



## THE CAUSES OF LABOUR MIGRATION

Labour migration in East Africa persists as a continuing movement of farmers and school leavers to sell their labour in rural or urban areas away from their homes. In a situation where the supply of this unskilled labour greatly exceeds both the present and the potential future demand, the result is a chronic under-utilization of human resources in the rural areas. To understand how this situation has arisen, and why it persists, it is necessary to account for the nature of labour migration, and its relation to attitudes towards employment and agriculture.

There is now a considerable body of literature on labour migration in sub-Saharan Africa which documents the nature and extent of migratory movements, from ethnographic and urban studies and surveys of migrants, together with discussion derived from this material giving a more general account of the causes, effects and persistence of labour migration.

The behaviour of school leavers is sometimes thought to pose special problems in this field, as it is presumed that they will despise agriculture on account of the standard of education that they have achieved. The little empirical data that exists, however, seems to indicate that the general explanations of the factors involved in labour migration apply whether or not those concerned have been educated; such differences as there are being those of degree.

### 1. The Study of Labour Migration

The earliest studies of labour migration were largely concerned with the possibilities of deleterious effects of migration on tribal life, which involved attempts to analyse the main causes of migration. There was some variation in the emphasis put on different causal factors, but as information was gathered from a growing number of sources, it became clear that the underlying incentive to migrate was overwhelmingly one of economic need. Subsequent discussions revolved largely around the levels on which these factors should be analysed, and the different circumstances of migration found in different communities which can make the evidence appear conflicting.

One of the earliest attempts to clarify the causes of labour migration came from I. Schapera, who was asked to investigate the effects of labour migration on the social and economic life of the peoples of Bechuanaland<sup>1</sup>. There was a long history of migration from Bechuanaland to employment centres outside the Protectorate, but Schapera found that variations in the rates of emigration and in the circumstances of the migrants related to a number of factors, which, together with statements of the migrants, led him to three groups of causes:

1. Economic necessity - this was the 'most nearly universal' cause, resulting from the fact that the current level of wants had made wage-labour an indispensable source of income for which there were inadequate opportunities within the protectorate. The men with the least opportunities at home, for example those without cattle, or from areas of land shortage, were most likely to migrate, while those who could satisfy their wants at home, did so.

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1. Where the names of countries have changed since independence, the name is used which was in force at the time of the studies quoted.

2. Social and Psychological - migration had become an 'accepted and expected' part of tribal life, and there were, therefore, a number of incentives to migrate arising from this pattern, for example; desire for adventure, the attraction of town life, achievement of status for young men, escape from communal or domestic problems, and in addition, migration had become a means of initiation into manhood, replacing the traditional rite de passage which was no longer practised.

3. Propaganda and Political Pressure - Schapera also gave some consideration to the role of external forces in such factors as the role of labour agents - the taps which opened the flow of migration - and the role of chiefs in putting pressure on their subjects to migrate. (Schapera 1947)

P.H. Gulliver in his studies of two areas of Tanganyika developed this analysis further, putting the major emphasis on underlying economic conditions. Given this basic economic motivation he explained other factors listed by Schapera, in terms of 'last straw' causes, that is, the final link in the chain of individual motivation that determines the particular point in time at which a particular man leaves home, as opposed to the underlying economic condition which accounts for the phenomenon of migration. A number of 'causes' mentioned by Schapera, such as the attraction of the town, or the idea of migration as initiation were not applicable to the peoples with whom Gulliver was concerned, who would have preferred to have stayed at home if they could have made money there. (Gulliver 1955, 1957)

J.C. Mitchell follows Gulliver by posing a Durkheimian distinction between the rate of migration, variations in which will depend on underlying economic conditions related to felt wants and local opportunities, and the incidence of migration accounted by individual motivation or 'last straw' causes at a particular moment. This led him to define three axes along which migration operates simultaneously:

1. Normative - where migration has become a customary pattern within tribes; it is only likely to persist while the social needs which gave rise to it persist.
2. Economic - the main basis of migration
3. Individual - the precipitating factors determining individual movement (Mitchell 1958, 1959)

Data from sources in East, Central, South and West Africa reinforce the main features of these arguments, though they are not always discussed in full. In general, however, discussions of migration have to take into account a threefold level of explanation: firstly the general level of poverty or lack of economic opportunities at home; secondly the relative level of wants or aspirations, and thirdly a confusion of individual motivation and subsidiary factors which vary between tribes and areas.

