

Competition for Malawian Labourers: 'Wenela' and 'Mthandizi' in Ntcheu District, 1935 – 1956

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Between 1935 and 1956 Nyasaland experienced intense competition for its migrant labour between the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA) and the Rhodesian Native Labour Bureau (RNLB). The paper examines the strategies each of these adopted in order to gain advantage of the other. In doing this, the paper relies on oral and archival sources coupled with document reviews and field observations. The results of the study shows that though Wenela was a dominant force in the recruitment of Malawian labourers it did not conduct its activities without major challenges and setbacks. Mthandizi and other recruiters posed a big challenge, and sometimes effectively outdid Wenela. The evidence from the case study suggests that Malawian migrants were driven by lack of economic activities and propagandistic campaigns mounted by recruiters in their participation in contract labour system. It was actually the combination of these factors that made contract migrant labour system a success during the period of study.

1. Introduction

Much of the literature on colonial Malawi's labour migrancy deals with social and economic causes of out – migration, the physical dangers the migrants went through in the process of migrating, the working conditions to which they were subjected, and the negative and positive effects on the local economic and social structures (Sanderson, 1961; Coleman, 1972; Makambe, 1980). A theme often alluded to, but less analysed and discussed, is that of competition between the various organizations that recruited labour in the country (Chirwa, 1992; Chirwa, 1996). Studies done elsewhere in the Southern Africa region have shown that labour recruiters engaged in fierce competitions to attract large numbers of workers. The methods employed were often expensive and counter-productive as workers, acting singly or in concert, often found their way to the place of employment (Jeeves, 1983; Jeeves, 1986; Crush, 1987).

The present paper deals with the competition for Malawian labour between the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA), or *Wenela* as it was locally known in Malawi, and the Rhodesian Native Labour Bureau (RNLB) and its recruiting agent Rhodesian Native Labour Supply Commission (RNLSC), or *Mthandizi* (the helper) as it was also locally known. *Wenela* recruited for the South

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African mines while Mthandizi recruited for Southern Rhodesian² employers, especially farmers. The paper outlines the strategies used by these organisations and other private recruiters, as well as the responses of the Malawian migrants. It argues that though Wenela was a dominant force in the recruitment of Malawian labour due to its economic power,³ it did not conduct its activities without major challenges and setbacks. Mthandizi and other recruiters posed a big challenge, and sometimes effectively outdid Wenela, by recruiting more labourers from Malawi. The evidence from the case study chosen, Ntcheu district, in the southern sections of the Central Province⁴, suggests that lack of economic activities and recruiters' propagandistic campaigns also played a critical role to determine the participation of Malawian migrants' in contract migrant labour system. It was the combination of these factors that led to the success of the whole system of labour migration.

The period covered in this paper is from 1935 to 1956. This is an important period in the study of Malawian migrancy. To begin with, 1935 marked the reopening of labour recruiting in the country for South African mines after the official ban in 1913 due to high death rates among "tropical workers" (Boeder, 1974). The ban was followed by the signing of labour agreements between the governments of Malawi and those of South Africa and Southern Rhodesia. Farmers and mining companies from South Africa and Southern Rhodesia stepped up a strong campaign for access to the labour sources from Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia.⁵ It was actually in response to this pressure that the two governments took the initiative to sign labour agreements with the government of Nyasaland. The first of these agreements was the Tripartite Labour Agreements between Nyasaland and the two Rhodesians signed in September 1936 "with a view to keeping trace of migrant native labour" (Chirwa, 1992:385) and to ensure attention to the varying needs of the countries (Chirwa, 1992). In this agreement, first priority was to be given to each country's internal labour needs and only "free" labour was to be permitted to migrate from Nyasaland. From 1938 the Southern Rhodesia government sponsored a "free" transport system, the Southern Rhodesia Free Migrant Labour Transport Services popularly known as *Ulere* in Nyasaland. *Ulere* is a *chichewa* or *chinyanja* word for "free". Through this system, Southern Rhodesia government hired lorries to carry self-migrants travelling to Southern Rhodesia for free. The service was meant to benefit the southern Rhodesian tobacco farmers, who were constantly short of labour. From the mid-1930s, the Southern Rhodesian tobacco industry began to recover from the Great Depression of the early 1930s, and thus needed an increased supply of labour (Rubert, 1991).

From the early 1940s, the Nyasaland government issued permits to Southern Rhodesian tobacco and maize farmers who wanted to recruit labour in the country.

² Southern Rhodesia was the colonial name for the present Zimbabwe.

³ This is how Wenela is portrayed in J. Crush, A.H. Jeeves, and D. Yudelman, **South Africa's Labour Empire: A History of Black Migrancy to the Gold Mines** (Boulder: West view Press, 1991). It economic power lied in the fact that it was well funded by the South African Chamber of mines. This was not the case with Mthandizi which throughout the period had to struggle for funding.

