

MINES, MASTERS AND MIGRANTS -LIFE IN A NAMIBIAN COMPOUND

(R. J. Gordon, Ravan Press, Johannesburg 1977)

Reviewed by Philip Scheiner

Dr Gordon was Personnel Officer during 1974 at a mine near Windhoek, and the book presents a sociological study of the black migrant labour force on the mine: in the words of the author, his motivation was "to make Black mineworkers more visible." In this regard, the book is fascinating and is amply illustrated by the absorbing personal experiences of the author during the course of his duties.

We are shown that there are two central institutions for black workers on the mine – the workplace and the mine compound. These two areas correspond to "two worlds" of the black worker – the interface between himself and the white supervisor and his private, off-duty world.

The interface is vividly described. There is firstly the well-known typification of black workers by their supervisors as indolent, lazy etc. and the typical ethnic labels given to various workers – for example, one supervisor told the author that "Angolans are regarded as being good bossboys because they are not afraid to beat up fellow workers." This is symptomatic of the inhuman attitude towards workers at the bottom of the occupational pyramid on the mine. Secondly, there is a very strict system of etiquette at the workplace which defines whites as superior to blacks – for example, it is taboo to challenge a white miner's knowledge on any particular task. Breaches of etiquette would lead to victimisation. To this should be added the fact that black promotions and discharges are seen by blacks not to be based on competence but on the arbitrary whims of the white supervisors.

The author simultaneously, recounts the indirect methods used to hit back at white workers. Firstly there is a high labour turnover on the mine despite a national labour surplus situation. Workers also express their dissatisfaction through the abuse of equipment, pilfering and work slowdowns. Finally there are various methods of work avoidance: for example, the worker may prefer to use his indigenous name whilst on the mine, thus confusing supervisors and making the worker less likely to be chosen

for chores.

The contract workers see their situation as being one of oppression and they regard their prime problem as managing the uncertainty resulting from the capriciousness of whites. A major finding of the book is that in the private world of the compound, the workers create patterns of group behaviour which are defensive mechanisms to cope with the uncertainty and hostility around them. Chief amongst these mechanisms is the system of "brotherhood" which arises spontaneously as a result of trust and solidarity amongst the workers. A "good brother" is one who shares your view of the mine, is not an informer, and helps his fellow workers. Brotherhood applies especially in the area of lending and borrowing money – indebtedness is endemic in the compound.

Two more fascinating aspects of the compound are discussed: the rules and regulations which the workers have to obey, and the secondary sources of income that migrants have at the mine. With regard to the latter, "quick money" includes small-scale pilfering and activities such as the illegal importation of liquor into the compound for resale at double the town price (drivers are particularly favoured here because they have access to Windhoek). "Business money" is earned from the small-scale manufacturing done within the compound: largely woodwork, tailoring (making trousers and shirts) and beerbrewing. The most common way of making business money in the compound is by brewing traditional beer.

Although most of the book is concerned with the sociological study of the workers on the mine, the book also includes very interesting information on the spending patterns of migrants whilst they are away from home and the extent and mechanics of remittances. Finally, there is a handy chapter dealing with the overall pattern of migrant labour in Namibia and occupational structure and wage levels on the mine, no doubt of more interest to the economist or student of labour economics. □