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978-1-107-11122-6 - Zimbabwe's Migrants and South Africa's Border Farms:

The Roots of Impermanence

Maxim Bolt

Excerpt

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1 Introduction

Labour and Fragmentation on the Limpopo River

South Africa's great spinal road, the N1, runs from Cape Town north to Zimbabwe. Past Johannesburg, Pretoria, and hundreds of miles of green Highveld; over the subtropical ridge of the Soutpansberg at Louis Trichardt; through the flat, dry, scrubby *mopaneveld*¹ of the Limpopo Valley, and the bustle, trade, and exhaust fumes of Musina town. Then it collides abruptly with the border, near South Africa's northernmost point. Following the Limpopo River westwards, rather than crossing into Zimbabwe, means following a winding, potholed military service road. The road, in turn, tracks an endless serpent of razor wire coils, the centrepiece in an undulating strip of sandy no man's land. This defensive line, punctuated by garrisons, was erected during the 'border war' of apartheid's twilight. Its electric wires, once lethal, are now set to 'detect'. The patchwork of repairs, and the ceramic parts strewn across the ground, show that the fence is not as formidable as it might seem.

Across the road from the fence, dense riverside vegetation is punctuated by human settlement. Gaps in the foliage expose the tomato fields, cotton plantations, and citrus orchards of white-owned farms, and the regimented brick blocks or ramshackle mud houses of their labour compounds. The occasional *bakkie* (pick-up truck) – an informal taxi driver, a white farmer, a black foreman, a police or military patrol – shuttles between estates, garrisons, and the border post and town to the east. But the spaces between sites of settlement are quiet. A turn in the road, and there is not a soul to be seen.

The emptiness is vital for people hoping to cross the dry Limpopo riverbed undetected, climb and cut through the fence, and make their way southwards through the bush. A sparsely populated landscape is also a danger. Game farmers find corpses slumped against trees in the silent, parched expanse of *mopaneveld* – their postures exhausted, their empty water bottles still in hand. The bush stretching back from the border is a sea surrounding islands of crop farms and their working populations.

Undocumented migrants generally try to stay out of sight – with good reason. So, at six o'clock one April morning in 2008, South African

¹ Bush dominated by *mopane* trees.

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soldiers newly posted to the area were all the more perturbed by the sight of hundreds of 'border jumpers'. In the biting cold of dawn, they crowded outside a farm, just off the border road a stone's throw from the garrison. Conspicuously undeterred by the soldiers' presence, they were looking for work.

At Grootplaas Estates, recruitment for the harvest was under way. In the yard outside the farm's workshop, women who had been employed in previous years stood in rows. Some jostled; others rushed forward. All hoped to be selected first for jobs in the 'packshed', sorting and boxing the farm's oranges and grapefruits for export. The black foreman and his team of work supervisors struggled to maintain control. Even Willem, the usually aloof white farmer-landowner, in khaki two-tone shirt and shorts, came over to call for order.

The real fight would be at the yard's perimeter fence, where most job-seekers waited. As usual, cross-border networks had relayed the recruitment date at least as far as Beitbridge, the Zimbabwean border town some 50 kilometres to the east. The soldiers entered the yard, but the crowd of 'illegals' clearly saw the recruitment process as trumping any state presence. Willem approached them, his Alsatian at his heel. If the soldiers left his recruitment alone, they would have a list of workers' names by the end of the day – a gesture towards distinguishing between those undocumented Zimbabweans who were farm workers, and those who were simply 'border jumpers'.

For the moment, work seekers were neither border jumpers, nor farm workers. They were suspended between categories. For the harvest of 2008, and unlike previous years, the white farmers had in fact agreed that their senior black employees would compile recruitment lists beforehand. Thus, the struggle for employment had already largely been won or lost – though many did not know this – in earlier appeals to powerful members of the workforce. Many first-timers, as well as the usual faces, had made the cut. Even so, until the list was read, the soldiers had no idea who among the crowd would be employed, and who would be left as 'just' a transient, undocumented migrant.

