MIGRATION AND STABILIZATION

Mining Labor in the Belgian Congo, Northern Rhodesia, and South Africa

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1 Introduction

The mining of metals and precious gems has been the most important industry for the Southern and Central African region since the late 19th century. Industrial mining in this area began with the discovery of large diamond deposits in Kimberley in 1867 and gold in the Witwatersrand in 1886, both in South Africa. These copious findings and the prospects of further mineral wealth were a primary impetus for the European scramble for Africa in the late 19th century (Cleveland 2014). A few decades later, when the value of copper and other non-precious metals in international markets rose, the Central African Copperbelt, located in the British protectorate of Northern Rhodesia and the Belgian Congo, emerged as a second major industrial mining region.

The discovery and extraction of minerals set in motion unprecedented magnitudes of population movement to supply the mines with labor. The migration systems that emerged after mineral discoveries partly reinforced existing migration ties — such as between Mozambique and South Africa — but also led to the creation of new migration routes. This chapter compares the shifting patterns in the migrant labor systems directed to Southern and Central African mines with a focus on four major migrant-receiving industrial mining areas in three different countries: the Kimberley diamond and Rand gold mines of South Africa and the copper mines in Northern Rhodesia (Copperbelt province) and the Congo (Katanga province). Certainly, other Southern and Central African regions developed mining industries that attracted African migrants from rural areas and from across territorial borders as well, but these fall outside the scope of this chapter. Even though the labor recruitment strategies of company and state constitute the main focus of this chapter, I also consider migrants’ motivations and agency when exploring the causes and directions of large and continuous migrations flows.

One aim of this chapter is to explain the differences between mining areas in their reliance on stabilized versus circular migrant labor. In all studied mining centers, African workers started out as temporary, circular migrant laborers, housed in single-men barracks, while their families continued farming in their rural homelands. But longer-term work relations with corresponding company investments in workers’ training and welfare and

DOI: 10.4324/9781003225027-14
the settlement of black mineworkers with their families in mining towns were eventually favored by mining companies, and either tolerated or promoted by states. However, the timing of this “stabilization” varied, with Katanga taking the lead from the early 1920s, followed by the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt from the late 1940s, and lastly South Africa in the 1970s. According to Brown (2019, 164), the decision of companies and the state to rely on either stabilized or circular migrant labor “was shaped by population densities, production technologies, the relative costs and ratio of skills and the geographical composition of the ore field.” I argue that colonial governance ideology and geopolitical considerations played an important role as well.

A second, related, aim of this chapter is to explain the changes over time and differences in geographical scope of the recruitment catchment area, which was much wider in the case of the South African gold mines than for the diamond mines or the Central African copper mines. The gold mines relied on a sophisticated system of organized recruitment to continuously replenish its transient workforce, including agreements with foreign governments and recruitment stations throughout Southern Africa, as far as Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia (Pérez Niño 2019). This system was developed and expanded throughout the 20th century. At the peak in the early 1970s, 70% of the workforce in the Rand gold mines was foreign, while the numbers of foreign workers had increased from 100,000 in the 1920s to 265,000 in 1970 (Pérez Niño 2019, 275). The Congolese mining company *Union Minière du Haut Katanga* started out with a much tighter catchment area which initially included neighboring countries but became completely internally oriented as its reliance on recruitment diminished in the 1920s. When industrial mining took off in Northern Rhodesia, the copper mining companies tapped into the domestic labor pool, which had supplied the mines of Katanga (as well as Southern Rhodesia) for over a decade, and complemented it with foreign migrant workers from neighboring colonies who reached the mines on their own account.

This chapter is structured as follows. Section 2 describes the period of discovery and consolidation of mines. Section 3 delves into the formation and evolution of labor systems specific to each mining area until the 1960s when most sub-Saharan African nations had attained independence. Section 4 examines comparatively the stabilization undertaken belatedly in the Rand after 1970, as well as the effect of the copper crisis on labor migration. Section 5 concludes with comparative remarks.

## 2 Discovery and consolidation of industrial mines

### 2.1 Gold and diamonds in South Africa: from individual prospecting to amalgamation

The history of large-scale mining in Southern Africa starts with the discovery of diamonds in 1867 near the confluence of the Vaal and the Orange River, in Griqualand West, a territory that lay north of the British Cape Colony and west of the “Boer” republics of Orange Free State and the South African Republic (Transvaal colony after 1902 and until 1910). Griqualand had been granted protection and right of self-government by the British in 1834. The Griqua (descendants from Khoikhoi and European colonists of the Cape) were the main inhabitants of this area.

Diamond mining started on a relatively small scale: in 1870, some 5,000 people camped along the river diggings (Herbert 1972, 25). Digging and washing were carried out mostly
by Boers from the Orange Free State and the South African Republic, sometimes with the help of a black employee, while women and children usually took care of the sorting (Hofmeester 2017). Claims were 20 square feet (approximately 37 m²) large. Local rules limited the number of claims per digger to one and dictated the loss of the claim when the holder was absent for more than three workdays in a row.

The discovery of much vaster diamond deposits on two white farms (Dorstfontein and Bultfontein) about 100 miles (about 160 km) from the river diggings in 1870 led to a diamond rush. The next year, some 50,000 diggers were working on what were called dry diggings on those farms, around 20,000 of whom were of European descent, the rest black. In July 1871 the richest mine, Kimberley (which became famous as the “Big Hole”), was discovered. That same year, Britain annexed the diamond fields and much additional territory of Griqualand West, which had been claimed by the neighboring Boer nations. The area became a Crown Colony and the mining region became known as Kimberley. From the early 1870s, a group of London diamond merchants bought one farm after another from the Boers and became owners of the mines, which they let out to individual diggers (Worger 1987, 17).

However, in the mid-1870s, the diamond industry was already into depression, given the saturation of the diamonds market, the exhaustion of surface deposits, and the problem of constantly collapsing sides of the shafts due to the large quantity of small, deep claims (Worger 1987, 19).

The use of more sophisticated technology (like dynamite, water pumps, and steam engines to pull the diamantiferous soil out of the hole and wash it) could make mining profitable again but required the amalgamation of claims for scale economies. In 1877, the colonial governor of Griqualand West repealed the claim limitation and invited foreign investors to buy claims and land. This precipitated the end of individual prospecting and the rise of oligopolistic large-scale mining. From 1880 onward, the remaining claim holders transformed their firms into joint-stock companies, selling part of the shares to the public (Hofmeester 2017). In 1885 only three companies (Kimberley Central, the Compagnie Française, and Cecil Rhodes’ De Beers Mining Company) controlled the diamond mines. By 1888, De Beers had a monopoly.

