

# Comparative Aspects of Farm Labour in Twentieth Century Botswana

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Botswana became a British protectorate in 1885 and attained independence in 1966. The British had for the most part neglected the country for the entire colonial period, and Botswana's economy was largely integrated into that of South Africa. There was no significant white settlement in Botswana, but four settler-farming enclaves emerged in the 1890s and early 1900s. These were the Tati to the north-east, Ghanzi to the west, the Gaborone and Lobatse blocks to the south and the Tuli Block to the east.<sup>1</sup> These enclaves were the ones that became freehold agricultural estates and adopted commercial agriculture. South African influence was pervasive in Botswana during the colonial period, but it was largely in these settler enclaves that it clearly manifested itself. Most of the white settlers were South African nationals and as such had close affinities with that country. This article will focus mainly on the Tuli Block and Ghanzi farming areas because they were, and still are, the most economically viable.

The aim of this article is to draw a comparison between the labour situation in Ghanzi and the Tuli Block farms during the protectorate years, specifically from 1930 to 1966. These two areas lie in two extreme ends of Botswana. The Ghanzi farms lie in the dry highlands of western Botswana, close to Namibia. In the 1930s and early 1940s Ghanzi was a peripheral area, having little contact with the rest of the country and the settler economy being largely subsistence. The Tuli Block is in the valley bushveld of eastern Botswana close to the Transvaal (now Limpopo province). By the 1930s and 1940s, this area had already adopted commercial farming. It is interesting to compare these two areas because while one would expect many similarities under British protection, the contextual variations that existed also created divergences that invite comparisons. Whites (predominantly Afrikaners) from South Africa owned the farms in both areas, but there were different regional variations, different ecological zones and ethnic workforces that make an interesting comparison. These key aspects of the farming areas and their implications will become clear as the study unfolds. Another interesting comparison is between the different ethnicities that provided labour within the Ghanzi farms.

This study is placed in the general context of the farm labour situation in southern Africa during this period. As such, some comparison with South Africa on a

crucial phenomenon will be made at some stage. However, the study is specifically located in the context of Ghanzi and the Tuli Block freehold farms. There were different economic and social contexts that also contributed to certain variations and similarities in these areas. Most interesting to emerge is the degree to which these manifested themselves.

### **The labour market and nature of work**

It is important to note the ethnic nature of the labourers and the manner in which ethnicities related. The majority of labourers in the two settler enclaves belonged to what are known as subject or minority groups in today's Botswana. In Ghanzi, the Basarwa, derogatively referred to as the 'Bushman' comprised the majority of labourers. The Basarwa are of Khoe-san stock, and they are different from the Bantu-speaking people of Botswana. Being largely hunter-gatherers, they were subjected by Bantu-speaking groups and turned into servile people with the status of serfs. Some of the labourers in Ghanzi were Baherero and Bakgalagadi who were also Bantu speakers. In the Tuli Block, the majority of labourers were Babirwa and Batswapong. Although these four (non Basarwa) groups belong to the Bantu-speaking majority in Botswana, they are regarded as people who originally came seeking refuge (*Bafaladi*) to the Setswana speakers and hence 'subject peoples'. The different ethnic compositions of labourers in the farms, the Bantu speakers and the Basarwa, contributed to their different conditions on the farms. As will be shown, there was differential access to resources between the Bantu speakers and the Basarwa, which resulted in differential treatment and opportunities.

Throughout the colonial period, freehold commercial farming in Botswana did not become highly significant as it did in the neighbouring settler states of South Africa and Southern Rhodesia, and the numbers of those employed by white farmers was small. Thus, freehold farming 'never provided enough employment to qualify as a major source of livelihood for the *merafe* (tribes) of the Protectorate' (Croston 1993:275). The number of labourers and farmers involved was small, the farms were scattered and differences existed from farm to farm. Differences also existed not only between districts, but even between farms in the same district, and depended on the personalities of different farm owners, the labour needs of a particular farm or farms, the wealth of a particular farmer, and the location of a farming area within the protectorate (Croston 1993). In spite of these differences, however, a general pattern concerning farm labour is discernible.

The Ghanzi freehold farms in Botswana were superimposed on a predominantly Basarwa settlement area, and the Basarwa who stayed in the farms were given the status of squatters and were obliged to provide labour for the farmers. After the farms were fenced in the 1950s, there was increased range degradation and Basarwa 'were gradually moving into a situation approximating that of

proletarians'. Those who stayed on farms had no other source of income except wages (Mogalakwe 1986:14).

As indicated, farm labourers were very few in Botswana. In Ghanzi, no precise census population of Basarwa labourers was taken until the 1950s. Between 1938 and 1945, it was estimated that approximately 200 Basarwa were employed by the white farming community, while about 100 Africans were also employed on cattle related duties. The labour supply was described as 'plentiful'. In 1956 it was estimated that there were about 12,000 Basarwa in Ghanzi district, and that about 4,000 of them lived on farms. Of the estimated 4,000 on farms, only about 300 were believed to be employed by farmers, while the rest were regarded as squatters (BNA S.564/12). This situation of surplus labour placed Basarwa labourers in a precarious situation because farmers did not have to compete for labourers either amongst themselves, or with other sectors of the economy. Farmers could thus summarily dismiss labourers and engage others without any difficulty. Thus, the labour market here was different from that which existed in the Tuli Block where farm labourers were offered better working conditions because of the need to retain them. These prospects were not available to Basarwa labourers in Ghanzi. During the 1920s to the 1960s, migrant mine labour to the South African mines was the main avenue available to Botswana unskilled labourers, and thousands of them enrolled for the mines. This avenue was not available to Basarwa because the protectorate government and Bantu speaking dominant groups discriminated against them.

