


# *From Labour Elites to Garveyites: West African Migrant Labour in Namibia, 1892–1925*

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*This article focuses on the aftermath of the First World War for West African Kru in colonial Namibia. It posits that Kru had been a ‘labour elite’ in the colony under German rule and that the war and resulting years of South African occupation led to their economic decline. By the early 1920s, this situation was a strong factor in West Africans’ robust engagement and leadership within the colony’s ‘Africa for the Africans’ Garveyite movement. Economic troubles after the First World War, as well as an increasing tendency towards intermarriage between Kru and local Namibians, factored into Kru workers’ decisions to join political ranks with the Herero and other groups who had suffered under German rule. Both local and migrant Africans saw Garveyism as a possible solution for their new economic and societal challenges. The article utilises a South West African migrant worker database that I compiled for this research (WBL Namibian Worker Database) and micro-histories to give insight into individual workers’ experiences between 1892 and 1925. On a broader note, this work expands research on the role of West African labour in colonial Namibia, bringing regional historiography more firmly into the scope of the discipline of global history.*

**Keywords:** Namibia; Kru; Garveyism; First World War; migrant labour; labour elite; Liberia; 1918 influenza pandemic

In the early to mid 1920s, Garveyism shook the Protectorate of South West Africa (modern Namibia), formerly a German colony but, as of 1920, a League of Nations Class C Mandate under South African oversight.<sup>1</sup> This movement, founded by Marcus Garvey and known as the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and African Communities League, united Africans in South West Africa (SWA), both locals and migrants, by ‘... prophesying an “Africa for the Africans”, free from white colonial rule’.<sup>2</sup> The UNIA in SWA had many prominent leaders who were West Africans, often called ‘Monroviaans’, but they also came from different regions of Liberia, the Gold Coast and other parts of the region.

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1 For a detailed map of South West Africa, see the introduction to this special edition.

2 R.T. Vinson, *The Americans Are Coming! Dreams of African American Liberation in Segregationist South Africa*. (Athens, Ohio University Press, 2012), p. 1.

Before the outbreak of the First World War, most West Africans in German South West Africa (GSWA), including those who became involved in the UNIA, were male skilled labourers who received comparatively good wages within the colony. The shipping industry employed a majority at the ports of Swakopmund and Lüderitzbucht, but, by the later years of German colonialism, a number were working in mining, railways, finance, government, the restaurant industry and beyond. West Africans in the colony under German rule were a 'labour elite' among African workers. They were a skilled workforce who filled essential roles in the colonial economy, most often in longshore work that could not readily be filled by European settlers or local Africans. Accordingly, their pay was relatively higher than that of other African labourers.

The West African position as 'labour elites' was cemented by the German colonial war and genocide against the Herero and Nama from 1904 to 1908. During this period, the colony's infrastructure and attendant West African labourers were essential in sustaining the massive increase in materiel and troops. While West Africans held an elevated position for the duration of German colonialism, it was precarious. This is because the colonial government and society, which put Africans at the bottom of the social ladder, could at any time strip them of their privilege. The First World War brought their precarious situation to the fore, resulting in their forced recruitment as auxiliaries for the German military and their accompanying loss of assets and possessions. Their forced indenture continued from the war's onset in late 1914 to the official surrender of the German forces to South Africa in July 1915. During the South African occupation of SWA, their economic position would not return to its pre-war status and, as mentioned above, this group, once integral to the colonial system, was rebelling against it by the early 1920s.

Historians of migrant labour in early South West Africa have largely left West Africans unresearched. Essentially, all scholarship that mentions them does so in passing or was conducted using only secondary literature.<sup>3</sup> Rather, most research has focused on Ovambo workers. This is principally because they made up the majority of migrant workers throughout most of the early colonial period.<sup>4</sup> Some research has examined other migrants from South Africa or the Kavango, but it has been lacking in comparison with research on other migrant

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3 K. Brackmann, *Fünzig Jahre deutscher Afrikaschiffahrt: Die Geschichte der Woermann-Linie und der Deutschen Ost-Afrika-Linie* (Berlin, D. Reimer, Andrews und Steiner, 1935); M. Zappen-Thomson, 'Der "andere" Träger in Deutsch-Südwestafrika', *Sam Cohen Library and Museum Reports*, 48, 2 (2016), pp. 38–45; B. Bravenboer and W. Rusch, *The First 100 Years of State Railways in Namibia* (Windhoek, TransNamib Museum, 1997); S.M. Moir and H.T. Crittenden, *Namib Narrow Gauge* (Lingfield, Oakwood, 1967); *Lüderitzbucht damals und gestern* (Windhoek, SWA-Wiss. Ges., 1983); G. Pirio, 'The Role of Garveyism in the Making of Namibian Nationalism' in B. Wood (ed.), *Namibia 1884–1984: Readings on Namibia's History and Society* (London, Namibia Support Committee, 1988), pp. 259–67; E. Brock, 'Reiserinnerungen 1903/1904' (unpublished manuscript, Swakopmund, 1994); J.S. Gaydish, "'Old Swakopmund'" Reexamined: German Labor Mobilization Practices in Colonial Namibia' (Master's dissertation, Arizona State University, 2001).

4 For Ovambo labour in early SWA see: R. Strassegger, 'Die Wanderarbeit der Ovambo während der Deutschen kolonial-Besetzung Namibias. Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Wanderarbeiter auf den Diamantenfeldern in den Jahren 1908 bis 1914' (PhD thesis, University of Graz, 1988); R. Moorsom, 'The Formation of the Contract Labour System in Namibia, 1900–1926', in A. Zegeye and S.L. Ishemo (eds), *Forced Labour and Migration: Patterns of Movement Within Africa* (London, H. Zell, 1989), pp. 55–108; A.D. Cooper, 'The Institutionalization of Contract Labour in Namibia', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 25, 1 (1999), pp. 121–38; P. Hayes, 'The Failure to Realise Human Capital: Ovambo Migrant Labour and the Early South African State, 1915–1938', *The Societies of Southern Africa in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (London, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, 1993), pp. 55–70; M.L. Kouvalainen, 'Ambomaan Siirtotyöläsyyden Synty' (Master's dissertation, University Helsinki, 1980); R. Moorsom, 'Colonisation and Proletarianisation: An Exploratory Investigation of the Formation of the Working Class in Namibia Under German and South African Colonial Rule to 1945' (Master's dissertation, University of Sussex, 1973).

labourers.<sup>5</sup> The following pages begin to fill this historiographical lacuna and bring their history into the larger scope of migrant labour in the colony. Research on West Africans in SWA is essential in understanding the region's late 19th- and early 20th-century labour history.

In order to explore the role of West Africans both in SWA under German colonialism and in the colony's transition to South African rule, I will answer the following questions: why were West Africans in South West Africa? How did changing living standards during the war and occupation affect political engagement in the 1920s? Was there a connection between changing work and social patterns for West Africans during the occupation period and the spread of the Garveyite movement in South West Africa?

To pursue the inquiries above, this article engages with a variety of sources. Most notable is my newly compiled dataset of almost completely unutilised African estate files. The records making up the database comprise mainly the 'Native Estate Files' found at the National Archives of Namibia, which consist of information on all non-white workers who died working in SWA from 1917 to 1951. These files were marked for destruction by the apartheid South African government in the 1970s, based on the premise that the estates of non-white workers were of no historical importance. The files escaped their planned fate only through bureaucratic negligence. More than two decades after Namibian independence in the 2010s, the Native Estate Files were rediscovered by Ellen Ndeshi Namhila of the University of Namibia. The size of the files in total, with over 11,000 individual estates, is vast.<sup>6</sup>

This article examines estates of West Africans who died between 1917 and 1920. A similar set of estates from the German colonial period supplements the occupational period files. Although tinted by colonial record-keeping, these archives give a viewpoint into the lives of West Africans in SWA. Data points include the value of their estates upon death, personally held items, their place of origin, ethnicity, employer, work location, cause of death, start of contract, date of death and number of days spent in hospital. Almost all files include information entered on universal forms, making the data relatively uniform and therefore more comparable. Additionally, a macabre characteristic of the estates between 1917 and 1920 is a large number of workers who died in the 1918 influenza pandemic. The resulting trove of files would otherwise not exist. To underline this point, just under half of all Native Estate Files during this period cite 'Spanish influenza' as the cause of death.