As Marula,² the black foreman, and André, the white production manager, drove the short distance to the gates of the yard, the crowd surged forward, and was ordered back onto the dirt road outside. The soldiers decided to take control, pushing people back beyond the fence with their guns. Security guards made a show of joining in, but their efforts lacked any real conviction. With the gate now shut, Hardship – keeper of the

² Although evoking an alcoholic drink, this pseudonym reflects the character of the foreman's real name. His nickname-like designation appears officially in his national identity book, and belongs to a register of black South African names that speaks of a life residing and working on white farms.

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employment register – began to call out names. One soldier peered over his shoulder, as though checking that the list was genuine. The crowd, stretching back down the dirt road to the border fence, fell silent as hopefuls strained to hear. Those chosen pushed their way forward and were let through the gate. Eventually, the recruitment roll was completed: two teams of 30 male pickers and one of 30 female pickers; and 40 men and 80 women for the packshed. There would be further recruitment, on top of the 210 just chosen and the 120 employed a few days before, to make up Grootplaas's usual complement of around 460 seasonal workers. But surprise and disappointment were unmistakable among the huge crowd left outside the gate.

There was a more immediate concern. The line between workers and border jumpers had been drawn, for now. Those left in the crowd were simply 'illegals', incongruously arrayed in front of a South African military patrol. People scattered into the citrus orchards, chased briefly by a soldier before he tripped over his gun strap and dropped his magazine. Most would walk a few kilometres to the neighbouring estates, hoping for work there. Some would soon be back for the next round of recruitment at Grootplaas. Once the soldiers had gone, a few men and women approached supervisors and the white production manager. They complained that promises had not been fulfilled, trying one last time to find employment through quiet negotiation.

At the moment of recruitment, diverse people, with diverse hopes and plans, become divided into clear groups. On the one hand are those without employment. In the eyes of soldiers, these are simply 'border jumpers', transients fleeing Zimbabwe's crisis, with no claim on the border as a place of labour. On the other are 'workers', built around a core of permanent employees – 140 at Grootplaas – whose presence is legitimated by their attachment to the farm.

Many new arrivals do indeed live a fugitive existence. The Limpopo River presents risks: from drowning or crocodile attacks when it is in flood, to abuse, assault, or rape by *magumaguma* – gangs that operate along the border – or by South African soldiers (see SPT 2004; cases in Orner and Holmes 2011). Some arrivals on the farms lack basic resources for immediate survival. Money, mobile phones, and even South African contact numbers may be casualties to robbery (see Hall 2013). On the farms themselves, aggressive border policing leaves recruits vulnerable to deportation raids.

Migrants' experience of transience is one of temporal fragmentation and spatial insecurity. Contexts of crisis, characterised by 'a loss of coherence and unity' (Vigh 2008: 10), often mean little scope for planning for the future. In Zimbabwe (see Hammar 2014; Jones 2014), as elsewhere, fast-shifting, unpredictable circumstances require constant navigation, as personal projects collapse, and norms formerly taken for granted cease

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to produce intended effects (Vigh 2008; see also Mbembe and Roitman 1995). On the Zimbabwean-South African border, displacement and the search for employment foreground a distinctly spatial dimension. As migrants seek shelter and work, and as they attempt to avoid apprehension, connections to places are tenuous at best. Crisis and transience here mean not only living from day to day, but also looking over one's shoulder, and figuring out where to go next.

On the border farms, recruitment renders migrants' transience starkly visible. Yet, away from the ritual of recruitment, distinctions between people become more complex. The farms and their settled workforces represent sites around which people gravitate. Situated far from the closest South African town, the farm's apparent isolation and stability is belied by networked connectedness, mobility, and variety. The majority of workers hail from Zimbabwe, but many have relatives elsewhere in South Africa with whom they remain in constant contact. Large numbers of Zimbabwean seasonal workers are employed on the farms each winter, and while some stay for the whole harvest, others quickly move on southwards into South Africa. Others again, who lack employment, are connected to workers through kinship, friendship, and sexual relationships. The farms integrate and root people – albeit to different degrees, and in unequal and sometimes precarious ways. They do so by offering them incorporation into workforces, and futures in the relatively ordered worlds of labour compounds. Lives amidst crisis can themselves become routinised to a degree (Mbembe and Roitman 1995; Vigh 2008; Finnström 2008). But routine on the farms is much further-reaching. Here, wage labour organises time and work hierarchies organise people.

