

# The Disruption of Migrant Labour on the Labourer, Family, Community, Land and Religion or Church in South Africa during the 20th Century

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## Abstract

The impact of migrant labour could not be avoided by the church during the 20th century in South Africa. Migrant labour has contributed to the national economic development of South Africa. This is an important aspect of community development in terms of growing the South African economy, building infrastructure, opening business opportunities, and for South Africans to benefit from this type of economy. Initially, agriculture was the best economy for community development, driven by African people who were heavily dependent on their agricultural economy. However, the policies related to migrant labour have disrupted and lowered agricultural production that existed, and which was also thriving as an agricultural economy. Furthermore, migrant labour policies promoted numerous cases of family separation and infidelity in marriages. White missionaries collaborated with the mine owners (as colonisers) in terms of access to education and freedom of worship. However, African religion, male labourers, as well as women's dignity and rights were violated by these same policies. The article will first discuss the socioeconomic successes and challenges caused by migrant labour in South Africa. We then explore the role of African spirituality, the contribution of missionaries and African labourers in missions and evangelism, and the role of the church in addressing the socioeconomic challenges facing migrant labourers. Lastly, the article presents an analysis of the participation of women in migrant labour (by being employed to do household domestic work) and the establishment of women's church organisations in urban areas.

**Keywords:** African women; ancestors and God; agricultural economy; family; land; migrant labour; mission; religion

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## Introduction

The church's mission in the context of a migrant labourer and his family is critically important. Migrant labour theology is a significant phenomenon in historical theology. Mohlabi (1970, 73) says, "A migrant labourer is a person who oscillates between his home and his work. In South Africa, migrant labourers are frequently prohibited by law to receive visits from their families to the locality of their work." Colonial and apartheid laws were used to deny the Black labourers in South Africa to freely move anywhere in their own land. This was a very strange phenomenon on African soil in a country such as South Africa. Mohlabi (1970, 73) contends that "It is strange to note that, despite all restrictive measures and all efforts made to control influx into towns, the population is found to have undergone a phenomenal change with every census taken." The migrant labour issue was controversial due to the manner in which it was implemented, as it benefited White people economically, while Black people lost their effective agricultural economy and their organised structural family was disrupted. The study primarily focuses on South African migrant labourers, families, communities, land and religion. The study refers to South African migrants who migrated from their homelands or rural areas to towns and cities within their own country. The migration happened because of the influence of migratory labour. The phenomenon of migrant or migratory labour, and some positives and negatives of it, are critically engaged. The historical migratory labour system is explored within the South African context. The terms "migrant labour" and "migratory labour" are used interchangeably. The article engages the conceptualisation of migratory labour; God, ancestors and migrant labourers; migrants and family; conflict between the church and mine owners; the violation of African workers' rights; and women and migrant labour.

## The Conceptualisation of Migratory Labour

The discovery of diamonds at Kimberley in 1867 or 1870 in South Africa, the establishment of the diamond mining industry, and other discoveries of gold on the Witwatersrand in 1884 or 1886 (and shortly thereafter coal in Natal) changed the South African economic landscape within the context of the mining industry (Maloka 1997, 242; Watts 1970, 13). This industry was developed on a system of cheap labour, and African men worked on the basis of contracts. African men were overworked for four to 12 months or until their contracts ended, without the option of returning to their families and homes. Kimberley mines allowed migrant labourers to leave the premises only at the end of their employment contracts. On weekends, the Witwatersrand mines granted their African labourers permission to visit fellow Africans who were staying in the nearby urban areas and compounds, with special passes. The men stayed in the barracks known as compounds, an institution first developed in the Kimberley diamond mines and later in the Witwatersrand gold mines (Maloka 1997, 242). This was a period of South African industrialisation. Before these economic discoveries, Africans in South Africa were primarily living in their reserves and their rural areas, heavily depending on agricultural economy until the middle of the 20th century. Cattle farming and crop farming were the reigning, successful economic developments. "The communal

