Settling in Motion: Northerners’ Informal Migration through Southern Rhodesia into the Union of South Africa: 1920s – 1950s

Anusa Daimon

University of the Free State
South Africa
Introduction

- In the last 20 years, South Africa (SA) has experienced an influx of illegal African migrants from the region & beyond.

- Most immigrants are political & economic refugees fleeing homeland socio-economic & political inadequacies in pursuit of the lucrative promises that post-apartheid South Africa offers.

- Many are illegal or undocumented migrants.

ARGUMENT - However, illegal African migration into SA is not uniquely a post-apartheid phenomenon. It has its antecedents in the colonial/apartheid period.

- It is predated to the colonial labour migration from the 1890s - when migrant labourers (Northerners) came from Malawi, Zambia & Mozambique.

- There was rampant illicit migration mainly by northern labourers through Southern Rhodesia into SA between the 1920s & 1950s.

- Many transient labourers subverted the inhibitive Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA) contractual obligations by informally migrating independently into SA.

- In essence, they ‘settled in motion’, using Southern Rhodesia as a stepping-stone or springboard en-route to SA.
Historiography on Informal Migration

- Existing studies on colonial labour migration in the region have not been explicit on the nuances of illicit labour movement into SA.

- For example, SA literature has shown that the majority of black miners were Mozambicans who were transformed from slavery & indenture in the Cape to migrant labour in the 1800s (Patrick Harries 1990, 1994, 2014).

- Post Anglo-Boer war labour shortages compelled the industry to rely on alternative Chinese labour from north China but were repatriated in the aftermath of changing race politics in SA (F. Rankin-Smith, 2014).

- Karen Harris (1997, 1998a; 2002) further looked at the experiences of these indentured ‘overseas Chinese’ in SA showing their struggles to belong in a racially hierarchical society where they are seen as not black or white enough.

- Thereafter, migrants from Mozambique, Malawi, Lesotho, flooded the mining industry (David Coplan 2014).

- Dunbar Moodie (1992) discussed how culture & broader identities of Mozambican migrants’ on SA gold mines were central for surviving ethnic & work related challenges.

- Francis Musoni (2012) chronicled the rise & resilience of illegal migration across the Zimbabwe-South Africa border from the late 19thC, but without being explicit & specific on northern labour migrants.
For many northern labour migrants, Southern Rhodesia was not their final destination.

They ‘settled in motion’, entering Rhodesia up north & gradually working their way down south.

They would eventually reach the shores of the Limpopo River & clandestinely crossed into SA to work on farms & mines in Musina, Transvaal, Johannesburg, the Orange Free State & reach as far as Durban & Cape Town.

McCracken (2012) – ‘for many Malawians, including the two most famous, Clements Kadalie & Hastings Kamuzu Banda, Rhodesia was a staging post to SA.’

Banda worked for 18 months at Hartley hospital in Southern Rhodesia before moving to Maronjeri colliery in South Africa in 1917.

Kadalie worked as a clerk for the Rhodesian Railways & two gold mines before heading south to Kimberley almost exactly a year later.’

BSAP Provincial Criminal Investigation Officer (October 1950) - ‘Because Rhodesia lies astride their route to SA, they only go through the motions of registering & working here...as soon as they can (in some cases they only stay a matter of weeks) they move to SA by various devious routes.’
Colonial Labour Migration Routes
Reasons for Informal Migration

- Paper merges migration & statecraft arguing that illicit migration emerged & expanded as an unintended by-product of state building processes, which began with colonization.

- Crush, Williams & Peberdy (2005) - colonial boundaries severed societies/communities in half - creating ‘artificial boundaries’ (Asiwaju, Mamdani & Connor )

- Colonization introduced new notions of borders & border enforcement, which destabilized pre-colonial patterns of mobility.

- Colonial policies of migration control criminalized & produced new kinds of mobility.

- Borders delegitimized/criminalized African mobility across territories.

- This saw the emergence of nomenclature such as illegal, clandestine, irregular, informal & undocumented migrants or border jumpers.

- Illicit labour migrants sought to avoid the exploitative contractual obligations of the WNLA.

- Rand Mines recruitment monopoly also drove informal migration - other colonial industries (agriculture & domestic service ) - often hired migrants outside the law.

- SA also encouraged such informal migration – competition with Southern Rhodesia
Approximately 95% of unofficial migrants proceeding to SA were northern aliens, esp. Malawians.

Beitbridge police patrols revealed in 1937 – between 200 & 300 Africans crossed the border monthly.

Between August 1938 & January 1939, the Rhodesia Railways Road Motor Service carried 4006 labourers from West Nicholson to Beitbridge.

Pass Office records at West Nicholson from January 1st to June 2nd 1939, revealed that 3,805 ‘passes to seek work’ were issued to ‘alien natives’ of which 3,650 were to Beitbridge, indicating an exodus of alien labourers at a rate of about 7,000 a year.