In the Tuli Block, the number of farm labourers also remained small during the colonial period. There were 449 men and 388 women living in the Tuli Block in 1936, about three tenths of a percentage of the population of Botswana at that time. In 1946, the numbers living in the area had fallen to 224 men and 190 women, about one tenth of a per cent (or 'about one thousandth') of the total population of the country. Although it was not possible to obtain the total number of employees over the whole period, the numbers 'changed very little over the years' (Croston 1993:275). However, one can assume that with the rise to prominence of cash crop production in the 1950s and 1960s, the number of workers rose. In this farming area, and other parts of eastern Botswana, such as the Tati, shortage of labour was reported to be prevalent in the 1920s and 1930s. Farmers in the eastern protectorate faced a serious competitor, the South African mines, which (as already indicated) was the major employer of migrant labour from Botswana. The problem of labour shortage seems to have plagued the freehold farmers in the Tuli and Tati areas even before a sizeable proportion of young adult males from the reserves undertook migrant labour in the 1930s. At one stage, the problem became so acute that farmers in the Tuli Block contemplated engaging migrant labourers from Northern Rhodesia. The shortage of labour at this juncture has been explained by the fact that the available labourers were too mobile. Most of them had just managed to wrest free from their positions of 'servitude, clientilage, marriage or juniority. Most of them were also tax

defaulters or those who had otherwise flouted authority'. They were, thus not the kind of labourers to undertake long-term employment for a single employer. Even in the late colonial period, labour turnover remained a problem on many farms, especially in the Tuli Block (Croston 1993:287-288). In this part of Botswana, labourers had options such as migrant mine labour, industries and even farms in the more developed South Africa. This was not the situation in western Botswana where Basarwa had no options except to provide labour or squat on the farms. Thus, the geographical location of the two freehold farming areas played a role in shaping the farm labour market.

Turning to the nature of work, labour in both Ghanzi and the Tuli Block involved cattle related activities such as herding, trekking, watering, branding and dipping. There was little specialisation in the two areas during the 1930s and 1940s and much of the work was still related to cattle (Silberbauer 1965:119; Croston 1993:276). The 1940s saw farmers in the Tuli Block turning more to crop production and intensifying the production of maize and crops such as cotton, groundnuts and oranges. With this increase in the adoption of cash crops more labourers were needed (especially women) for sowing, weeding and harvesting. Cotton was a particularly labour-intensive crop, and thus the few farmers who undertook cotton production needed many workers. It should be noted that in the Tuli Block the situation was more complex than Ghanzi because the labour needs of farms varied greatly, with some farms being sites of both cash crop production and ranching, while others largely concentrated on cattle ranching (Croston 1993:276). In Ghanzi labour involved predominantly cattle related activities because the area was dry sandveld, and not suitable for crop production.

It was largely from the late 1940s to the 1960s that farmers required labourers to carry out specialised tasks. This was caused by the growing and changing needs of agricultural production, which, in some cases, required special technology. Hence labourers with special skills such as tractor drivers or those with knowledge of veterinary science were employed (Croston 1993:276). The Tuli Block farmers also began to use irrigation technology and (later) harvesters, which needed specially trained workers. It is in this light that one should read the 1951 resident commissioner's report, which referred to a farmer having trained his 'natives', ('apt pupils' as they were described) 'to work a mechanical milking plant'. He had also taught his herdsmen how to run and repair pumping machinery (BNA S.224/5). Workers with specialised training in cattle vaccination were also employed on farms in this decade (Croston 1993:276). In the late 1950s and early 1960s some farmers in the Tuli Block had advanced to such an extent that they employed specialised cooks to feed the large numbers of farm labourers working over long periods on duties such as weeding and harvesting. In some enterprises, there were also specialised labourers for washing clothes, house cleaning and, sometimes, for gardening (Croston 1993:278). Workers had been used domestically in the earlier period, but at that time, they had carried out numerous other tasks and had not concentrated specifically on domestic work.

Such a degree of specialisation and change did not take place in Ghanzi. Cattle herding did not require many specialised functions and economically the Ghanzi farmers were not on the same plane as their counterparts in the Tuli Block. However, in the late 1950s, some of the labourers in Ghanzi also started operating water-boring machines. Moreover, the type of labourers needed tended to differ in the two areas. The Tuli Block needed a sizeable amount of women labourers because of crop cultivation, while Ghanzi labour was predominantly male due to it being mainly required for ranching, with a few women performing domestic duties.

Labourers engaged in crop cultivation in the Tuli Block had more bargaining power because of the farmers' need for them during seasonally crucial periods. It has been observed that such labourers were paid slightly more than those engaged in other jobs (Croston 1993:263). The difference between the Tuli Block and Ghanzi was that farmers in the former employed many women and children as seasonal labourers in crop production, while at Ghanzi labour was largely male and adult. These different labour needs further indicate how the African division of labour was carried into the freehold farming regimes.

## **Conditions of work**

### *a) Employment contracts and treatment of labourers*

It has been observed that conditions of work in the farms of Southern Africa were largely abysmal. Evidence from early twentieth century Botswana indicates that the employment of farm labourers did not involve any formal or written contracts. The method of recruitment was that a farmer could send some of his workers to find labourers for him, or he might venture into a village and look for interested people. A villager in the peripheral areas of the Tuli Block or Ghanzi might also go to a farm and offer his/her services, sometimes accompanied by one of those already working on the farm. Julia Croston describes the situation as having been 'very casual' with no documentation whatsoever to identify the labourer (1993:287). An effective recruiting strategy was, according to Mazonde, centred on 'the familial networks of African families'. By this system, employees on a farm were used to acquire new seasonal and permanent wage labourers who were in most cases relatives and friends of the existing employees (Mazonde1991:84). The farmers clearly trusted the workers they sent out as scouts, who would have been employees of long service and good record. There was no written agreement on the duties a labourer was going to perform, how she/he would be remunerated, nor how other aspects of work (such as leave and duration of employment) would be regulated. Labourers would simply be told what they would be doing and how much they would receive in terms of pay. This, however, does not mean that workers would not be called upon to perform other duties – something which was to the advantage of the farmers who could utilise labourers fully by requesting them to switch to different jobs as required.