⁴ Provinces are now known as regions. The regions are southern region, eastern region, central region and northern region.

⁵ Nyasaland was the colonial name for present day Malawi, and Northern Rhodesia was the colonial name for Zambia

This resulted in the development of a class of independent recruiters who operated a network of more or less “informal” agents in the country and along the major migrant routes to the south. The “informal” recruiters became “touts” who often bribed or forcibly recruited migrants travelling independently (Chirwa, 1992).

Meanwhile, there was intense competition for northern migrant workers in South Africa between the mining industry and farmers in the northern and eastern Transvaal districts. William Germill, the Wenela transition officer in Southern Rhodesia, campaigned for the South Africa mines and negotiated with northern territories of Nyasaland, Northern Rhodesia, and Mozambique for labour agreements (Jeeves, Crush and Yudelman, 1991). He carried his “propaganda battle for the mines into the diplomatic arena, including the International Labour Office (ILO) in Geneva” (Jeeves, Crush and Yudelman, 1991:50). Various Farmers Unions in South Africa responded by pressurising their government to allow the employment of northern workers on their farms. Very often independent migrants from northern countries were waylaid and rounded up after crossing the Rhodesia – South Africa Border and compelled to sign contract for labour in northern and eastern Transvaal (Chirwa, 1992).⁶

The period covered also witnessed the growing influence of the Northern Rhodesia Copper belt on the Nyasaland labour supplies. From the 1940s, and especially with the copper boom of the 1950s, a lot of Nyasaland workers found their way into Northern Rhodesia. Also important was the influence of the Lupa Goldfields, small copper mines, and sisal and groundnuts plantations of southern and south-western Tanganyika. These attracted considerable numbers of Nyasaland workers, especially from the districts in the north of the country like Mzimba and Nkhata Bay. It is against this background that we need to understand the competition for Nyasaland labour during the period covered in this paper.

2. Methodology

The study drew heavily on a variety of data within the confines of written and oral sources. Oral sources were the primary sources of information for the study. Granted their flaws, oral testimonies were used to capture the life experiences of the migrants as they interacted with the labour recruiting agencies in Ntcheu district. Oral interviews were conducted with 12 ex-migrants from the study area who were randomly selected on the basis of their availability in the area. The ex-migrants were identified by themselves with one respondent identifying a fellow ex-migrant from the study who travelled either to Southern Rhodesia or South Africa between 1936 and 1956. It should be noted that a lot of ex-migrants were identified from the area, but most of them travelled to these areas in the recent years between 1970 and 1988. Archival sources consulted included official correspondences on conditions of labour in South Africa and Southern Rhodesia, immigration policies and transactions from the Ntcheu District Commissioner (DC)

⁶ This appears in an article by the same by the same author “The Prisons of Bethal: Nyasaland Workers on the farms of Northern Transvaal, 1935 – 1950”, unpublished paper. I am grateful to Dr. Chirwa for allowing using his material in this paper.

and Provincial Commissioner (PC) of the Central Province,⁷ Ntcheu district annual reports, provincial annual reports, memorandums of understandings on migrant labour, labour migration reports by 'Wenela' and 'Mthandizi'. These sources yielded important information on the official perception on the development of labour migration and the competition that developed between the recruiting agencies. Secondary literature on labour migration in Chancellor College library and the History Department was consulted to create the scholarly base for the study. Other documents were obtained from specialists on labour history in the History Department at Chancellor College.

3. Ntcheu District and its Potential as a Labour Source

The case study district, Ntcheu is important for five main reasons. The first of these has to do with its geographical position. The district is at the south end of the Central Region bordering Dedza to the north, Mangochi and Machinga to the east, Mwanza to the south, Balaka to the south-east, and Mozambique to the west. These geographical characteristics were important in two ways. First, the routes taken by migrant labourers from the north and east passed through the district. Thus information on recruiting, working conditions, and wages was easily passed on to Ntcheu prospective migrants, and that too influenced them to migrate or stay at home, depending on their choice. Secondly, since the entire western part is almost inside Mozambique, illegal recruiters had very minimal difficulties operating in the district, or locating themselves just across the border and lobbying independent migrants passing through the district. This was compounded by lack of police patrols along the territorial border between Nyasaland and Mozambique. Besides, it was a common practice of Ntcheu residents to cross the border into Mozambique to visit or trade; thus they were ready potential recruits, less fearful of cross – border migrations.