existence in the tribal tradition meant security” (Colliers 1970, 51). In the midst of migrant labour, African women became essential economic players in the agricultural field, where “in rural areas they supplemented the earnings of the migrant workers, hence helping to subsidise the profitability of the mines” (Maloka 1997, 242). These African forms of economy were performing well and proving to be valuable in creating equality and stability for the community and African survival. This was advanced by an integration of African communal existence and security. Africans’ ability to advance their economy was the integration of native education in agricultural knowledge and productivity. The rural land was already a means for economic growth and excellence in service of the Africans and their animal husbandry. The agricultural economy resonated with Africans to avoid poverty and issues of unemployment and not being productive.

However, Jooste (1970, 62) says:

The Native Land Act of 1913 prohibited farming and animal husbandry by Bantus outside their own territories. This had an effect of driving many of them to urban areas without any definite employment in view, and with a consequent decline in wage rates and living standards. Without the support of the family and the tribe, living conditions soon deteriorated and crime and disease rates went up.

This Act was implemented to deny Africans their human right to protect their land, sustain their economy, and uphold community wellbeing. The African socioeconomic development by Africans was prevented by the White colonial government. This socioeconomic hindrance became the most serious development challenge ever to Africans’ community living conditions in a historical South Africa. This transition could not have come from within Africans themselves, but from an outsider who had no integrity and respect for the African context. The transition was an advocate for destruction, while the African socioeconomic development was advocating for constructive solutions. According to Mohlabi (1970, 73), primitive agriculture was no longer thriving, and it became unable to feed the African population. This led some men to work as migrant labourers, where White people stayed in various South African areas with opportunities for earning a living. The point here is that Black men and families had thought critically to create a new source of income to supplement their agricultural income in order for their families to be economically stable. Black migrant labourers had to adapt to a new work environment while critically analysing its difference from their previous agricultural environment.

The migrant labour recruitment system disrupted African socioeconomic development. Jooste (1970, 62) states, “A formal recruitment system was organised in the years prior to World War 1 to meet the needs of agriculture, mining and manufacturing in South Africa.” The increase in mining operations and other forms of industrialisation created agricultural economic decline while providing a solution to the challenge of earning an income, and “migration to the city become inevitable” (Colliers 1970, 51). Mining and other industrialisation forms in the city were meant only for the men and for

urbanisation, but were not a migration of the family. Migration to the city was exacerbated by the outbreak of World War II. A monetary economy was imposed on Africans. The establishment of cities and industrial work created insecurity as a result of the new urbanisation context. South African migrant labourers were employed on contract systems. This system was unable to guarantee the economic security of African migrant labourers. Furthermore, “The general sense of insecurity as a result of urbanisation intensified in South Africa by legislation, especially the law on influx control (No. 25 of 1945 as amended)” (Colliers 1970, 51–52). “Illness from nutritionally poor diets, inadequate sanitation, and rampant respiratory diseases, resulted in high mortality rates” (Maloka 1997, 242). This new economic formation was meant for benefiting the Western world and impoverishing the traditional African economic world. This transition disrupted the African economic model of equal and stable beneficence, wellness and security of Africans. Africans were regarded as people without security and without owning permanent land and economy. The African ownership of land, leadership, and agricultural and mineral resources was violently taken away. The system of migratory labour created an improper infrastructure, which led to sickness and death among African labourers. The human rights and dignity of Africans were violated and abused to the extent that Africans had to live in fear and distrust in their own land.

In the 1960s and 1970s, South Africa was the leading industrialisation powerhouse on the African continent. Its financial strength was to sustain and develop its industrialisation, which was related to migrant labour. However, other growing nations in the world were part of this industrialisation. The church had to participate in the migratory labour system (Berglund 1970a, 8). The entire South African economic structure depended on migratory labour for certain mines and industries that required labour.