This article also uses sources from the German and South African colonial governments, missionaries and companies who employed migrant labour. Particularly valuable are files containing reimbursement claims submitted to the South African colonial government after local hostilities related to the First World War ended. For all the compensation applications reviewed for this article, there is no case where the South African government awarded full reparation. The outcomes could be the result of bureaucratic bias against non-South African migrant workers. With no other records found for African migrant labourers for comparison

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5 For South African Labour in early SWA history see: U. Lindner, 'Transnational Movements between Colonial Empires: Migrant Workers from the British Cape Colony in the German Diamond Town of Luderitzbucht', *European Review of History*, 16, 5 (2009), pp. 679–95; W. Beinart, "'Jamani" Cape Workers in German South West Africa, 1904–12', in W. Beinart and C. Bundy (eds), *Hidden Struggles in Rural South Africa: Politics and Popular Movements in the Transkei and Eastern Cape, 1890–1930* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987), pp. 166–91; H. Loth, 'Das kaiserliche Deutschland und die frühe antikonkoloniale Bewegung in Afrika', *Zeitschrift Für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 20 (1972), pp. 325–44; F. Wege, 'Die Anfänge der Herausbildung einer Arbeiterklasse in Südwestafrika unter der deutschen Kolonialherrschaft', *Jahrbuch Für Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, 10, 1 (1969), pp. 183–222. For Kavango labour in early SWA, see K.M. Likuwa, 'Colonialism and the Development of the Contract Labour System in Kavango', in J. Silvester (ed.), *Re-Viewing Resistance in Namibian History* (Windhoek, University of Namibia Press, 2015), pp. 105–26. K.M. Likuwa, *Voices from the Kavango: A Study of the Contract Labour System in Namibia, 1925–1972* (Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2020).

6 E.N. Namhila, 'Little Research Value': *African Estate Records and Colonial Gaps in a Post-Colonial National Archive* (Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2017), p. xii.

and no bureaucratic notes arguing that the claims are exaggerated, the applications and the information regarding possessions and capital before the war will be taken at face value. An additional clue found in these files are letters written by applicants in both German and English. At the very least, such multilingual documents can be used to infer a general vernacular skill on part of the West Africans in this study. Additionally, apart from their mother tongue, most of these workers probably learned the basics in African languages spoken among the local work force, such as Oshiwambo. The reimbursement claim files give a unique perspective into the lives of West Africans in the period before the conflict's outbreak. While the database and sources for this article are important as a foundation, a sound methodological framework is vital to its analysis.

The following draws from Christian De Vito and Anne Gerritsen's micro-spatial historical method to cross the divide between global and local by utilising micro-analysis in combination with a 'spatially aware' approach. This translates into an adjustable level of localised analysis between South West Africa and West Africa. In following these authors' suggestion, this article is based on research that surpasses local boundaries, drawing on loose strands of information and connecting them with diverse contexts and examining the migration of people, things and concepts. Trans-locality and entanglement will be emphasised to bridge both short- and long-distance connections and question the global-local divide.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, West Africans will be viewed through a collective lens in South West Africa. Adopting Eviatar Zerubavel's structure of 'splitting', West Africans in the colony will be examined as separate from the workforce at large while simultaneously the group is 'lumped' together because of their relatively similar backgrounds and experiences.<sup>8</sup> With a general outlay of the methodology made clear, let us explore the first question previously posited: why were West Africans in South West Africa?

## Origins of West Africans in Colonial South West Africa

Most West Africans in German South West Africa came to the colony through contracts in the German maritime industry, which handled the lion's share of trade and transport in and out of the colony. These workers were numbered in the thousands by the end of German colonialism, and many who started in this line of work went on to employment in other industries within GSWA. There were other groups of West Africans in the colony who had not initially come for contract work, but their numbers were probably no more than 100 individuals. The largest group was around 50 African soldiers who had been exiled, along with family members, after a failed mutiny in the German West African colony of Cameroon.<sup>9</sup> Of important note is that, among West Africans in the colony, the group from Cameroon was the only one that included a sizable proportion of women and children. The 50 men were accompanied by approximately 21 women and children.<sup>10</sup> This article will not examine these individuals who were in forced exile in the colony, as their economic and societal position was substantially different from that of most West Africans. Furthermore, their migration had been a form of punishment. This does not discount the fact that some were active in the Garveyite movement of the 1920s. But those involved were, at most, a handful of individuals. Among those West Africans who came to the colony for work of their own volition, all on record were men.

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7 C.G. de Vito and A. Gerritsen, 'Micro-Spatial Histories of Labour: Towards a New Global History', in C.G. de Vito and A. Gerritsen (eds), *Micro-Spatial Histories of Global Labour* (Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 2.

8 E. Zerubavel, 'Lumping and Splitting: Notes on Social Classification', *Sociological Forum*, 11, 3 (1996), pp. 422–3.

9 J.B. Gewald, 'Mbadamassi of Lagos: A Soldier for King and Kaiser, and a Deportee to German South West Africa', *African Diaspora*, 2, 1 (2009), p. 112.

10 National Archives of Namibia (hereafter NAN), Native Estate Files (hereafter NES) [003], 5753/442 Estate Alexander Junge (Cameroon), 31 July 1920, Letter from Native Affairs to the Secretary for the Protectorate, Luderitzbucht.



**Figure 1.** West African longshoremen on the beach at Swakopmund in the early 1900s. (Photo 1128. Source: Scientific Society Swakopmund [Incorporated Association not for Gain].)

In the German maritime industry of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, one company in particular dominated operations in GSWA: the Woermann-Linie. This company was responsible for running the colony's two colonial ports, at Swakopmund in the north and Lüderitzbucht in the south. While in some ways similar, for example in sharing a cool coastal climate, the two locations had very different geographic characteristics. At one extreme, Swakopmund had no natural harbour. It was founded in the early 1890s because the German Empire needed coastal access to the northern and central part of the colony. The only natural harbour in the area, Walvis Bay, was an enclave under British jurisdiction. Swakopmund was founded to avoid British import controls and to begin developing infrastructure in the new colony.<sup>11</sup> This meant that, for approximately the first 10 years of Swakopmund's existence, almost all supplies and people entering or leaving the settlement via the Atlantic Ocean needed to be transported from the beach to ships, anchored offshore, via surf boats manned by skilled workers.<sup>12</sup> Those labourers were West Africans working primarily for the Woermann-Linie, which, by the early 1900s, was under contract to handle longshore operations at the port (see Figure 1).

Margarethe von Eckenbrecher, a German settler who arrived at Swakopmund in early 1902, was taken from her ship, Woermann-Linie's *Eduard Bohlen*, to shore by West African workers and their surf boats. She gave the following account:

I admired the skill of the Kruboyes, who, with the greatest certainty and cold-bloodedness, put their oars in the waves and made rapid progress. But when I saw the colossal wave up close it either seemed as tall as a house or to create a deep abyss, I couldn't stop from getting goosebumps ... We shot forward like an arrow through the breakers, and with a tremendous heave, the bow of the boat was on the sand as the stern rose high. A few Kaffirs from the shore had already come out to us and before I knew their intentions, one had me on his back and carried me to dry land.<sup>13</sup>

11 Gaydish, "'Old Swakopmund' Reexamined', pp. 24–6.

12 U. Massmann, '90 Jahre Swakopmund', *SWA Annual Jahrbuch* (1980), p. 94.

13 M. von Eckenbrecher, *Was Afrika mir gab und nahm. Erlebnisse einer deutschen Ansiedlerfrau in Südwestafrika ... Mit 16 Bildertafeln und einer Karte* (Berlin, E.S. Mittler und Sohn, 1907), p. 42. Translation from German to English by William Blakemore Lyon.

Eckenbrecher's account makes clear the high level of skill needed to work as longshoremen at Swakopmund, especially in the period before a mole and pier were established, a few years after her description. In 1904, with the beginning of the war between the German Empire and the Herero, the 500–600 West Africans working for Woermann-Linie at Swakopmund would be joined by an additional 1,000.<sup>14</sup> Local skilled Africans were, owing to genocidal violence, no longer available. The uniquely challenging longshore work required in Swakopmund in the years before the construction of reliable harbour infrastructure was not required in Lüderitzbucht. It was there, in the south of the colony, that West Africans were employed in more traditional port labour.