The discovery of South Africa’s main gold reefs took place in 1886 in what was at the time the Boer Republic of Transvaal, in the Witwatersrand scrap. Initially, as with diamonds, the working of the gold outcrops was carried out by individual prospectors, many of whom had been bought out in the course of amalgamation of the diamond fields (Katzenellenbogen 1975, 363). In 1889 it was discovered that more gold lay deep underground but was embedded in a pyritic rock that required sophisticated and expensive technology to be extracted. The consequent shift to deep-shaft mining in the 1890s propelled the process of amalgamation in the gold fields. Small claimholders gradually gave way to conglomerates, especially the Rand Mines Company, formed in 1893, and the Consolidated Gold Fields of South Africa, formed in 1887. Anglo American Corporation, a South African conglomerate, was founded in 1917 by Ernest Oppenheimer with British and American capital, and became a dominant producer of gold, and – by taking over De Beers – diamond as well. After the Second World War, prospecting by this company yielded the discovery of further large gold deposits in the Orange Free State.

Soon the industry acquired the characteristics of a monopoly. There was little or nothing to be gained by competition among companies regarding wages or technology because the demand for gold was infinitely price elastic and because the selling price could not be
changed by the companies (it was fixed internationally). Until the early 1960s, there was complete collusion among the companies to keep African wages low (Austen 1987, 163).

### 2.2 Central African copper: from European discovery to main colonial export

Large-scale copper extraction on the Copperbelt began on the Congolese side (Katanga province) in the first decade of the 20th century. The rich copper deposits that lay on the surface had been mined by locals for centuries, but from the late 19th century British prospectors showed increasing interest (Larmer 2017).

In the Leopoldian tradition of state-monopoly policy, the Congolese state granted the Comité Spécial du Katanga (CSK) the right to prospect copper (Peemans 1975, 178). The CSK had been entrusted with the administration of large land concessions in Katanga in 1900, and the state received two-thirds of the profits generated by the CSK, the other third going to a Belgian chartered company. As the CSK was unable to attract Belgian prospectors, Robert Williams, a Scottish engineer who had also obtained prospecting rights in Northern Rhodesia, acquired a 40% interest in Katanga’s mineral wealth in 1900. In 1906, the Union Minière du Haut Katanga (UMHK) was formed by the CSK in cooperation with Williams’ Tanganyika Concessions Ltd.

When the Belgian state took formal control over the Congo from King Leopold II in 1908, the UMHK retained its copper mining monopoly until copper was nationalized in 1967 by independent Congo’s president Mobutu. Through its holdings in the CSK, the colonial government kept the right to approximately 60% of all profits generated by the mines. Production started in 1912, two years after the railway reached Elisabethville and connected the mines to the port of Beira in Mozambique, from where the product was exported. Smelting plants were set up near the mines to carry out at least the early stages of refinement, to save on transport costs. By the late 1920s Belgian Congo had become the world’s third-largest copper exporter (Perrings 1979).

In the mid-1920s, systematic prospecting yielded extensive underground copper reserves on Northern Rhodesia’s side of the Copperbelt. The average copper content of the ores in the British colony was much lower (3%–4%) than in Katanga (about 15%) – though higher than in the American ore. However, a new processing method, called flotation, made mining of these lower grade ores profitable. Two large investment groups were attracted by the British South Africa Company (BSAC), which administered the territory of Northern Rhodesia until 1924, to prospect and exploit the copper reserves: Chester Beatty’s Selection Trust Limited (reorganized in 1926 as Rhodesian Selection Trust), a British concern with American financial and technical backing, and Anglo American Corporation, mainly South African. By 1930, several mines were under construction and commercial production started soon after. Those two parent companies (individual companies were floated for the different mines) retained a monopsony over copper mining until copper was nationalized in 1970 by President Kaunda.

### 3 The migrant mining labor system until the independence era

#### 3.1 Making the mining labor force in 19th-century South Africa

Labor migration was crucial for the functioning of the mines. Most black laborers in Kimberley did not originate from the immediate surroundings but had traveled more than 150
miles. The largest group of workers belonged to the Pedi tribe from the South African Republic in the Northeast. Second in numbers were the Tsonga people who came from Southern Mozambique (Tsonga from Mozambique were also called Shangaans). For instance, in 1878, Shangaans from Gaza district in Mozambique made up about 30% of the workforce on the diamond diggings (Harries 1994). In 1885, over two-thirds of laborers were Pedi and Tsonga, who traveled 600 to 1,000 miles on foot to the mines (Worger 1987, 109). The Southern Sotho from Basutoland were the third-largest group in the early years, but they and the Tswana from Botswana overtook the former two in the 1890s when the Pedi and Tsonga turned to the gold mines of Transvaal (Turrell 1987, 169). Other ethnic groups (like Tlhaping, Kalanga, Natal Zulu) supplied lower numbers of workers (see Map 10.1).

Africans from the mentioned areas had sought work on farms or public works in the British and Boer republics decades before the onset of mining. In the 1850s and 1860s, rising

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**MAP 10.1** Origin and destination of migrants to the South African mines.


*Notes:* For the gold mines (Witwatersrand), the arrows denote actual major migration routes. For the diamond mines (Kimberley), the arrows merely connect the mines to their major sending regions.
ecological pressures in large parts of Southern Africa (due to the spread of livestock diseases and droughts), as well as the Boers’ territorial expansion and wars against Pedi, Tlhaping, and Sotho, had impoverished some of these peoples and increased social stratification, which probably pushed people into labor migration (Worger 1987, 65). Young men belonging to the Sotho and Pedi sought temporary work for some months in the Cape Colony and obtained desired goods like cattle, guns, ammunition, or blankets, to improve their individual economic situation upon return, as well as that of their chiefs, since a proportion of those goods were used to pay taxes. The Tsonga from Southern Mozambique had traveled to Natal (a British colony until 1910) to work on the sugar fields since the 1850s and 1860s, usually for about two years, and returned with sterling pounds. Cash was used to buy goods imported from Europe via Delagoa Bay (now Maputo Bay) and became the main medium of bridewealth from around 1870 (Van den Berg 1987). The diamond mines opened another opportunity to work that paid higher wages than other types of employment, and to acquire desired goods, pay for a bride, and reinvest in the rural economy (purchasing livestock, plows, or wagons).

On the other hand, the diamond mines’ high demand and prices of perishable food and firewood, which were too expensive or short-lived to transport over long distances at least until the railway from the Cape reached Kimberley in 1885, provided a market opportunity for Africans who occupied land in the immediate surroundings, like the Griquas, Koranna, and Tlhaping (Worger 1987, 82–3).

In the early stages of mining, a few black Africans were claim holders in the diamond diggings, or independent share-workers of the claims, though most were already wage laborers. The wage workers traveled on their own account for several hundred miles on foot to work with pick and shovel under the supervision of white diggers, usually for short periods of three to six months, upon which they returned to their rural homes. Given the high demand of wage workers during the rushes on the diamond mines, their wages were relatively high and rising in the early years. Between 1871 and 1875, weekly wages quintupled from 5 shillings per week to 25 shillings per week plus food (Worger 1987, 87). Clearly, workers’ wages, when determined freely and competitively, had to compensate the long and dangerous journey on foot, as well as the high costs and daily insecurity of living around the mines (Harries 1994, 53). Reflecting miners’ agency, when mining faced a deep crisis in 1876, black workers resisted the 50% wage cuts that white claim holders aimed to introduce, and instead left en masse to their rural areas or sought wage work in the Cape. Soon after, wages shot up again.