The homelands continued with traditions primarily based on self-provision and the production of food (Mohlaba 1970, 73). Migratory labour issues were part of this phenomenon. Migrant labour was an economic issue and was intended for the development of the colonised land. Although it was not a perfect phenomenon (due to its inhumanity), some positive outcomes were also visible. Berglund (1970b, 49–50) states that part of the inhumanity entailed that African migrant labourers were forced to get work permits. African migrants viewed their rural areas as offering human dignity, while their city lives were experienced as inhuman due to the apartheid system.

According to Watts (1970, 12), the 20th-century economy can be viewed as an urban-industrial economy within an economic development context that had strong Western influences. This economic development influenced the system of migrant labour. Berglund (1970b, 35) states that migrant labourers from rural settings tried to sustain their roots in the homelands. They were employed and living in hostel buildings in areas such as Durban, motivated by their need to be close to the workplace. Commuter

transportation from rural areas to the workplace was a serious challenge, and staying in the city was more convenient and economical.

## God, Ancestors and Migrant Labourers

In African religion, God, ancestors, the homestead, and family are central. Moller (1970, 91) states:

The traditional religion is most intimately involved with this feeling of keeping up good relationships with relatives and the dead. The traditionalist in the compound or the hostel, who has his family in the rural area, was strongly inclined to see his religion practised at home only, especially if his near ancestors were buried there.

When an African migrant labourer left such a context to stay in a city, there was an experience of loneliness. This disturbed the peace and harmony of the family and ancestors. A migrant labourer no longer felt safe. Africans would say, “My trouble is that I never dream any more. I have nobody that speaks to me, except these men in the hostel” (Berglund 1970b, 39–40). Migrant labourers had a spiritual connection with their homeland or rural areas where ancestors and God would protect and speak to them and their families. As migrants, they felt disconnected from their ancestors, land and families, because of being in the city. African spirituality was a central element between them, their ancestors and God. The economic need forced migrant labourers to the city, while their spirituality became a vacuum and a challenge for their safety and well-being. For an African, economics, family and spirituality are always integrated, and cannot be separated. Migrant labour created a challenge for Africans to simultaneously enjoy the economy, family unity and spirituality. African migrant labourers have always aspired for an African migrant labour system that embraces the integration of economics, family and spirituality.

In the 1960s and beyond, the diviner was very rare in the city when he was needed by the migrants. The diviner, or spiritualist, always returned to the rural areas to communicate with *amadlozi* or ancestors for the sake of serving migrants. Other diviners did not return to their homeland any more due to distance. The other important profession among Africans was that of a herbalist, and they had shops where migrants could buy medication instead of visiting a medical doctor or a local chemist (Berglund 1970b, 45–46). Diviners were very important to the spirituality of migrant labourers. They played an important role in healing and providing divine solutions to the challenges in the lives of these migrants. The economy of diviners emerged from their divine consultation as supported by migrants. Herbalists were proudly central to the health and wellness of the migrants who supported their medicine shops. Migrants relied heavily on diviners and herbalists because of their rural backgrounds and traditions for their spirituality and health. African spirituality here was not disrupting migrant labour, but showed that South African migrant labourers could not be separated from their African spirituality.

## Migrants and Family

Migratory labour was unable to grant African men an opportunity to bring their wives from the homelands to their workplaces in town. *Rand Daily Mail* (1970a) records on 23 June 1970, that the Fordsburg Bantu Affairs Commissioner's court in Johannesburg ruled that it was illegal for a wife to stay with her husband who worked in a city. The wife was sent home separately. The woman in question had stayed with her husband in Soweto for several years, but this court forced her to return to her rural area. In another case, a Black woman was arrested for visiting her sick aunt in Johannesburg (*Rand Daily Mail* 1970b). The apartheid system determined the migration policy for the exploitation of women and the working class. The separation of husband and wife, who had stayed together for several years in the city, was a serious human rights violation. The courts of law failed to protect and support women in the interest of justice.