The second important characteristic of the district was that it was traversed by two main routes, to the west and north through Dedza; and to the east through Kabwazi to Salima, Nkhota Kota and Nkhata Bay. There was also a railway line that passed through the eastern sections of the district connecting Salima and Balaka, to Blantyre, from there to South Africa through Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Botswana. Some secondary roads passed through Dedza and Mwanza connecting the district to Mozambique. With these communicating lines it was easy for migrants from the district to travel south⁸. They had open access to Mozambique and through here to Southern Rhodesia and, subsequently, South Africa.

The third reason is that, the people of Ntcheu had a long history of participating in labour migrations (Chirwa, 1993; 1994). They were among the pioneers of migration in the country, at first to the settler plantations of the Shire Highlands from the late 19th century, and then abroad. By migrating to the plantations of the Shire Highlands, male workers from the district became experienced in migrant

⁷ District Commissioners and provincial Commissioners were government officials in-charge of districts and provinces. Provinces were more or less regions comprising different districts.

⁸ MNA NC1/14/6 Provincial Commissioner - Central Correspondence, Routes 1942 – 1948

farm wage labour. It was this experience, which made them become the most favoured recruits of the Southern Rhodesian farmers.

The fourth reason for choosing this district has to do with its economic conditions during the period covered here. The district lacked employment opportunities, which in turn influenced men to migrate. By the early 1930s the district had only 11 small estates in operation, which could not offer employment to large numbers of workers. As one District Commissioner noted:

“With only 11 estates operating (in the district) the majority of the local natives seeking work have to find it outside the district; the greater part of the paid labour force and of tenants are provided by natives from other districts and from Mozambique territory”⁹

The mention of “natives” from other districts and Mozambique suggests that the local workers were running away from low wages and poor working conditions, or found it more profitable to stick to agricultural production in their family gardens.

Finally, the cultural practices of the Ntcheu people encouraged young men to migrate. The majority of people from Ntcheu during the period covered here were of Ngoni origin. Their ancestors migrated from South Africa and Southern Rhodesia. Going to work in these two countries was like going back home to be in touch with their ancestral spirits. For young men, labour migration was also a kind of rite of passage through which they proved their manhood and won the admiration of beautiful young women. One respondent argued:

“A man would not be regarded as a man until he demonstrated some prowess. Going to Wenela and be involved in mining work was a great mark of bravery. Whosoever went to Wenela was regarded as a real man.”¹⁰

4. The Coming of 'Wenela' and 'Mthandizi' in Ntcheu District

The potential of Ntcheu as a labour source was known to Wenela and Mthandizi in a number of ways. First, they learnt of it through the increasing numbers of independent migrants from the district flocking to Mozambique, Southern and Northern Rhodesia, and South Africa (Rubert, 1991). This gave them the impression that the men from the district could not find employment locally and would be eager to work abroad. Second, reports were given to Wenela and RNLB through those who had made official contacts with the district. For example, in 1928 Wenela sent a delegation to survey the labour sources of central and eastern Africa: Nyasaland, Northern Rhodesia, Tanganyika and Mozambique (Jeeves, 1986). The delegation reported to Wenela on the potential areas for labour recruitment in Nyasaland, and Ntcheu was one of them. For the RNLB, it was the Southern Rhodesian farmers in Nyasaland who reported on the potential areas of recruiting. The reports emphasised the easiness with which the recruiting agencies would establish themselves in the country. By the time the agreements of 1936 were signed, both Wenela and RNLB already had adequate information on the areas in which they would establish themselves to ensure profitable operations.

⁹ MNA NCN 2/. 1/4 Ntcheu District Annual Reports, 1936 – 1949

¹⁰ Oral Interview: L.P. Gwiyani, Tcheza village, T.A. Kwataine, Ntcheu, 13/9/94.

The RNLB began its operations on 4th June 1937. Up to the mid – 1940s, the organisation agreed to operate on the principle of “free migration” without “active recruiting” (Rubert, 1992). This meant that it could not mount an active recruiting campaign in the country. Its activities were confined to providing transport facilities, rest camps, food and other facilities to those who voluntarily contracted with it. Upon their arrival in Southern Rhodesia the RNLB distributed them to the miners and farmers who needed workers. This approach made sense at the time because the Southern Rhodesian economy, like other economies in the region, suffered from the Great Depression. Neither the RNLB nor the government, let alone individual mines and farms, could finance an active recruiting campaign at the time. It became the policy of the government of Southern Rhodesia, which financed the RNLB, to cut down on wasteful commitments to ensure its survival in such an adverse economic environment (van Onselen, 1976). Direct and active recruiting of Nyasaland labour would be an expensive venture for the government. At the same time both the RNLB and the government wanted to fully exploit the already existing system of “free” independent migration. Since Nyasaland workers were already flocking to Southern Rhodesia, it was not absolutely necessary to engage in active recruiting in the supplying areas. It was also feared that active recruiting would result in state interference in the free flow of labour and thus jeopardise the supply of labour to southern Rhodesian employers.