The situation of black mine labor took a turn for the worse after diamond mining changed hands from individual prospectors to large-scale oligopolistic firms. Less labor was required due to increasing mechanization (Table 10.1), and companies were able to exert pressure on the administration to help them increase the supply of wage workers from South Africa, by reducing their subsistence basis and opportunities to market their produce, and by imposing or increasing financial obligations in the form of taxes. For instance, Britain’s annexation of Griqualand West went hand in hand with dispossession of the local population in favor of whites, confining Griquas to plots of land often too small to be self-sufficient. Additionally, in 1879 the administration raised a hut tax on the native population (Worger 1987, 94–6). Land annexations by British or Boers elsewhere, such as in Basutoland in 1882 and Bechuanaland (today’s Botswana) in 1885, had the same effect of pushing black Africans to seek wage labor in the mines (and elsewhere). The companies also colluded over wages to limit the bargaining power of workers (Worger 1987, 107).
Table 10.1: Number of black mineworkers by mine in Kimberley in the 1880s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mine</th>
<th>1881</th>
<th>1882</th>
<th>1883</th>
<th>1884</th>
<th>1885</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Kimberley</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>1,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De Beers</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>1,260</td>
<td>1,700</td>
<td>1,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dutoitspan</td>
<td>8,000</td>
<td>3,235</td>
<td>2,800</td>
<td>3,300</td>
<td>4,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bultfontain</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>2,685</td>
<td>2,300</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>3,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>17,000</td>
<td>11,920</td>
<td>8,360</td>
<td>9,000</td>
<td>11,300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Large diamond mine owners managed to obtain significant political influence to impose laws that facilitated the exertion of control over their labor force. In 1880, the Cape Colony annexed the Crown Colony of Griqualand West and made the Cape Parliament directly responsible for enacting legislation in the territory. In 1881, J. B. Robinson, one of the major shareholders of the Kimberley mines, and Cecil Rhodes of the De Beers Mining Company were both elected for Kimberley in the Cape Parliament. At their suggestion, the Parliament enacted the Diamond Trade Act in 1882. Under this Act, people accused of illicit diamond trade were presumed guilty until they could prove their innocence and heavy punishments were imposed on diamond thieves. The Act also allowed the mining companies to perform intimate body searches on black workers when entering or leaving the diamond mines. Furthermore, extra police were appointed to enforce the pass laws, increasing the number of arrests and convicts. In 1883, De Beers negotiated with the Cape government to establish a privately controlled convict labor station, whose inmates carried out compulsory work in the mines.

From 1885, all miners were housed in compounds, built by the three mining companies that effectively controlled the diamond production, following the example of the De Beers’ convict labor station. The aim of compounds was to avoid illicit diamond trade and to eliminate drunkenness and absenteeism. Miners were not allowed to leave the compound except to work, and they did so through a tunnel connecting the compound with the mines. Food was sold in the company store and alcohol was prohibited in the early years. Diseases like pneumonia and dysentery prevailed under the unsanitary conditions and inadequate housing of the compounds. Hospital facilities for black workers were very deficient. However, an uprising in 1890 in response to a reduction of wages led to some improvements in labor conditions, such as the implementation of eight-hour shifts and better medical and sanitary services in compounds (Hofmeester 2017, 100).

Still not content with the supply and price of labor, the mining companies sought to actively recruit labor in farther rural areas from 1885. Until then, black wage workers had arrived in Kimberley largely on their own account, in accord with demands of the agricultural cycle, and white diggers contracted them at the outskirts of the town. Following a depression of the industry in 1883, thousands of workers were dismissed. Afterward, the three companies started to hire men recruited through direct negotiations with chiefs in rural areas or through established labor agents, who generally had unsavory reputations. They also colluded to pay only half the pre-crisis wage and offer only longer (six months to one year) contracts (Worger 1987, 107). In contrast to the gold mines, since the early 20th-century diamond mines used independent recruiters (as opposed to a monopolistic recruitment organization) and could rely to a larger extent on workers who presented themselves on their
own accord (Katzenellenbogen 1975, 412). It is unclear to what extent miners at the turn of the 20th century were still combining mine work with farming. According to Turrell, the large number of women and children who resided around the diamond compounds and were dependent on miners in 1903 suggests that an increasing number were landless and did not return to their rural homesteads between contracts (Turrell 1987, 169).

3.2 Twentieth-century expansion of South Africa’s labor catchment area

Initially, the demand for unskilled black labor in the gold mines was met by the men who had supplied the diamond mines: the Pedi from Transvaal and the Shangaans (Tsonga) from Mozambique. However, the gold rush of the 1890s accelerated labor demand so that at the turn of the century, 100,000 black Africans worked in the Rand mines, up from 14,000 in 1890, a number that increased further in the following decades (Wilson 1972, 4).

The mobilization of large numbers of unskilled and low-paid laborers from poorer distant areas throughout Southern Africa (and even for a short time between 1904 and 1907 from China) probably became crucial for the survival of the South African gold mining industry (Crush, Jeeves, and Yudelman, 1991, 1). Ore deposits, though large, turned out to be of lower quality than expected and lay deep underground. The geological characteristics demanded expensive equipment for deep-shaft mining and also favored the use of a large number of unskilled labor. Since the price of gold was fixed internationally, production costs could not be passed on to consumers (Figure 10.1). Saving on labor costs was the only strategy left to increase the profit margins. Thus, while the white workers’ positions and wages were protected by racial policies and trade unions, the real value of black mineworkers’ cash earnings probably fell over the period from 1911 to 1969. Black miners’ wages also lost value against black wages in the South African manufacturing sector, which did not tap into foreign countries’ labor pools (Feinstein 2005, 67).

![FIGURE 10.1 South African gold output and inflation-adjusted average annual price.](https://clio-infra.eu/Indicators/Inflation.html)
The *Chamber of Mines*, formed in 1889, coordinated the Randlords’ initiatives to secure sufficient labor at a low cost (Wilson 1972, 2–3). In 1896, it created the *Rand Native Labor Association* to curtail the competition in labor recruitment by the different mines and keep wages low. Its successor since 1900, the *Witwatersrand Native Labor Association* (WNLA), retained a monopsony over African labor recruitment outside South Africa and the protectorates. Initially WNLA recruited only in Mozambique, which supplied most foreign workers throughout the history of Rand gold mining, but it expanded its catchment area in the following decades.