The contract or agreement that was entered into between freehold farmers and their labourers continued to be 'very casual' in the period after 1930 and remained so (according to oral testimony collected) up to independence and beyond. Xaabaie Xashe of Ghanzi put it thus: '*Ga go kwalwe sepe sepe le gone jaanong jaan.*' ('There is nothing nothing written even now now.') According to Samson Banda of Lerala in the Tuli Block periphery: '*Tumalano ya eng? O bolelelwa tiro le madi. O a dumela kana o a gana.*' ('What agreement? You are told your job and pay. You accept or refuse') (Interviews: Xashe 1994; Banda 1994). The contract hardly involved anything beside the spoken word. There were rare instances where a written agreement was struck, but in most instances the process was verbal.

Informants who worked in the 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s in both Ghanzi and the Tuli Block maintain that there was no agreement with their employers on working hours and other terms of service such as leave, sick leave, termination of contracts, compensation for injuries or pensions. George Silberbauer has also found that the period of service was not stipulated by either of the contracting parties, they depended rather on mutual satisfaction: 'If the labourer dislikes the employer, he leaves and if the employer finds the worker unsatisfactory, he summarily dismisses him' (Silberbauer 1965:118). Although the situation just described pertained to Ghanzi, it was probably also prevalent in the Tuli Block because interviewees mention how labourers were dismissed for no apparent reason. This arrangement (of summary departure or dismissal) could theoretically favour either party, depending on the circumstances. However, it was obviously biased towards the farmers who were, after all, the payers of wages. And in a situation of surplus labour such as Ghanzi, a farmer could dismiss a worker quite easily, while in the Tuli Block, the fragile nature of some crops meant farmers had to adopt a cautious approach. The situation also favoured farmers who preferred not to pay their labourers their due wages on dismissal. In addition, if either party could violate the verbal contract in most cases it was the labourer who suffered because it was difficult to redress any wrong committed by the employer. According to a former long-term serving labourer, '*Go ne go sena boikuelo fa leburu le go kobile.*' ('There was no appeal if a Boer dismissed you.') (Interview: Lemme 1994).

From the early 1900s, when Batswana started working for white farmers, there was (and still is) no legislation stipulating that farmers and their employees should enter into any written agreements. The administrators regarded agricultural labourers as insignificant and it was even stated that Botswana and other High Commission Territories were not covered by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) rulings on agricultural labour (BNA S.575/3). More attention was paid to documenting migrant labour, and sections dealing with farm labour in annual reports merely provided approximations on the numbers of agricultural wage labourers and wage estimates. On the other hand, in South Africa, Alide Kooy noted that in most Karoo farms there were flexible arrangements about

sick leave on farms. Some farmers held that they paid full wages for a few weeks, while others paid full wages indefinitely in cases of 'genuine' illness. Other farmers also recognised incapacity resulting from accidents at the workplace. Conditions also varied from farm to farm and they were also determined by the attitude of the farmer (Kooy 1977:105). Whilst conditions also varied from farm to farm in Botswana, it seems the situation in South Africa was more formal and it recognised critical aspects of the labourer's welfare such as leave, although enforcement was a different matter. This difference could be explained by the earlier industrialisation of South Africa where commercial agriculture became a critical component of the economy earlier than in Botswana.

As for workers' rights, agricultural wage labourers, as distinct from any other wage earners, have been the most politically neglected in colonial and postcolonial Botswana. It was only in 2006 that proposals for a minimum wage were made in parliament. Furthermore, agrarian workers do not enjoy the rights enjoyed by other workers in mining, industry and the civil service such as sick leave, old age pensions, insurance and workman's compensation. The pitiful state in which some of the 'subject' [Basarwa] people of Botswana (the so-called 'serfs'), who formed the majority of agricultural wage labourers, found themselves in some of the reserves in the 1930s has been the subject of a study by Michael Crowder and Suzanne Miers. These writers describe the type of relationship that existed between Basarwa and their servants especially the Basarwa, who were in effect owned by the Bangwato. The 'serfs' were inheritable and lacked rights to own property, to represent themselves or bring their masters to court and they were tied to their masters in an almost slave-like situation. Miers and Crowder describe how the colonial government gradually eroded this situation (Crowder and Miers 1988:172–200).

*b) Management and supervision*

In the management of farms and daily supervision in the two areas, some farmers employed farm managers who were initially whites – although Africans were employed in the later period – to run the farms and supervise labourers. Sometimes, however, the owner managed the farm himself. The farm foreman, when he was African, usually came from a different ethnic group from that of the labourers. In fact, one reason for this practice was to ensure firmer control of labourers by dividing them from overseers along ethnic lines (Croston 1993:283; Silberbauer 1965:118). Certainly, on the Ghanzi farms supervisors were, in most cases, Bakgalagadi or Baherero presiding over Basarwa. The supervisors were thus mostly from a ‘superior’ *morafe*. Interviewees maintain that the supervisors were strict and the ‘*baas*’ (boss) applied the *sjambok* (hide whip) on numerous occasions. The ‘*klap*’ (a blow delivered with the backhand) – former labourers called it the ‘Kaffir clap’ – was also administered when one was accused of not working hard enough. Women maintain that they were sometimes beaten in front of their husbands, and when the latter complained, they too would be beaten (Interviews: Shiko, Paul and Lemme 1994).