Mohlabi (1970, 74) states that men were away from their families for six to eight months and even longer. This created a problem for men and their wives. In the late 1960s, the urban population was growing and becoming permanent and some men never returned to their homelands. This context led women to start working in towns without the approval of the government or the tribe. On weekends, migrants in the city were given permission to go anywhere. Urban girls washed the clothes of family men who ended up having children with them in the city, and no longer supporting their homeland wives (Mohlabi 1970, 74–75). A husband rarely met with his wife, parents and children (Moller 1970, 88). Migratory labour disrupted the family unit to the extent that husbands were no longer supporting their children and wives. Children grew up without the presence of their fathers, who never returned to their families and had established new families in the city. According to Mohlabi (1970, 75), the migration of men caused the neglect of parental responsibility and care of the children and wives; hence, their ancestral worship role declined because a father was regarded as a priest. The point is that men were traditionally entrusted with parental authority and worship, which were key support areas for a family. This entrusted responsibility of men experienced a serious vacuum, which frustrated the structure of African family unity. The integrity of manhood was lost, and the dignity of a family was negatively affected. The restoration of manhood could occur only if men continued to be faithful to their wives, supported their children, and performed their priestly functions when they returned home.

Migrant labour created a shortage of young men in the homelands or reserves. This increased the volume of unmarried women in the reserves. Young men ended up becoming migrant labourers and eventually disappearing from their families (Mohlabi 1970, 77; 81). Banghart (1970, 99–100) states, “There is evidence that migration has weakened, and in some cases, even destroyed the functioning of the family group. This is principally due to a person staying away for either relatively long periods, or more or less permanently.” The solidarity of families became vulnerable, whereby young women were no longer getting married, and young men became absent from their homeland. This means that the traditional formation of an African family was disrupted

and no longer viewed as highly recognised in the homeland. The family used to be regarded as a central institution in the homeland; however, migration was harmful to this institution and the structure of rural existence.

## The Church and Migrant Labour

Mission and evangelism ministry was essential for the church in migration. According to Maloka (1997, 242), in the early 1890s, White missionaries from Roman Catholic, Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, and Congregational churches began their mission in the Witwatersrand to preach and convert Africans to Christianity. The church mission was disrupted or stopped during the Anglo-Boer War; however, this war ended in 1902. Christian membership increased from 1902 as more Africans became Christians. African Christians evangelised and converted more Africans who stayed in the compounds and locations. Christian membership increased because of African Christians' role in mission work. They organised prayers and religious services for their fellow Africans (Maloka 1997, 242). However, missionaries were failing to support this African Christian initiative. Missionaries employed several African Christians as full-time evangelists, who established churches in urban areas. African evangelists led mission societies, which by nature carried various church traditions due to the absence of missionaries. Baptism and Holy Communion were conducted only by the invitation of missionaries. For example, "Christian work at the Premier Diamond mine near Pretoria was headed by Africans as late as 1928, despite the arrival of numerous missionary societies on the Witwatersrand. At Dutoispan in Kimberley in 1937, Sotho Christians were still holding services on their own, also together with the Xhosa" (Maloka 1997, 242–243).

The point here is that Witwatersrand and Kimberley mines and compounds were fertile areas for Christian missions and the conversion of Africans, especially by the evangelistic contribution of African Christians. Africans were converted to various types of Christianity or church traditions, which had a Western influence and doctrines. Western Christianity was used in conflict with the African Traditional Religions (ATR) beliefs and practices. However, Africans retained their ATR while, at the same time they adopted the Western Christian faith practices. African evangelists were central planners and pioneers, not only of conversion ministry, but establishing missionary churches in urban or city areas. It was very unfortunate that African evangelists had limited powers to perform spiritual ceremonies such as baptism and Holy Communion, which were performed only by missionaries. This was a disturbing arrangement, especially when evangelists converted new Africans who needed baptism, because they had to invite and wait a long time for missionaries to arrive and baptise.