## 2. The Level of Economic Condition

The first factor, that of the level of economic condition, is the one on which virtually all studies are agreed as the feature of overwhelming importance in any account of migratory movement, and most of these accounts are concerned with tribes who are not able to meet their cash demands at home.

William Watson, for example, in his study of the Mambwe of Northern Rhodesia, describes a situation in which there are no cash crops, and though some subsistence crops may be sold, these cannot bring sufficient income to cover taxes, school fees, clothes and other wants. (Watson 1958)

D. Hobart Houghton in discussing a survey of Keiskammahoek in the south east of South Africa states that though there were subsidiary reasons, migration from the area was caused primarily by poverty as the traditional economy could barely provide for subsistence needs, let alone a growing range of new wants. (Houghton 1958)

Philip Mayer also working in South Africa, found that the Xhosa peasants in East London could not maintain themselves on their home reservations:

"Here where the growing population tries to win its food from the dwindling soil, with drought as an occasional calamity or a semi-perpetual handicap, wage-earning had become accepted as a regular second front in the battle for economic survival and security." (Mayer 1961 p.90)

A number of writers in different areas of East Africa found much the same situation. Audrey Richards saw the movement of immigrants from Ruanda-Urundi into Uganda as a general movement of population from a poorer area of population into a richer one:

"The picture gained from the Kabala and Kyaka ferry answers is that of a people continuously in need of money to satisfy their social obligations and aspirations." (Richards 1954 p.68)

Emil Rado writing of Uganda in the 1960s emphasises the different economic levels existing between the employed and others in the community:

"The average Uganda African wage-earner, though poor by the standards of Europe or America, was more than 60% better off than his self-employed brother. That is why wage-earning jobs are so keenly sought." (Rado 1965 p.101)

Walter Elkan comments on the general situation in Uganda which is perceived as the outcome of the balance of cash-earning opportunities between different sectors of the economy:

"Except in a very general sense, the proportion of men who enter employment is not so much a function of their farm incomes as of their relative opportunities for earning an income as farmers or in employment." (Elkan 1960 p.36)

S.H. Ominde in discussing the movement of labour from the Nyanza Province of Kenya, also related the high level of emigration to the relative balance of economic opportunity.

"It is this inability of the land to cater for the expanding needs that has driven a large section of the inhabitants of the area to seek paid employment in the urban areas of Kenya. . . . The migration of Nyanza's people may thus be seen as an attempt to redress the balance of economic development in favour of the receiving areas." (Ominde 1963 p.31)

In contrast to the other East African tribes studied, E.H. Winter found that the Baamba were at a stage of economic development at which their needs could be met by subsistence cultivation plus cash crops, so that the basic economic incentive to migrate was lacking. He found that few Baamba of his acquaintance migrated, except for reasons such as escape from witchcraft or family conflict, which might formerly have driven them to another village. (Winter 1955) Elsewhere he adds:

"Today an Amba who wishes to acquire wealth is well advised to stay at home and cultivate the cash crops - coffee and cotton. In fact, although a certain number of Amba men do leave the area every year to seek their fortunes elsewhere, the main trend is the immigration into Bwamba of people from other parts of the Protectorate. . . . This trend will continue as long as coffee and cotton, particularly coffee, maintain their present price levels." (Winter 1965 p.14)