A similar situation was reported in the Bethel district of South Africa where, throughout the working day, labourers had to work hard and were continuously urged to 'push hard'. Here also, the 'native foreman, and frequently white overseer', riding a horse 'followed behind the gangs of field hands, invariably with whips or some instrument in their hand' (Murray 1997:79). On many farms of South Africa, farmers determined punishment that could be flogging with a *sjambok* or, in some instances, even the murder of a worker. Here, the perpetrator would be charged for the lesser offence of common assault (Marcus 1989:50).

Thus, the physical abuse of farm workers was a common feature in the freehold farms of Botswana and South Africa. It is obvious that such practices could affect labour supply and, in 1957, the district commissioner at Machaneng in the Tuli Block stated that although labour was generally easy to obtain, he regretted that a 'gradual deterioration in [the] master-servant relationship was causing the supply of farm labour to decrease in proportion to its demand' (BNA S.568/6). The district commissioner's statement implies that labour shortage on the farms was constructed from below, that is, by labourers who tended to avoid those masters who were harsh. This situation was somewhat similar to that which was reported in the Transvaal at the turn of the century where 'the most energetic farmers' and 'harsher landlords' had difficulties in obtaining labour (Krikler 1993:214).

Much of the work on freehold farms was intensive and strenuous. My informants in the Tuli Block maintain that the planting, care, and harvesting of groundnuts was a laborious and heavy task. The women tell of working from sunrise to sunset, only stopping for a midday meal. Labourers spoke of the omnipresence of the master throughout the working day, and of labourers who dared to rest for fear of being reprimanded (Interviews: Shiko, Paul and Lemme 1994). Samson Banda relates how: '*Babereki ba ba neng ba fihelwa ba ikhuditse nako le nako ba ne ba bile diwa kwa khichining mme leburu le ba betse tota.*' ('Workers who were found resting were time and again summoned to the kitchen where the Boer would really beat them.') (Interview: Banda 1994). Interviewees who worked in different decades in the Tuli Block constantly referred to the existence of physical punishment, other forms of harsh treatment, and the arduousness of the labour: the weeding and harvesting, usually done by women, were exhausting tasks and the usual working day was excessive (Interview: Banda 1994; Croston 1993:276). In Ghanzi too, labourers were engaged in heavy work, with the branding of cattle, cutting of poles for fencing and bush clearance obviously involving much physical exertion. Moreover in Ghanzi, the trekking of cattle along the long and sandy Ghanzi/Lobatse road was not only strenuous, but also dangerous, since it was the site of attacks by lions upon attendant workers (Silberbauer 1965:118).

This arduous working situation prevailed in most farms in southern Africa. Crush and Jeeves relate that labour relations on southern African farms and mines were

characterised by violence and brutality. They aptly capture the mood thus, 'White farms were places of unrelenting cruelty' (Crush and Jeeves 1997:25). Martin Murray presents the working conditions graphically in the maize belt of the Bethal district from 1910 to the 1950s when he states that there was rigid regimentation of the working day. 'Farm work was backbreaking labour that, depending upon time of the year, went from 5.00 a.m. till after 7.00 p.m.' Workers were organised into gangs to accelerate the pace of work and the old, young and sick had to keep pace with others. The foreman frequently withheld the wages of those who could not keep the pace and complete their quota. Labourers worked with hand-held instruments and animals were used for heavy work. Murray sums up the situation thus: 'A corollary to a labour regime that depended principally upon sweat and labour and primitive tools was the extensive use of force and violence' (Murray 1997:79).

On the Ghanzi and Tuli Block farms, the working hours were not fixed and varied with the type of work and the season. Some duties, such as fencing and building, usually took about eight hours per day, but the jobs that were regular on the farms rarely involved a labourer for more than four hours a day (Silberbauer 1965:119). What seems to have occurred, however, was that after a labourer had completed a regular job for the day, he or she would be asked to carry on with other outstanding farm work. Existing farm labour was fully utilised and this enabled farmers to avoid further expense on additional labourers. Similarly, as late as the 1970s in the Karoo farms Alide Kooy found that farm labourers were exposed to long working hours. The farm owners defended this situation by arguing that farm labour was not similar to working in the manufacturing industry, construction or mining. To them, work began and ended with the sun and the hours of work were determined by the kind of work. They maintained that farming was a twenty-four hour a day job, and seven days a week for both the farmer and his workers. Kooy comments that:

This idea, that the worker is 'on duty' at all times and can be called from his house at any time if there is a crisis on the farm or a job to be finished urgently, has important implications. It means that the worker cannot control his own leisure, far less his work (1977:104)

In Ghanzi, physical punishment and other forms of ill treatment were more pronounced than in the Tuli Block throughout the period under study, especially punishment meted out to Basarwa labourers. This situation was made possible by the remoteness of Ghanzi, which was without district officers for many years during this period. Basarwa were not accustomed to the labour rhythm of commercial cattle keeping, and the farmers sought to get them used to it rapidly (and often violently) to effect rapid progress on their new farms. Similarly, in the South African sugar, cotton and wattle plantations of Natal and the citrus farms of the Transvaal, mistreatment of farm labourers was rampant. Here, labour relations remained primitive for a long time. Labourers worked in mealie sacks from dawn to dusk and some farmers even extended this period into the night. They forced workers

to begin work before daylight and to continue after sunset and even to work on Sundays. Labourers had their meagre wages withheld if they were ever paid and the wages were also frequently reduced to cover the cost of pass fees, transportation and recruitment (Crush and Jeeves 1997:25; Murray 1997:79).