With a natural harbour, Lüderitzbucht was more easily accessible by ship than was Swakopmund. Even so, its harbour needed skilled workers, and Woermann-Linie had a similar group of migrant labourers there as well. These two settlements became not only the main transport nodes in and out of the colony but also the merchant hubs for many settlers inland wishing to buy goods from abroad. West African longshoremen were the lifeblood that ensured that the veins of commerce that coalesced at Swakopmund and Lüderitzbucht functioned.

West African employment in South West Africa, while very far from the labourers' home, was no coincidence. The relationship between German shipping companies and West Africa, including the Woermann-Linie, went back to the mid 19th century. The work of George E. Brooks gives a broad overview of how 19th-century employment of West Africans along the coast of Africa and beyond was essential to the global maritime industry's functioning. Brooks states, '[i]nnumerable Kru, Lebou, Fanti, Cabinda-men and other peoples served aboard European and American trading vessels and men-of-war as sailors, boat-pullers, coopers, carpenters, cooks, interpreters, and gold-takers; and ashore as lighter-men, stevedores, warehousemen, boat-builders, and shipyard artisans of every skill'.<sup>15</sup> Concerning German shipping, a very close economic connection developed, particularly with Liberia. This relationship often tends to be overlooked in Liberian historiography, as has been argued by Wolfe W. Schmokel, especially because '[t]he historic link between Liberia and the United States is so well known ... historians have tended to depict this relation to the United States as the predominant theme of Liberia's foreign relations, if not of all Liberian history'.<sup>16</sup> But, in the 1850s, Carl Woermann, a merchant from Hamburg, established his first trading venture in the young African republic.<sup>17</sup> 'By 1906, a British estimate placed the German share of Liberia's trade at three quarters, a German naval officer in 1909 reported it as amounting to between 80 to 90%'.<sup>18</sup> Most of Woermann's labourers were Liberians, mainly those who, in the early 20th century, were labelled and identified as Kru. To clarify, the term 'Kru' in this article does not directly translate to an ethnic group but rather refers to West African maritime workers, most but not all from the Kru coast of south-eastern Liberia and western Ivory Coast. The term will be used as defined by Diana Frost's work, in which she describes Kru as '... a social construct that has emerged out of various social and economic processes that occurred during a period of European colonial activity in West Africa'.<sup>19</sup> Beyond workers coming from the many

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14 Brackmann, *Fünfzig Jahre deutscher Afrikaschiffahrt*, p. 78.

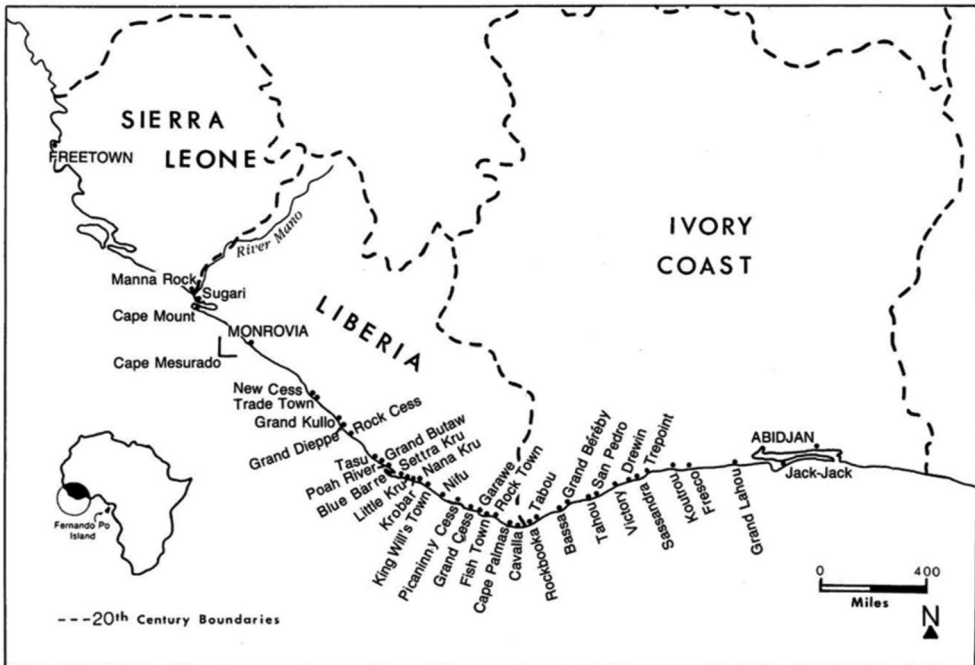
15 G.E. Brooks, *The Kru Mariner in the Nineteenth Century: An Historical Compendium* (Newark, Liberian Studies Association in America, Inc., 1972), p. 1.

16 Indiana University Archives, Liberian Collections, Frederick Dean McEvoy Collection, 1956–1979, Box 1, Publications and Manuscripts, W.W. Schmokel, 'Liberia, Germany, Britain and the United States, 1905–1918' (unpublished paper, Burlington), p. 1.

17 P.E. Schramm, *Deutschland und Übersee* (Braunschweig, Westermann, 1950), pp. 184–203, 239–40, in Schmokel, 'Liberia, Germany, Britain and the United States, 1905–1918', p. 1.

18 Schmokel, 'Liberia, Germany, Britain and the United States, 1905–1918', pp. 1–2.

19 D. Frost, *Work and Community Among West African Migrant Workers since the Nineteenth Century* (Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 1999), p. 8.



**Figure 2.** Sources of Kru migrants (from M. Schuler, 'Kru Emigration to British and French Guiana, 1841–1857', in P. Lovejoy [ed.], *Africans in Bondage: Studies in Slavery and the Slave Trade. Essays in Honor of Philip D. Curtin* [Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1976], p. 158).

small towns of the Kru coast, such as Sasstown and Grand Cess, substantial 'Kru towns' or settlements could be found in Monrovia, Liberia and Freetown in colonial Sierra Leone (see Figure 2). While some workers were recruited in larger settlements, where German merchants had offices, others were enlisted directly from small coastal villages. In the case of Woermann-Linie in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, personal relationships between ship captains and local communities played an important role. It was not uncommon for captains to come ashore with gifts to negotiate for wages and workers. This meant that, by the end of the 19th century, hundreds of Kru worked aboard Woermann's vessels.<sup>20</sup> For the Woermann operations at Swakopmund and Lüderitzbucht, many Kru were stationed as stevedores, in charge of loading and unloading ship cargo as well as passengers. Of the West Africans in the colony who began work as longshoremen, some moved on to other sectors of the economy to pursue a better income and more favourable working conditions. Let us look at one man and see how his case fits into the economic status of Kru in colonial GSWA.

### Kru as 'Labour Elite'

Pieter Dares was a Kru man from Monrovia working in GSWA in the early 20th century. He had been employed by the Swakopmunder Buchhandlung, a book store in Swakopmund, when he died on 12 May 1909 in Lüderitzbucht.<sup>21</sup> He probably came to the colony working for the Woermann-Linie and eventually made a change, going to work at the bookstore. Pieter's affairs at his death were complex. Financially, according to a fellow Kru colleague,

20 Brackmann, *Fünfzig Jahre deutscher Afrikaschiffahrt*, pp. 70–71.

21 NAN, BLU [146] G.5.a., 12 May 1909, Notice of death by the police sergeant of the Lüderitzbucht Colonial Office, p. 61.

Edward, Dares had £55 to his name.<sup>22</sup> Around £24 of this was held in Afrika-Bank's Lüderitzbucht branch.<sup>23</sup>

Pieter was in difficult circumstances when he died. He was in jail for reasons that cannot be deciphered, and he owed a good sum of his money to his football club. Fellow team-mates Pieter, Eduard, Toby, Tuies and Keins claimed that around £20 of Pieter's estate was owed to the club.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the government would charge almost £6 to cover his expenses in jail, which lasted 130 days, as well as translation and burial fees. Beyond his finances, Pieter had entrusted his last employer with a trunk full of personal possessions, which were to be given to his brother Hannes, who was working for a settler by the name of Louis Worm.

