants.⁵³ However, the pattern that unfolded dashed these expectations. One more district magistrate joined the other twelve, who, in the previous year, had offered merely cold statistics of migrants, refraining from commenting any further.

The question of the reliability of official figures relating to migrants departing from Transkeian districts is as open today as it was when successive Labour Commissions used them then. Based on official passes

⁴⁹ BBNA, G.42-'98, reports from Umzimkhulu, 135, Matatiele, 133, Mt. Frere, 131, Ngqeleni, 110, Flagstaff, 113, Libode, 109, Port St. John's, 106 respectively.

⁵⁰ BBNA, G.42-'98, , report for Mqanduli, 1897, 95.

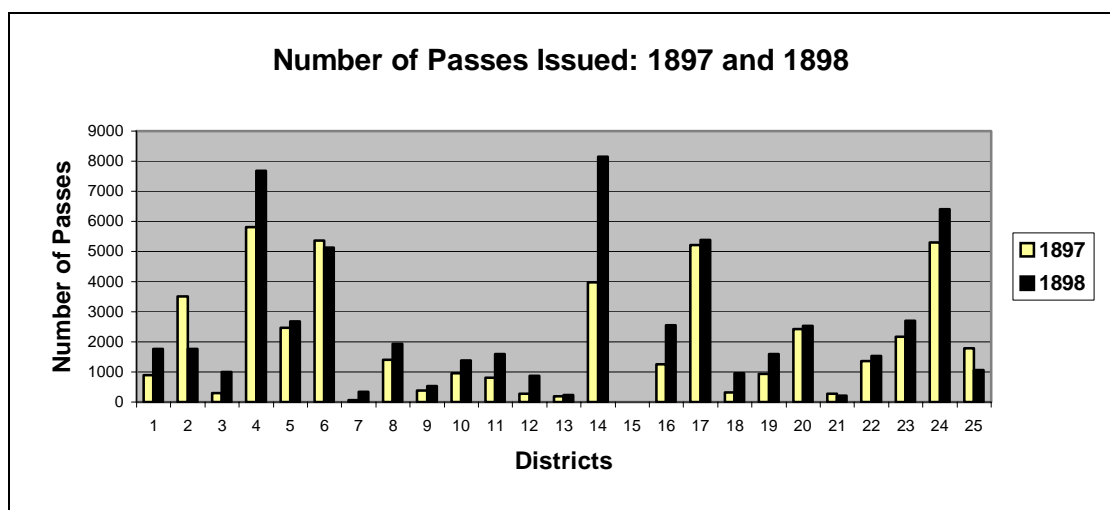
⁵¹ Ibid., report for Umsikaba (Lusikisiki), 111.

⁵² Ibid., report for Saint Marks, 1897, 99.

⁵³ CMT 3/280, CMT to SNA, 1 April 1898.

that were issued to departing Africans, these figures excluded Africans who left the districts without obtaining passes. This exclusion could have affected a significant number of departures especially when a pass could only be granted to men who had paid the requisite hut-tax. Many men left with the precise purpose of earning the hut-tax and would have thus evaded the magistrate offices to obtain the required pass. The figures also only account for annual passes. Many migrants made multiple visits to labour centers during the year. Individual district figures are especially unreliable. Despite stringent colonial control of human movements across colonially imposed district boundaries, Africans did move around. Therefore, there was nothing to stop an intending migrant from one district from traveling to another to join up with friends and relatives for a trip together to the labour centers.

Thus, a quantitative analysis of the pattern of labour migrancy may reveal little. However, if we use the statistics as a drunken person should lamp poles, for illumination and not support, and if we buttress them against qualitative evidence, they may provide at least a snapshot of the pattern that was unfolding. The unavoidable conclusion is that there was no dramatic escalation in the number of migrants leaving the districts to seek distant employment when compared to the previous year:



DISTRICTS:

1. Bizana	7. Libode	13. Ngqeleni	19. Tsolo
2. Butterworth	8. Matatiele	14. Nqamakwe	20. Tsomo
3. Elliotdale	9. Mt. Ayliff	15. Port St. Johns	21. Umsikaba
4. Engcobo	10. Mt. Fletcher	16. Qumbu	22. Umtata
5. Idutywa	11. Mt. Frere	17. St. Marks	23. Umzimkhulu
6. Kentani	12. Mqanduli	18. Tabankulu	24. Willowvale
			25. Xalanga

Despite the undoubted increase in the number of migrants, generally, only two districts – Nqamakwe and Engcobo – witnessed an arguably significant rise. For reasons that must await a separate study later, both districts had always experienced higher rates of labour migrancy even before the rinderpest. Otherwise,

all other districts evinced normal annual increase of numbers of migrants, with numbers actually declining in three districts (Butterworth, Umsikaba – incorporating the Mpondo sub-districts of Flagstaff and Lusikisiki – and Xalanga) in 1898.