Interestingly, in Ghanzi the white farmers adopted in regard to their labourers some of the practices of the Batswana vis-à-vis their Basarwa 'serfs'. Thus, before the fencing of farms, white farmers in Ghanzi kept cattle in the cattle post system, in a way very similar to the Batswana. In this system, cattle supervised by Basarwa 'herd boys' were let loose during the day and kraaled at night. These Basarwa herders were treated abysmally, with District Commissioner Sinclair in the late 1930s lamenting that: 'The circumstances of the employment of Bushmen on cattle posts are deplorable. They could fairly justly be described as domestic slavery'. In the same period, the district commissioner (with seeming exaggeration) reported that: 'Relations between Europeans and natives [i.e. non 'Bushman' Africans] are good and the attitude of most Europeans to their native employees is benevolently paternal' (BNA DCGH 3/5). Notwithstanding the exaggeration, what seems to emerge is that the masters were harsher to Basarwa labourers as compared to Bakgalagadi and Bahereo, and this must – in part – have resulted from pre-existing relationships amongst Bantu speaking Africans and Basarwa.

As to the treatment of labourers, that of Basarwa was particularly severe. Interviewees from both the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi ethnic groups mention several instances where Basarwa labourers were severely beaten and tied to trees. Xarae Daosha displayed scars from whippings, and another man only known as Xam also showed scars, which he said had resulted from whippings on the farms. Other interviewees referred to instances (that prevailed until recently) in which they would be perched on top of trucks to ensure the safety of cattle being transported along the 600-kilometre road to the Lobatse abattoir (Interviews: Serole and Daosha 1994). The harsh treatment of Basarwa labourers prevailed for the whole period under study; it has continued up until recent times as evidenced by the testimonies of labourers who were recently employed, and can be seen in the results of two surveys carried out in the 1970s and early 1980s (Childers 1976:92; Mogalakwe 1986:2–5).<sup>2</sup> As indicated, the Bakgalagadi and Baherero workers were not subjected to such brutal treatment and this was largely because they were regarded as ethnically superior to Basarwa.

The working conditions on freehold farms in Botswana were poor and they have continued to be so in the postcolonial period. In spite of these conditions and the sometimes brutal treatment meted out to them, many labourers – i.e. the non-seasonal ones – remained on farms. However, because they were *bafaladi*, the socioeconomic and political hierarchies of Botswana's society gave them inferior status. Thus, although *bafaladi* were welcome to settle on land belonging to the other *merafe*, including those who had earlier welcomed them, they were expected to pay allegiance to their hosts and were not on an equal footing with them in

respect of key rights, such as that to land. There is little doubt that the overlordship of the superior *merafe* was a source of concern for the *bafaladi*: the Babirwa disliked both British and Ngwato 'imperialism' after losing the Tuli Block to the British South Africa Company and preferred to remain on settler farms and offer their labour to the new masters (Croston 1993:291-295). Similarly, the Basarwa could not leave the farms and stay amongst the Bakgalagadi because the latter would assign them duties as herd boys, while in most cases not giving them any better rights to land than that which they had on settler farms.

The nature of labourers as *bafaladi* served the interests of farmers because they were utilising workers who, having few options, had to provide cheap labour. *Bafaladi* remained attached to their ancestral lands even after these had been parcelled out to white farmers. Not surprisingly, the labourers found it difficult to appeal to any authority for help when they had problems with farmers. To take an example: the headmen of Babirwa and Batswapong who worked in the Tuli Block were nominally under Bangwato chiefs, and it would have been difficult for the former to appeal to the latter because of the historical animosity between the two *merafe*. It was also, as one interviewer put it '*thata thata go repota lekgoa mo go le lengwe*' ('very very difficult to report a white man to another white man') (Banda 1994), that is, for instance, to report a freehold farmer to the district commissioner. This was both for fear of reprisals and the belief that a white official would never reprimand a fellow white man. Neither could labourers readily present their grievances to their headmen because employers could humiliatingly chastise them in front of the headmen (Interviews: Motlalamadi and Tlhalefang 1994). Thus there was little workers could do to have their grievances addressed. In such conditions, flight or resignation to one's fate were the usual options. Flight or avoiding harsh farmers should be seen here as a weapon employed by labourers against the powerful farmers.

### **Shelter and remuneration**

For shelter, labourers in Ghanzi and the Tuli Block tended to provide for themselves by constructing thatched wattle and daub huts. Even most of the regular farm labourers in the Tuli Block who resided on the farms constructed their sleeping quarters in the form of rough shacks made 'from empty grain sacks' (Croston 1993:265). Former labourers speak of having used poles, mud and old discarded iron sheets to make what they called *mekhukhu* (Interviews: Motlalamadi and Tlhalefang 1994). In fact, shelter for farm labourers has only made modest improvements since the 1930s, as demonstrated by the fact that, as recently as 1981, a survey in Ghanzi found that about sixty per cent of the workers lived in hovels and shacks (Mogalakwe 1986:2-5), and that accommodation for workers in the Tuli Block was made from sacks and old corrugated iron sheets (Croston 1993:265; Maruatona 1988:30). Thus, generally, it would appear that accommodation for farm labour in Botswana farms was sub-standard.

The question of remuneration on the freehold farms is a complex one. The wages paid labourers differed from farm to farm and the available records only offer approximations of them. Some of the employers gave rations in addition to wages, and this also makes it difficult to find out the precise magnitude of remuneration. The value of rations in most instances was not detailed, and the frequency with which rations were given also varied markedly from farm to farm. There are other hurdles in trying to assess wages. Some of the former workers interviewed could not remember the exact amounts they were paid, or the precise periods in which they were paid specific wages.

The situation concerning payment of wages in the 1930s and 1940s in Ghanzi is unclear. Some reports indicate that some wages, however low, were paid, while others maintain that no monetary wage was paid at all. In 1937 one rather prejudiced official in Ghanzi stated that the majority of 'Bushmen' received shirts, blankets, milk and tobacco in lieu of wages because it was pointless to give them money, since they allegedly did not know its value:

They do not receive cash wages, but clothes to the approximate value of in many cases from £3 to £5 per annum, as much milk as they want, and rations of mealies when milk is scarce. When given money, the Bakgalagadi dispossess them in exchange for trash or dagga. (BNA S.182/5)

Remuneration also depended on the whims of farmers, making it difficult to construct averages. However, despite these difficulties, comments by colonial officials on wages, the views expressed by former labourers, and the existing scholarship enable us to draw some conclusions.