The trunk was filled with a long list of possessions including a gramophone and records, a harmonica, a white suit, ties, eau de cologne, photographs and caviar, among many other items.<sup>25</sup> His possessions and his liquid assets displayed that his work and resulting wealth allowed him to participate actively in the consumer culture of GSWA. Hannes, Pieter's surviving brother in the colony, received the estate, including Pieter's remaining £24. Then, on 28 May, little more than two weeks after his brother had died, Hannes left GSWA with the estate in his possession to return to their 'homeland' of Monrovia.<sup>26</sup> His steamer, *Swakopmund*, operated by the Hamburg–Amerika-Linie, left the port of Lüderitzbucht for the 'Northern Republic' (Liberia).

Other records of Kru before the war echo similar types of personal possessions. The most commonly held were multiple pairs of suits in various fabrics and colours, Panama hats, musical instruments, gramophones, football jerseys and photographs.<sup>27</sup> While this article will not go into a detailed analysis of Kru possessions, a cursory conclusion is that clothing, music and sports were central to the social life of West Africans in the colony. Rhenish missionary records during the German colonial period state that other migrant workers in GSWA, such as South Africans at Lüderitzbucht, also enjoyed playing sports including football and tennis, often instead of attending church.<sup>28</sup> It is reasonable to assume that Pieter's Kru football club played matches against other migrant workers, such as South Africans, during their free time. Similarly, church, when it was attended, was a sphere where diverse workers, including Kru, came together. One letter from missionary Laaf in Lüderitzbucht in 1908 mentions Ovambo, Kru and Cape Coloured workers from South Africa in his congregation.<sup>29</sup> As for photographs, it may have been a way of reminding workers of family and friends in West Africa. Regarding the overall wealth of Kru in GSWA during the German colonial period, the 64 Kru workers who have records of their possessions before the war had, on average, slightly over £30 in combined physical and liquid assets.<sup>30</sup> This makes Pieter's estate minus his debts, while slightly more than the average when taking into account the value of his physical possessions, fairly representative for Kru.

Following Pieter's death, his brother Hannes' ability to end his work and leave on a steamer for Monrovia with his inheritance gives us a glimpse of the relative mobility and freedoms of Kru during German colonialism compared to local Africans. This is especially clear after the

22 This article will use only British pounds as currency. Marks have been converted using the 'historical currency converter', developed by Rodney Edvinsson, Stockholm University, available at <https://www.historicalstatistics.org/Currencyconverter.html>, update 10 January 2016.

23 NAN, BLU [146] G.5.a., 16/5/1909, Letter from Herrn Fläschendräger of the Afrika-Bank regarding the estate of Kru Pieter, p. 65.

24 NAN, BLU [146] G.5.a., 30/6/1909, Statement from the *Fußballklub der Kruneger*, p. 72.

25 NAN, BLU [146] G.5.a., Estate items of Kru Pieter, pp. 66–7.

26 NAN, BLU [146] G.5.a., Estate items of Kru Pieter, p. 68.

27 *WBL Namibian Worker Database* (publication forthcoming); NAN, ADM [211], 237–8.

28 Archiv- und Museumsstiftung der Vereinte Evangelische Mission (hereafter VEM), RMG 2.509 a, Bl. 1-37a, 24 May 1911, K. Laaf letter from Lüderitzbucht, p. 4.

29 VEM, RMG 2.509 a, Bl. 1–37a, 4 November 1908, K. Laaf letter from Lüderitzbucht, p. 3.

30 *WBL Namibian Worker Database*; NAN, ADM [211] 238, 1–23; NAN, ADM [238] SWAKOP243, 1–42.



implementation of the Native Ordinances of 1907. These centred around measures of control such as the passes that Africans above the age of six had to wear in the Police Zone in addition to worker contracts.<sup>31</sup> In function, ‘... the authorities aimed to transform the Africans into a landless proletariat, destroy their political organisation and culture, and force them to work in a disciplined and orderly manner for white employers’.<sup>32</sup> This translated into realities such as Police Zone Africans pushed into the service of colonisers regardless of their aspirations, and strict controls on travel and where one could live. Kru workers’ comparative freedom to change or quit work and the ability to leave the colony reflected their unique social and economic position. Even where many West Africans could live often differed from other non-whites. Woermann-Linie company documents show that, in 1913, as ordinances in settler towns such as Swakopmund and Lüderitzbucht were furthering formal racial separation, specifically barring non-whites from living within the city centre, the company petitioned for special allowances for its black employees, who were mainly Kru, to remain living in company housing in white areas.<sup>33</sup> The company argued that this was necessary for business operations and that having their black workers live outside town in the African ‘location’ was impractical. Until the outbreak of the First World War, Kru employees of Woermann-Linie were still living in company housing in the centres of coastal towns. The relatively privileged mobility and housing options for West Africans in GSWA was a result of their unique skills and place in the colonial economy. Furthermore, Kru were also comparatively wealthy.

Kru’s assets under late German colonialism were exponentially greater than other African migrant labourers’, making their position as a ‘labour elite’ clear. Estates of workers from the Ovambo polities, located to the north of the German settler region, were much smaller. As the largest group of migrant workers in the colony, 10,000 per year, on average, went south on contract between 1910 and 1914.<sup>34</sup> For those who died in 1913 and 1914, their average estate size was less than £1.<sup>35</sup> Even taking into account the fact that many Ovambo workers were on contracts for less than one year and afterwards would take their earnings and purchases home to partake in agricultural work, the estate value differential is enormous. The average size of an Ovambo estate in 1913–14 is about 2.7 per cent of that of a Kru worker in the same period.

The other large group of African migratory workers during late German colonialism comprised of those from South Africa. Their numbers in the years before the First World War roughly matched the Kru, with a few thousand in the colony. Most came during this period for contracts in the diamond mines around Lüderitzbucht or to construct the colonial railways.<sup>36</sup> They were a mix of various ethnic groups of almost all men. Estate records from

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31 J. Zimmerer, *Deutsche Herrschaft über Afrikaner: staatlicher Machtanspruch und Wirklichkeit im kolonialen Namibia* (Münster, LIT Verlag, 2004), pp. 68–9.

32 M. Wallace and J. Kinahan, *A History of Namibia: From the Beginning to 1990* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 184.

33 Scientific Society Swakopmund, *Woermann-Linie Jahresbericht* (Swakopmund, 1913), pp. 5–6.

34 R. Moorsom, *Underdevelopment and Labour Migration: The Contract Labour System in Namibia* (Bergen, Chr. Michelsen Institute, 1997), p. 9.

35 *WBL Namibian Worker Database*; NAN, BLU [011] B.G.L. Band 4–5, 70 Ovambo worker estates containing relevant data.

36 An argument not visited in this article but central to my doctoral thesis is that, between 1904 and 1914, German South West Africa was one of the most attractive labour markets for migrants in southern Africa, including from the colonies that would eventually become the Union of South Africa. This was largely the result of a decimated local population in GSWA resulting from colonial genocide, severe labour shortages, policies to import Chinese labour and then push down African wages on the Rand after the Second Boer War, expansion of colonial infrastructure by the German empire and the discovery of diamonds near Lüderitzbucht in 1908. For more on this, see my forthcoming doctoral thesis at Humboldt University of Berlin, provisionally titled, ‘Migrant Labor in Namibia under German and early South African Rule, 1890–1925’.

1910 to 1914 show just over half to be from the Transkei in the Eastern Cape, while just under half were Cape Coloured from the Western Cape.<sup>37</sup>

There were, in the diamond mines alone, an average of 1,226 South African workers for the first few months of 1913.<sup>38</sup> Thousands more were to be found building and maintaining the colonial railways.<sup>39</sup> German estate records for South Africans who died between 1908 and 1914 show that their estates averaged £1/10/0 (one pound ten shillings).<sup>40</sup> They often stayed on for longer contracts than their Ovambo counterparts and carried out more skilled labour. This translated into higher average salaries than Ovambo workers. As for their relation to West Africans, migrant South African workers' average estate size was much smaller. The economic position of the Kru in comparison with other African migrant workers in late GSWA was relatively unique. They had access to well-paying jobs, initially as longshoremen and then, for some like Pieter, in a diversity of other industries. Their ability to purchase and enjoy high-end commodities, ranging from gramophones to fine suits, all made work and living in GSWA attractive for West African migrant labour. West Africans were a 'labour elite' in colonial SWA, but a similar status was not common for Kru migrants working in other coastal regions of West Africa and beyond.