When the RNLB started its operations in Nyasaland, the first tasks were to open routes, establish rest camps and feeding depots. Outside Nyasaland the routes run from Fort James in Northern Rhodesia, near the Nyasaland border to Mrewa inside Southern Rhodesia; another one from Feira on the Mozambique border, to Mount Darwin in Southern Rhodesia. From Chimutu on the Northern Rhodesia border north of the present day Kariba ran a route to Sinoa in Southern Rhodesia. There was also another one from Fort Manning on the Nyasaland Northern Rhodesia border, and Misale in Northern Rhodesia, through Tete in Mozambique to Salisbury in Southern Rhodesia. Rest camps and feeding depots were established at Mount Darwin, Bindura, and Shamwa in Southern Rhodesia. Inside Ntcheu, among others, the camps and depots were at Lizulu, Senzani, Kasinje and Bilila. These were connected to those outside the country by the travel route the recruiting organisations had established.

With these networks of routes, rest camps and feeding depots, the RNLB was assured of smooth operation in Nyasaland. The turning point was 1938 when the RNLB introduced the *Ulere* transport system. In this system, lorries were used to pick up the migrants travelling to Southern Rhodesia on the routes established by the RNLB. This was followed by a train service operating from Salima, east of Ntcheu, to Southern Rhodesia via Balaka, Blantyre and Dondo in Mozambique.¹¹ On their way to Southern Rhodesia the migrants did not pay anything. Their fares were covered by the Southern Rhodesian government and employers through their financing of the RNLB. However, on their return journey the migrants were charged a minimal fee of 10 shillings, at least in 1938.

¹¹ MNA LB1/4/2 Labour Agreements and Conference, Memorandum.

“Free” migration continued up to 1947. In this year the RNLSC or Mthandizi was established with the aim of evenly distributing recruited labour among the Southern Rhodesian employers.¹² It was also partly due to the failure of the “free migration” approach, which could not provide the employers with the amounts of workers they needed. In Southern Rhodesia, a lot of migrants from Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia ended up in the Northern and Central districts of the country. Often it was the tobacco growing districts of Lomagundi and Mazoe that benefited from the “free migration” (Rubert, 1992). Thus the mining companies, most of them with their establishments in the southern parts of the country, complained of the uneven distribution of the labour from the northern territories.

When Mthandizi began its operations in Nyasaland it established recruiting centres in Ntcheu, Mangochi, Dedza and other districts. In Ntcheu, the most active centres were at Bilila, Mlangeni, and Bemvu.¹³ The latter is still known as Mthandizi up to this day. The establishment of these centres marked the beginning of active recruiting by Mthandizi and independent private recruiters. It also marked the beginning of the fierce competition between Mthandizi and Wenela, and between these and the independent private recruiters.

Wenela resumed recruiting in Nyasaland in February 1938. Between that date and the late 1950s, it established depots at Blantyre, Bilila, Mlangeni, Dedza, Lilongwe, Salima, Fort Manning (presently known as Mchinji), Mzimba, Dowa and Katumbi.¹⁴ Initially it received from these depots migrants who voluntarily contracted with it but later on changed to active recruiting. As already seen above, Mthandizi established its depots side by side with Wenela in the district. The areas were chosen by both Wenela and Mthandizi for two reasons. Firstly, they were the most densely populated areas in the district. This offered the recruiting organisations a good chance of recruiting large numbers of men in the areas. Second, the areas were located on busy communication lines. Mlangeni and Bemvu were on the main road between Blantyre and Lilongwe. Bilila was on the main road that passed along the lakeshore to Salima and northern parts of Nyasaland. The Blantyre – Salima railway line also passed through the area. It was therefore easy to transport the labour recruits from Ntcheu and other districts from the northern region of the country through these three centres. Mlangeni was also chosen for the recruitment and transportation of workers from the nearby Mozambican districts, given that the area was on the Malawi –Mozambique border. This materialised in the 1940s when Wenela was given official permission to use Mlangeni to recruit labour from Mozambique.¹⁵ It was therefore geographical location and communication networks that played an important role in the selection and established of recruiting centres in Ntcheu district.

¹²MNA LB10/3/1 Labour Recruiting – Non – Military, Rhodesia Native Labour Supply Commission, 1944.

¹³ Oral Interviews: Ndoya Joram, Gunundu village, T.A. kwataine, Ntcheu, 30/9/94).

¹⁴ MNA LB1/5/1 Labour Agreements and Conferences, WNLA 1938-1945

¹⁵ MNA LB1/5/1 Labour Agreements and Conferences, WNLA 1938-1945.