WNLA recruitment outside South Africa was regulated by inter-state agreements that secured at least some profit for the labor-exporting countries. The first official Labor Agreement between the Portuguese colonial government and the *Chamber of Mines*, the Modus Vivendi, was signed in 1901. This agreement and its later amendments granted WNLA monopolistic permission to recruit labor in Mozambique. For its part, the Lusitanian colonial government charged recruitment licenses as well as administrative fees for each Mozambican employee to the recruiting organization. Workers were to travel by train to Johannesburg and be repatriated after completion of their fixed-term contracts, to ensure Mozambique was not permanently deprived of its working population. This way, miners contributed to the monetization of the home economy and paid hut taxes levied by the Portuguese administration (Alexopoulou and Juif 2017).

The length of stay of foreign circular migrant workers in the mines – also stipulated in the inter-state agreements – varied by origin and in time but was never more than two years in a row. For Mozambicans, contracts were of 12 months, extendable by a further 6 months. Black South African workers were mostly engaged for fixed contracts of 270 shifts (around ten and a half months) by the *Native Recruiting Corporation* (NRC). Following the example of Kimberley’s diamond mines, black workers in the Witwatersrand were housed as single men in barracks for the duration of their contracts. Until the 1970s, a mere 3% of black workers were placed in family housing (Crush, Jeeves, and Yudelman 1991, 13).

Table 10.2 shows the origin of black gold mineworkers from the 1890s to the 2000s. Before the *Native Recruiting Corporation* (NRC) was set up in 1912, to recruit in South Africa, Lesotho, Swaziland, and the southern parts of Botswana, almost 70% of black mineworkers were recruited in Mozambique by WNLA. About another 8% originated from “tropical Africa,” including Angola, Northern Rhodesia, and Nyasaland. However, due to the appalling pneumonia death rates among the latter groups of workers, in 1913 (and until 1933) the British and South African governments banned recruitment in any area above 22 degrees south latitude.

Labor shortage was relieved in the 1920s and 1930s and the mines temporarily cut down on recruitment in foreign countries. A sharp decline in real gold prices after the First World War threatened to render several mines unprofitable, and many workers were laid off. The Great Depression, which freed workers from other sectors, made labor even more abundant. By 1932, the share of – recruited – foreign black workers had come down to less than 40% (Crush, Jeeves, and Yudelman 1991, 232).

From 1940 to 1970, the increasing wages and proletarianization outside mining raised pressure on African miners’ wages, which was met by a renewed push of recruitment northward. In fact, the African miners reacted to the refusal of the Chamber to increase wages by illegally forming the *African Mine Workers’ Union* in 1941 and inciting a strike in 1946, which the state and Chamber ruthlessly suppressed (Crush, Jeeves, and Yudelman 1991, 12). The mining industry even tried in the post–Second World War period to cut its total wage bill by partly stabilizing its South African black labor force and weakening the “color bar,”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>South Africa</th>
<th>Mozambique</th>
<th>Nyasaland</th>
<th>Southern Rhodesia</th>
<th>Northern Rhodesia</th>
<th>German East A.</th>
<th>Angola</th>
<th>Botswana</th>
<th>Lesotho</th>
<th>Swaziland</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Tropical</th>
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<td>32,508</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2106</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>53,000</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>13,569</td>
<td>5,770</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td></td>
<td>6,494</td>
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<td>Mozambique</td>
<td>Nyasaland</td>
<td>Southern Rhodesia</td>
<td>Northern Rhodesia</td>
<td>German East A.</td>
<td>Angola</td>
<td>Botswana</td>
<td>Lesotho</td>
<td>Swaziland</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Tropicala</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Crush, Jeeves, and Yudelman (1991, 234–5); Feinstein (2005, 65); Wilson (1976, 456); Crush, Peberdy, and Williams (2006, 10).

a Includes labor in gold and coal mines in Transvaal.
b Includes Lesotho and Swaziland.
c Data from Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WENELA) Annual Reports (rounded numbers), cited in Wilson (1976, 456).
d Includes Malawi, Angola, Zambia.
so as to replace some of the increasingly expensive white miners by cheaper black ones, but these attempts failed due to government opposition (Crush, Jeeves, and Yudelman 1991, 83). Similar agreements as the one with Mozambique had been reached with Northern and Southern Rhodesia and Nyasaland in 1938, and several new WNLA recruitment stations refurbished the mines in the following decades. Map 10.1 shows the main migration streams in 1940 to 1970. From about 1970, labor migrancy to South Africa’s mines entered a new phase (see Section 4).

To sum up, the gold mines in South Africa relied for a long time, until the 1970s, on a system of circular migration from distant rural places and foreign countries. Labor-supplying governments, rural chiefs, and white workers (voters) preferred this system, which was, most times, also not at odds with the mining industry’s interests, over the stabilization of workers and their families around mines.

Recruiting in distant poor areas allowed mining companies to hire men with a low reservation wage. A workforce whose members oscillate between rural and urban areas could “justifiably” be paid below the urban subsistence level as it was assumed that the worker got additional support from his native village (Wilson 1972, 121). A migrant workforce was also easier to control, as insurgent workers could be removed by returning them to their home areas, and could be fragmented politically.11

The high turnover of black mineworkers helped ensure that they did not compete with white miners in terms of training and skills, providing justification for the color bar, which became entrenched in South Africa’s racial state ideology both before and during the apartheid regime (after 1948). Under the later pass laws including the 1923 Natives (Urban Areas) Act and its subsequent amendments, urban areas were deemed as “white,” and black South Africans were granted only temporary permission of residence for the duration of their contracts. The circular labor migration system made sure that black people did not reside and work long enough without interruption in the city to qualify for permanent residency in the metropolitan area (Ogura 1996).

For their part, labor-sending colonial governments did not wish to be deprived permanently of their working and tax-paying population and received their share from “lending” their workforce. Rural chiefs and village elders generally insisted on their followers’ allegiance to traditional leadership structures and gained, for instance, from taxing returning mineworkers and cashing in on bridewealth. As to migrants themselves, the circulation between mines and rural areas may have been their preferred arrangement in the beginning, particularly when there was no minimum contract length, which allowed men to work long enough to meet a set target while their help was not needed at home for farming. But after years of movement and increasing landlessness or deterioration of traditional livelihoods, they might have preferred to settle permanently with their families near their workplace. However, in the Rand mines this option was cut off by the law (Wilson 1972, 5).

The sending rural areas were certainly affected as a consequence of the periodical deprivation of a significant share of their young adult male population, but the effects may have varied from place to place. In the view of many scholars writing in the 1960s and 1970s, South African mine labor migrancy in the 20th century undermined the peasantry and intensified poverty in the African reserves (e.g., Moyana 1976; Bundy 1979). The absence of able-bodied men may have resulted in lower yields in some instances, but logically the total income in the communities, including cash wages, must have increased in the short run, as men would probably have decided to stay put otherwise (Wilson 1972, 131). Still, income
distribution, agricultural practice, culture, or institutions may have suffered disruptions induced by labor migration (Sanderson 1961; Van den Berg 1987).