As migrants attempt to gain a foothold in something stable, the farms themselves are far from unchanging. This monograph begins with the story of the rise of the border farms in the 1980s, following the earlier ascendancy of other forms of capitalist production in South Africa's far north. The farms were forged in the very crucible of mobility, as white farmers left newly independent Zimbabwe or came from other parts of South Africa to plant crops, and temporarily root themselves, on the southern bank of the Limpopo River. The wider geopolitics of the region, with its emphasis on redressive and restitutive measures, now in turn makes for an uncertain future. Farmers insure themselves against the possible vagaries of South African land reform by spreading risk across several farms, even securing land in Mozambique so that they can leave South Africa if necessary. Their expansion is equally a response to a liberalised market in which only the largest operators survive. At the same time, some have invited Australian coal prospectors onto their land, keeping their options open in case they are forced to sell. This is far from the popular view of sedentary farmers, rooted in land passed down

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the generations. For white farmers and black workers, everyday stability remains provisional.

And yet the estates have become focal points around which diverse residents organise their lives, amidst a bewildering kaleidoscope of economic informalisation and political turmoil. Being a farm worker, not a transient border jumper, means being incorporated into arrangements of stability, even permanence, however provisional. This book explores the lives of migrants, of settled black farm workers and their dependants, and of white farmers and managers, as they intersect on the border. Focusing on one farm, it investigates the role of a hub of wage labour in a place of crisis. *The Roots of Impermanence* argues that, for people facing uncertain futures in current regional upheavals and global capitalism, workplaces are lifespaces.

Insecurity, Labour, and the Meaning of Mobility

This is one perspective on capitalism today. Contemporary flexible capitalism stands for ephemerality and perpetual change. Local arrangements are thought to be so *ad hoc* and fleeting that contracts collapse into informality, employment into entrepreneurialism. Acute crisis is seen merely to hasten capitalism along its path. The notoriously chaotic national border between unemployment-ridden South Africa and Zimbabwe, with its political and economic troubles, is certainly a place of crisis. But here local centres of capitalist production – the border's plantation estates – represent centres of gravity, islands of wage labour in a sea of informal arrangements.

The struggle for farm employment on the border is desperate and sometimes violent. This is all the more striking because agricultural labour is some of the least desirable work around. Understanding the significance of this book's argument – that workplaces and work relationships root people – means appreciating the acute insecurity that pertains in contemporary Zimbabwe and South Africa.

The scene above is an indicator of Zimbabwe's recent political and economic crisis. Since 2000, the crisis has precipitated one of the world's highest-ever rates of hyperinflation (see, for example, *Guardian* 2008) and severe supply shortages. This has led to the displacement of millions of people across the region in search of livelihoods. Most head for South Africa. Statistics are unreliable because most Zimbabweans come through the border fence but, by 2009, Doctors Without Borders put the number at an estimated total of 3 million (Doctors Without Borders 2009). In South Africa, a citizenry frustrated by mass unemployment has reacted with violent xenophobia (see Morreira 2010). In April 2008, when this book's opening scene took place, hyperinflation in Zimbabwe was escalating fast. In South Africa, deportations of Zimbabweans

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were rampant, and widespread attacks on people perceived to be foreigners were about to hit headlines. Against the backdrop of all this uncertainty, April also saw the first of Zimbabwe's controversial 2008 elections, an event to which I return later.

As with similar forms of instability elsewhere, such as the economic decline in the Democratic Republic of Congo that drove many 'respectable' people to live by fending for themselves (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000), a large number of Zimbabweans seek unfamiliar means, outside their home country, of making ends meet. Many people who pass through the border have only a vague sense of how they will do so. Those who do not find jobs on any of the farms keep going, southwards. Some have relatives in cities or in smaller towns. For others, Johannesburg beckons, with its famed opportunities. But the Central Methodist Church in the heart of the metropolis is a good indication of what awaits: at night, its winding corridors are packed, body-to-body, with Zimbabweans seeking shelter.³