By the 1940s, the informal migration had become uncontrollable

Illegals were entering SA at a rate of approximately 14,000 a year,

At any given moment in the 1940s, some 36,000 Malawians were resident in SA. In 1946 they were 61,005; 64,000 by 1951 & 10,777 by 1970.
## Foreign Africans in South Africa, 1911-1970

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1911</th>
<th>1921</th>
<th>1936</th>
<th>1946</th>
<th>1951</th>
<th>1960</th>
<th>1970</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angola</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Botswana</td>
<td>5,020</td>
<td>11,959</td>
<td>4,048</td>
<td>38,559</td>
<td>51,017</td>
<td>21,658</td>
<td>49,469</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lesotho</td>
<td>75,132</td>
<td>111,733</td>
<td>163,838</td>
<td>199,327</td>
<td>219,065</td>
<td>73,639</td>
<td>157,499</td>
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<tr>
<td>Malawi</td>
<td>4,573</td>
<td>22,122</td>
<td>17,657</td>
<td>61,005</td>
<td>63,655</td>
<td>23,608</td>
<td>110,777</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mozambique</td>
<td>114,976</td>
<td>110,245</td>
<td>98,031</td>
<td>141,417</td>
<td>161,240</td>
<td>35,857</td>
<td>142,512</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Namibia</td>
<td>2,230</td>
<td>2,296</td>
<td>1,879</td>
<td>4,990</td>
<td>4,129</td>
<td>1,073</td>
<td>2,518</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swaziland</td>
<td>21,662</td>
<td>29,177</td>
<td>31,092</td>
<td>33,738</td>
<td>42,914</td>
<td>17,836</td>
<td>29,167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanzania</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>118</td>
<td>2,937</td>
<td>7,127</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>288</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zambia</td>
<td>2,158</td>
<td>12,189</td>
<td>13,515</td>
<td>13,544</td>
<td>2,996</td>
<td>2,194</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Zimbabwe</td>
<td>2,526</td>
<td>2,167</td>
<td>32,034</td>
<td>32,697</td>
<td>11,805</td>
<td>13,392</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>930</td>
<td>5,146</td>
<td>2,730</td>
<td>22,569</td>
<td>4,282</td>
<td>857</td>
<td>4,369</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>229,207</td>
<td>279,819</td>
<td>333,777</td>
<td>556,807</td>
<td>605,992</td>
<td>189,622</td>
<td>516,044</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Illicit Migration Mechanisms – (a) Social Networks

- Most migrants had strong transnational social networks on better working conditions across the Limpopo.

- Native Commissioner of Gwanda, J.C Kallis, reported -‘by each train a number of alien natives arrive here wishing to proceed to SA...’all I can get from enquiries is that the exodus is due to letters from ‘brothers’ at Messina telling that labour is wanted, & that the pay is higher’

- South Africa wages were distinctly attractive as compared to the region – e.g. Southern Rhodesia (10 -19 shillings/month); Wages on the Rand ranged from 70 shillings to 100 shillings a month, plus free rations & quarters (McCracken 2012)

- BSAP Provincial Criminal Investigation Officer, Mashonaland, Sergeant G. Haines - ‘letters have been found on these natives from friends in SA giving full particulars of the route to be taken, situation of Police Stations & such like places to be avoided in order to get through & they usually have considerable sums of money on them for the journey’

- Some Nyasas were occasionally caught within Southern Rhodesia in possession of such incriminating letters.

- Roben was found in possession of three letters one of which contained 5 pounds in Rhodesian notes stating that ‘work was easy to get in SA & the money is between 4 & 5 pounds per month & you must come quick.’
(b) Forging Passes

- Migrants were not allowed to proceed to SA because their registration certificates or passes confined them to seeking employment in Southern Rhodesia.

- In response, Northerners acquired forged SA passes from colleagues & syndicates.

- Most fake passes were badly written ‘from which it would appear that they were issued by natives & not by any European in authority.’

- F.W. Harrison, the Divisional Criminal Investigation Officer, Bulawayo - ‘natives have been found in possession of forged printed passes from mining & other concerns in SA.’

- The Controller of Censorship Department in Bulawayo usually intercepted 5 or 6 of such letters per day.
### Copies of Letters Nabbed by the Controller of Censorship

#### COLONY OF SOUTHERN RHODESIA CENSORSHIP

**CORRESPONDENCE SUSPECTED TO REQUIRE SPECIAL ATTENTION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sender’s Name</th>
<th>William Blantyre</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sender’s Address &amp; Office of Posting</td>
<td>c/o...Bushwick Mine, P.O. Bushwick...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date of Letter</td>
<td>18.4.44...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original Language</td>
<td>Chinyanja...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name of Addressee</td>
<td>Joseph Tembo...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Address of Addressee</td>
<td>c/o...A.E. Freeman Esq., P.O. Box 1, Palapye...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature, or amount, of Enclosure</td>
<td>(if any)...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Material passages copied here:

> "...Please I am still here waiting for you to come & pick me up there, am really anxious to come over there. When coming up here you must please get a pass leave from your master & that pass must be given to me, do not write as if it is yours."