On the other hand, some studies emphasize African agency, and hold that, although some migrants used their earnings to gain independence from parental or chief control or to satisfy newly acquired tastes of consumption goods, many have also used such earnings to support their rural homesteads. For instance, Beinart (2014) argues that most migrant miners returning to Mpondoland – where in 1936 over 40% of all 15–40-year-old males were absent at any time of the year – reinvested their wages (which until 1910 were sometimes even paid in cattle) into the rural economy, thereby raising agricultural productivity. He provides evidence based on agricultural censuses and surveys of a positive rather than an inverse relationship between mine wage income, livestock holdings, and smallholder output – at least until the 1960s. In the latter part of the 20th century, when the share of households deriving their incomes from farming declined and unemployment rose, transfers of income from mineworkers were probably vital for some rural households in sending areas.

3.3 From international recruitment to stabilization in Katanga until the Great Depression

Securing sufficient labor for the construction and operation of the mines in Katanga was the largest challenge faced by the UMHK in the first decades of its existence. The mining area was sparsely populated given its unfavorable geographic and climatic characteristics. Moreover, the Congolese population probably had little incentive to work for Europeans, due to the bad reputation it earned during the rubber exploitation under King Leopold’s rule, the high morbidity and mortality of miners, and the possibilities to sell food produce to the mines.

In the early years, the mines, in cooperation with the Belgian colonial state, resorted to organized and often forceful recruitment in relatively distant areas of the Congo as well as in surrounding colonies. From 1910, a government-assisted recruiting agency, the Bourse du Travail du Katanga (BTK), controlled by UMHK, Katanga Railways, and other enterprises, recruited labor in Belgian colonial territory, particularly in the province of Kasai in the center of the Congo and in the Lomami district of Katanga. After neighboring Ruanda-Urundi became a League of Nations-mandated territory under Belgian administration, the BTK recruited there as well.

The colonial state legitimized moral and fiscal pressure to work exerted on natives by a need to defeat presumed “African laziness” (Juif and Frankema 2018). It set quotas of able-bodied men who could be recruited in each village, to be selected by local chiefs and handed over to recruiters. Although the Belgian foreign office voiced some concerns about violent and fraudulent practices by the semi-private recruitment agencies in the late 1910s, and legislation attempted to safeguard recruits from those abuses, little was done to enforce it (Buell 1928, 538). Around 10% of recruits, many of whom had been compelled to sign work contracts, deserted on their way to the mines or shortly after arrival in the early 1920s (in South Africa the desertion rate was around 2%) (Buell 1928, 554). Government assisted employers in retrieving deserted workers by introducing a dactyloscopic (fingerprint-based) identification system in 1919, and in 1922 decreed the termination of employment before contract expiration as illegal, punishable with prison and fines (Buell 1928, 553). Until the Great Depression, an important but decreasing share of African mineworkers was recruited
outside the Belgian territories, in neighboring British Northern Rhodesia (also Nyasas were recruited there), and Portuguese Angola (see Table 10.3). The “foreign” share was almost 50% until the mid-1920s, and most of them were contracted through private recruiting companies like Robert Williams and Company or Correa Freires. Other than the vast catchment area of South Africa’s recruiters, the majority came from neighboring countries (see Map 10.2), and organized recruitment ceased to be the main instrument to secure labor after 1930.

Like between South Africa and other sending countries, labor migration to Katanga was regulated by inter-state contracts. The agreement with Northern Rhodesia included the posting of a permanent Inspector of Rhodesian Labor at the largest mine, the “Star of the Congo” at Lumumbashi, and granting Robert Williams and Company the exclusive right of labor recruitment in the northeast of Northern Rhodesia. These contracts also stipulated that workers had to be repatriated to their home village at the end of their terms, where they would receive the last part – about two-thirds – of their wage according to what was known as the “deferred pay system.” This clause ensured that “exported” laborers fulfilled their domestic tax obligations. The wages of mine labor migrants were the main source of tax revenue raised by the BSAC. The BSAC also permitted labor recruitment for Katanga because the mines provided traffic for the Rhodesian railway which it had built. The duration of contracts was usually 180 working days (ca. 7 months) or, after 1922, 240 days.¹³

### TABLE 10.3 Origin of laborers at the UMHK in total numbers and percentages

#### Panel A: Total numbers (period averages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Northern Rhodesia</th>
<th>Barotseland</th>
<th>Angola</th>
<th>Congo</th>
<th>Nyasaland and others</th>
<th>Ruanda-Urundi</th>
<th>Total of foreigners</th>
<th>Sum total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1920–22</td>
<td>6,182</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>5,472</td>
<td>431</td>
<td>7,195</td>
<td>12,680</td>
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<tr>
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<td>6,380</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>8,167</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>7,243</td>
<td>15,410</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926–27</td>
<td>4,834</td>
<td>920</td>
<td>577</td>
<td>13,303</td>
<td>535</td>
<td>1,241</td>
<td>6,844</td>
<td>21,409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928–30</td>
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<td></td>
<td>11,672</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>10,214</td>
<td>707</td>
<td>1,502</td>
<td>12,423</td>
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<tr>
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<td>239</td>
<td>1,952</td>
<td>19,900</td>
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<td>25,252</td>
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#### Panel B: Percentages

<table>
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<th>Barotseland</th>
<th>Angola</th>
<th>Congo</th>
<th>Nyasaland and others</th>
<th>Ruanda-Urundi</th>
<th>Total of foreigners</th>
<th>Sum total</th>
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<td>1951–60</td>
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<td>13.8</td>
<td>7.2</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Rapports Annuels UMHK-MOI, various years.

¹ Barotseland was a part of Western Northern Rhodesia which enjoyed special autonomy.
Arguably, thanks to some of the conditions stipulated in these agreements, the morbidity and mortality of Rhodesian workers in Katanga was lower than among the Congolese recruits.

Recruitment for the UMHK had important consequences for the sending regions in and outside the Congo. Perrings (1977) documents a short period of organized recruitment by Robert Williams and Company in the Angolan province of Mexico (about 300 to 500 miles from the mines) between 1917 and 1921. Even though stipulated differently in an inter-state agreement with the Portuguese, outright coercion was employed in the recruitment and deserters were brutally punished. As a consequence of the deplorable recruitment practices and the high morbidity in the mine camps, out of the 3,479 Angolans recruited in this period, 536 men died on company premises, and a further 778 deserted. One year after the recruitment operation started, the territory was recorded to have been left abandoned by Africans following the disruptions of these activities. Williams’ concession was not renewed the following year, but some Angolans continued to be recruited until 1921; afterward, they came on a voluntary basis.