Information from West African sources seems to indicate that though there are differences in the patterns of migration, the underlying conditions are much the same. R.M. Prothero, for example, found that migration from the Sokoto Province of Northern Nigeria was predominantly a seasonal movement of people from an area of high population pressure and insufficient cash earning opportunities, to areas where these cash needs could be met. (Prothero 1957)

R.K. Udo, commenting on the migration of tenant farmers in Eastern Nigeria, found a similar movement from areas of high density and low cash earning opportunity, to areas of low density and higher opportunity either in cash cropping or wage earning. (Udo 1964)

Elliott P. Skinner in questioning the Mossi of Upper Volta found that they preferred migration to growing cotton, even when given the opportunity, as it was more profitable:

"The Mossi place so much emphasis on the economic motive for labour migration that none of my respondents among the migrants stated that he had gone to the Gold Coast or the Ivory Coast for any other reason." (Skinner 1965 p.66)

A.B. Diop writing of Toucouleur migration, also lays great emphasis on the primacy of economic condition as the underlying cause of migration:

"Les raisons avancees prouvent que les gens partent parce que l'economie de la region ne peut plus assurer convenablement leur survie." (Diop 1965 p.86)

In these circumstances the economies of a number of tribes have developed to the stage where they are dependent on the income from wage labour earned outside the area in order to maintain the standard of living which is regarded as essential, and as far as information can be gathered it seems that the persistence of migration is rational in economic terms, given the present productivity of traditional agriculture.

Elliot J. Berg has attempted to show for West Africa that the seasonal migrant labour pattern is the best means of adjustment to the general economic situation:

"Historically it permitted West Africa to enjoy more rapid economic growth than would otherwise have been possible. It continues to benefit both the labor-exporting areas and the recipient area. Because migrant labor permits a better allocation of resources than would be possible under any other form of labour utilization, it is not likely to disappear until fundamental changes appear in West African economies." (Berg 1965 p.161)

Other writers have shown the extent to which migration has become part of life in the way that Schapera found it among the Bechuanaland peoples. For example Murray Armor, using a questionnaire to Barotseland recruits to the South African mines, found a situation in which men spent their time alternating between careers at the mines and at home, and, in order to maintain the standard of living they expected, kept returning to the mines throughout their working lives. Migration had become not only an accepted part of life; it was essential to the economy of the village. (Armor 1962)

Similarly J. van Velsen studying the effects of migration on Tonga tribal society, found that the minimum requirements of the Tonga had reached a level which necessitated a higher cash income than could be earned at home, so that migration had become a necessary part of normal life. (van Velsen 1959)

While this information stresses the importance of underlying economic conditions, and the balance of economic opportunities in accounting for the movement of labour, it is not enough to explain why some areas export labour, and some areas receive it; variations in rates of emigration both within and between different tribes and areas must also be accounted for. A considerable body of detailed material has in fact been gathered, mostly within East Africa, but also from elsewhere, showing the extent to which migration rates can differ over quite small areas and relating these differences to variations in local earning opportunities.

In considering the history of migratory movements in Uganda, P.G. Powesland summarised the differences in migration patterns:

"These disparities between one tribe and another and between one part of the country and another in the relative availability of opportunities for cash earning, whether for taxes or for other needs that developed, very largely explain the tribal composition of the immigrant labour force on which Buganda, and most recently the Jinja zone, have come to depend."  
(Powesland 1957 p.9)

J.F.M. Middleton reporting on migration among the Lugbara of Uganda, found that cash was the primary motive for migration, and the highest emigration rates were from the areas where population density was greatest, and land pressure most serious. (Middleton 1952)

Aidan Southall found in a similar manner, that the territory of the Alur of Uganda could be divided into three areas in each of which there was a different level of income from cash crops associated with related levels of emigration. The rate of emigration being highest where income from cash crops was lowest. (Southall 1954)

Walter Elkan in considering the labour supply in Uganda comments on the number of times in the past in which the extension of cash crops into a new area resulted in the decline in the numbers of men emigrating from that area, and traces a general inverse relationship between farm incomes in different areas, and the proportion of men in employment. (Elkan 1960)

P.H. Gulliver in his studies of two areas of Tanganyika found among the Ngoni and Ndendeuli (Gulliver 1955) considerable variations in the level of village earnings, with migration being heaviest from areas where earnings were least, while among the Nyakyusa (Gulliver 1957) rates of migration varied according to the distribution of cash crops, in a very similar manner to that Southall describes among the Alur.