In general, studies of farm labour in Botswana agree that labourers were over-worked and under-remunerated (Croston 1993:263–278; Maruatona 1988; Mgadla 1976:19–36). However, farmers engaged in commercial crop production had to pay slightly better wages if they were to avoid shortages of labour, which did occur at times in the Tuli Block (Croston 1993:263). What is certain, however, is that wages on the protectorate's farms remained below those paid to farm labourers in the Transvaal Province of South Africa (Croston 1993:280), and although wages for cultivators might have been slightly higher than those for other labourers, the difference was not significant. As the above statement shows, while the Bantu speakers received some wages, Basarwa in Ghanzi were only paid in kind, because of their ethnicity, which condemned them to the status of serfs in Botswana's society. Labourers in the Tuli Block were in a better position as compared to their counterparts at Ghanzi since they could also work on the other side of the border in the Transvaal where better wages were paid. The official reports indicate what was considered to have been the general level of wages and, for some years, they reveal the difference between wages paid to Africans and whites. The estimates provided in colonial annual reports regarding the general wage levels in the country, and the figures or estimates

provided by officials from areas such as Ghanzi, differ in some cases. I have used some of the scant and varying official data available to construct Table 1.

From Table 1 it can be seen that if official records are reliable then there were some significant wage increases for Africans in the 1940s. Wage increases could have been due to labour competition arising from the opening of new mines in South Africa, or the higher wage levels prevailing in the neighbouring Transvaal after the Depression, which compelled farmers to increase the wages for farm labourers in Botswana. Most of the European employees, it would appear, were managers or supervisors, while the Africans were general labourers, and the wage differentials between them were extremely wide, with the remuneration structure heavily discriminating against African labourers. It might also be noted that, in the Tuli Block, wage levels appear to have been far below the national averages, as is suggested by Table 2.

Evidence from the Tuli Block suggests that, once more, wages and fringe benefits differed for Europeans and Africans. In 1959 the district commissioner at Machaneng, who had jurisdiction over the Tuli Block area, reported that in addition to their wages, European employees got free farm produce and often a share in the profits. The African general labourers, cattle herders and foremen on the other hand received from 30s to £5 a month and some food (BNA S.577/6). The picture generally therefore, is one of severe racial discrimination and also indicates disparities between official records, which in some cases show relatively high wages for Africans, such as £5 per month, and those found in the oral sources provided by Croston, which indicate levels to have risen from £1 in the 1940s to £3 in the 1950s and 1960s. Although it is difficult to state what could have been an appropriate wage, it appears the general picture was that of low wages for farm workers in the period under study.

For much of this period, farmers in the Tuli Block also operated stores and provided rations for labourers. Some of the rations were from the farmers' own stores, while others were produced on the farm. The rations included items such as coffee, tea and sugar, and, at times, beasts might be slaughtered for labourers (Croston 1993:265). However, rations given to underpaid workers probably served the interests of the farmers because they ensured the physical strength of

**Table 1.** General wage levels in Botswana

Years	Wage (Europeans)	Wage (Africans)
1930s	£60–£320 per annum	£6–£14 per annum
1940s	£96–£240 per annum	£12–£24 per annum
1950s	£15–£40 (per month)	£4 per month
1960s	N/A	£4 per month

*Source:* Blue Books 1931–1945, and BNB 41–50. *BP Colonial Annual Reports, 1950–1960*

**Table 2.** Wage levels in the Tuli Block, Botswana

Years	Wage per month (African labourers)
1930s	£1 (about 4s in some cases)
1940s	£1 (about 17s 9d in some cases)
1950s	£2 (Europeans £15–£40)
1960s	£3

*Source:* This table was constructed from data provided by Julie Croston 1993:265–281

the labourers (Mazonde 1991:84). Although they supplemented low pay in instances where they were handed out regularly, rations could also have been used to depress money wages. There were also labourers who resided permanently in the Tuli Block, and who were allowed to keep a certain number of stock and (sometimes) cultivate a plot. These seem to have received lower cash wages (Interviews: Motlalamadi and Banda 1994). It was not possible to establish at any point the number of workers, permanent or not, who were accorded rights to land, or the amount of land so allocated. Normally, one was told not to graze cattle beyond a certain area, and also instructed not to allow stock to mix with the employer's cattle (Interview: Malapela 1994). This makes it difficult to draw conclusions as to how widespread the practice of allowing labourers to use land was, and what its precise effect on the freehold farming system was.

In Ghanzi, the situation concerning remuneration was in some ways different from that in the Tuli Block. At a session of the European Advisory Council (EAC) in 1939, the government secretary informed members that the usual practice in Ghanzi was to employ a Damara or Herero herd boy to preside over a varying number of 'Bushmen' who supervised anything from 150 to 1,400 cattle. The herd boy got about 10s to 15s, while the 'Bushmen' cowherds 'received rations, milk and an annual pay in the form of an item such as a blanket, shirt, coat, or a pair of trousers' (BP EAC 1939). The government secretary was here echoing a statement similar to that made by an administration official at Ghanzi in 1937, and despite knowledge of the prevalence of such a situation by senior colonial officials, they did not take any concrete action to remedy this situation of abysmal remuneration, and it amounted to blatant exploitation and abuse of farm workers. This further reinforces the argument that Basarwa were under-remunerated and exploited because of their ethnicity and servile status in Botswana.