Only three district magistrates (for Mqanduli, Libode and Mt. Fletcher) applauded the increase of migrants from their districts against an equal number (Ngqeleni, Umsikaba, Umzimkhulu) who fretted the absence of any change. “Only a few left the district in search of employment during he past year”, piqued the Ngqeleni magistrate.⁵⁴ The Umzimkhulu magistrate perceived a general pattern. The obliteration of the bastion of African societies economy should be producing a dire need to seek employment. “But it really [did] not appear to be so”. Only 2,695 out of an estimated total population of 32,500 people in the district left to seek work during the year. This was “instead of what might be expected under the circumstances, say three times that number”.⁵⁵

Examining the pattern of migrancy to the Transvaal is especially illuminating. The reef mines had always been unpopular among African migrants. This resulted from a combination of factors. They included remoteness from the homes of migrant labourers and the hazardous trip there and back. Others included the ignominious strategies of mass recruitment, stringent contract terms and the unscrupulous competition over labour recruitment among the various mining companies. The latter led to employers breaching promises once workers arrived at the work place. The reef mines were also notorious for defrauding workers of their wages, abysmal living conditions in the mine compounds and general ill treatment.^{56 57}

Did the dire crisis of subsistence brought on by the rinderpest now force Africans to this notorious labour centre? Seemingly, it did not. African migrants continued to avoid working on the reef mines. Even the Nqamakwe magistrate, whose district registered “quite an unprecedented number of natives leaving the district to seek employment” lamented that “a fact worthy of note is that it is almost if not quite impossible to get natives to go to Johannesburg...During the past few months hardly any have gone there.”⁵⁸ Of the 8,149 passes issued in 1898, only one-eighth was for migrants going to the Transvaal mines. The available statistics confirm that the number of migrants to the Transvaal did not escalate appreciably in the year following the outbreak of the rinderpest.⁵⁹

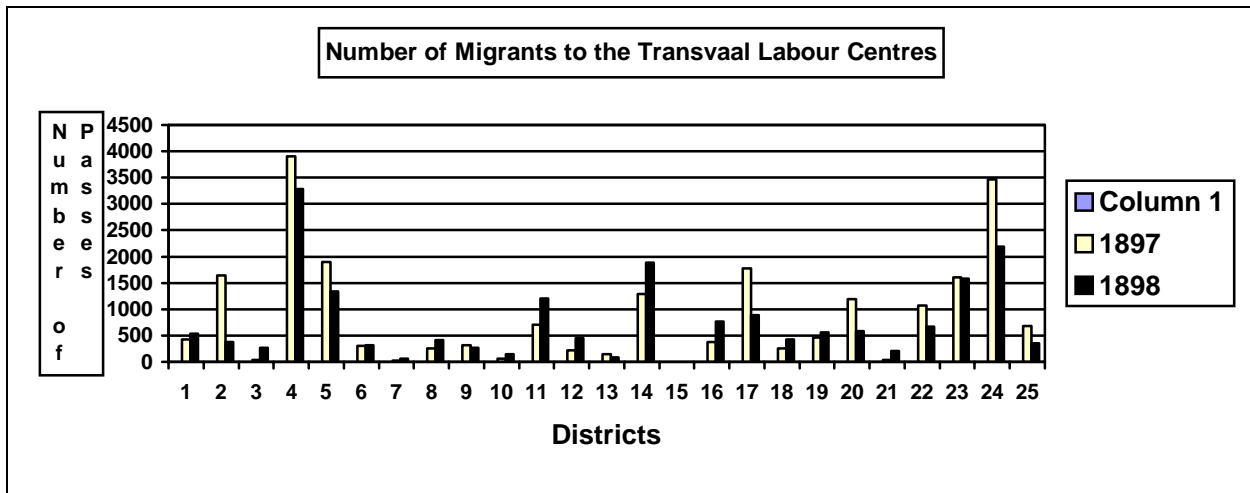
⁵⁴ BBNA, G.42-'98, , report for Ngqeleni, 101.

⁵⁵ Ibid., G.42-'98, report for Umzimkhulu, 1897, 114.

⁵⁶ For the unpopularity of the reef mines among African workers generally, and the reasons for it, see especially Harris, Work, Culture, and Identity; Jeeves, “Control of Migratory Labour”; Jeeves, “Over-reach”; ⁵⁶P. Richardson and J.J. Van Helten, "Labour in the South African Gold Mining Industry, 1886-1914", in S. Marks and R. Rathbone, Industrialization and Social Change; 77-98;;also various evidence to the South African Native Affairs Commission, South African Native Affairs Commission, 1903-5, 4 vols (Cape Town, 1905); also Report of the Transvaal Labour Commission, Together with Minority Report: Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence (Johannesburg, 1903).

⁵⁸ BBNA., G.42-'98, report for Nqamakwe, 77.

⁵⁹ Ibid., annual district reports, 1898.