These predicaments intersect with others in the region. The Zimbabwean crisis is only one among a cluster of processes of fragmentation. Opportunities for formal employment have contracted. South Africa and Zimbabwe, especially, previously drew vast numbers of black people from across Southern Africa into formal, though inequitable, employment as labour migrants. The 1990s saw both countries turning to leaner economic models. In today's South Africa, government policies have paved the way for neo-liberal open markets and 'flexible accumulation' (Harvey 1990). The widespread casualisation of work, in especially large numbers on commercial farms (Ewert and du Toit 2005; Addison 2006; Rutherford and Addison 2007), coexists with secure employment for the privileged few, who become targets of such initiatives as Corporate Social Responsibility (see, for example, Rajak 2008). Most people are excluded from such employment altogether. In 1990s Zimbabwe, similarly severe loss of employment followed 'the global imperatives of the structural adjustment programme' (Raftopoulos and Phimister 2004: 357; see also Gibbon 1995).

The 'informal economy', as practice and academic concern, now appears to sum up livelihood opportunities. Crisis in Zimbabwe meant 'informalisation' of employment, tenure rights, party politics, and migration (Raftopoulos, conference keynote quoted in Hammar, McGregor, and Landau 2010: 269). With the collapse of much Zimbabwean industry and commercial agriculture, ordinary people are reduced to hunting

³ Bishop Paul Verryn's Central Methodist Church in downtown Johannesburg has, since 2004, been a *de facto* refuge for countless migrants, most from Zimbabwe. It consequently became a focus for high-profile humanitarian efforts. See Beremauro's recent ethnographic study (2013). In 2015 migrants have come under renewed pressure to leave the church and have been subject to deportation raids (see Guardian 2015; Al Jazeera 2015).

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ad hoc, survivalist opportunities to make ends meet: *kukiya-kiya*, 'making do' by means of 'zigzag' arrangements (Jones 2010). For many in South Africa, finding an ever-smaller niche in the overcrowded world of small-scale trade appears the only option beyond state benefits (Ferguson 2007; see James and Hull 2012). In both countries, many people's livelihoods and projects have insecure, short-term horizons. The days of the long-term plan, achieved through stable employment, seem a remote memory: remitting throughout years of work, accumulating a fund for respectable retirement.

Changes in patterns of spatial mobility reflect – indeed, epitomise – this wider fragmentation. Large-scale migrant labour in centres of capitalist production appears to have disappeared overnight, together with the academic preoccupations that had accompanied it. Earlier scholarly focus on labour migrancy in southern Africa,⁴ the 'productivist' historiography of 'the Africa of the labour reserve' (Andersson 2006: 376), has given way to trade networks (see Andersson 2006), new forms of debt and destitution (Hull and James 2012), and identity and 'abjection' in the neo-liberal world order (Ferguson 1999).

Yet hubs of waged, migrant labour have not simply disappeared. What does employment – now far scarcer – mean amidst such transience? What was at stake for the Zimbabweans at the Grootplaas gates? Answering these questions means thinking differently about labour migration itself. Labour migration and displacement – or 'forced migration' – are the subjects of two largely separate bodies of literature, with different guiding questions. Scholarship on the latter often explores the nature of people's attachment to places and their experiences of being uprooted.⁵ Labour migration literature, on the other hand, assuming longer-term continuity, seeks to establish whether migrants seek material accumulation or personal transformation when they move,⁶ and explores the moral struggles surrounding, and the consequences of, remittance patterns.⁷

In Southern Africa, too, labour migration and displacement have been considered as two different kinds of human mobility. Until apartheid ended in 1994, 'labour migration' was the central paradigm. Literature emphasised the integration of Zimbabwe, South Africa, and neighbouring nation states into a single regional political economy in which countless black people from across the subcontinent sought employment

⁴ While this book takes Zimbabwe and South Africa as its particular focus, there have also been important hubs of labour migration in other countries such as Zambia (see, for example, Epstein 1958) and Namibia (see, for example, Gordon 1977), and migrants hailed from across the Southern African region.

⁵ For example, Malkki 1992; Jing 2003; Turton 2005; Loizos 2008; James 2009.