4 Competition between ‘Wenela’ and ‘Mthandizi’

To attract large numbers of workers both Wenela and Mthandizi adopted a number of strategies. The first of these was to lobby and use the Provincial Commissioner (PC) to give mandate to the District Commissioner (DC) to inform the Native Authorities (NA) to publicise the existence of the two recruiting organisations in the district. Emphasis was put on the free motor transport offered by these organisations.¹⁶ The District Commissioner was also called upon to assist with the issuing of Identification Certificates to men intending to migrate. He also sometimes accompanied the chiefs and headmen to address public meetings on the villages where the operations of both Wenela and Mthandizi were publicized. The second strategy was to use posts pinned on notice boards at courts, offices, and some pinned on trees in public places and along the roads. Through these adverts men learnt more about the two recruiting organisations. Those intending to migrate obtained letters of permission from their village headmen, which they took to the District Commissioner’s office to obtain Identification Certificates. The letter of permission was meant to show that the prospective migrant did not have a criminal record, had made enough provision or arrangements for the care of his family, and above all paid his annual tax. The village headmen, Native Authorities, and *kapitaos*, Malawians who were engaged by the labour recruiting agencies to mobilise prospective migrants, often took advantage of their powers to issue or reject the issuing of the letters of permission, to demand some favours from the intending migrants. Two types of Identifications Certificates were issued by the DC’s or NA’s office: one for South Africa, and the other for Southern Rhodesia. The intending migrants were expected to make a choice. Those going to South Africa would then go to Mlangeni or Bilila for registration before being sent off.¹⁷ Those for Southern Rhodesia registered at Bembu, Bilila or Mlangeni and then took a train from Bilila or Balaka to Blantyre. Some went through Dedza and Misale where a free lorry service operated between May and December (the dry season) to Salisbury through Tete in Mozambique.¹⁸

The spirit of competition between Wenela and Mthandizi is clearly reflected in the way they chose their recruiting centres. Both of them competed for the same supplies and ran a similar campaign. They both worked hard to lobby and work through government officials and traditional leaders. It should also be noted that, in fact, the Southern Rhodesia recruiting organizations were established with the prime aim of competing with Wenela (Jeeves, 1986). Each of these organisations had comparative advantages over the other. Wenela was a better-organised and well-funded organisation. It had a good financial and political backing from the South African Chamber of Mines. It also had a larger recruiting network than Mthandizi, encompassing the whole of the Southern Africa region. This, coupled with the long history of recruiting going back to as early as the first decade of the 20th century, made Wenela more experienced in matters of labour recruiting than

¹⁶ MNA NCN1/9/1Ntcheu District Correspondence, Immigration: Policy and Instructions.

¹⁷ Oral Interview: B. Joseph, Chimutu Village, T.A. Kwataine, Ntcheu: D. Bonongwe, Chogawana Village, T.A. Kwataine, Ntcheu.

¹⁸ MNA LB12/1/1/ Labour Rest Camps, Shelters on Migrant Labour Routes, 1942 – 1944.

Mthandizi. More important of all, the organisation recruited for employers who offered the highest wages in the regional markets. This gave it the biggest advantage over Mthandizi and other independent private recruiters.

However, for all its experience and economic advantage, Wenela lost out to Mthandizi in six areas. First, unlike Wenela, Mthandizi did not subject its recruits to rigorous medical tests to qualify for mine work: one at home and two in South Africa. The only medical or physical test Mthandizi insisted on was that the recruit should have over 32 teeth and a weight of about 120lbs. The teeth specification was basically a way of verifying that the recruit was of a mature age. Those who fell short of the weight requirement were housed in rest and feeding camps for a week or two, given an improved diet, and then forwarded down after gaining some weight. Through these arrangements Mthandizi recruited men Wenela would regard as physically and medically unfit. Thus, those who failed to qualify for Wenela flocked to Mthandizi.

Second, the organization encouraged farmers of Southern Rhodesian origin working in Nyasaland to carry with them their tenants and wage labourers when returning home for holiday or to stay.¹⁹ Those farmers who had farms in Nyasaland were legally encouraged to transfer their tenants and workers on seasonal basis, from Nyasaland and to Southern Rhodesia.²⁰ This was made possible by the seasonal differences in the preparations of gardens and the harvesting of crops between the two countries. Thus, taking advantage of this, Mthandizi encouraged and collaborated with Southern Rhodesian farmers working in Nyasaland to transfer their tenants or other labourers to work in Southern Rhodesia.²¹

The third advantage Mthandizi had over Wenela was in the way it conducted its recruiting activities on the ground in the village surrounding its recruiting centres. It had a network of local agents, which included local people and village headmen.²² These organised a propaganda campaign for the organisation including bribing people to contract with it.²³ Agents were sent out from Bemvu, Mlangeni, and Bilila to hold meetings with local people and their traditional leaders. The commonest message sent out was that the recruits were going to work on farms just like they did in their gardens. This was not hard work; it was the usual work everybody in Ntcheu was already accustomed to. Farm work, they claimed, was not as dangerous as mine work. The latter involved going underground, making the workers prone to accidents and death. Some migrants to Mthandizi sang against those going to Wenela:

“Awo avala wenela monga akafa akabwera” (You have put on Wenela T-Shirt, you will die there and not come back)²⁴

¹⁹ MNA LB11/3/7 Labour Reports: Provisional Labour Officer Lilongwe, 1950 – 55.