George Kay in a detailed study of the sources of village incomes in the Fort Rosebery district of Northern Rhodesia found that the proportion of labour migrants away from home and sending remittances to their kin varied inversely to the total cash earning opportunities from agriculture and other sources locally. (Kay 1964)

R.K. Udo in the study of tenant farmers mentioned above had to account for an unexpected movement from one low density area in contrast to the usual movement from areas of high density. In this case he found the low density area had an unusually low level of subsidiary cash earning opportunities outside farming, and was thus worse off than other low density areas. (Udo 1964)

These differences in earning opportunities arising from proximity to market outlets, population pressure and land shortage, cash crop incidence and other local cash earning opportunities can account for the major patterns of migratory movements, and most differences over small areas, but they cannot account for the circumstances in which the wealthiest part of an area may have the highest rate of emigration, or for changes in emigration rate without any associated changes in economic circumstances. These must be looked at in terms of relative aspirations.

### 3. The Level of Aspiration

The most elusive factor occurring in the studies quoted, and in other accounts is this level of aspiration or felt cash need. At any stage of development migration represents aspiration reaching a level at which it cannot be satisfied by local opportunities, but at which it can be satisfied by opportunities elsewhere. (The actual satisfaction through employment elsewhere being dependent on the general employment situation, and the distribution of earning opportunities.)

In some circumstances these needs may vary over a man's lifetime so that the pattern of migration varies not only according to the economic condition of any area, but according to the ages of the inhabitants. For example, W. Watson in his study of the Mambwe people of Northern Rhodesia mentioned above related different rates of migration to different needs and aspirations at different stages of a man's life. The youngest man with immediate needs, and lacking the experience and fare-money for longer journeys, went to the nearest low-paid work on rural estates; married men preferred the higher paid employment of the Copperbelt or other urban centres, and older men whose cash needs were largely satisfied, aspired less to wealth than to the achievement of status and power within their tribal society. (Watson 1958)

Philip Mayer also found that the Xhosa migrants to East London had three stages at which their needs were rather different. The senior boys went to work for one short period to show their manhood and to get personal money. The young men who were in need of money for marriage and the expenses of setting up a home would migrate to get money for these purposes, while the mature men with family responsibilities would keep on earning until they had sons old enough to take their place. (Mayer 1960)

In another study, Philip Gulliver examined the data on migration from Tanganyika and Northern Rhodesia and divided the available employment into low-wage rural employment, and high-wage industrial employment. The rewards of low-wage migration are marginal so are only attractive to the youngest men with immediate needs who have little incentive to work for more than a short time. Migration to high-wage employment, on the other hand is a longer term prospect used to establish and maintain a much higher standard of living.

"In this kind of situation wage-labour becomes much more than merely fulfilling youthful needs for clothes, bridewealth contributions and a little ready cash to establish a man as husband, father and householder." (Gulliver 1960 p.160)

The areas to which migrants from different tribes choose to go, thus vary according to the level of rewards they are seeking to meet their needs at that particular time, and will change according to the orientation of their aspirations.

In general, changes in aspirations tend to be associated with the degree of contact with the world outside the home area, and it is often those with the greatest degree of contact who are in the best position to acquire cash at home, but who nevertheless migrate, because they are aware of a range of new needs which cannot be satisfied even by relatively high earnings at home.

Margaret Read who studied groups of villages in Nyasaland found that migration rates were correlated with lack of economic opportunity, but were also affected by variations in levels of aspiration and standard of living, influenced by contacts with the wider world and experience of education.