The labour and life situation of Basarwa also deteriorated over time. There were few farmers in the 1930s and 1940s, the farms were not yet fenced, and Basarwa had some access to land. But, a new wave of immigrant white farmers arrived in the early 1950s and extended to the settlement area. The new farms had been advertised in newspapers in South Africa where they were described as lucrative vacant land. Incentives to develop the farms were also offered for those who

wished to take up the offers. This area was occupied by Basarwa (Russell and Russell 1979:94). This settlement exacerbated the expropriation of valuable hunting, gathering and grazing land, turning more 'Basarwa into squatters on their traditional land' (Thapelo 2003:96). In the 1950s and early 1960s, Afrikaner nationalism started asserting itself in Ghanzi as Afrikaners called for the removal of Basarwa squatters from their farms, as well as the Bantu speakers on the periphery of the farming area. The farmers declared that Ghanzi district belonged to them (Russell and Russell 1979:20–21). During this period the farmers preferred employing the Bantu speakers as against Basarwa, driving the latter into deeper misery. Whereas conditions for the Basarwa were progressively deteriorating, those of the now preferred Bantu groups were improving, as commercialisation of agriculture gathered momentum.

The Bantu speakers in both farming areas had access to land in communal areas and hence the possibilities of accumulation by engaging in both crop production and livestock keeping. They could thus be accorded better working conditions because they could withdraw their labour and subsist on their own production. This could have adverse effects on farmers especially during peak seasons such as harvest time. On the other hand, Basarwa were squatters on farms with no access to land and no possibilities of accumulation and maintaining an independent subsistence. With increased range degradation due to an increase in livestock population, even foraging became difficult. Hence they depended on the whims of the farmers and could do nothing to better their working conditions.

The wage situation in Ghanzi was the least attractive in part because, unlike their counterparts in the Tuli Block, farmers here did not compete for labour with the mines or industries. The Basarwa were the main source of labour on Ghanzi farms during the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. It is likely that fewer of them were needed once fencing of the farms began in the mid-1950s and there was no longer any need to employ large numbers of herders to keep cattle from straying. For the labourers, the situation must have been bleak because the reduction in the availability of farm employment was not compensated by the availability of land or better wage opportunities elsewhere. The Basarwa, who had played a crucial role as cheap labourers in ensuring the prosperity of white farmers, were now losing their positions to Bantu groups, notably Bakgalagadi and Baherero who were experienced cattle keepers (Silberbauer 1965:118).

In instances where Basarwa did receive wages, they were the lowest in the agricultural sector in Botswana. In 1954, the district commissioner informed the government secretary that the average wage paid to a Mosarwa labourer – it was estimated that there were then about 12,000 Basarwa living in the freehold farming area (BNA S.556/11) – was about £1, though sometimes it ranged from half to double this figure (BNA S.556/6). However, wages of £1 and £2 per month would have been rare, and it was extremely rare for wages in Ghanzi, and especially those for Basarwa, to have been equal to wages paid in



areas such as the Tuli Block. The most plausible figure is that provided by a concerned district commissioner in 1955, who complained about the lowness of the 10s monthly wage paid to 'Bushmen' in Ghanzi (BNA S.116/5). However, despite inconsistencies in pay levels, and in the regularity with which payments were made, it seems there was a steady trend towards payment of monetary wages, however low, in the late 1950s and the 1960s (BNA S.116/5). This situation seems to have been brought about by the commercialisation of agriculture that was taking place at the time, and by the imposition of taxation on Basarwa by the colonial government.

In fact, the payment of taxes by Basarwa, and not their welfare, was the main concern of the administration officials. In 1954, District Commissioner EH Midgley stipulated that 'Bushmen' who had not hitherto done so were to pay tax. Those of the Basarwa who owned stock, or those earning £1 or more per month, would pay the normal £1 8s basic tax plus 5s or more graded tax. Those who did not own any stock, were unemployed, or working for irregular periods would pay a graded tax of 5s per annum, while non stock-owners in regular employment earning less than £1 per month were to pay the basic tax of £1 8s (BNA S.116/5).<sup>3</sup> This imposition of tax was a further burden on a community that was already impoverished by land alienation to white settlers.

The wage situation of the Basarwa labourers in the Ghanzi freehold farms was, indeed, a miserable one. Compared to other agricultural labourers elsewhere, they were in a desperate situation, one vividly described by the district commissioner in a dispatch to the government secretary in 1955:

I have been concerned to make Bushmen wage conscious. I've been collecting graded tax and in some cases basic tax. Some farmers object saying they have never paid a wage or given a regular ration. Ninety percent of stock thieves were employees who claim that they have worked as much as fifteen years for Mr Burton and have never been paid a wage. Payment has only been a blanket, a coat or shirt or shorts a year, a bag of mealies perhaps once a year and a handful of tobacco once weekly. (BNA S.116/5)

He continued to lament that these 'slave' labourers lived mostly on milk at the cattle posts of Burton, a man who owned about 15,000 head of cattle and who was reputed to be one of the richest men in the country (BNA S.116/5). Throughout the 1930s to the 1950s, the colonial government recognised that Basarwa were oppressed, and the fact that they could not do anything about it shows that they served the interests of the ruling classes, both white and Bantu.

The position of the Basarwa was not to improve with the growth and expansion of ranching activities in Ghanzi. Indeed, with the gradual introduction of new technologies and the spread of commercial agriculture, the condition of the Basarwa labourers and even the 'squatters' deteriorated. By 1964, it was estimated that of the 4,000 Basarwa living in the freehold farming area of Ghanzi (Silberbauer 1965:118), few remained as labourers, and the wages of those who did so

varied from R1.10 to R6 per month, the average wage being R3 with a ration of mealie meal, meat, tobacco, salt and – sometimes – tea, coffee, and sugar (the South African currency, used in Botswana, changed in 1961 to the decimal rand). Silberbauer estimates that the value of rations was about R5 per month at the maximum (1965:118). However, rations were irregular and differed from farm to farm and even pay was not regular (Childers 1976:92; Mogalakwe 1986:15–31; Morapedi 1989:14–21). The official data on rations and wages was probably supplied by those white farmers who paid their labourers. Some farmers were astounded by a call in the 1950s that they should pay their labourers monetary wages, a clear indication that on many farms the adoption of wage payments was a painfully slow process.