Districts: (see page 16)

Statistics of the origins of migrants who worked on the reef mines also show that the mines continued to draw most of its labour from their traditional supply sources, notably the East Coast – especially from Mozambique⁶⁰ - and the northern regions of the Transvaal:⁶¹

Statistics of Arriving Migrants at the Chamber of Mines, July-October 1897

PLACE OF ORIGIN	JULY	AUGUST	SEPTEMBER	OCTOBER	TOTAL
East Coast	81	431	1427	2238	4177
Northern Districts	348	913	607	937	2802
Bechuanaland	213	236	154	-	603
Swaziland	24	42	12	19	97
Cape Colony	13	18	93	196	321
TOTAL	713	1739	2319	3391	8162

Overall numbers of Africans working for the Chamber of Mines in 1898 also show that the bulk of African migrants came from the East Coast and the Transvaal’s northern districts:⁶²

Territorial Origins of African Labourers under the Transvaal Chamber of Mines, 1898

AREA OF ORIGIN	PERCENT
EAST COAST TERRITORIES	60.2
NORTHERN DISTRICTS	23.38
BASUTOLAND AND CAPE COLONY	11.12
ZULULAND AND NATAL	.95

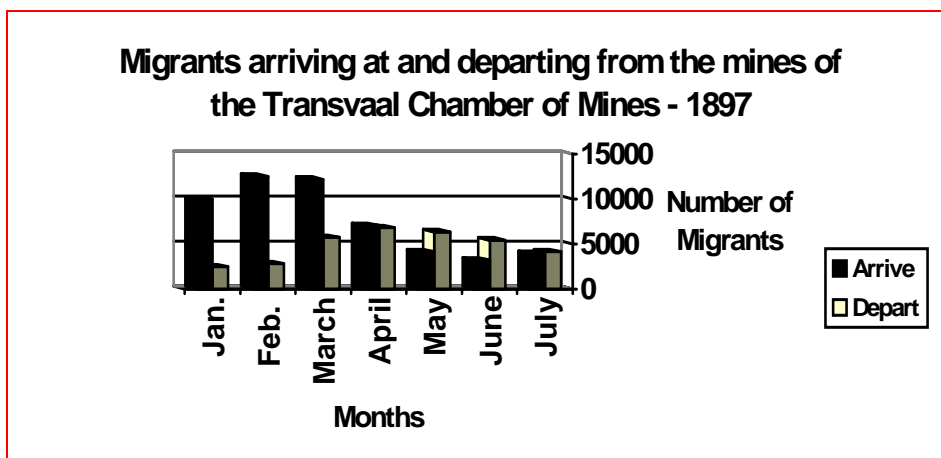
⁶⁰Harries, *Work, Culture, and Identity*, 109.

⁶¹*South African Mining Journal*, vii, 323, 1897, 250, 302, 316, 325, 326, 343, 350, 651, 793.

⁶²*Ibid.*, viii, 382, 28 January 1899, 319; also *ibid.*, ii, 323, 11 December 1897; vii, 325, 25 December 1897; vii, 326, 1 January 1898.

As late as in 1904, the Umtata magistrate, repeating the observations of his counterparts in the other districts, could still say that mine labour was unpopular because of “strongly adverse reports brought back by returning labourers as to the low rates of wages and unsatisfactory conditions.”⁶³

Rather than a dramatic rise in the number of African migrants to the reef mines, seemingly the reverse occurred. The mines experienced unprecedented desertions in this period. As we have seen, mining management had been debating strategies of reducing labour costs and improving the labour supply in the decades preceding the rinderpest. The touted solution for both was to reduce the wages of mineworkers and to increase their working hours significantly. The rinderpest and allied ecological traumas offered a seemingly compelling argument to act of these intentions. However, not all mining stakeholders agreed. The ensuing controversy alone caused anxiety and uncertainty among African mine workers. It kept prospective labourers away from the mines while spurring those already there to desert. When finally these decisions were implemented in September 1896, the sequel was that the trickle of desertions now became a flood. By mid-1897 a Transkeian newspaper was reporting "a heavy exodus of native boys from the Rand, while the arrivals are very few."⁶⁴ Statistics of arrivals at, and departures from, the mines confirm this trend. In the first month of 1897, the Chamber of Mines recorded more arrivals than departures. From May, however, this pattern was reversed, as the following chart shows:⁶⁵



African migrants also continued to bypass labour recruiters. They preferred to seek employment themselves and on their terms. They also chose employers who offered more wages and better conditions of work. Migrants, reports averred, had "an absolute horror of contracts."⁶⁶

⁶³ CMT 3/173, RM, Umtata, to CMT, 6 January 1904.

⁶⁴ Umtata Herald, 15 June 1897.

⁶⁵ South African Mining Journal, vi, 307, 31 August 1897, 1004.

⁶⁶ BBNA, G.31-'99, report for Nqamakwe, 77, Mqanduli, 86.

Thus, the rinderpest and accompanying ecological and pestilential calamities of the turn of the nineteenth century seemingly failed to unleash African labour. Apparently, this was the ubiquitous pattern among African communities throughout South Africa. The BaMangwato of Bechuanaland Protectorate, who bore the first onslaught of the rinderpest after it left Southern Rhodesia, did not migrate to the labour centers in any large numbers. Indeed, their chief, Khama, prohibited labour recruitment from Ngwato territory during the rinderpest period 1896-7.⁶⁷