Beginning in 1918 and until 1930, the UMHK withdrew from the Southern African migrant labor system, which continued to furnish African recruits for other industries and farms of the region (Higginson 1989). As Table 10.3 shows, the share of “foreign” workers in the Katanga mines decreased from about 60% in the early 1920s to about 10% in the
1940s. As it turned its back on foreign labor, mine management freed itself from the considerable costs of organized recruitment in foreign territory. In 1931, as the Great Depression had diminished the demand for labor, the UMHK decided to stop actively recruiting outside Belgian territory altogether. At the same time, the company resolved to cut down on recruitment within the Congo, also due to pressure from missionaries and some civil servants who denounced the social disruption caused by the departure of young men to the emerging urban centers (Peemans 1975, 190). While in 1922 76% of all UMHK black workers had been actively recruited, in 1935 the share was only 15% – all recruited in Katanga’s Lomami district – and by the mid-1940s it had declined to around 5%.

One reason for giving up on foreign African labor recruitment was its costs relative to Congolese labor. After the First World War, the value of the Belgian franc against the British pound dropped abruptly, raising the wage bill for black African workers from British colonies – as well as for white workers – who had to be paid in sterling. On top of that, the incipient mining industry and consequent rise in labor demand on the Rhodesian side of the Copperbelt border disrupted the labor supply for Katanga. In 1929, the British colonial government prohibited recruitment by the UMHK in Northern Rhodesia upon request of the new domestic mining companies.

The UMHK management’s decision to dissolve its dependence on large-scale labor recruitment in and outside Belgian territory went hand in hand with the implementation of a policy of stabilization, which involved a search for improved productivity and paternalistic and authoritarian welfare policy. The UMHK sought to reengage Congolese workers immediately after their contracts expired and offered longer contracts. After 1927, the company hired workers only for three-year contracts. While in 1928 45% of the workforce had a contract for a duration of three years, 98% had one in 1931 (Mottoulle 1946, 53). In the vein of paternalism, a very large share of labor costs was not spent on cash wages but on food for workers and their families, hospital and children’s welfare, amortization of housing construction, clothes, and firewood, in total about 50% to 70% until the 1950s (Juif and Frankema 2018). The company had realized that married workers were healthier, more productive, and more likely to stay for the three years or longer. Thus, the UMHK strongly encouraged the presence of wives in camps, even advancing wage payments for bridewealth to unmarried workers when signing their work contract (Mottoule 1946, 19). Infrastructure in mining compounds was improved dramatically during the 1920s and Catholic missionaries were put in charge of the provision of wide-ranging welfare services. Workers’ death rates declined from 35 per 1,000 in 1920 to less than 2 per 1,000 in 1930 and thereafter, remaining higher for underground workers than for surface miners (see Table 10.4).

**TABLE 10.4** Stabilization in Katanga

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>mortality per thousand workers</th>
<th>% workers married</th>
<th>% non-recruited workers</th>
<th>Desertion % (contract breach)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1920–24</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>14.8²</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925–29</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>45.1</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930–34</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>52.0</td>
<td>72.0</td>
<td>n.d.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


² In 1924.
A motivation for the UMHK’s investment in longer-term work relations was its decision that it was economical to invest in African workers’ training. Trained black workers were to complement increasingly used machinery and to replace more expensive (semi-)skilled white mineworkers. Increased labor productivity and mechanization resulted in an increase of UMHK’s finished copper production from about 19,000 tons in 1920 to 147,500 in 1930, while the African workforce was merely doubled (see Figures 10.2 and 10.3). Soon, the children of the stabilized workers were also educated and trained to make up the future labor force, whereby Benedictine missionaries with the help of African moniteurs inculcated in them the traits of obedience and work ethic (Juif 2019). In the Congo, other than in the British territories of Southern and Central Africa, given the absence of European trade unions which demanded equal pay for equal work, technically qualified Africans could be promoted to skilled jobs and could replace Europeans (for a much lower pay). Already in 1919, after a failed strike by – mainly South African – white miners, many of the white workers had been dismissed and were replaced by black Africans (Higginson 1989, 42). The range of wage scales for African workers was thus higher in the Congolese than in the Rhodesian mines, because it included, for instance, overseers (Juif and Frankema 2018, 24).

Worker insurgencies among UMHK-stabilized workers were probably kept at bay by a tight net of control, including camp police and church-sponsored associations, and in general an appeasing paternalistic labor system. Following black workers’ strikes in 1941, during the Second World War, motivated by a rise in food prices, the Belgian government introduced a further series of improvements in working conditions, like minimum wages and legalization of trade unions in 1946; compensation for accidents at the workplace in 1949; family allowances in 1951; paid vacations in 1954; as well as an eight-hour day in 1958 (Larmer 2017). The Katangese indigenous miners’ trade union turned out to be disinclined to strike – also compared to its Rhodesian counterpart – and only a small share of workers affiliated. In the words of Ralph Austen: “miners in Katanga became a black labor aristocracy but one very much under the control of Union Minière and lacking political, social or […] economic influence comparable to the position of white south African workers” (Austen 1987, 167).

Stabilization was well established in the 1950s and 1960s, and the UMHK had a large pool of experienced and trained workers, even if it continued its recruitment missions within the Congo (in Kasai and Lomami) and Ruanda-Urundi (Rwanda and Burundi) to supply a small part of the “fresh” labor (except in the 1930s, when the Great Depression did away with labor shortage). By 1951, the average term of employment in Katanga mines was 11 years. Out of the workers who were newly engaged (i.e., in their first three-year contract) the share that had been actively recruited by the UMHK recruitment missions ranged between 13% in 1956 and 35% in 1961. The rest were engaged onsite.

3.4 Hesitant urbanization in Northern Rhodesia’s Copperbelt

When mining operations started out in Northern Rhodesia, labor scarcity was a challenge, given that the population was used to seeking work abroad. On the other hand, the mining companies had the advantage that they were able to tap into a domestic pool of labor that was experienced with copperminework in Katanga. The costs that could be saved on organized recruitment were invested in workers’ wages to compete with the UMHK. In 1928, for instance, all workers had to come to the mines on their own account in Bwana Mkubwa
FIGURE 10.2 Congolese and Zambian copper output and inflation-adjusted average annual price. 

FIGURE 10.3 Number of workers, Katanga and Copperbelt, 1911–64. 
(a lead and zinc mine in Central province) and 88% at the Roan Antelope copper mine (Ferguson 1999, 49). Only during the mine construction boom, which required the mobilization of huge numbers of workers in a short period (31,941 in the peak in September 1930), was part of the labor obtained by recruitment agencies, sometimes through coercion (some 30% to 40%) (Ferguson 1999, 49).