Kru non-maritime migrant labour, particularly agricultural work, had resulted mainly in unfavourable and, at times, dire conditions for workers. Kru who engaged in non-maritime work often went into contract for low wages, which contrasts with West Africans in colonial SWA. Examples of this type of Kru labour are diverse and go back to at least the early 19th century. Jane Martin gives us an idea of the breadth of Kru labour, including thousands travelling to British Nigeria in the mid 1870s or to work for the French on their failed Panama Canal project in the 1880s.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps some of the direst non-maritime work conducted by Kru was agricultural labour off the west coast of Africa. Fernando Pó (today Bioko and part of Equatorial Guinea) had a plantation economy and was a major recruiter of Kru labour from the middle of the 19th century. Thousands were initially recruited but, by the early 20th century, with near slave-like conditions for labourers on the island, Kru were avoiding work on Fernando Po.<sup>42</sup> One of the farthest-flung locations of Kru migrant labour was on plantations in British and French Guiana. Monica Schuler argues that this migration, which occurred mainly in the 1830s and 1840s but generally ended by 1850, was stymied because '... western Kru leaders were becoming convinced that transatlantic migration was a mistake. They complained, first, that low wages and high living costs retarded Kru saving and delayed repatriation; second, that in British Guiana Kru men developed "habits of comfort and extravagance," thereby impeding readjustment to Kru Coast lifestyles'.<sup>43</sup> While this last statement intriguingly mentions the lifestyle of Kru in British and French Guiana in the mid 1800s, no further details are given of individuals' lives.

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37 WBL *Namibian Worker Database*; NAN, BLU [011] B.G.L. Band 4–5 and National Archives of South Africa, Pretoria (hereafter NASA), Office of the Governor General of South Africa (hereafter GG), 276 File 4/27, 42 South African worker estates containing relevant data.

38 NAN, BLU [011] B.6.L Band 2, Arbeiter Verhältnisse ins Diamanten gebiet, Statistics for April 1912 to May 1913.

39 U. Lindner, 'Transnational Movements between Colonial Empires', pp. 684–5.

40 NAN, BLU [011] B.G.L. Band 4, NAN, BLU [011] B.G.L. Band 5, BLU [146] G.5.a.

41 J. Martin, 'Krumen "Down the Coast": Liberian Migrants on the West African Coast in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 18, 3 (1985), pp. 405–6.

42 I.K. Sundiata, *From Slaving to Neoslavery: The Bight of Biafra and Fernando Po in the Era of Abolition, 1827–1930* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), p. 129.

43 Schuler, 'Kru Emigration to British and French Guiana, 1841–1857', in P. Lovejoy (ed.), *Africans in Bondage: Studies in Slavery and the Slave Trade: Essays in Honour of Philip D. Curtin on the Occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of African Studies at the University of Wisconsin* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1986) p. 184.

What is true of colonial SWA is that the situation of West Africans in the colony did not reflect what many Kru experienced while working elsewhere. Their position as a ‘labour elite’, privileged but tenuous, was maintained by a multifaceted reality. This consisted of the economy’s need for highly skilled workers, a historical relationship between West Africans and German shipping, SWA’s geography, the demographic reality of a small settler population coupled with the grim results of genocide against Africans in the colony, and, importantly, the unique ability of Kru to meet local demands. The outbreak of war in 1914 would change much of this.

## **A Socio-Economic Precipice for the Kru: The First World War and the Occupation of South West Africa**

The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 led to a shutdown of GSWA’s economy. While a major military operation in the Police Zone did not occur until 1915, with the invasion of the Union of South Africa’s military, the economy was put on a war footing within a few months of hostilities’ outbreak in Europe. The German colonial government took full control of the colony’s industries, including mines, ports and train infrastructure, to redirect their resources to the war effort. Kru workers were labelled ‘alien natives’, arrested by the German authorities and forced into different positions to serve the government and army.

One such West African was Hocky, a Kru man from Liberia who filed a personal effects claim for items lost in the war on 27 September 1920. He wrote:

I came here in 1911. I worked for Woermann-Linie at outbreak of war. When I left Swakop I went to Nonidas by orders of Woermann-Linie then to Omaruru then to Aub then to Otjiwarongo and Khorab. I was cutting grass and looking after oxen. I got no money. I left my things with Woermann-Linie and when I came back everything was gone ... In time of war we were forced to be sent into country so I asked my master if I can take my things along with me so my master said no he is going to look after my things, when I came back I asked my master. He said I have to wait till the war is over.<sup>44</sup>

Hocky’s possessions before the war included black suit trousers, two pairs of boots, a table lamp, multiple shirts, a cap, a Panama hat, and cash worth around £7. In his application for reimbursement, he listed his total assets before the war at just over £24, slightly under the Kru average for the late German period.<sup>45</sup> As a result of his application for reimbursement, Hocky received £10, less than half of his estate’s previous worth.

The above recollection of eight months’ forced work for the Germans with no pay was common for almost all Kru in the colony. They were required to work without pause while shadowing the military until the German surrender in July 1915. Their tasks included grazing horses, cutting grass, assisting troops, guarding POW camps and mail delivery.<sup>46</sup> Simultaneously with their forced labour, Kru, like Hocky, were ordered to leave their possessions and assets at their places of employment, in Swakopmund and Lüderitzbucht. As Hocky’s account makes clear, after hostilities ended and they received permission from the South African military administration to return, they found that their belongings were gone. The West Africans’ possessions were likely to have been stolen by either South African forces, German settlers or, possibly, in some cases, their former employers. Kru migrant labourers’ position as a labour elite in South West Africa had ended.

44 See map of SWA, [Figure 1](#) in the Editorial of this special issue. NAN, ADM [238] SWAKOP264/24, Hocky Kroo Boy, pp. 2–3.

45 *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

46 NAN, ADM [238] SWAKOP264/ 1–42, ADM [211] 238 1–23.

For Kru during the Union occupation from 1915 to 1920, their economic status changed dramatically. Records show that the average Kru who applied for war damage reimbursements received only half of his lost estate.<sup>47</sup> Compounding this economic thrashing, in the years during the military occupation between 1917 and 1920, records for Kru workers who died show that average estate sizes were between £5 and £6. This is less than half of their pre-war average.<sup>48</sup> The occupation period saw West Africans finding work for the South African Railways (SAR) repairing lines destroyed by the Germans in retreat. In 1916, railway lines were also built connecting Swakopmund to the South African-controlled port to its south at Walvis Bay, which had a natural harbour. A 1916 South African report from the military occupation government stated:

[t]here is naturally a great deal of speculation amongst the German merchants and other property owners at Swakopmund regarding the future of that town ... The advantages of Walvis Bay as a port are however, so immeasurably superior to those possessed by Swakopmund that from the trading point of view, the fate of the latter place is sealed, and it will develop into a seaside resort for the Northern districts of the Protectorate ...<sup>49</sup>

As for longshore work:

a number of men previously engaged on the large re-inforced concrete jetty which the German authorities were constructing when the war broke out, are of course now idle, and the same may be said of the men formerly occupied on harbor and landing work. Under these circumstances it is surprising that the indigent list is not far larger.<sup>50</sup>

As for why the unemployment lists were not greater for the port town, increased demand for temporary railway labour probably provided per-diem work. Furthermore, Walvis Bay's harbour could have absorbed others. However, the neighbouring South African port, having already been a functioning harbour before the conflict's outbreak, probably filled most of its labour demand with prior staff. Woermann-Linie's operations at Swakopmund were in stasis as the occupational government kept them in forced shutdown. During the period since the beginning of the war, the company increasingly relied on a credit line from Deutsche Afrika Bank, which put a limit on the salary and pay that they could give to their remaining workers.<sup>51</sup>

From the beginning of November 1916, all Africans living in Swakopmund, including the Kru, were ordered by the military occupation to move to the 'location': one and half kilometres north of town. While, ostensibly, the move was for health reasons, it was opposed by the local town government. Contrarily, the likelihood of becoming sick for Africans who had lived in town and were forced to the 'location' increased. The substandard housing and living conditions there exacerbated the damp and cold climate. The 1916 Woermann-Linie report states that tumult erupted in the 'location' and the South African police opened fire and killed two Africans.<sup>52</sup> For the Kru living in formerly booming pre-war Swakopmund, 1916 brought an increasing likelihood of no more work and deteriorating living conditions.