Seemingly, the effects of the rinderpest did affect the volume of migrancy from the BaNgwaketse and BaKwena territories. Most likely, this was because the devastation of the rinderpest and its impact were more severe among these predominantly pastoral societies. Observers offered an absolute figure of 800,000 in dead beasts among BaNgwaketse alone.⁶⁸ By late 1896, missionaries reported that only two or three head of cattle remained alive in every hundred that had existed at the beginning of the year.⁶⁹ The BaKwena under chief Sebele were hit hardest. At the end of July 1896, the London Missionary Society representative, H. Williams, estimated that only seventy herds had been spared from the ten thousand held by Chief Sebele alone.⁷⁰ A representative of the London Missionary Society in Molepolole claimed that at one mission station, the entire village could muster only eleven head of cattle. The 5,000 inhabitants of Kolobeng were left with about thirty herds, and forty at Gaborone.⁷¹ The BaKwena also suffered most from the severe drought that preceded and followed the rinderpest, including the sweeping locust invasion that followed the murrain.⁷²

Africans in the Cape Colony, including those in the former British Bechuanaland – recently transferred to the Cape government - also experience dire food shortages in the wake of the rinderpest and allied ecological and pestilential traumas.⁷³ Discerning the pattern of migrancy from these “native locations” is difficult now as it was then. This is because most of the labour migrancy was internal, therefore requiring no issue of passes – the only method of ascertaining the efflux of migrants. Most Africans worked on local farms, railway and road construction, and public works. Those who traveled afield went to the Kimberley mines and to alluvial diggings.

⁶⁷ Q.N. Parsons, "The Economic History of Khama's Country in Botswana, 1844-1930", in Palmer and Parsons, The Roots of Rural Poverty (London, 1977), 126-7.

⁶⁸ Coillard 1897: 626-7, also Christian Express, xxvii, 328. 1 Oct. 1896..

⁶⁹ L.M.S., In-letters, B.53, Wookey to Thompson, 20 June 1896.

⁷⁰ L.M.S., In-letters, B.53, H. Williams to Thompson, 15 May, and 5 June 1896.

⁷¹ Christian Express, xxvi, 316, 1 Oct. 1896.

⁷² For the cycle of disasters that hit the Bakwena and BaNgwaketse in 1896 and 1897, see the various letters of LMS missionaries in L.M.S. in-letters and annual reports, Boxes B.53, 54, 55; C.-8141, Correspondence, reports from Geberone and Palapye, April 1896, in resident commissioner, Mafeking to high commissioner, 30 April 1896, 50-51; Annual reports, Bechuanaland Protectorate, 1896-7; also Anon "Schwere Zeiten", in Die Evangelischen Missioner, 3 (1897), 44-46; Rhodes House, Oxford, Mss Afr. S. 1568 (i) , J. Ellenberger, "Early Days of Bechuanaland Protectorate".

⁷³ For depressing reports of the disasters that struck these communities from 1896 to 1898, and their impact, see BBNA, G.19-'97; Ibid., G.42-'98; G.31-99, L.M.S. in-letters and annual reports, Boxes 53, 54 and 55.

Some officials reported that the number of migrants leaving to seek work had increased.⁷⁴ Yet, only the divisions of Glen Grey, Herschel and King Williamstown reported any significant change in the efflux of migrants in 1897 and 1898.⁷⁵ In former British Bechuanaland, reports singled out only the division of Mafeking as providing more labourers to the Kimberley diamond mines than had been the pattern before.⁷⁶ Still, the inspector of native locations castigated many “idlers [who] hang about the stads and town”, without the inclination of going to work.⁷⁷

Despite living near the diamond diggings, and "crying out for the past two years that they [were] starving", the inhabitants of the Barkly West "native" locations continued to evade recruitment.⁷⁸ The numbers of labour passes issued to Africans living in the Bolotwa location in Glen Grey actually shrunk in 1898-9. Similarly, the civil commissioner of the Kimberley division continued to complain of the scarcity of labour in the diggings.⁷⁹

The rinderpest wreaked havoc with herds in Natal and Zululand.⁸⁰ Mortality estimates in some districts were 98 per cent.⁸¹ As late as 1906, the number of African-owned cattle in Natal and Zululand had not yet reached the level they had been before the rinderpest. They were estimated to number 494,402 in 1896. The disease had left 75,842 head alive in 1898. In 1904, they had recovered to a mere 343,159,⁸² still way below the pre-rinderpest figure.

Yet, the Zulu labour supply failed to satisfy even the internal demand on the farms of Natal colonists. Amid the rinderpest, the colony's legislature introduced and debated a “Native Labour Bill” in 1898. It sought strategies to improve the supply of labour to local farms.⁸³ From nearby Zululand, very few migrants went to distant markets “compared to thousands in former years”. Many preferred to go across the border to Natal.⁸⁴ Like their Transkeian counterparts, they also avoided the reef labour centers, the region sending the lowest number of migrants to the reef mines in 1897 and 1898 as we have seen.

⁷⁴ For example, BBNA, G.31-'99; for the Cape Colony proper, see reports for Atherton, 27, Sterkspruit, 29, Komgha, 39, Uitenhage, 47; for British Bechuanaland, see report for Vryburg, 60, Kuruman, 64, Taung, 65,

⁷⁵ Ibid., G.42-'98, reports for Glen Grey, Herschel and King Williamstown and, 28, 34, and 38, respectively; G.31-'99, reports for Glen Grey, Herschel and King Williamstown., 28, 31, 35, 41.

⁷⁶ Ibid., G.31-99, reports for Mafeking and Taung, 69-70, 71.

⁷⁷ Ibid., G.31-99, 70.