The height of the Northern Rhodesian mine construction boom coincided with the onset of the Great Depression, which hit the copper industry hard. The price of copper declined by half in the years after 1929 (see Figure 10.2), resulting in the temporary closure of mines and a hold on mine construction work. With the crisis, the problem of labor scarcity had been solved and organized recruitment was done away with altogether, in favor of an all-voluntary labor force (Parpart 1986, 47). Even though mining companies did not have to resort to proactive recruitment, they did complain at times about the government failing to raise higher barriers on outmigration to Southern Rhodesia and South Africa.17

Like in the other cases studied here, most of the African workers did not originate from the areas immediately surrounding the mines, but, in the case of Northern Rhodesia, from the agriculturally poorer areas in the Northeast about 300 to 500 miles away, where the Bemba-speaking people lived. A 1945 memorandum on native labor of the most important mining companies reads that 50% came from Northern province (Bemba territory); Southern and Western provinces supplied 2–3% of miners each; Barotse province in the west supplied 3% of labor; and the remaining provinces contributed about 8% in total. The rest, around 30% to 40%, came from outside Northern Rhodesia. The 1960 Chamber of Mines Year Book records that 25% of all workers came from outside Northern Rhodesia, 30% from Northern province (main Bemba territory), 16% from Luapula province, 10% from Eastern province, 8% from Central province, and the rest from Northwestern, Barotse, Western, and Southern province.18

The Northern Rhodesian mining companies looked at both South Africa and Katanga for models of labor systems. Mine management may at first have favored a men-only, circular migrant labor force, following the example of South Africa, as it allowed the companies to save on the cost of housing and on feeding workers’ families (Parpart 1986). On the other hand, Chauncey (1981) has argued that the policy of the mine managers almost from the start was to gain a competitive advantage over labor markets in South Africa and Southern Rhodesia by allowing the presence of wives and children. Even though companies did not build enough suitable houses or provide sufficient food rations for families until after the Second World War, often resulting in crowded living conditions, the possibility to bring their wives was attractive for many workers, and compound managers soon also recognized the advantages of the presence of women. The share of married workers in the camps of Katanga and the Rhodesian Copperbelt was not dissimilar in the late 1920s (about 30%), though afterward Katanga was always ahead of Northern Rhodesia by around 10% to 20% (see Table 10.5).

Still, compared to Katanga, mining companies probably had lower incentives to invest in longer-term relations with their African workers. A legal color bar was never introduced in Northern Rhodesia, as the Colonial Office opposed it, and European settlers as well as white South African workers lacked the political power or incentives to impose it, also because they were small in numbers and their turnover was high (Money 2016). Still, a de facto color bar was embedded in company policy. This meant that all skilled and semi-skilled positions were reserved for the white workforce, deterring companies from training Africans. As Table 10.6 shows, whereas Katanga gradually replaced white workers by Africans, the black to
TABLE 10.5 Percentage of workers married

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Rhodesian Copperbelt</th>
<th>Katanga</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>28.4</td>
<td>33.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>41.0</td>
<td>50.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>52.1</td>
<td>57.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>69.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>53.3</td>
<td>78.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>68.8</td>
<td>82.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>75.0</td>
<td>84.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ferguson (1999, 59), Rapports Annuels UMHK-MOI, various years.

TABLE 10.6 Black-white mineworker ratio (black miners per white miner)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Rhodesian Copperbelt</th>
<th>Katanga</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>8.75</td>
<td>9.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>5.81</td>
<td>7.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>7.62</td>
<td>17.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>7.52</td>
<td>15.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>8.09</td>
<td>22.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>8.31</td>
<td>16.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Perrings (1979), Rapports Annuels UMHK-MOI, various years.

white miners’ ratio remained constant in the Northern Rhodesian mines. At the same time, there was less scope for mechanization in the mostly underground mines of Northern Rhodesia, comparably favoring the use of more untrained workers. Thus, while in 1938 almost all African workers in Katanga had three-year contracts and the majority reengaged after contracts expired, a ticket system whereby miners were paid after 30 completed shifts (one ticket) was still in place in the Northern Rhodesian mines (and over 90% of the workforce had been in service for less than three years).

Different from the Belgian Congo government, Northern Rhodesia’s colonial rulers shunned what they called detribalization, or the complete severance of indigenous peoples from their tribal roots (Ferguson 1999, 50 ff). They continued for years to fear a depression similar to the one of 1931, which left thousands of urban unemployed who had to be taken care of. The provision that the mining industry would die out someday discouraged the presence of children in compounds who would know of no employment other than mining. Further, permanent urbanization and the loss of support from rural kin would require the provision of costly retirement pensions and adequate urban welfare facilities. Therefore, in the 1940s the Rhodesian government demanded that Copperbelt mining companies retain a part of miners’ salary and remit it to their tribal villages at the end of their contracts, to ensure that workers returned and spent their cash there.¹⁹ Legal restrictions to African settlement in urban areas were set in place as well and not lifted completely until independence in 1964, although they were certainly not enforced as effectively as in South Africa.
Despite the often-conflicting interests between the colonial administration on the one hand and company managers (and Africans) on the other, in 1945 and 1946 the decision was taken by ruling elites to invest in a stabilized workforce. The government’s goal to invest in urban development was recorded in the Ten-Year Development Plan for Northern Rhodesia approved in 1947 (Heisler 1971). African mining townships in the Copperbelt were supplied with water-borne sanitation, paved roads, street lighting, proper houses for nuclear families, and some schools. Until 1950, all African workers were housed and fed at the expense of the mining companies, while afterward they were gradually brought into an “inclusive wage scheme,” which consisted of wages being paid exclusively in cash, and in which they paid rents themselves. As part of the stabilization program, the Northern Rhodesian Chamber of Mines decreed that Africans in their industrial capacity could be represented by trade unionists and most improvements in mine labor conditions were introduced after strike actions, particularly after the creation of the indigenous trade union in 1949, and the state remained at the fringes of it. As mining companies made high profits in the post-war reconstruction period, wages were raised, turning Copperbelt miners into some of the best-paid manual workers in sub-Saharan Africa (Juif and Frankema 2018).

4 Post-independence and the oil crises

When across sub-Saharan Africa, including the areas of recruitment of the South African mines, colonies started gaining independence one after another, some governments of newly independent nations prohibited the recruitment of workers in their territories. WNLA recruiters had always been banned from Angola (Angolans were recruited in Northern Rhodesia, see Map 10.1), and inter-state agreements with the Portuguese colonial administration included the prohibition to recruit above 22° latitude in Mozambique, except for a short time between 1908 and 1913 (Alexopoulou and Juif 2017). After independence in the 1960s, Zambia and Tanzania withdrew their workers from the mines (Wilson 1976). Migration from Mozambique was curtailed in the 1970s when the Frelimo independence movement closed several recruitment centers operated by the WNLA. Most “tropical” recruits came from Malawi before the Malawian president withdrew workers consequent to the crash of a WNLA plane that was carrying migrants to the Rand mines in 1972 (Wilson 1976).

As the events of the 1960s and 1970s revealed the vulnerability derived from depending almost entirely on foreign workers, South African mining companies decided to change their labor and production policy. This shift involved attracting black South African labor by raising wages to make them competitive with other South African industries and at the same time introducing more mechanized production techniques on deeper-level mines to reduce the labor needs (Moodie and Ndatsche 1994). The steep rise in gold prices in 1973–74 (see Figure 10.1) made this wage increase and investments in technology easily bearable (James 1992, 20). In the 1970s companies experimented with stabilization, incentivizing workers to reengage immediately after terminating their contracts, under threat of being replaced (this was a moment of general economic crisis and unemployment outside the gold mining sector). In 1986, almost two-thirds of all miners had been working in the mines for five to ten consecutive years, which contrasted sharply with the high labor turnover before the 1970s (De Vletter 1987).