"The evidence of the investigation shows that even if the economic situation is favourable for growing export crops, sociological considerations may nevertheless encourage emigration.

These sociological factors arise partly from the tribal organization of the people, and partly from the degree of Western contact which has changed their outlook and activities." (Read 1942 p.617)

In his study of the Ngoni, P.H. Gulliver found the case of Likuyu Fusi where high earnings at home were coupled with a high rate of emigration contradicting the general pattern by which high emigration was associated with low home earnings. This area, however, had been under strong mission influence, and had much greater experience of education than other areas, as the mission had trained many men as artisans.

"They, and almost only they amongst the rural Ngoni, are fired with something like Western-type ambition to improve their standards, to enlarge their demand and to bring other Ngonis' luxuries into their class of necessities. .... Those ambitions are realised by seeking the highest paid employment, that is by labour migration." (Gulliver 1955 p.27)

The operation of these factors in East Africa has been succinctly expressed by Aidan Southall:

"Broad distinctions may be drawn in East Africa today between areas of low emigration and primitive subsistence economy, areas of heavy emigration which lack cash crops, or in which land is short, areas of low emigration and highly developed cash cropping, and finally, areas of high economic and educational advancement with emigration at the professional level." (Southall 1961 p.168)

The picture which emerges from this material is one of a process by which the contact of Western societies with formerly non-money economies brings about a gradual increase in the use and appreciation of cash, first through the compulsion of taxation, and later by the development of new wants. To the extent that these new wants cannot be met within the home area, men will be drawn into labour migration. The examination of the part played in labour migration by the level of aspiration, therefore becomes the study of the agents of contact with the wider world that lead to development of the kinds of wants that can only be satisfied by cash earning, outside the home area.

Probably the most striking of these stimulants to rising aspiration has been education, and this has been commented on in a number of studies. There has been a tendency to presume that the experience of education leads boys to regard village life as inferior and the town as possessed of a peculiar glamour or attraction, but this does not seem to be quite the case. Education does lead to rising aspirations, but does not result in the town acquiring attraction as such. The school leaver will weigh the relative opportunities and rewards between the town and the village, and if the village can only offer traditional agriculture, the rewards of the town will almost always be higher. The attraction of the town, therefore, lies not in the 'bright lights' but in the inability of the rural areas to satisfy the aspirations of their population at a given standard of living.

A summary of the main conclusions of a symposium on unemployed youth makes the following comment:

"One of the reasons for the refusal of young persons to accept farming is that generally insufficient effort has been made to prove to them that farming is a worthwhile occupation comparable in income and prestige to other occupations. When a scheme has been carefully prepared to take account of these elements and offer attraction, e.g. the Farm Settlement Scheme in Western Nigeria, the response by the young has been remarkably satisfactory." (CCTA/ILO 1962 p.14)

As long as the majority of school leavers fail to see any evidence that farming can pay, there is no reason for them to change their assessment of the situation, though they may be forced into agriculture through lack of alternative opportunities.

Archibald Callaway emphasises the same point:

"The fact is that school leavers' views of their vocation in life are determined largely by what happens outside the school, in the society and the economy. As long as they see in farming a poor and stunted life, they will seek for what seems to them the better opportunities of the cities. What is wanted first of all is a really effective general policy towards agriculture which would demonstrate that improved farming can bring as much money and as rewarding a life as other occupations." (Callaway 1963 p.362)

M. Peil comments on the same process among middle school leavers in Ghana, where the spread of secondary education brought an increasingly sophisticated knowledge of the employment market, and a move in occupational aspiration away from formerly high status white collar jobs to skilled manual labour which carries as high rewards, while farming remains a last resort because of its low level of reward. (Peil 1966)

Unemployed school leavers interviewed in Kampala and Jinja, Uganda, showed a general lack of hostility to agriculture as such, and a low level of occupational expectation, but they hoped to find in urban employment a source of regular income which was denied to them at home. (Hutton 1966)

School leavers, therefore appear to respond to the same general incentives as other labour migrants, but their education leads them to reject agriculture insofar as they do not see how it can give them the level of reward which they are seeking.