⁷⁸ Ibid., G.42-'98, report for Barkly West, 11.

⁷⁹ Ibid., G.42-'98, report for Bolotwa and Kimberley, 24 and 31, respectively; also report of protector of natives, Kimberley, 34.

⁸⁰ For more details on the impact of the rinderpest in Natal, see C. Ballard, “The Repercussions of Rinderpest: Plague and Peasant Decline in Colonial Natal”, International Journal of African Historical Studies, 19, 3 (1986), 421-50.

⁸¹ Ibid., annual reports for the districts of Umsinga and Umvoti, p B24 and B26.

⁸² Natal Departmental reports (NDR), Annual report of the Department of Agriculture, 1902, 12-15; Natal Census, 931; see also (Marks 1970: 185)

⁸³ Colony of Natal. Debates of the Legislative Assembly, 2nd Parliament, 1898, 646-50, 657-69, 673-79, 724-28, 733-4

⁸⁴ NDR., 1898, BB.9.

The rinderpest almost wiped out the entire Swazi herd.⁸⁵ The Transvaal government exploited this disaster to assist the labour starved gold mining industry.⁸⁶ It promptly imposed, and enforced, payment of an annual ten shilling's hut-tax and a sixpence road tax. A trickle of young Swazi young men did seek work on the reef mines to earn money to pay this exaction. Still, the efflux was hesitant and halting. Swazi young men continued to enter, and exit, the labour market on their terms.⁸⁷ Even those who did go to the reef mines played truant with the mining management - they left the mines soon after they had arrived.⁸⁸

The “captains of labour” experienced a similar disappointment when recruiting labourers from their most trusted source – Basutoland.⁸⁹ Instead of a dramatic exodus of labourers, the country experienced an unprecedented invasion of an army of recruiters and labour touts who descended on the countryside. Their hope was to reap a labour boon from the catastrophe resulting from the rinderpest. Throughout June and July 1897, twenty recruiting agents from the Rand mines and another twenty from the Jagersfontein diamond mines arrived in the country virtually daily to recruit earnestly. Agents on the spot competed for BaSotho labourers, with a barrage of letters arriving daily from the Chamber of Mines requesting labourers.⁹⁰ Repeated and urgent requests for labourers flooded the Resident Commissioner’s office.⁹¹

Thwarted, the Chamber of Mines whimpered that it had failed to recruit BaSotho labourers despite “several” attempts. Nevertheless, it entertained hopes that prospects would improve after BaSotho had completed their ploughing.⁹² The trickle in the volume of BaSotho labourers going to labour centres in 1898, however, dashed these expectations. By June, the executive of the Chamber of Mines was vexing that “very few natives from Basutoland are arriving”.⁹³ In the next report, the Chamber did not even include figures of arriving labourers from Basutoland.⁹⁴

⁸⁵ For the rinderpest in Swaziland, see successive issues of The Times of Swaziland, 1897, 1898.

⁸⁶ For the marriage of convenience between mine owners and the Transvaal government in this period, see, Harries, Work, Culture and Identity, 129-137.

⁸⁷ F. Mashasha, "The Road to Colonialism: Concessions and the Collapse of Swazi Independence: 1875-1926", Ph.D. thesis, Oxford University, 1977.

⁸⁸ South African Mining Journal, vi, 306, 14 August 1897.

⁸⁹ For the impact of the rinderpest in Basutoland, see P. Phoofolo, “Face to Face with Famine: The BaSotho and the Rinderpest, 1897-1899”, Journal of Southern African Studies, 29, 2 (2003), 503-528.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 307, August 31 1897, 1005.

⁹¹ For example, Lesotho National Archives (LNA), S7/1/1/6, assistant commissioner, Berea, to resident commissioner, 24 December 1897; South African Mining Journal, vi, 307, August 31 1897, 1005; LNA, S7/7/20, Botha to resident commissioner, 3 June 1898; ibid., Charles Beck & Co. to Sloley, 4 June 1898; LNA, S7/7/20, Ernest Lowe to resident commissioner, 22 June 1898; ibid., J. Bosman to resident commissioner, 17 November, 1898; ibid., J.C. Mackenzie to resident commissioner, 18 November 1898; South African Mining Journal, vii, 326, 1 January 1898; vii, 350, 18 June 1898; vii, 368. 22 October. 1898.

⁹² South African Mining Journal, vii, 326, 1 January 1898

⁹³ Ibid., vii, 350, 18 June 1898.

⁹⁴ Ibid., vii, 368. 22 October. 1898.

So Laggard was labour migration from Basutoland that it threatened the earnings of local traders. To improve this bleak situation, the Basutoland Chamber of Commerce asked the colonial government to appoint a labour agent in Johannesburg. He would “assist the BaSotho labourers with advice, see justice done to them, so as to avoid harsh treatment...thus perhaps causing larger numbers to seek labour on the mines, and enhance thereby receipts of both the government and the trading community”. It also disapproved of the prevailing scramble for labourers by “a large number of labour agents now endeavouring to obtain BaSotho labourers”.

