

Forced labour by those who lived through it

How was chibalo enforced in colonial Mozambique? The 1928 'Codigo do Trabalho dos Indígenas nos Colónias Portugueses de Africa' was the basic legal document of the system, which remained in force until 1962. This Code was supplemented by a set of Regulations promulgated for Mozambique in 1930. These laid down three kinds of obligatory labour: (1) for government agencies or municipalities; (2) for the purposes of dealing with natural calamities; and (3) for services connected with native living conditions and agriculture, including road maintenance. The colonial state claimed that these exceptional functions apart, the use of forced labour for private ends was expressly prohibited. But there was a trap, as can be seen from the law's formulation: **The government of the Republic (of Portugal) does not impose nor does it permit that any form of obligatory or forced labour is demanded of the natives of the colonies for private ends, but it does insist that they fulfil the MORAL DUTY (our emphasis) which necessarily falls on them of assuming through work the means of subsistence, thus contributing to the general interests of humanity.** Thus was moral duty made the mechanism of forced labour. It was of course the State which enforced this 'moral' duty to work, regarding all peasant farmers as idle and dragooning them periodically into chibalo labour.

The force of the law tells part of the story of this system; far more graphic are the accounts of its victims. The interviews published below are only a fragment of the experience that could be recounted.

THE MANHUNT

The periodic manhunt for chibalo labour was particularly intense where large plantations, as in Zambezia Province, needed large and regular supplies of labour. **Lofas Nzampo** first worked as chibalo labourer in 1927. Interviewed fifty years later, in the Luabo compound of Sena Sugar Estates, he told how he was first rounded up:

QUESTION — Where were you born and for how long have you been working here?

ANSWER — I'm from Angónia. I have been working here since 1927.

— How did you know that you could find work here? That the SSE existed?

— We were recruited to come here by sepoys; they gave us money and sent us here.

— How did the sepoys recruit the people to come and work here?

— When you refused, they beat you and tied you up.

— Were these sepoys from the Administration?

— They were from government, from the Post.

— Did the recruited men all go to the SSE, or were they also sent to other places?

— They were recruited only for SSE in Marromeu, Caia and Mopeia.

— When did the recruiting system by sepoys start?

— It started with our parents, but they were recruited for the army. If they refused, they were beaten up.

In Angónia, men fled from chibalo recruitment:

— At the time we always hid ourselves in the mountains. Our wives brought us food in a bucket. It looked as though they were going to fetch water but they came to give us food. If

we heard the sound of a dog barking, we knew that the sepoys had arrived. They ordered the door to be opened and asked the women where her husband was. If the woman didn't say she was beaten. We were searched for like rats. Our wives continued to bring us food in the bush. Recruiting continued, continued, continued and we had to leave our land for other lands. Those whites came here to trick us, and we didn't have time to rest. We were treated like bulls, we were given 200 escudos to leave our land and come and work at SSE.

This was the manhunt for chibalo which whole families and communities were organized to evade.

Listening to this interview in the Luabo compound was **Armando Juma**, who came from Alto Molócuè, but had much the same sort of experience:

QUESTION — How was the recruiting system and the work in Alto Molócuè?

ANSWER — I'll tell you what I've heard, but it is as if I had done it with my own hands. In our land we were punished. In our land the men in principle didn't sleep in their house. They were afraid of the recruiting. And at that time there wasn't any transport. The people went on foot and the whites were carried in palangins. From our land to Mocuba were 200 kilometres. The men who were prisoners were obliged to carry two bags with cement from Alto Molócuè to Mocuba. At the same time they had to carry other bags with food, such heavy ones that a man couldn't support them. If you had a daughter, you could give her to the sepoys and that way you could carry less weight. After we arrived in Mocuba we were to go home but they told us again to stop on our way. Even if one said that he was working, the sepoys answered that that wasn't the work which was necessary to be done. And we had to go and carry firewood from the bush to the city. Even the women were recruited to carry firewood from the bush to the city. After having accomplished this punishment, when we arrived at home, we started thinking to flee, at night. At night we weren't afraid of the sepoys. If we happened to meet a sepoy and he asked us where we went, quickly he brought us to another service. Later we heard about the SSE Company, which had started to function here and we went to present ourselves. When we started working, we earned very little. But we stayed because we heard that our friends who had stayed on our land, were suffering a lot with the recruiting and, therefore, we didn't

want to go back to our land. Some of us started to pay the taxes here and others went to Salisbury. People went to Rhodesia, to Joni and to Tete and, once there was a company here, we stayed here.

Chibalo raiding went on continuously throughout the country. **Dinani Xilenge**, who was 80 years old when he was interviewed in Homoine, Célula Khambane in Inhambane Province, herded goats as a boy, and was then scooped into a chibalo labour pool. The sepoys practised tricks to defeat the suspicion of the women:

QUESTION — How did they get you?