The other former Kru hub of employment, Lüderitzbucht, was also suffering economically. According to a 1916 report by the occupational government, the town '... was largely dependent upon the forwarding of trade with the interior, but the linking up of the Protectorate railways with the Union Systems has caused a considerable decrease in the

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47 *Ibid.*

48 *WBL Namibian Worker Database*, 30 Kru files of workers who died between 1917 and 1920.

49 NASA, GG 606 File D.B. 30/1723/9199: 'Report of the Administrator of the Protectorate of South West Africa, 1916', pp. 27–8.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 42.

51 Scientific Society Swakopmund, *Woermann-Linie Jahresbericht* (Swakopmund, 1916), p. 4.

52 *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

volume of this business, as storekeepers inland for the most part now import direct by rail from the union'.<sup>53</sup> Later it mentions that in Keetmanshoop, east of Lüderitzbucht, '... quantities of beers, wines, spirits, foodstuffs, clothing and other articles of merchandise have been imported into the District from the Cape Province. Before the outbreak of the present war practically the whole of the articles imported into the Protectorate were from Germany'.<sup>54</sup> While it would go on to mention almost full employment in the Lüderitzbucht district, the long-term implications for its harbour were clear. The town's recent connection with South Africa's railway infrastructure decreased its importance as a port and consequently its need for the same number of skilled West African longshoremen as before. But what did the economic, political and societal upheavals in the protectorate between 1915 and 1920 mean for the long-term prospects of the Kru?

As for work, the most easily accessible opportunities were repairing and extending the lines of the SAR. The SAR absorbed many labourers who had lost their former jobs.<sup>55</sup> This translated into high levels of employment, even if much of it would last only through 1916. But, for the military government, local Africans were a priority, especially as the Union of South Africa made its case for the colony to come under its oversight following the end of the First World War. The South African goal to separate themselves from prior German mistreatment of the local African population, especially concerning the German 1904–08 genocide of the Herero and Nama, was made clear in their publication of the Blue Book in January of 1918.<sup>56</sup> The report highlighted German atrocities primarily through interviews with African survivors. In contrast to the book's findings, the Union sought to manage local African affairs better. Their goal was not made easier by the famine that affected the largest group of migrant labourers in the protectorate, from the northern Ovambo polities. The so-called 'famine that swept' in 1915 occurred simultaneously with an onslaught of Portuguese colonial rule in Angola to the north, which '... created a famine of such devastating proportions that henceforth Ovambo would have to move elsewhere to make a living'.<sup>57</sup> The catastrophe led thousands of Ovambo to move to the settler region to survive. For the government coping with the crises, work and provisions for Ovambo migrants were the priority. West Africans in the colony, by comparison, were essentially given no assistance, especially given their non-local status. That being said, excess labour, including those fleeing the famine, could not match demand. The secretary of the protectorate wrote in October of 1916 that '... the Railway Department is about 1100 short of their complement of Natives, and that the Mines require at least another 1000 ...'.<sup>58</sup> In short, work existed for the Kru in the early years of the occupation but often not at the same pay grade or in the same industry as their pre-war positions. For West Africans who did secure long-term work, it was mainly with the railways. The colonial ports, formerly essential infrastructure, now required much less labour, owing to their reduced importance.

Kru workers' waning status, difficulties with work in the occupied colony and an inability to leave easily for home because of the First World War were compounded by growing pressure on the part of the occupying government to rid the colony of West African 'undesirables'. The South African government often linked them to social disorder and

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53 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

54 NASA, GG 606 File D.B. 30/1723/9199: 'Report of the Administrator of the Protectorate of South West Africa for the Year 1916', p. 34.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 46.

56 J. Silvester and J.B. Gewald (eds), *Words Cannot Be Found: German Colonial Rule in Namibia: An Annotated Reprint of the 1918 Blue Book* (Leiden, Brill, 2003), p. xix.

57 J.B. Gewald, 'Near Death in the Streets of Karibib: Famine, Migrant Labour and the Coming of Ovambo to Central Namibia', *Journal of African History*, 44, 2 (2003), pp. 212–13.

58 NAN, ADM 77, Herbst in Windhuk to Gage, Karibib, 14 November 1916, in Gewald, 'Near Death in the Streets of Karibib', p. 234.

voiced open disdain toward the West African migrants, as exemplified in the following letter from 1916:

... it would be very greatly to the benefit of the Protectorate if some means could be found of returning the Kru boys to Liberia ... While it is true they are handy at harbours etc. ... they are such born and inveterate thieves and rascals that they are a constant source of worry ... I have convicted at the very least 30 of them ... for theft ... they have also been convicted for being in possession of liquor ... the railways naturally refuse to re-engage them and I have great difficulty in getting rid of them. I believe most of them are desirous of returning home and several have already spoken to me on the subject.<sup>59</sup>

While some indeed wished to return home and others wished to stay, government representatives had a crueller suggestion for the West Africans in the colony. The secretary to the magistrate of Swakopmund and Walvis Bay recommended in 1917 that the Kru be sent to the Native Labour Contingent in France serving in the First World War.<sup>60</sup> Regardless of Kru difficulties, it is apparent that, with or without consent, the government was intent on trying to repatriate or send them elsewhere, even if that meant into a war zone.

While the landscape had changed for Kru in the colony, opportunities back in West Africa did not offer a promising alternative. The First World War brought economic collapse to Liberia, as its former trading partners, including Germany, no longer called at its ports. From 1915 to 1916, the powerful coastal Kru towns of Liberia staged an uprising against the central government. They cited an inability to pay taxes to Monrovia because of decreased economic activity as a central reason for the revolt.<sup>61</sup> Though the Kru were wealthy, skilled and well-armed, they were no match for a Liberian government backed by US military might. The intervention of the American cruiser *Chester* and of US officers to assist the Liberian Frontier Force led to the eventual defeat of the Kru uprising.<sup>62</sup> The resulting victory for Monrovia ‘... led to reprisals, devastation of the coast, and exile for many, with the effects lasting well into the twentieth century’.<sup>63</sup>

In SWA, the last two years of the occupation, 1918 and 1919, were plagued by Spanish influenza. This disease ravaged the population and perhaps made clear that things would not return to the pre-war status quo for the Kru. As M.C. Musambachime has written, ‘[t]he Herero called it “Kapitohanga” because it killed people fast[er] than the bullet’.<sup>64</sup> This disease came on the heels of the end of the First World War and resulted in a massive number of deaths in colonial SWA. Statistics vary, but mortality rates in sub-Saharan Africa were 5–10 per cent of the population.<sup>65</sup> The virus arrived in October of 1918 via a train on its way from De Aar in the Northern Cape to Windhoek. The train staff and crew had the first symptoms, followed by cases breaking out simultaneously in Keetmanshoop, Windhoek and Karibib.<sup>66</sup> From there, it spread throughout the colony and resulted in the death of a large number of migrant workers in both 1918 and 1919. The effect on the Kru population over those years was significant. Among the records of Kru deaths in the protectorate

59 NAN, SWAA [2233] A. 494/2, Liberians in SWA Protectorate, 10 August 1916, Letter from the Military Magistrate to the Secretary of the Protectorate.

60 NAN, SWAA [2233] A. 494/2, Liberians in the Protectorate, 4 August 1917, Letter from the Secretary of Native Affairs to the Secretary of the Protectorate.

61 J.M. Sullivan, ‘The Kru Coast Revolt of 1915-1916’, *Liberian Studies Journal*, 14, 1 (1989), p. 59.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

64 M.C. Musambachime, ‘“Kapitohanga: The Disease That Killed Faster than Bullets”: The Impact of the Influenza Pandemic in the South West Africa Protectorate (Namibia) from October 1918 to December 1919’ (unpublished paper, Basel, 2000), p. 2.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

66 NASA, GG 606 File a. 33/3370/3: ‘South West Protectorate Report of the Administrator for the Year, 1918’, p. 53.

between 1917 and 1920, approximately 40 per cent were due to the Spanish influenza.<sup>67</sup> One such victim was Teeplalty, alias ‘Tom Glasgow’, who passed away in October 1918.