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Africans living in the Transvaal itself would hardly satisfy the mines’ insatiable thirst for labour. This was despite this territory suffering the worst famine in the region.⁹⁶ Yet, even amid such dire distress, labour from this source was elusive. “Nothing” came of “attempts to mount relief through encouraging young men from the region to go to the reef mines”, as the mouthpiece of the Chamber of Mines vexed.⁹⁷ Even those contemporaries who did not stand to gain directly from the flow of labour from the starving Transvaal African communities bewailed the prevalent scarcity of labour. The Transvaal’s newly appointed veterinary surgeon, Arnold Theiler, felt that he could sustain his sympathy for the starving populace of northern Transvaal “if only they would work in the gold mines where work [was] available.”⁹⁸ His spouse, Emma, was more blunt, despite the stereotypical racist undertones of her thoughts: “Kaffirs prefer to lead idle lives instead of going to Johannesburg to work in the mines that almost had to close because of the lack of black labour.”⁹⁹

Of course, the South African War that broke out on the heels of these disasters in September 1899 restricts us from taking a longer view on the impact of the rinderpest on African migrancy. The effects of the war were ambiguous.¹⁰⁰ The commencement of the war disrupted what labour migration did occur. It stopped this avenue to recoup from cattle losses. It also led to a mass exodus of labourers from the mines. They arrived home “in a state of absolute destitution, great numbers having walked from inability to pay railway fares and emaciated from want of food.”¹⁰¹ The high demand for transport oxen for military operations enticed those whose cattle had survived the rinderpest to sell to the military and to speculators. This set back further the long-term regeneration of their herds. Africans also acquired large herds of cattle by

⁹⁵ LNA, S7/7/20. G.R. Hobson (chairman of the Basutoland Chamber of Commerce) to Government Secretary, 19 November 1898.

⁹⁶ For stark phrases of contemporary observers conveying the deep sense of hopelessness and depression that settled on Africans living in the Transvaal, see The Christian Express, xxvii, 323, 1 May 1897, 71; M.S.S. 330, Weavind to Hartley, 21 November 1897; Beuster, “Die Hungersnot in Nordtransvaal”, Die Evangelischen missionen, 3, 1897, 118-119; Kahl, “Die Fieberepidemie in Transvaal”, Die Evangelischen Missionen, 3, 1897, 237-39; P Rosset, “Valdezia la famine”, Bulletin de la Mission Suisse Romande, 11, 127, 1896, 98-99; H. Berthoud and E. Creux, “La detresse au Transvaal”, Bulletin, 11, 132, 1897, 230-34; E. Creux, “La detresse au Transvaal”, Bulletin, 11, 131 1897, 304-5; Standard and Diggers’ News, 15 February 1897.

⁹⁷ South African Mining Journal, vi, 299, June 20 1897 “Annual Report of the Association of Mines”, 812.

⁹⁸ Johannesburg Public Library, S Store 920, letters of Sir Arnold Theiler, 25 December 1896.

⁹⁹ Ibid., letters of Emma Theiler, 11 December 1896.

¹⁰⁰ For a more detailed discussion of the effects of the war on the Transkeian communities, see P. Warwick, Black People and the South African War, 1899-1902 (London, 1983), 114-119, 122-124.

¹⁰¹ BBNA, G.50-1900, report of CMT, 28.

buying them cheaply from both boer and English farmers in the Aliwal and Barkly districts, who feared having their cattle requisitioned by the military. Those who could not acquire enough stock by honest means exploited the confusion of war by stealing from neighbouring farmers. These frantic stock movements introduced equine and bovine diseases.¹⁰² The series of stock disasters thus unleashed opened yet another chapter in the continuing story of escalating rural deterioration in the twentieth century.

However, once it got underway, the South African War did offer Transkeian communities a temporary opportunity to cushion the immediate hardships of the rinderpest and the accompanying drought. Besides wartime demand for, and inflated prices for, produce and livestock, the war created an insatiable labour market for military workers at inflated wages. Communities in the Territories could thus acquire cash to recoup some of their losses and to display a facade of relative prosperity. They sold their produce, stock and tobacco to British troops garrisoned in the Territories at inflated wartime prices. They engaged themselves at remunerative wages in virtually every department of the military including guarding borders, scouting and actual combat. The demand for African labour and the high wages offered during the war were so high that they enhanced the workers' ability to bargain for wages, conditions of work and the type and place of employment.¹⁰³ In Kentani, for example, Africans decline to work on the roads for 15s.6d per day – a comparatively high pay – because they could get higher wages on with the military. Consequently, the entire annual public works vote for the year was unspent.¹⁰⁴

Therefore, the war distorted the pre-war pattern of African migrancy. Indeed, as the captains of labour were to lament in the immediate post-war years, the relative buoyancy of the South African War was a further impediment to the already beleaguered efforts to draw African labour to the industrial centres. The control and regulation of African labour was to be a major feature of Lord Milner's post-war reconstruction plans.¹⁰⁵

Thus, seemingly labour migrancy was not a popular strategy for post-rinderpest recovery throughout South Africa. Instead, most Africans stayed at home and engaged in rural labour. The immediate need was to obtain the bare necessities of life, and to rebuild their own, or family, herds. They could achieve this best through combining productive labour in their fields and targeted migrancy. The same European contemporaries, who cheered the rinderpest's potential to unleash an exodus of African labourers, have also left us fascinating details of this trend. They show the remarkable industry that African peasants displayed after their cattle died.