The church had a moral responsibility to protect the Bantu family in the midst of migrant labour, which had more negatives than positives. Bruwer (1970, 5) states that God knew the migrant labourer as a person within his employment context. The church should have considered the migrant labourer within his own special context. "His language, his culture and religious background are taken seriously" (Bruwer 1970, 5). The church had

to approach labourers in an industrial context by providing a special ministry. South African ministers had to set time apart for ministry to the migrant labourers. However, “the danger exists that such an approach to the migrant labourers as individuals, isolates them and breaks the congregation into a number of segments determined by labour” (Bruwer 1970, 5). Migrant labourers started attending churches from their homeland. The church had to also minister to them in their work situation. This was the only form of ministering to migrant labourers at home and work. The church’s challenge was how to serve a city congregation with various languages and cultures, which could not do “justice to the constructive service to migrant labourers” (Bruwer 1970, 6). However, this did not dismiss the fact that a city congregation could not offer services to labourers. The city church had to report back to the homeland church about its service to migrant labourers (Bruwer 1970, 6). It was central for the church to ensure that the migrant labourer was served within his lived culture and religious experience. Labour was in control of migrant labourers, which made it difficult for the church to minister to them in a divided congregation. The church had challenges in providing a constructive service in a congregation (with migrant labourers) that had various languages and cultures. The church designed pastoral and spiritual programmes to address the urgent ministry of migrant labourers.

Synnott (1970, 1) critically states that “Whites in South Africa are no better or no worse than others. After all, if White Christians did as they wished to be done by, and allowed Africans to have their families where they work, there would be no migratory problem.” This was regarded as a social-ethical challenge, which created a historical casualisation of colonisation instead of decolonisation in South Africa for the betterment of African people. This was a social evil, and the church was challenged to demand change to root out the unjust migratory labour problem. Migratory labour has disrupted families in the context that most men neglected their families, as they never returned or did not send money to their homes (Mohlabi 1970, 81). The church was responsible for challenging the South African government “to bring to an end the condition of insecurity and disruption” of Africans in urbanised and industrialised society (Colliers 1970, 55). The church had a pastoral and relevant ministry in the city to promote the security and well-being of Africans. This means that the church’s mandate was to protect the value and existence of Africans. This was the duty of the church in its urban ministry.

The church had a responsibility to investigate why families were broken or disrupted by migrant labour. The Word of God and church activity were essential means to engage migrants. The church played a critical role in uniting different ethnic groups of labourers who fought each other (Mohlabi 1970, 81). The church had to create a safer space for migrants and their families to protect their unity. It had to ensure that various migrants respected and protected each other’s cultures and practices.

Migrant labourers left their rural areas to work and seldom attended the church in the city. According to Moller (1970, 91), it was difficult to establish a church in compounds and hostels or even bring different tribes together in one church. It was even more



difficult to link a church in the city with a rural congregation. During the year, some of the migrant labourers received Holy Communion only in December during Christmas at their homelands. This phenomenon happened in churches such as the Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Congregationalist and others (Berglund 1970b, 40). According to Colliers (1970, 51), the disruption and loneliness of a migrant labourer should have been addressed, because such a person “must find his home, the security of belonging among the people of God.” The point here is that the city church had a role to serve and provide security for the troubled migrant labourers. The church had a pivotal role to play among migrants and their families, and regarding their social life. However, the church did not have an easy task to establish its congregations in rural and urban areas.

### Conflict between the Church and Mine Owners: A Violation of African Workers’ Rights

In the beginning of migrant labour, mine owners were allies with missionaries for the purpose of ethical work and discipline in the mines. Migrant labour promoted missions and evangelism as the mine workers were bringing their traditional faith to the workplaces. African workers were rebellious against the hostility of White mine managers in the beginning. Workers were dehumanised and experienced alien conditions in the mine and in compounds (Maloka 1997, 248). Kimberley diamond mines, De Beers, supplied labourers with Bibles in various languages, although mine and compound managers were against the value of the gospel. Compound managers and Whites, in general, “feared that ‘educated natives’ would develop political aspirations and ideas about collective bargaining; some thought workers would refuse to work on Sundays” (Maloka 1997, 246). Mine “police boys” were instructed to drive missionaries and African evangelists away. Compound managers who found workers reading, tore their books and threatened them with punishment. Preaching was not allowed in the compound (Maloka 1997, 246). The missionaries’ and African evangelists’ mission work was a serious threat to the business of mines. Africans were reading and interpreting the Bible as a liberating tool to protect themselves from mine and compound managers who violated their human and workers’ rights.