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sender’s Name</th>
<th>PitirosiKumwenda...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sender’s Address &amp; Office of Posting</td>
<td>c/o...Oliphant Farm, P.O. Box 76, Que Que...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date of Letter</td>
<td>14.4.44...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original Language</td>
<td>Chibenga...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name of Addressee</td>
<td>abrack Mitt, Dan DykMyr...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Address of Adressee</td>
<td>No. 2 Compound, Room No. 13, P.O. Box 20, Boksburg...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nature, or amount, of Enclosure (if any):...

Material passages copied here:

> "...I am desirous of coming down there & I beg your most kindness to buy me a pass of that country & after you have bought it, please send it to me very urgently. I am sure to pay your money back on arrival there. I am here with my two friends, their names are as follows: 1. SandiresiNgoma, 2. TaniyereNgoma. I have written their names as to show that otherwise if possible you may favour them also."
Forging syndicates were busted within Nyasaland & Southern Rhodesia.

Webster was caught issuing bogus passes to fellow Malawians.

Apparently, Webster used to work for the African Explosives & Industries Ltd in SA where before departing for his homeland had stolen the company’s booklet of passes.

He then sold these passes to those wishing to travel to the SA for 6 shillings for each pass.

Webster would forge the details of his clients in pencil on the blank passes which purported to show that they were on leave from various firms in SA.

On 28 March 1944 four of his clients were arrested at Plumtree & sentenced to one month’s hard labour for contravening the Native Passes Act.

52 Rhodesian ‘natives’ were arrested for being in possession of these false passes in February 1951.
(c) Formal Passes

- Some migrants followed procedure by obtaining the formal pass granting them permission to visit Messina for a few days after which they would disappear in South Africa.

- NC Gwanda - ‘it has been customary to give alien natives who apply here for Passes seeking permission to visit Messina for 4 days, with instructions to report to the Pass Officer at Messina.’

- ‘They very seldom return here, & there is no doubt they obtain work in the Transvaal, the majority I think at Messina, & I am unable to prevent these natives from crossing the Rhodesian border, whether the Limpopo River is in flood or not.’

MISDEMEANOURS

- Serious misdemeanours characterised migrants along the labour routes
- Desertions from mines were rampant & swift.
- White employers complained of rampant theft – stock, stores
Curbing Informal Migration

- Apparently, illicit migration was impossible to stop for both the native authorities & the colonial police.
- Rand Mail (1936) – ‘SA farmers & miners on the whole ‘prefer foreign natives because they remain longer on the farms & mines & are stated to be better workers.’
- Physical challenges – BSAP – the border is more than 400 miles & can be crossed with ease at any place
- Lack of stringent laws against illicit migrants – the imposition of a fine or short term of imprisonment would have little or no effect as a deterrent to emigration.
- Those arrested were not deported but paid 15 shillings for a Temporary Permit & immediately found employment in SA
Exploitation of Rhodesian Incentives

- Northerners also exploited the free Rhodesian government transport services to quicken their journey.
- Southern Rhodesia had introduced the Free Migrant Labour Transport Service consisting of buses, trains, lorries, food depots, shelters in 1936.
- Known as *Ulere* among Malawians (*Ulere* means ‘free’ in Chewa) - service ran from Nyasaland through Salisbury to the mines of southern Matabeleland near the border with South.
- By the 1950s, *Ulere* transported about 70% of northern migrants entering or leaving Rhodesia.
- Ulere reduced the transnational trip from months to less than a week.
- Johnson (2000) – ‘prior to Ulere, intending illegal migrants, having walked through the Zambezi valley, arrived in Rhodesia ‘so tired & debilitated’ that they had to ‘work for 2-3 months in S. Rhodesia to get in condition for proceeding to SA, & possibly to find money to travel otherwise than on foot to the border.’
- Ulere enabled migrants to save what money they may have, & to use it for the purpose of proceeding further South in the direction of the Rand mines.
- Therefore, movement was relatively swift with the free transport with migrants no longer really ‘settling in motion’ or gradually working southwards.
Conclusion - Parallels
Post-apartheid Illegal Crossing – Zim-RSA
Conclusion - Parallels

- Narratives of informal migration detailed herein nuances & challenges numerous orthodox views within the historiography of migration in Southern Africa.

- This narrative acts as a background for understanding the precursors of the rampant illegal African migration into post-apartheid South Africa.

- No longer settling in motion – but informality still prevalent

- Colonial African agency - authority circumvention, social networks, forgery, arduous journeys & desertions – has been prevalent in the last 15 years

- Migrants deported by the SA gvt – always find their way back in SA

- The border is still as porous as during the colonial times

- RSA govt continues to rely on such undocumented labour – farms along the border (Maxim Bolt 2015)

- 2010 World Cup infrastructure was largely built by formerly illegal migrants given Special Permits

- Migration remains a critical part of the regional economic system – Remittances/Infrastructure
Thank You