¹⁰² E.G. CMT 3/171, RM, Umtata, to CMT, 30 January 1902.

¹⁰³ BBNA, G.25-'1902, for example, reports for Nqamakwe, 42, Tsomo, 43-44).

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., G.50-'1900, 31, 39.

¹⁰⁵ Jeeves, "The Control of Migratory Labour"; Richardson and Van-Helten, "Labour in the South African Gold Mining Industry", in Marks and Rathbone, 77-98; S. Marks and A. Trapido, "Lord Milner and the South African State", History Workshop, no. 8 (1979),

Many set out to plough their fields before their cattle died; some ploughed by moonlight to complete the work before their cattle collapsed in their yokes.¹⁰⁶ Those whose herds were already infected used sick oxen to plough while keeping spare ones nearby. From the latter, they would drive in an ox and yoke it to replace the one that “[had] sunk in the yoke.” Others used mixed teams of assorted animals. The sight of a pony and a “venerable cow that had only one eye” yoked together regaled the Nqamakwe magistrate.¹⁰⁷ The Butterworth magistrate graphically described another similar sight, finding it “ridiculous in the extreme”:¹⁰⁸

In one case, I saw a man trying to yoke a team of four, three cows and an ox. The ox stood stolidly besides the plough with yoke hanging from his neck while the three cows each at the end of a long rim danced madly around bellowing and at intervals casting themselves on the ground, and as for the poor teamster – well, his language, to quote one of the minor poets, “was frequent and painful and free”, and much of it in English and some of it in Dutch”

Virtually every one resorted to the traditional hoe to cultivate their fields. Even the Mpondo, who colonial officials and Europeans missionaries stereotyped as indolent, now received encomiums for “avoiding wasting time in vain regrets at the loss of their oxen” and ploughing with the hoe. The Bizana magistrate noted:

Cows, calves, bulls, everything that could be put in a yoke, has had to work and work hard too, for it is now a common sight to see two small beasts pulling a plough instead of the old span of six. Even where there are not cattle, the people have worked so hard with their hoes that they have sown all their old gardens and in many instances broken up new ones. Europeans who have been in the country for many years declare that they have never seen the people work as they are doing this year.¹⁰⁹

Butterworth and Willowvale magistrates vowed that every acreage had been cultivated despite the absence of oxen. The former reported that an old resident of the district told him “more cultivation was completed this year in September [1898] than has been done in that month during the past thirty years”.¹¹⁰

Hoe cultivation seemingly ensured intensive agriculture, and a higher value was attached to the product. This was probably due to familiarity with this method of cultivation than with the newly introduced heavy

¹⁰⁶ CMT 3/100, report for Idutywa, 7 November 1897; also Agricultural Journal, xi, ii, 25 November 1897, 606; Also BBNA, G.42-98, report for Willowvale.

¹⁰⁷ P.M.O 249, report for Nqamakwe.

¹⁰⁸ BBNA, G.42-98, report for Butterworth, 79.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., G.31-'99, report for Bizana, 105.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. G.42-'98, report for Butterworth, 79.

American plough. The hoe also brought adult labour into agriculture than the existing practice of relying on younger boys to hold the plough. In addition, the product of hard labour was valued more. “It is very noticeable”, observed the Willowvale magistrate that “a much smaller quantity of grain cultivated by means of the hoe is brewed into beer than was the case when the gardens were cultivated by means of oxen, one small boy guiding he plough and another driving them, the proud owner of the plough and team watching proceedings from the pleasant shade of the neighbouring tree”.¹¹¹

Africans also tapped into what still survived of the network of reciprocal relationships after decades of European social restructuring. Many whose animals had miraculously evaded infection, or had recovered, loaned or hired out their ploughing oxen to those who had lost all. “A good deal of cultivation was completed last month”, observed the Umzimkhulu magistrate, “the fortunate possessors of draught oxen hiring them out to others destitute in that respect, at very paying rates.”¹¹² In Ngqeleni, people paid as much as 10/- a day for four oxen to plough their fields. Others practiced communal cultivation. For example, the Butterworth magistrate reported that it was “common” for a man who had a span to “send his team the round of his friends and relatives” after completing his own ploughing.¹¹³

Enterprising African peasants perceptively intensified their energy growing multipurpose and drought resistant crops. Without their milk-producing cows, they cultivated the sweet potato, maize and the sorghum vulgare. The sweet potato had two main advantages among several others. It was less vulnerable to locusts. It could be crushed into a juice that resembled and almost tasted like milk. Thus prepared, it could feed the babies and weaned children who were now deprived of the all-essential milk.

From maize, peasants could make porridge, also to feed weaned children. The latter’s salvation lay only in a diet of sweet potato gruel and fermented maize porridge that was made into a milder form of traditional beer. Maize could also be made into various forms of food - whole, crushed, stamped, or ground. It could also be eaten while green - this convenience helped to tide over the peasants until the sorghum harvest.

Despite its advantages, maize was more vulnerable to drought than the sorghum. Amid the raging drought, therefore, sorghum cultivation competed favourably with maize. Its porridge fed suckling mothers and improved lactation upon which babies depended. It was also more resistant to drought and less vulnerable to locusts. Mass harvests of sorghum were reported throughout the Territories, even beyond.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Ibid., report for Willowvale.