²⁰ See W.C. Chirwa, “No Chibaro.” Competition for Nyasaland Labour, South African and Southern Rhodesia Recruiters, 1935 – 1960”, Unpublished paper. I am grateful to Dr. Chirwa for permitting me to use his unpublished manuscript.

²¹ MNA LB10/4/6 Labour Recruiting – Non – military WNLA Recruiting Illegal, 1943 – 1950.

²² Oral Interview: G. Hara, Njunga Vilage, T/A/Phambala, Ntcheu 5/10/95

²³ Oral Interview: M. Jackson, Tcheza Village T/A Kwataine, Ntcheu 5/10/95.

²⁴ Oral Interview: M. Jackson, Tcheza Village T/A Kwataine, Ntcheu 5/10/95.

Such propagandistic messages, combining deceit, false promises and threats, proved very effective in luring unsuspecting recruits to the Southern Rhodesian farmers.

In addition, Nyasaland workers already in Southern Rhodesia were frequently given money and holiday to come home, recruit their relatives and friends, pay their train fares and take them down to Southern Rhodesia. The Mthandizi representatives in the district also went on ground to the villages with loud speakers. They gave out gifts such T-shirts, glasses, sugar and soap, and enlisted recruits and took them in their cars to the recruiting and registration centres. With cars going deep into the villages collecting men, Mthandizi was no match for Wenela on the ground.

The fourth advantage was in the allowance it gave to the recruits to migrate with their families if they wanted to. By the early 1950s, Mthandizi allowed its recruits to take their families to Southern Rhodesia if they wanted to stay at the place of work for periods up to four years.²⁵ The assumption was that such workers would extend their contracts and eventually establish themselves more permanently. They would be less anxious to return home since their immediate families were with them there. The practice increased the utility and maximum exploitation of the individual workers and members of their families. The wives and children of these workers often found themselves working on the farms where their husbands or/and fathers were employed. The practice therefore gave the Southern Rhodesian farmers access to a variety of forms of unpaid family labour which included casual wage labour and work paid in kind. It also encouraged the practice of *matchona*,²⁶ “getting lost” as some of those who migrated would not return home.

The way the Mthandizi recruits were transported was also an added advantage over Wenela. The free lorry transport and the train tickets given to the recruits encouraged men to contract with the organisation. As regards transport, the turning point was June 27, 1944 when the Department of Immigration in Southern Rhodesia approved a free lorry service for labourers from Ntcheu district to proceed to Southern Rhodesia from Biriwiri in the Mozambique side of the border. The service began on July 11, 1944 barely two weeks after the approval, and operated once a week. The lorries arrived at Biriwiri every Tuesday and left every Wednesday.²⁷ Local agents went into the villages announcing the arrival of the lorries and brought men to the pick-points. This service was later taken advantage of by independent private recruiters. They sent their own lorries from Southern Rhodesia with their agents to collect men in Ntcheu and other labour supply districts in Nyasaland, as far as Ntaja in the eastern side of Machinga district. The competition between Mthandizi was thus intensified.

Finally the agents of both Mthandizi and independent private recruiters were also good at way-laying men who were migrating independently.²⁸ This gave them

²⁵ Oral Interview: D. Bonogwe, Chogawana village, T.A. Kwataine, Ntcheu 25/9/94

²⁶ Matchona were migrants who opted to remain in Southern Rhodesia and South Africa after their contract expired.

²⁷ MNA NC1/14/6 Central Provincial Commissioner Correspondence: Routes 1942 – 1948.

²⁸ MNA LB10/4/6 WNLA Recruiting illegal, 1943 – 1950.

an advantage over Wenela, which for the most part, depended on official recruiting channels. They located themselves just across the Nyasaland–Mozambique border and “pounced” on those who were migrating independently, by force or bribing them into accepting to contract for farm labour in Southern Rhodesia.