ANSWER — They came very early in the morning when we all still were asleep and told the women to wake us up. They told the women that outside there were people looking for workers. When one went out of his house, they jumped in on him, tied him up and took him away with them. Sometimes they came in the middle of the night, knocked on the door and threatened to force the door open if we wouldn't open it. They went from house to house until they had the number of people they wanted and then they brought us to the Regulus, and there we were distributed to the Administration, where they wrote our names and distributed us to different whites (who had asked the Administration for a certain number of chibalo labourers), (...)

Chibalo labour was not only rounded up by the Administration; Xilengo described how a Portuguese ex-soldier and farmer 'arrested' his own labour:

— After the completion of my contract (chibalo labour on the Xinavane sugar plantation) I returned home to rest, but it was not long before I got arrested again and taken for chibalo. This time I was sent to Alberto — the one nicknamed 'Noventa'. 'Noventa' was a big landowner and I did chibalo there for 6 months. It was not 'proper chibalo' because this man did not send a request to the administration for a certain number of chibalo workers; he simply went out and arrested people himself and made them work on his farm. He was a remnant of the Portuguese army which captured Nghunghunyani (1895). After the war he received a big tract of land from the Portuguese authorities and settled down as a farmer.

— Did you get any pay at the end of your 6 months' 'contract'?

— I was paid 300\$00 at the administration. 'Noventa' did not even provide us with food, our own wives or families had to bring us food every day while we worked for this landowner.

EXCEEDING THE LAW

According to the chibalo Regulations, men who had worked for at least six months in the colony or men who had returned from working a contract abroad, were not liable for chibalo. These provisos were blatantly ignored.

At times, as in the experience of **Alfredo Sithole**, interviewed in the District of Guijá, in Gaza Province, the six month period was forcefully prolonged:

QUESTION — Have you ever done chibalo?

ANSWER — Chibalo? I've done chibalo six times!

— Six times!? Where did you do it for the first time?

— I did my first chibalo here in Macia, at Public Works.

— What was your job?

— Roads — we constructed roads. I used to be a carrier — we loaded lorries with sand and excavated the foundation of the road.

— In which year was that? do you remember?

— It was in 1941, and I had been working for a year.

— One year? We heard that chibalo was only six months.

— It was one year. I have worked for one year here for Public works. Then I went prisoner soon after I finished, and I was sent to a white man's place in N'wandzengele (harbour of Lourenço Marques). I worked at the Harbour Railway.

— For how long did you work there?

— I worked for six months.

— How much did you receive and bring home after you concluded your contract?

— I received seven pounds (700 Esc.) from which I paid 200 escudos for hut tax.

Miners on their way back from working contracts on the South African mines were sometimes hi-jacked directly into chibalo:

J. Sithole — Even when you had paid your tax and you had just arrived from the mines, they would arrest you and send you away for chibalo. Returning migrants often had to leave their luggage at the Administration offices where they were intercepted before they reached their homes and sent away for chibalo.

Solomon Nyalunga, interviewed at Matukanyana in Maputo Province, gave an example of how false accusations were made against workers to force them to remain in chibalo:

— It happened very frequently that when a man was just about to finish his chibalo contract, the farmer would suddenly lay a false accusation against him: he would be accused of theft of tools, chickens or other small stock. Judgement would be passed; you would be beaten and thrown out of the place. The farmer would then write a letter to the administrator where the man had been requisitioned in the first instance, to say that such and such a person had deserted. The consequence of this action would be: first, the chibalo worker could not claim his deferred pay from the administrator, that is the money he would have received at the end of his contract, which he could have been paid only when he presented the contract duly signed by the farmer. Secondly, the sacked chibalo worker would immediately be liable to be arrested and despatched for another term of chibalo. For this reason, the chibalo person concerned would not dare approach the administration in his area to complain against the false accusation and wrongful dismissal by the farmer. This was colonial exploitation. While you were out doing chibalo, your wife would have to bring you some food because the food they gave you was uneatable. This in fact meant that both you and your wife were doing chibalo. In the meantime what was happening to your family? Your children suffered, and your wife was at the mercy of the policeman who had come to arrest you for chibalo.

STRIKES AGAINST CHIBALO

Chibalo labour was an extreme form of bonded labour; recruited forcibly by the administration and its police, these

workers were rightless and unorganised.

Asked whether chibalo workers staged protests against their conditions, some informants were sarcastic:

'Strikes?' said one. **'How could you have gone on strike? If you fought with those people (bosses of the Sugar Estate), you would have been fighting with the (colonial) regime itself. I, personally, have not heard of any conflicts when chibalo workers were said to have staged any strike against their employers. There might have been strikes but I have never heard about them.'**

They, (the chibalo workers), he said, **were afraid of the white man because the white man would beat them up** (if he was not satisfied with the way the work was being done). **The white man would shout at the capataz and curse him for being too soft with the chibalo workers. The white man would beat the foreman with the thin end of the bamboo branch. They would make you bend down and they would hold the branch with both hands and hit you on the back.**

— **Did you put up any resistance against this beating?**

— No. How could we have fought against the foreman?