⁶ For example, Ferguson 1999; Gardner and Osella 2003; Parry 2003; Bakewell 2008.

⁷ For example, Ferguson 1999; Ballard 2003; McKay 2003; Gamburd 2004; Mazzucato, Kabki, and Smith 2006.

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in white-controlled centres of capitalist production like Johannesburg. It analysed how migrants lived their lives in labour compounds and in townships, in areas that were assumed to be 'white' spaces and where they had insecure tenure. And it investigated the relationship between migrants with different backgrounds while nonetheless concentrating – as did the migrants – on their long-term commitment to their more secure 'home' settings. With the contraction of formal sectors in Zimbabwe, South Africa, and elsewhere, and following Zimbabwe's political and economic crisis, 'displacement' – with its focus on upheaval and uprootedness – has replaced 'migration' as the dominant paradigm for understanding Zimbabweans' mobility.

However, these two paradigms – displacement and labour migration – need to be understood, not as alternatives, but in a dynamic relationship. Zimbabweans are dislocated. But on the border they find themselves drawn into a world in which white agricultural estates manage for the present to organise residents' lives, spatially, socially, and economically. Permanently employed farm workers – sometimes referred to simply as *mapermanent* – depict their lives on the farms in terms of stability and non-movement, asserting their rootedness as members of a resident population. Many such workers attempt to save for retirement, battling against Zimbabwe's economic and political instabilities in their bid to maintain their kin there. They establish stable structures of hierarchy and authority at Grootplaas that organise their own lives and the border compounds, and shape their relation to the border itself. It is these formalised labour hierarchies that seasonal workers are forced to negotiate. The latter, who come for the harvest, comprise both regulars and more recent recruits who seek work as they flee Zimbabwe's crisis.

To return to the Zimbabweans waiting at the Grootplaas gates: those admitted to the workshop yard, and into farm employment, *become* labour migrants *at their places of work*. Their relationships, their plans for the future, and their very sense of personhood come to be defined in relation to their workforce membership – with its paternalist hierarchies, its organisation of space, and its rhythms built around the wage.

What is more, traders are drawn by the lucrative markets represented by hundreds of waged workers. They hail from different national backgrounds (Zimbabwe and South Africa) and employment positions (farm labourers, displaced entrepreneurs, workers from other sectors, members of a former or aspirant middle class). Within and beyond the labour force itself, therefore, migrants with different motivations together make up a nexus point of provisional settlement and stability through the social arrangements on the farm.

Appreciating these experiences requires looking beyond displacement or neo-liberal fragmentation, and beyond a view of labour migration set apart from this fragmentation. Doing so, in turn, requires a second

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analytical move, which I have already prefigured. Rather than viewing contemporary phenomena in purely national terms, this book attempts to recover a regional view of crisis and employment.

For a Regional Perspective

Academic literature on Zimbabwe and South Africa has diverged markedly in recent years. This reflects the different histories of the two countries, but it underplays the political economy they have in common. Scholarship on the former, analysing the Zimbabwean crisis, has often focused on the politics surrounding the Mugabe regime.⁸ Central in current analyses of South Africa, in contrast, has been a less personalised and more systemic analysis. Focusing on the diverse effects of neo-liberalism, this has covered themes from the shrinking of the state and outsourcing of its roles (Koelble and LiPuma 2005), to the rise of occult economies (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999), to the 'precarity' even of people with secure employment (Barchiesi 2011), to 'declarations of dependence' by insecure people seeking vertical ties of obligation and protection (Ferguson 2013). While Zimbabwe's and South Africa's forms of instability differ in many ways, what they share is their 'informalising' effects on ordinary people. Indeed, whereas Guyer (2004) writes of multiple 'formalisations' to characterise the diverse ways economic activities are brought within the purview of states, recent changes in Zimbabwe and South Africa might aptly be described as multiple but mutually reinforcing 'informalisations'. The shared experience of 'making do' in both countries is striking given apparent national contrasts.