Wenela could not let these aggressive strategies by Mthandizi and the independent private recruiters go unchallenged. Between 1948 and 1950, it changed its strategies as well. Up to this time it had depended on “free” flow and voluntary contracting. From 1948 or thereby, it pressurized the Nyasaland government to allow it to engage in “active recruiting”. The Nyasaland government conceded. Immediately Wenela began to issue T-shirts written **WENELA** on the chest and gave them to its agents, chiefs, village headmen and its recruiters. It also gave gifts and offered bribes to those who helped it recruit men in Ntcheu and other districts. Its agents issued pamphlets advertising the organisation and the type of work available in the South Africa mines. Vans equipped with loud speakers toured Ntcheu and the neighbouring districts encouraging men to come forward and contract with Wenela.²⁹ The turning point came in 1952 when the organisation opened an air service between Chileka in Blantyre and Francistown in Botswana. Buses collected recruits from Dowa, Ntcheu, Lilongwe, Dedza and Ntchisi to Chileka in Blantyre to board a plane to South Africa via Francistown. By the mid-1950s, Wenela air service had become just too superior for Mthandizi lorry service to compete with. The prestige of boarding a plane became a big attraction for Ntcheu migrants. Thus, it was only from the mid-1950s that Wenela was able to recruit more people than Mthandizi from Ntcheu district and probably Nyasaland as a whole.

The available statistical evidence indeed suggests that there were more Nyasa workers in Southern Rhodesia than in South Africa in the early 1940s. For example in 1943, it was estimated that about 70,000 Nyasa workers were in Southern Rhodesia, as compared to about 21,000 in South Africa, and about 5,000 in Northern Rhodesia.³⁰ The average number of Nyasaland workers on the South African gold mines in that year was 2,438 (Crush, Jeeves and Yudelman, 1991). Between the above date and 1954, the average number of Nyasaland workers on the South African gold mines never went beyond 12,407 (Crush, Jeeves and Yudelman, 1991). The number of Identification Certificate also suggest that it was indeed from the mid-1950s that Nyasaland workers began to register for South Africa in larger numbers compared to those who registered for Southern Rhodesia. The table below illustrates the point.

²⁹ MNA LB10/4/7 Labour: WNLA General Correspondence 1951 - 1952

³⁰ MNA LB3/16/1 Witwaterland Mine Native Wages Board: Reports and Memorandum by the Nyasaland Northern Rhodesia Labour Officer, 1943 – 1944.

Table 4: 1 Issuing of Identity Certificate in Nyasaland

YEAR	SOUTH AFRICA	SOUTHERN RHODESIA
1946	7,637	
1947	10,066	25,650
1948	9,936	23,991
1949	8,848	22,362
1950	9,988	21,984
1951	9,307	20,279
1952	8,819	32,253
1953	7,526	41,289
1954	10,772	39,975
1955	14,023	45,797
1956	15,516	46,072
		50,760

Source Nyasaland Protectorate, “Annual Reports of the Labour Department” (Zomba, Government printer, 1946 – 1953); Colonial Office, “Nyasaland Protectorate Annual Reports” (London: HMSO 1946 – 1962)³¹

The above table indicates the number of people who obtained Identity Certificates from either the District Commissioner or Native Authorities in order to migrate to either South Africa or Southern Rhodesia between 1946 and 1956. The figures show that the number of Nyasas who obtained Identity Certificates to go to Southern Rhodesia was almost double that of those intending to go to South Africa. However, it should be noted that the figures do not imply that these people actually migrated. Rather they serve to indicate the number of people who intended to migrate through official channels. It was required of them to consult either the Mthandizi officials or Wenela officials, depending on their choice for registration, attestation and transportation.

Statistics in the attestation of workers at Mlangeni for Wenela and Bemvu for Mthandizi, in Ntcheu district, also suggest that the latter had a greater advantage over the former up to the early 1950s. The main reasons for this pattern were the comparative advantages Mthandizi had over Wenela in the actual recruiting of the workers: the changes in the wider labour demands of the two countries; and the changes in the labour agreements, as it has been outlined above.

³¹ This was also quoted by W. C. Chirwa, ‘Theba is Power’, p.398.

Table 4: 2 Attestations of Ntcheu Migrants at Mlangeni and Bemvu

YEAR	BEMVU	MLANGENI
1938	1530	1205
1939	1502	1492
1947	1479	1440
1948	1405	1113
1949	1550	1150

Source MNA NCN 2/1/4 District Annual Report
MNA NC 1/4/3 Provincial Annual Report 1947 – 49

The sources from which the number of potential migrants attested at Bemvu and Mlangeni are silent on the number of potential migrants attested between 1939 and 1947. One of the possible explanations for the unavailability of statistical information is that the period saw the outbreak and development of the Second World War. Recruitment by Wenela and Mthandizi was stopped, and Ntcheu district among others was called to supply men to serve in the King's African Rifles (KAR).³²

However, all the tables used above do not tell anything about illegal labour recruitment. They are based on official figures. Given the power of "touts" who located themselves just across the border, and the illegal agents who worked within Nyasaland, and Ntcheu district in particular, official figures do not present a complete picture of the country's labour migrancy. The statistics also do not tell us the motives and behaviour of the migrant themselves.