Yet in the course of these interviews with workers who had done chibalo on the Xinavane sugar estates, our interviewer Alpheus Manghezi recorded two distinct strikes, one in 1943, and the second 13 years later in 1956.

Alfredo Sithole, interviewed in Guijá district, Gaza Province, described a strike of chibalo workers in 1943.

QUESTION — Why did you go on strike?

ANSWER — Because they did not give us food we went on strike. And because they improved the quality of the food we ended the strike.

— **For how long were you on strike?**

— Two days.

— **Who was your leader — do you remember the person who led the strike?**

— Aha! It was the people as a whole (there was no leader).

— **But when you were there, the whole lot of you, there must have been someone who started things going?**

— (someone) who stood up and told the others that we

should go on strike — and then the rest of us saying ‘Okay, let us go on strike’?

— **Yes, indeed! Who was the leader in that respect?**

— It was someone from Ximbutu — it was Bongwe.

— **So it was Bongwe who was the leader! Since Bongwe was the leader, and you went on strike for two days, what happened to Bongwe himself?**

— They said Bongwe was not interested in working but only in inciting others to go on strike, and told him to pack his things and leave!

— **They sacked him?**

— They sent him back to his home.

— **Did they send him away or did they put him under arrest?**

— They wrote a letter and sent it to his administrator.

— **Do you know what became of him after he went back to Ximbutu?**

— We don’t know what happened to him over that side.

Dinani Xilenge, of Homoine in Inhambane Province recounted how he was one of a group of chibalo labour on a farm called Mapinya sent from Inhambane to work on the sugar fields at Xinavane, who staged a strike.

QUESTION — Can you explain how this happened?

ANSWER — I had only been home for a few weeks when they arrested me and sent me to the sugar plantation in Xinavane.

— **Was there an explanation why they were arresting you?**

— They told me that I was going to work for the Government. Do you think that when they arrested you for chibalo you would be going to work for yourself? You went to work for the Government!

— **What happened when you reached Xinavane?**

— After we were picked up they sent us to Xinavane and put us up for the night at the Wenela Compound near Xinavane. The next day we were taken to the sugar plantation and put to work. One day, after we had been in Xinavane for some

months, they gave us porridge with sauce made from castor seed. It was lunch time and we all stood in a queue for our rations. We got a lump of porridge and a laddle-full of sauce which looked very appetizing. But when we tried to eat, the sauce burned our throats. After swallowing the second or third spoonful, one started having a terrible diarrhoea. It was terrible, and many people lost their lives that day. As a result, we all went on strike. It was a very serious strike and the authorities could not persuade the workers to return to work until reguluses were summoned to Xinavane from the respective districts where the chibalo workers had been recruited. This was the time when regulus Valente ruled.

— Who was regulus Valente — was he the regulus in the Xinavane area?

— He was regulus in Bhukuxa (Homoine district).

— So the authorities had to call in the reguluses — and then?

— We wanted them to come and look at the food we were being fed on. We told them that this was the reason we went on strike and that we were prepared to leave for our homes in HOMOINE, Vilanculos, Morrumbene, Marxixe and Manjacaze on foot! All the workers had gone on strike because of the food they had given us.

— Do you remember the year when this happened?

— I don't remember, but I think it was in 1956.

— Do you think it was in 1956 — can you say more about what happened on that day?

— It was a big strike, indeed. We refused to eat any more food; we broke up plates and refused to go to work. We told them that we would not go to work without food but we were not prepared to eat any of the food they offered. They called in the white men — the big white bosses, to come and talk to us, but we told them we had decided to leave for home. They then made telephone calls to Manjacaze, to HOMOINE and other places.

— Who was the leader of the strike — was there one person as the leader?

— Yes, there were leaders.

— Do you remember their names?

— They were from our area — there was that man — what was his name again? There was a leader from Nyampupu — he was called Mkuku, and there were others over on the other side but I don't remember their names. When you come to think about it, well, many people died that day!

— What happened after the reguluses had been summoned to Xinavane?

— After the reguluses arrived, the authorities tried to talk to them but we did not allow the reguluses to talk — we took them to the fields and camped there with them. However, two chiefs (from Homoine) spoke to the authorities, and these were Bhukuxa (Valente) en Mkumba who told the authorities: 'If you don't want our people from Homoine to come and work here, let them go home. Why did you feed them on food like this? Don't you know that castor seeds are not for human consumption? You brought our people here for chibalo, and on top of that you try to kill them — why?' After that, better food was introduced: from that day they started shooting hippos for workers to eat with their porridge, and even today workers at Xinavane are still provided with hippo meat — and it was hippo meat that saved the company (Incomati Sugar Estate).

(The interviews with Lofas Nzampoa and Armando Juma in the Luabo Compound of Sena Sugar Estates in Zambesia were carried out by Judith Head. The rest of the interviews, including the accounts of the strikes by chibalo workers on the Xinavane Sugar Estates, were conducted by Alpheus Manghezi, during the course of field interviews in the provinces of Gaza, Inhambane and Maputo during 1977, 1978 and 1979.)