The view from the border underlines the need for a regional historical perspective. When Zimbabweans cross the border into South Africa today, they encounter a rural landscape that bears the mark of similar settler-state policies to those that shaped Zimbabwe: sharp divisions between white commercial farms and black communal land. On white farms themselves, black workers live in labour compounds, on separate parts of estates from the gated houses of white farmers and managers. Farming ideals have promoted the figure of the fatherly farmer looking after his 'people', conferring gifts as he sees fit, rather than engaging in contractual arrangements with clearly defined limits (for South Africa, van Onselen 1992; see also du Toit 1993; Waldman 1996; for Zimbabwe, see Rutherford 2001; 2003). I describe regional white farming in greater detail in Chapter 2.

Zimbabwe and South Africa share wider historical legacies that are key to understanding the character of border farms. The two countries

⁸ See Hammar and Raftopoulos 2003; Raftopoulos and Phimister 2004; Ranger 2004; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009; Raftopoulos 2009.

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together formed a bloc of state-backed settler capitalism around which the political economy of the region was built. Central to this political economy were established patterns of labour migrancy, following the mineral discoveries of the late nineteenth century.⁹ Moreover, it was gold on the Witwatersrand that led to settler expansion northwards into Zimbabwe, in search of further wealth (Phimister 1988).¹⁰

Inducing migration was partly achieved by limiting black access to cultivable land. Both countries saw the gradual creation of rural labour reserves, whose subsistence agriculture supplemented black wages, enabling white employers to offer lower pay (see Wolpe 1972).¹¹ Yet the racial division of land and patterns of migrancy were messier than they sound. Change was more complex and regionally diverse than the

⁹ Gold was discovered on the Witwatersrand, the hilly area around present-day Johannesburg, in 1886. By 1900 there were already almost 100,000 black workers on the gold mines. Rapid change in South African economic structure and restructuring of the labour market shaped a system characterised by organised labour supply, oscillating black worker migration, the colour bar (with certain occupations reserved for whites), and industrial relations determined by strong white miner unions (Wilson 1972).

¹⁰ The discovery of the Witwatersrand's gold underpinned 'the immediate genesis of colonial Zimbabwe' (Phimister 1988: 4). Mineral discoveries brought new importance to the southern African interior, and Cecil Rhodes hoped to find a 'Second Rand' north of the Limpopo River (*ibid.*: 5, 6). These mines, like those to the south, quickly became dependent on migrant black workers, secured by hut taxes and professionalised recruitment. In attempting to satisfy labour demands, they were brought into direct competition with their southern neighbours: 'the Rhodesian Native Labour Bureau was specifically designed to exclude the Rand from certain recruiting grounds and to direct labour to local mines away from those of the Transvaal' (*ibid.*: 50).

¹¹ The high levels of black labour migration in both Southern Rhodesia and the Transvaal were actively encouraged by state authorities. Although early migrants went to white centres of production to acquire items such as guns (see, for example, Delius 1980), moving to work was soon the result of deliberate government policies. A series of commissions in Southern Rhodesia allocated reserves for black Rhodesians, a process justified by reference to the idea that European civilisation was being imparted to eager Africans. But the majority of territory was kept for future white use. Meanwhile reserve land was of poor quality and was in the following decade further depleted by population growth (see Palmer 1977). In South Africa, it was the 1913 Natives Land Act that formalised racialised land ownership and access, allocating 8 per cent of land for black African occupation. This represented 'a degree of land alienation unrivalled in any sub-Saharan context' (Beinart 2001: 10). As in Southern Rhodesia, the Act rendered black South Africans' rural livelihoods unsustainable, and further reinforced oscillating labour migration patterns. Africans' wages as migrants supplemented inadequate agricultural yields on overcrowded land, and were used for the payment of taxes. One objective of racialised land allocation was to support white commercial agriculture, by supplying good land while squeezing out black competition. In South Africa, this 'undermin[ed] agricultural commodity production developed by Africans (often on white-owned land) during the previous half century', while causing a gradual shift to wage labour in increasingly capitalist white farming (Bernstein 1996: 5). In Southern Rhodesia, similarly, black producers became dependent on a range of commodities during years of agricultural prosperity, which then had to be satisfied through labour migration once their farming operations were squeezed in a process of 'delayed proletarianisation' (see Arrighi 1970; Kosmin 1977; Phimister 1988).