Teeplalty was a Kru man from Monrovia who worked in Lüderitzbucht for SAR. When he died, he possessed few things, especially compared with West Africans before the war. In contrast to colleagues prior to the conflict, he had no suits, no Panama hats and no luxury items such as a record player. His most expensive possession was a watch, worth 15 shillings. Tom’s total estate was £5/5/0 after the sale of his personal effects, which is just about average for Kru who died during that period.<sup>68</sup> Within his file is also a letter from his brother, Teeplah Teah, written from Freetown, Sierra Leone. The letter was written before Teeplalty’s death and relayed news of loss from home.

Both Teeplah Teah’s daughter and the two brothers’ sister had died.<sup>69</sup> The influenza, while not referred to directly, was affecting both sides of the family, in West Africa and, unbeknown to the sender, in SWA. The letter, typical of many sent to migrant labourers in SWA in the early 20th century, combined news of births and deaths with a request for money. Teeplah states:

I am now in Freetown Sierra Leone and am hard up in every way. It is proper for you to send money to me here ... I will keep it save until you come ... Please reply me at once and please don’t sent it empty. Our brother Kpameh Dae who had the headman job had refused to give me a chance ...<sup>70</sup>

Additionally, Teeplah Teah used social pressure in an attempt to influence his brother to act by mentioning that ‘friends’ had been sending ‘40 pounds or more so’ back home.<sup>71</sup> If he was writing about SWA, this is probably an exaggeration or untrue. Whether Teeplah was attempting to trigger feelings of sadness and guilt to get money, or his grievances were heartfelt, he would not succeed, at least not as intended, because of his brother’s death. Teeplalty’s file mentions his wife, but there is no detailed information of her whereabouts. It is not certain where the estate of around £5 was sent. The family difficulties both in West and South West Africa were not in doubt. The account, while limited, gives a family’s perspective on the Kru community’s increased challenges related to work, money and disease that had been accumulating since late 1914. The estate of Teeplalty and other Kru whose data exist in the archival record show that, in comparison to the years before the First World War, their average assets had shrunk dramatically.

With the end of the Spanish influenza outbreak by 1920 and the creation of a South African civil administration in SWA, relative stability for the colony seemed on the horizon. But, for local Africans, the defeat of the Germans and transition to South African control had not led to the widespread change in the colony that many had thought possible. In the early years of the South African occupation, those who had suffered under the genocide saw the new situation as an opportunity to regain lands lost. One Herero man, Fridoline Kazombiaze, who spoke in the 1940s on the matter, explained:

[w]hat we don’t understand is that when two nations have been at war, such as Britain or Germany or Italy, and when one or another of those nations is defeated the lands belonging to that nation are not taken away from them. The nation remains a nation, and their lands belong to them. The African people although they have always been on the side of the

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<sup>67</sup> *WBL Namibian Worker Database*.

<sup>68</sup> NAN, NES [003], 5753-435 Estate Tom Glasglow, Deceased Estate.

<sup>69</sup> NAN, NES [003], 5753-435 Estate Tom Glasglow, 1 June 1918, Letter to Teeplalty from Teeplay Teah, p. 2.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

British people and their allies, yet have their lands taken away from them and we are treated as though they had been conquered.<sup>72</sup>

Frustrations after the First World War and the defeat of the Germans were felt not only by the Herero. Many Africans began to search for an alternative future.

### Kru as Garveyites in South West Africa

It is under these circumstances that both local and migrant Africans, including the Kru, began to join in common purpose. The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) branch in Lüderitzbucht, founded in June 1921, showed the first promising signs of improving the lives of local workers.<sup>73</sup> While the ICU focused on higher wages and better living conditions, it remained confined primarily to Lüderitzbucht. It was, rather, the UNIA, which came to the colony in the same year, that melded local anti-colonial grievances and yearning for communal improvement with a global vision for African unity and liberation. This movement, in bringing together local and migrant Africans in the colony, was mirrored in social relations. A 1920 report of West African men in Swakopmund said that, of the 16 from Liberia and the Gold Coast, four had wives or live-in female partners (probably locals) and two of those couples had children.<sup>74</sup> Tellingly, an attached report on Kru in Walvis Bay for repatriation states that only one on the list of 21 'wishes to go'.<sup>75</sup> A similar government document from 1922 specified that, of the 39 Kru at the Windhoek 'location' for proposed repatriation, 10 had local wives. The women were also of varying ethnic background, implying that Kru were becoming accepted in the broader African community.<sup>76</sup> Certainly, increasing integration into local society melded with dim prospects of a prosperous life back in West Africa to drive the popularity of the UNIA among Kru in the region.

The UNIA had been created in Jamaica in August 1914 only a few days after the First World War had begun. By 1916, its founder, Marcus Garvey, and the organisation's main operations had moved to Harlem, New York City in the USA. It was a pan-Africanist movement centring around the betterment of people of African ancestry, claiming, 'Africa for Africans, at home and abroad!' The UNIA would become the largest black-led organisation in history and, at its height, had 300,000 members paying dues, a thousand chapters and maybe another million supporters around the world.<sup>77</sup> Its arrival in SWA was opportune.

In 1920, mounting political pressure in the Union of South Africa pushed the new Administration in SWA into '... removing the major inhibitions to the active exploitation of the colony. These changes, in turn, increased pressure on the indigenous population, accounting for increased resistance to the colonial state in the early 1920s'.<sup>78</sup> On the heels of such policies, which further disadvantaged Africans, Garveyism came to SWA. Soon, Kru were important members of its leadership. A 1921 Native Affairs letter on the UNIA

72 Testimony of Fridoline Kazombiase, 1946, quoted in T. Emmett, *Popular Resistance and the Roots of Nationalism in Namibia, 1915–1966* (Basel, P. Schlettwein Publishing, 1999), p. 86. Emmett appears to have obtained this interview transcript from the University of the Witwatersrand Historical Papers Research Archive, South African Institute of Race Relations Records, AD3411, I, Miscellaneous Items, 'In Face of Fear – Documents Relating to the Appeal to the United Nations of the Herero and other South-West African People Against Incorporation in the Union of South Africa and for Restitution of their Tribal Lands', published by the Revd Michael Scott for Frederick Mahareru, Paramount Chief of the Hereros, c.1948, pp. 37–8.

73 Pirio, 'The Role of Garveyism in the Making of Namibian Nationalism', p. 260.

74 NAN, SWAA [2233] A.494:2, 21 October 1920, Number of West Coast Boys in Swakopmund..

75 NAN, SWAA [2233] A.494:2, 21 October 1920, Number of Krooboyes in Walfish Bay, for repatriation.

76 NAN, SWAA [2233] A.494:2, 22 May 1922, Return of Kroo Boys Residing in Location No. 1 & 2.

77 Vinson, *The Americans Are Coming*, p. 9.

78 Emmett, *Popular Resistance and the Roots of Nationalism*, p. 90.



reported that ‘... it seems that the Kroo Boys are among its most active members’.<sup>79</sup> Exemplifying the position that West Africans had in the organisation, the group was referred to by Rhenish missionaries as the ‘Monrovia’ movement in SWA because of the prominence of Kru members and the fact that ‘the new ideology placed great expectations in the “Republic in the North” (Liberia).’<sup>80</sup> Garveyism in the colony spanned ethnic divides, with membership including not only Kru, but West Indians, Cape Coloured people, Herero, Nama and Ovambo. Being black transcended all other identities.<sup>81</sup> It became a tool of grievance, with Herero and Ovambo, in particular, joining Kru in using the UNIA to voice complaints against the new South African regime.<sup>82</sup>

By October 1921, the organisation spread from Lüderitzbucht to Windhoek, then to other urban centres and lastly to the bush.<sup>83</sup> The movement initially grew through the region’s railways and then by word of mouth via members to smaller African settlements. The ability of the UNIA to spread quickly and effectively was enhanced by West Africans and other members working for the railways. The shift in employment for many Kru in the colony from the harbours to the SAR, a result of the war and the change in colonial governance, was an important factor in Garveyism’s expansion.