One must note, however, a few instances where labourers were given better remuneration, including in-kind payments. Some relatively considerate farmers effectively pensioned old labourers off by continuing to feed and clothe them as well as giving them money periodically. Labourers viewed as hardworking were given bonuses in the form of livestock, although this practice was less widespread than Silberbauer supposed:

In addition to wages, rations . . . most farmers have the practice of giving regular bonuses of small stock to labourers who prove satisfactory. A few Bushmen have kept these and have built up fair-sized herds, which they are permitted to graze and water on their employers' farms, but the majority are less far sighted and eat the animals as soon as they are received. (1965:119)

Silberbauer's interpretation of the immediate consumption of the animals does not take into account the fact that Basarwa were short of food. After the farms were fenced, it was no longer possible for them to hunt, and the increase in livestock was gradually making foraging difficult for them. Moreover, the extermination of game on the farms meant that Basarwa could not supplement their rations from that source (Silberbauer 1965:118). Little wonder, then, that bonus livestock was so often immediately slaughtered. Some Bakgalagadi and Baherero interviewees admit to building herds from their bonuses, but they state that the grazing of the livestock (the numbers of which were limited) on the farmers' land was considered part of their pay (Interview: Serole 1994), thus diminishing the value of the bonus. These were workers who came from villages far from the farms, but they had access to land in the communal areas so the accumulation of stock, which might later be taken home, was an option available to them that was not open to the Basarwa. What is difficult is the calculation of the value of these practices to the labourers. Although it may appear that there was a tinge of paternalism in the relations between farmers and labourers in Ghanzi, this was nowhere near the close paternalistic attitude between Kas Maine and white farmers as portrayed by Charles van Onselen (1996).

The wage differentials and other conditions of work in the two farming areas was also a result of class differentials in the white farming community. In Ghanzi,

many of the whites in the 1930s and 1940s and even those who came later were described as 'poor whites' who had to be assisted by being given cheap property (land) (Russell and Russell 1979:34–35), while in the Tuli Block, the farmers were, from an early stage, a well established commercial 'bourgeoisie'. Most were absentee landlords who either had many other farms in the Transvaal, or held political and administrative positions in the cities of Pretoria and Johannesburg. Many of them also operated trading stores in the reserves or at their farms. They had easy access to markets across the border in South Africa and could utilise the developed infrastructure there. The farmers took advantage of this situation, which Mazonde terms 'Bordermanship' (1987:456). They could thus afford to pay better wages than their counterparts at Ghanzi who were about 700 miles away from South Africa and experienced marketing problems.

## Conclusion

This comparative study on freehold farm labour in the Tuli Block and Ghanzi areas of Botswana has revealed the complexities of the labour process in the two areas. Although there were numerous similarities such as abysmal remuneration of labourers, brutal and violent treatment and poor living conditions in those areas, the study shows that there were ethnic, economic and social factors that resulted in the Basarwa labourers being the worst affected. The ecological differences between Ghanzi and the Tuli Block meant that the two had different labour needs, as the Tuli Block needed labourers in both crop production and the cattle sector, which meant a sizeable number of women, while Ghanzi labour was predominantly male engaged in cattle activities. The Tuli Block was also economically advanced and its proximity to South Africa enabled a commercial bourgeoisie to emerge, which could pay its labourers better and adopt more specialised production techniques, while Ghanzi lagged behind. The displacement of Basarwa created a pool of squatters who had no option but to provide cheap labour on the farms. Their super-exploitation on the farms also emanated from the pre-existing social systems of Botswana, which accorded them servile status. The two cases show opposite ends of Botswana, not only in geography, but also in society. In the Tuli Block there was development and labourers had some options. In Ghanzi, the worst sort of white South African farm exploitation had been glued on to the worst features of indigenous Botswana ethnic discrimination – and the result was something close to slavery. Further detailed case studies on the relationships that existed in different farms could reveal more interesting scenarios.

## Notes

1. The white settler farming blocks of Tuli Block, Gaborone and Lobatse were lands ceded to the British South Africa Company (BSAC) to build a railway line by Batswana *dikgosi* (chiefs) in the 1890s. The Ghanzi farming area was ceded to the BSAC to settle white farmers after Cecil

Rhodes had failed to acquire Bechuanaland, and the Tati area was carved out for white settlement in 1911.

2. Interviews with William Babish, 10 December 1994 and Rakanang Mabung, 6 December 1994. They emphasised the fact that they knew of many incidents of ill treatment of workers from the 1940s to the present. In the 1930s, the fact that the district commissioner showed concern by stating that the condition of Basarwa on farms could be described as 'domestic slavery' indicates that ill treatment was prevalent then.
3. Resident Commissioner to High Commissioner, 11 April 1957. Later the district commissioner informed the government secretary that, 'there appears to have been a slight improvement in wages paid to Bushman in the Ghanzi district. Newcomers to the district have been prepared to pay higher wages and the "oldtimers" are coming round very slowly to their obligations', 23 September 1957. Newcomers were those farmers who moved in after the advertisement and sale of new farms in the 1950s. The district commissioner's statement is difficult to confirm since the records are imprecise and his report was based largely on what farmers told him.

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## **Oral interviews**

Lerala (Tuli Block), 4 December 1994:  
Mr Banda

Mr Motlalamadi  
Mr Tlhalefang  
Mr Malapela  
Mrs Shiko  
Mrs Paul  
Mrs Lemme

Ghanzi, 10 December 1994:  
Mr Serole  
Mr Xhashe  
Mr Daosha