The spread of education, although of great significance, is not the only agent acting on changes in the levels of aspiration. A number of factors combine to break down the comparative isolation of rural communities and lead to familiarity with a wider society. The most important of these can be listed as follows:

1. Physical communications - particularly relevant are improvements in transport facilities and also the achievement of a standard of living which allows increased mobility through cash availability for fares and bicycles. Also included here is the provision of feeder roads, and access to markets for export of local produce.
2. Mass media - in Africa the most influential medium is the radio with vernacular newspapers to a lesser extent in some parts. Television is still extremely limited in distribution, though potentially influential.
3. Political recognition - This lies in the farmer's awareness of the value and significance of his vote, particularly in newly independent countries.
4. Urban-rural feedback - information from returning migrants, or letters and messages from those who stay away, are probably one of the most vivid sources of information and enlightenment to the farmer at home on how his life compares with that of people elsewhere.

Thus although it can generally be found that low aspirations are linked to a low standard of living, changes in the level of aspiration, may owe more to factors such as these, than to any objective change in the level of economic condition.



1. The complex of individual motivation can obscure the main issues if these numerous individual factors are given equal weight. Confusion is particularly likely to arise where information is obtained by questioning migrants. These individual factors, however, as Gulliver, Mitchell, Barton and others have shown, cannot explain the nature of migration rates or the reasons for their change.

2. Studies of migration in tribes from rather different areas have produced what appears to be conflicting evidence on motivation. For example, some later writers have found evidence to support Schapera's category of social and psychological factors, while others have found that the concept of migration as initiation, the achievement of status through migration, or the desire for travel and adventure are not relevant to their area of study. These views can be reconciled however if these aspects are regarded as uses made of migration rather than as causal factors. For the peoples of Bechuanaland, and for certain others, migration serves as a substitute rite de passage and a means of achieving status, but these functions of migration cannot account for the different rates of migration from different areas of Bechuanaland, which Schapera explains in terms of varying economic conditions and levels of aspiration.

A further point of confusion here is that where large numbers of men migrate, and migration becomes accepted as a normal part of life, men only marginally in a situation of need in relation to the rewards of migration may be drawn into the general stream.

3. In societies such as that of the Baamba where the general incentive to migrate is lacking, some migration may still take place where employment represents a means of escape from the obligations and conflicts of rural life, and the road to town is taken by those who would formerly have moved to another village.

4. Explanations of migration couched in terms of the 'bright lights' theory or other forces of urban attraction which present the magnetism of the city as an independent force, cannot adequately account for the general relationships proposed here, nor the fact that the attraction of the city lies in the migrants' perceptions of the relative levels of rewards between town and country. Ultimately the reaction of aspirations on rates of migration will be dependent on the direction in which the 'rural-urban balance' of opportunities is tilted. Diop comments on this point:

"Si l'attrait de la vie urbaine joue un rôle, c'est essentiellement à travers les facteurs économiques: espoir de trouver un emploi, d'aider la famille, d'avoir des conditions de vie meilleures." (Diop 1965 p.89)

Undoubtedly there is some glamour for certain people in the prospect of town life, particularly among the young, but it is the difference in the levels of rewards that is the relevant factor in accounting for rural-urban movements, and explanations of this type have nothing to contribute to the understanding of rural-rural movements of labour.

If people stay at home when they could take up employment opportunities elsewhere, it is either because the level of living to which they aspire is satisfied at home, or because they realise that satisfaction cannot be achieved any more effectively by such employment than by opportunities already existing at home. The introduction of urban amenities as such into the rural areas will not be effective in retaining people at home if the village cannot give them the standard of living which they require. Similarly if land is not available, or cannot offer a better living, the schools cannot hope to inculcate the attitudes or skills that will of themselves change the order of things.

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