Stabilization in South Africa was driven partly by the same motives as in Katanga in the 1920s, in particular the increasing insecurity of foreign labor supplies. It also went hand in
hand with large investments in technology to reduce the demand for labor. However, neither companies nor the state wholeheartedly invested in family housing and welfare services in workers’ camps, in that sense bearing more resemblance with Northern Rhodesia before the late 1940s (De Vletter 1987). Other than in the Belgian Congo, stabilization was certainly not fully backed by the state. Instead, the apartheid regime maintained – at least partly for racial-ideological reasons – high barriers to the permanent settlement of black people in urban centers in the form of pass laws, which were lifted only after 1986 (Ogura 1996, 415).

Different from South Africa’s gold mines, the copper mining industry experienced a calamitous bust in the decade after Zambia’s and the Democratic Republic of Congo’s independence. Copper price crashed after 1974 and did not recover for almost three decades. In the years following the oil shock of the mid-1970s, the terms of trade for copper exporters declined sharply, pushing both countries, which had become heavily dependent on copper, into prolonged economic crises. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, mining regions were in sustained decline, leading to counter-urbanization, that is, urban to rural migration, and the adoption of rural-based economic activities like charcoal production or agriculture (Potts 2005, 604). In Katanga, some retrenched mineworkers turned to artisanal mining as a survival mechanism (Larmer 2017). Zambia had reached an unusually high level of urbanization for sub-Saharan Africa, with 40% of the population classified as urban in 1980, about half of which was in the Copperbelt (Potts 2005). Fraser and Larmer (2010, 50) explain the return to rural areas this way:

While developing distinct urban cultures and outlooks, Copperbelt Zambians were never separated in any meaningful sense from their rural kin and areas of origin: indeed, what really defined Zambia was not urbanization per se but the dynamic exchanges between town and village that it enabled.

As a result of structural adjustment programs, the state-owned mining companies Gécamines (Congo) and the Zambia Consolidated Copper Mines Limited (ZCCM, Zambia) sold their assets to private bidders from the 1990s onward. The growing Chinese demand for copper raised prices from the early 2000s and led to a renewed rise in production. This relatively recent re-emergence of copper mining activities has brought about new types of immigration including Chinese mineworkers, formally contracted by Chinese-owned mining companies; as well as the irregular immigration from neighboring countries of sex workers and workers engaged in the informal sector surrounding mines (Coderre-Proulx, Campbell, and Mandé 2016).

5 Conclusion

This chapter highlighted and compared the strategies used by the major mining companies of Southern and Central Africa to meet their demand for black labor over the 20th century.

At the beginning of mining activities, all mining companies relied on a circular migrant labor force. Where the recruitment of the temporary mineworkers took place depended on the relative costs of labor (including recruitment costs) and the willingness of “labor reserve” governments to allow recruitment in their territory. Eventually, employers throughout Southern and Central Africa deemed it economically sensible to stabilize the labor force, despite the costs – at least partly borne by companies – of retirement pensions,
unemployment benefits, urban housing for families, and modern health and education services. These costs probably balanced out the returns on investments in job training, made worthwhile for employees with long-term contracts, and the waning recruitment costs (Austen 1987, 165). The timing of the transition from a continuous migration-based labor system to a stabilized workforce varied from one place to another, which has been explained with reference to different geological conditions of the mines which determined their suitability for a more mechanized production, as well as the relative costs of national to foreign labor, the latter of which could generally not be stabilized.

However, the states’ stances toward stabilization, which were informed by both economic and political considerations (including voters’ power and preferences), played a major role as well, and were relatively path dependent. Governments’ influence on urban workers’ stabilization extended to other urban employers than the mines as well (Frederick and Van Nederveen Meerkerk, Chapter 12, this volume). There were clearly different ideological conceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of stabilization not only regarding the net returns to investing in urban development but also regarding the socio-economic consequences for the rural sending areas and the migrants themselves. Northern Rhodesia’s government clung to considering “detribalization” as a problem for all parties involved until the late 1940s, when mining companies pressured for stabilization and the state realized urbanization was already under way and irreversible. The Congolese government, in cooperation with employers, experimented early on with stabilization, and positive results strengthened their confidence in the system. South Africa’s policy of racial segregation culminating in its apartheid system prevented the promotion of Africans into (semi-)skilled jobs and disincentivized training investments by mining companies. Moreover, the state aimed to reserve central urban areas for white South African residents. Under the circular migrant labor system granting permanent residency permit to black workers and their families could be avoided.

Notes
1 Frederick and Van Nederveen Meerkerk (Chapter 12, this volume) address the early shift to permanent settlement of migrants in Belgian Congolese towns compared to the much more persistent transient character of rural–urban migration in Southern Rhodesia.
2 See Fourie, Chapter 7, this volume) on the Boer expansion in South Africa.
3 The black societies that did not or hardly participated in wage work on the diamond mines, like the Zulu, Mfengu, or Pondo, had relatively prosperous farming conditions and local markets (Turrell, 1987, 19).
4 For many years, diamond miners’ wages were also payable directly in guns or ammunition (Katzenellenbogen 1975, 412).
5 As for Mozambicans, escaping worse paid forced work at home, consolidated by the Portuguese forced labor provisions of 1899, probably contributed to push men to enroll for minework in Kimberley and Rand mines (Wilson 1972, 128–9). On labor and migration in Mozambique, also see Ribeiro da Silva and Alexopoulou (Chapter 9, this volume).
6 For similar dynamics in British colonial Africa, see Okia (Chapter 8, this volume).
7 Under the pass laws (which had been introduced in 1872 in Kimberley) the black “servant” received a pass with his name, wage, and the duration of his contract. When he wished to leave the diamond fields, the worker had to present a discharge certificate or a pass attesting to his conduct to be able to leave (Hofmeester 2017, 96).
8 The high morbidity together with the frequency of deadly accidents at work produced a death rate among black people in Kimberly of 80 per 1,000 around 1880 (Worger, 1987, 100).
9 The use of many unskilled workers was more economic for a longer time in the underground Rand gold mines than in the open pit mines of Katanga, where the extraction process soon became more mechanized (Austen 1987).
10 The Rand compounds were not completely closed as theft was not as problematic as in the diamond mines, but closely surveyed.

11 Interestingly, however, Wilson (1972, 125) suggests that a stable workforce should be less prone to industrial unrest, and Northern Rhodesian and Congolese mine companies may have thought so as well.

12 In 1913–17 annual mortality rates of mining workers ranged from 70 to 140 per 1,000 (Roberts 1976, 178).

References


Fraser, Alastair, and Miles Larmer. 2010. *Zambia, Mining, and Neoliberalism: Boom and Bust on the Globalized Copperbelt*. Cham: Springer.