¹¹² Agricultural Journal of the Cape of Good Hope, xiii, 9, 27 October 1898, 499.

¹¹³ CMT 3/59, report for Butterworth.

¹¹⁴ For Natal and Zululand, see Natal Agricultural Journal, 2, v, 26, May; 2, vii, 19 June; 2, viii, 23 June; 2, ix, 9 July; 2, x, 22 July 1898; For Basutoland, see Letter of Rev. I. Pascal, 14 August 1897, Journal des Missions, 1897, 600.

Those who sold their labour did so with a specific target - to restock. To that end, they chose types of employment that offered the best prospects for rapid restocking. Therefore, distant labour centres, especially the mines, were less preferred to local or neighbourhood places of work. When they did venture on long-distance travel to seek employment, it was because such jobs were sufficiently remunerative to outweigh their inconvenience. The overall figures for migrants leaving the Territories for various employment centres in 1898 confirm this pattern – most migrants went to work on the docks in Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, East London and on public works within the Cape colony, where wages were higher than on the reef mines:

Migrants to Various Labour Centres: 1898

NATAL	ORANGE FREE-STATE	TRANSVAAL	CAPE TOWN, PORT ELIZABETH, EAST LONDON
4,432	4,147	18,302	34,451

Typically, we are not vouchsafed even a glimpse into the roles of women in these remarkable efforts at rural recovery from a near famine. Given their central role as bastions of rural production even when circumstances were normal, we are justified to add “women” to every reference to “native” that appears in the sources. Women must have borne the greater burden of these multifarious survival and recovery strategies. Attesting this was the general trend to resort to hoe ploughing as we have seen. The hoe was a preeminently women productive implement that they used exclusively before the introduction of the ox-drawn plough.

Some contemporary observers did specifically mention women’s roles in the enhanced productive activities designed to stem the tide of the crisis. “This duty (of hoe cultivation) is dedicated to the women”, testified one contemporary. “The men, young and old”, he continued, “prefer the beer and meat pots. It is seldom that any of their sex are to be seen at work in the gardens”. He continued to observe that “more ground could have been got under had the men gone to the assistance of the women folk on whom the duty devolved”¹¹⁵

The enhanced role that women played in rural production amid the rinderpest crisis may explain why the crisis also failed to force African women into labor migration. The food crisis brought on by the rinderpest required them to remain at home to shoulder the tasks of rural survival and recovery. Their crucial contribution to this effort was acknowledged by a source outside the Transkeian Territories, and

¹¹⁵ BBNA, G.42-'98, report for Qumbu, 110.

most probably describes an ubiquitous pattern among African communities. It comes from a comment of a prominent Swazi chief, Mamisa. Asked to assist in recruiting Swazi women for the Witwatersrand gold mines after the massive death of Swazi cattle, he retorted: “No! we cannot spare the women - they must work at the kraal”.¹¹⁶

Thus, the “natives’ extremity” was not the “white men’s opportunity”. Certainly in the short term – seemingly it took until 1906 for a perceptible surge of labour migration from the Transkeian Territories to occur - the 1896-8 outbreak of rinderpest apparently failed to unleash the expected bonanza of African labour. The pattern that unfolded, and analysed here, validates the forewarning made by a knowledgeable correspondent to an Umtata newspaper after the rinderpest had ravaged through the territories. Using his knowledge of how Africans had responded to similar pestilential and ecological crises in the past, he warned:

Many people are of the opinion that the loss of cattle will not be such a great evil as is anticipated, if it will be the means of inducing more of the natives to go out to work, but in the light of the experience of past "bad times" amongst them, we question whether any hardship they may now have to face justifies this opinion.¹¹⁷

This is not to say that Africans did not use labour migrancy as another strategy both for acquiring cash with which to purchase food and for restocking, as was the case elsewhere under similar circumstances.¹¹⁸ Yet, the volume of migrancy did not soar as had been expected. What migrancy there was, was still purposive and discretionary.

To be sure, some of the long-term effect of the rinderpest may have combined with other more potent factors later to finally break the back of African resistance to thoroughgoing proletarianization. They may also have transformed irreversibly the prevailing pattern of labour migrancy. If the rinderpest must be included among the factors that pushed African labour to South African labour centres so dramatically in the first half of the twentieth century, it would have to compete disproportionately with the more disruptive villains of this period. These include the consequences of the 1913 Land Act, the economic and environmental disasters of the first third of the century and beyond. The latter include the progressive ecological deterioration, the 1929 depression and the catastrophic drought of 1932-3.

¹¹⁶ The Times of Swaziland, 30 July 1898.

¹¹⁷ Umtata Herald, 20 Nov. 1897

¹¹⁸ See, for example, labour movements after the Scottish potato famines of 1836-1950, including literature on the subject in C.W. Withers, “Destitution and Migration: Labour Mobility and relief from Famine in Highland Scotland, 1836-1850”, Journal of Historical Geography, 14, 2 (1988), 128-150; S.C. Watkins & J. Menken, “Famine in Historical Perspective”, Population and development Review, 11, iv (1985), 647-75