Missionaries had to intervene by engaging mine authorities to grant evangelists permission to enter into the compounds to teach and read the Bible and communicate with missionaries under restrictive rules. Mine authorities forced missionaries to instruct workers to abstain from drugs and alcohol, which was part of a required church membership. This included workers “to refrain from interfering with employer-employee disputes over wages and working conditions” (Maloka 1997, 246–247). The intervention of missionaries to engage mine authorities was not actually about the gospel and liberation of African workers. Missionaries endorsed injustice and poor wages and working conditions of workers. The human rights, dignity and living conditions of African workers in compounds were violated by mine authorities and missionaries. This means that missionaries rejected the God of justice and the gospel at the expense of exploiting workers in order for them to benefit financially from the mine

authorities. When workers' rights were not protected by missionaries, it was obvious that workers would not attend church services regularly, if not at all. Workers could not go to a church that they felt was not a safe space for them.

## Women and Migrant Labour

African women were also affected by migration. Xhosa, Basotho, Zulu, Shangaan and Thembu women had already migrated to central Johannesburg in 1896 (Gaitskell 1981, 107). They worked as domestic servants of mine and compound managers and White households in general (Gaitskell 1981, 117). They moved for the sake of staying and working in urban areas since there were already gold mine industries. More African women moved to the cities due to rural poverty caused by natural disasters and economic depression. In 1906–1908, the majority of African women moved to Johannesburg due to phenomena of “drought, cattle diseases, a depression and the rebellion in Natal” (Gaitskell 1981, 108–109). The migration of African women was also associated with evictions under the 1913 Land Act and a continuation of the 1911 drought. Floods and crop failures were followed by another savage drought in 1919–1920, which forced more women out of their rural areas (Gaitskell 1981, 108–109). The epoch from 1906 had not necessarily forced African women to leave their African soil due to issues of drought and cattle diseases, because, as experts in the agricultural economy, they had to rework the land to address the drought situation and could apply their preventative measures to find a cure for cattle diseases. African women were violently moved from their own productive land, which they used for their agricultural economy and the survival of their families.

African women's Christian organisations were called *manyanos*—a Xhosa name and also known as prayer unions—were established long before World War I. The *manyanos* movement was the most organised, cohesive and largest African women's organisation in South Africa. *Manyanos* were praying, preaching and funding church organisation. The women were regarded as trainers of young girls, and family and home builders. It had sessions for female teaching and leadership. Yet, in 1913, they organised the “Female anti-pass demonstration in Bloemfontein, the Herschel store boycott of 1922, the Natal beer protest of the 1920s, and perhaps even the mobilisation of the Potchefstroom women's protest of 1929 against residential permits” (Gaitskell 1997, 253–254). They were strong in economic agriculture and productivity (Gaitskell 1997, 255). *Manyanos* were highly spiritual women who supported the church with their work and finances because the church was a social institution. These African women were socially and politically committed to the liberation of South Africa.

## Conclusion

The article has discussed the challenges and successes of migrant labour in South Africa. Migrant labour had an impact on socioeconomic, political, family, land, culture and religious life. The first thriving African agricultural economy was heavily affected by diamond, gold and coal mines and industries. This economic and contextual shift

affected the unity of homeland families. Women became part of the urban economy and contributed towards the church mission. The religious sector and mining relations are complicated, if not in conflict, which makes the lives of migrants more vulnerable. The church's intervention to protect and serve the family and migrant labourers had positive and negative results. Mine and compound managers have denied African fathers the opportunity to perform their indigenous religious practices in their homelands. This was influenced by exploitative workers' contract clauses, such as four to 12 months without returning to their homes, or they could only return once a contract had ended. The article has highlighted the serious impact of migrant labour on the lives and traditions of Africans, often compounded by role-players such as the mining industries and even the churches.

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