The UNIA would have an important role in early 1920s SWA. Its effects were diverse, ranging from supplying the ideological framework for the development of subsequent Namibian nationalism to petitioning the League of Nations for SWA self-governance.<sup>84</sup> But, on a more local level, the organisation helped to improve members’ lives through initiatives such as help in cases of illness or providing death benefits to members.<sup>85</sup> At the same time, the UNIA also spread rumours meant to galvanise support and project a dream of a future unshackled from white colonial rule. This included the idea of eventual liberation of the colony by African Americans.<sup>86</sup>

The South African colonial government sought to suppress the movement in SWA and had, by the early 1920s, expanded its critique of West Africans in the colony, fearing that ‘they certainly have a bad effect on our aboriginals and are politically inclined’.<sup>87</sup> The same document went on to state of the Kru in Lüderitz, ‘I ... recommend that they be encouraged to leave ... in cases of proved crimes against them they should be deported ... I do not think that we could arbitrarily deport them all except in the case of criminals, but we should induce as many as possible to leave’.<sup>88</sup> While this report noted that arbitrary deportation was not technically feasible, criminal records of West Africans in Windhoek from 1922 hint that many of their arrests were indeed arbitrary. Of the 19 Kru in Windhoek with criminal records for the year, over 40 per cent were for violation of curfew or ‘location’ regulations, possession of liquor, breach of the peace or work absenteeism. These convictions were geared to controlling the African population and could be imposed almost at will by the

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79 Letter from R.S. Cope, Officer in Charge of Native Affairs, Windhoek, to the Officer in Charge of Native Affairs, Lüderitz, 12 September 1921, in R.A. Hill (ed.), *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers, Vol. IX: Africa for the Africans June 1921–December 1922* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995), p. 205.

80 Pirió, ‘The Role of Garveyism in the Making of Namibian Nationalism’, p. 266.

81 *Ibid.*, p. 261.

82 Hill (ed.), *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers, Vol. IX*, p. xlvii.

83 Pirió, ‘The Role of Garveyism in the Making of Namibian Nationalism’, p. 262.

84 Hill (ed.), *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers, Vol. IX*, p. xlvii; Intercepted Letter from Fitz Herbert Headly to Joseph Hailand, 14 November 22, p. 685.

85 *The Negro World*, New York, 22 November 1921, quoted in Pirió, ‘The Role of Garveyism in the Making of Namibian Nationalism’, p. 261.

86 Letter from C.N. Manning, Native Commissioner of South West Africa, to Private Secretary, in Hill (ed.), *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers, Vol. IX*, p. 455 n. 4.

87 NAN, SWAA [2233] A. 494/2, 6 May 1922, Letter on the Kroo Boys and Other West African Natives by the Native Commissioner of SWA.

88 *Ibid.*

state.<sup>89</sup> Although government intentions were well-defined, they did not have grounds to repatriate many Kru from the colony because of their intermarriage with local women and most individuals' unwillingness to leave of their own volition. With these hurdles in place, the SWA Native Commissioner made clear that critical oversight of the community would be maintained. He recommended '... that the Town Clerk be called upon to cause a roll of them to be framed, giving their names, the nature of their employment, their Hut numbers and stating whether they are married or single and whether they are holders of Hut licences or Lodgers permits'.<sup>90</sup> While the state attempted to purge the colony of, or at least to control, West Africans, it was fault lines within the African community that seem to have led to a decrease of Kru leadership within the local movement.

By 1922, the UNIA in SWA, which had operated as an amalgamation of both local and migrant Africans, with both Herero and Liberians strongly represented in the leadership, began to expel its West African leadership. As relayed by Pirio, a police report noted '... that there was a "friction" between the Liberian or Monrovia fraction and the Hereros in Windhoek, and subsequently the leadership of the Windhoek branch soon passed completely to Herero'.<sup>91</sup> One can reasonably surmise that the stark contrast between the two groups' experiences under German colonialism may have had a hand in this eventual schism, especially as some West Africans had again found themselves in positions of local power, this time politically within the UNIA. Even as Kru leadership waned, SWA Garveyism with active West African participation would continue to have a strong presence in the colony until the mid 1920s. But, by 1925, the UNIA, along with the ICU, had essentially met their end in SWA. Across the Atlantic in May 1925, Marcus Garvey was sent to jail in the USA for fraud, following a failed appeal.<sup>92</sup> The movement in SWA and its leader thousands of miles away seemed to have met similar fates. With the UNIA's fall and the solidification of a strong new occupying government, the state now exercised effective control over the colonised population.<sup>93</sup>

## Conclusion

In this article, I have used new labour study methodologies, including the micro-spatial approach and trans-local analysis. These have been implemented to bring a regionally focused study of migrant workers in SWA under German and South African rule into the global context of colonial infrastructure, world war, influenza and a movement for African liberation. In examining the tangled relations between West Africa, southern Africa and Europe between 1914 and 1920, inspiration was taken from Sebastian Conrad's assertion that '... the Global ... is not a distinct sphere, exterior to national/local cases; it is, rather, a scale that can be referenced even when we look at individual lives and small spaces'.<sup>94</sup> Using an array of sources, including the recently constructed *WBL Namibian Worker Database*, I have argued that West African migrant labourers who came to the colony in the 1890s were essential to the development and maintenance of the German colonial infrastructure before the First World War. They were a 'labour elite' among the African workforce. But, with the beginning of conflict in late 1914, they experienced financial and social disenfranchisement largely as a

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89 NAN, SWAA [2233] A. 494/2, 5 August 1920, Convictions recorded against Kroo-boys.

90 NAN, SWAA [2233] A. 494/2, 31 March 1922, Letter on the Kroo Boys by The Native Commissioner of SWA.

91 Miscellaneous document, 10 November 1922, SWAGA A.50/32 in Pirio, 'The Role of Garveyism in the Making of Namibian Nationalism', p. 264.

92 I.K. Sundiata, 'The Garvey Aftermath: The Fall, Rise, and Fall', in A. Jalloh and T. Falola (eds), *United States and West Africa: Interactions and Relations* (Woodbridge, Boydell and Brewer, 2008), p. 77.

93 Emmett, *Popular Resistance and the Roots of Nationalism in Namibia, 1915–1966*, p. 166.

94 S. Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 140.

result of being forced to labour for the German military and following a dramatic decrease in the economic centrality of the region's ports under South African rule. Their difficulties were compounded by the arrival of Spanish influenza in 1918. But, by the early 1920s, with many West Africans' desire to stay in the colony and increasing intermarriage with locals, a shift in the community took shape. West Africans, local Africans and families that now straddled the two communities wished to improve their situation under the increasing strain of South African colonialism. A home-grown variant of Garveyism took hold. It was one that placed local and migrant African political and economic enfranchisement at its centre. West Africans helped to spread the UNIA through their relatively new employment for the railways following the decline of the maritime industry. Eventually, inter-African tensions would, at least in some districts, lessen the leadership role of West Africans in the colony and, by the mid 1920s, the UNIA was essentially extinguished.

Over decades, the once separate communities of West African men who had come to GSWA on contract would meld fully into local society. In noting their continued presence in the mid century, Max Pickering, a Namibian whose father emigrated from the Caribbean to Lüderitzbucht in the early 20th century, remarked that Lüderitzbucht's 'location' in the 1940s was 'very cosmopolitan', filled with people from Liberia, Ghana, Togo, Cameroon, Sierra Leone and the Caribbean working in the fishing and canning industries.<sup>95</sup> In 21st-century independent Namibia, their ancestors can often be perceived only by unique surnames. To conclude, the author hopes that this work can re-position West African labour as essential in the late 19th and early 20th century social, economic and political development of colonial Namibia.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank those who organised and attended the 2019 re:work Summer School in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, for their valuable feedback on the early concept for this article, including my thesis adviser, Andreas Eckert. Also, those who have organised and attended the annual Namibian Research Day for the last few years at the Basler Afrika Bibliographien, especially Dag Henrichsen, were essential in supporting my investigation into Kru in South West Africa. The staff at the National Archives of Namibia and the Archiv- und Museumsstiftung der Vereinte Evangelische Mission were very kind and accommodating in helping me to assemble the primary sources for this article. I am also deeply appreciative of those who gave feedback and edited my drafts, including my wonderful wife, Melanie Lyon, Lennart Bolliger, Bernard C. Moore, Stephanie Quinn, Kai F. Herzog and the two anonymous reviewers.

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<sup>95</sup> Max Pickering, interviewed by the author, Windhoek, 22 March 2018. This one-to-one interview in Pickering's home, with notes taken by hand, concerned his family and the history of Lüderitzbucht.