Both oral and archival evidence suggests that by the 1950s, Ntcheu migrants had become very tired of Mthandizi's unfulfilled promises, threats, and propagandistic message. The migrants working in Southern Rhodesia wrote to their relatives and friends telling them of the disappointments they had with Mthandizi. They wrote about low wages, poor working conditions, and the harsh treatment by the Mthandizi employers.³³ The result was that increasing numbers of Ntcheu recruits especially those with experience, or with close contacts with relatives and friends in Southern Rhodesia, began to register with Wenela in larger numbers as noted in the figures above.

At the same time, especially from mid-1950s Wenela intensified its aggressive recruiting campaign. A newly acquired mobile cinema was introduced and it constantly toured villages to attract recruits.³⁴ These reflected the general expansion in Wenela investment in recruiting networks and facilities during the period. This was not confined to Nyasaland. It was Wenela's calculated strategy, to

³² MNA LB10/4/1 Wenela International Arrangements 1938 - 1940 also LB1/5/1 Wenela 1938-1945.

³³ MNA LB11/3/7 Provincial Labour Officer, Lilongwe 1950- 1955

³⁴ MNA LB10/34/7 Wenela General Correspondence 1951- 1952

expand its labour supplies from the 1950s, right up to the early 1960s, and probably beyond. The organisation made massive investments in recruiting networks and facilities in the regions during this period (Crush, Jeeves and Yudelman, 1991).

Besides, the period witnessed a great deal of improvements in the mining industry in South Africa. The mines were renovated to reduce accidents, which used to occur frequently. For example, the mines used to have one entrance. During this period each mine had an additional exit to offer an alternative passage in case one get blocked, a situation which was common leading to massive deaths.³⁵ The 12 hours shift was reduced to 8 hours as well. These improvements were made known to the Nyasaland government, which had to pass on the message to the prospective migrants through posters in all the recruiting centres.³⁶

The statistics cited above also do not tell us about stage migration. Some of the migrants who went to Southern Rhodesia did so simply to earn more money for their fares and subsistence, and thereafter to proceed to South Africa. Oral evidence suggests that some of them used the Mthandizi transport facilities only to desert the organisation when they reached Southern Rhodesia.³⁷ These migrant labourers' strategies are not reflected in official statistics. There is a possibility of double counting of some migrants as they exchanged recruiters on their way to places of work. They would appear on Mthandizi figures in Nyasaland, and deserted the organization and contracted with Wenela in Southern Rhodesia or any other country outside Nyasaland, and thus the same people would appear in Wenela figures.

The turning point in the study of competition for Malawian labour between Wenela and Mthandizi in Ntcheu district, and Malawi at large came in 1956. In this year a strike by Mthandizi broke out at Kariba dam in Southern Rhodesia. The major grievance of the recruits was unfulfilled promises made by Mthandizi recruiters in Nyasaland. As Boeder observed:

“..... the people had been attracted to Mthandizi because it meant ‘help’, but they did not realize that it actually, meant ‘help’ the European of Southern Rhodesia” (Boeder, 1974).

The strike resulted in the abolition of labour recruiting by Mthandizi in Nyasaland in October 1956. The greatest challenge to Wenela was thus removed and the era of peaceful labour recruiting in Ntcheu dawned. Fierce competition for Malawian labour came to an end.

5. Conclusion

The above account demonstrates the fierce competition between Wenela and Mthandizi in Nyasaland during the period covered here. Three conclusions can be drawn from it. First, for all its economic power, Wenela did not recruit Nyasaland labour without challenges from Mthandizi and independent private recruiters. All the parties interested in Nyasaland labour adopted strategies that were sometimes

³⁵ Oral Interview: Mr. Taulo, Chimutu village, T.A. Kwataine, Ntcheu.

³⁶ Oral Interview: Mr. Taulo, Chimutu village, T.A. Kwataine, Ntcheu.

³⁷ MNA LB1/2/1 Labour Agreements Influx of Northern Natives.

successful and at other times disappointing. Up to the early 1950s, it was Mthandizi which recruited more migrants from Nyasaland than Wenela. Second, the success of the recruiting organisations in obtaining increased numbers of workers in this country was determined by changes in the wider regional economy. The wider economic changes in South Africa, Southern and Northern Rhodesia had an important bearing on the demand for the Nyasaland labour supply, as well as the responses of the migrant labourers themselves. Finally, it is clear from the above account that Nyasaland migrant labourers, acting as individuals or as a group, were driven by the absence of economic activities in their homelands and propagandistic campaigns of the recruiting agencies in their participation in contract labour migration. In the absence of economic opportunities, migrants from Nyasaland found migration irresistible, and coupled with competitive campaigns by recruiters, larger numbers of Malawians joined the contract labour system.

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