



**Zachary Kagan Guthrie.** *Bound for Work: Labor, Mobility, and Colonial Rule in Central Mozambique, 1940-1965.* Reconsiderations in Southern African History Series. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2018. Illustrations. 240 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-4154-7.

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**Work in Colonial Mozambique**

Two and a half decades after Frederick Cooper's seminal *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (1996), and recently stimulated by the growing interest in global labor history, the field of African labor history is blossoming again. With his recent book, Zachary Kagan Guthrie has contributed a fascinating and beautifully written account that examines the agency of a set of actors—African male and female workers, colonial administrators, and the local “chiefs”—during Portuguese colonial rule in central Mozambique from 1940 to 1965 without either totalizing or downplaying the fundamentally violent experience of the colonial labor regime. By drawing from a rich source base of various archives—the bulk from the Arquivo Histórico de Moçambique (AHM), which was only recently reorganized and made accessible to researchers—as well as more than 175 interviews with elderly men and women in the region, the author convincingly demonstrates the crucial role labor inhabited for Mozambicans under colonial rule and the ways a closer look at labor mobility and African workers' capabilities to navigate the colonial political economy provides an innovative and in-depth framework to examine the interplay of African agency and colonial domination.[1]

The book consists of six chapters, ranging from seventeen to twenty-five pages, framed by an introduction and a concluding chapter. The introduction covers a broad range of issues: methodological considerations, assessment of the existing historiography, and a transparent and insightful elaboration on the interviewing process that was guided by a government agency and Guthrie's research assistant, Narciso Manecas Gastene. Guthrie's decision to provide the questions to his interlocutors' answers allows the reader valuable insights into the production of the narratives presented in the book.

Chapter 1 examines how colonial administrators controlled labor mobility through a study of the *contrato* (Portuguese for contract even though

there was no formal contract between workers and employers), which provided colonial employers like sugar plantations, sawmills, and agricultural businesses with a more or less steady supply of African labor to keep wages low and operations viable. By circumventing a *de jure* prohibition of forced labor (“legal gymnastics,” p. 108), the colonial administration recruited most workers by force, the most infamous method being the labor raid conducted with the help of African auxiliary policemen (*cipais*). The oral accounts give testimony to the long working hours, regular corporal punishment by employers, and insect-infested housing, underlining how much the *contrato* regime “was a deeply oppressive aspect of colonial rule” (p. 34). Chapter 2 zooms in on how African workers used their mobility to opt for different wage labor options. Selected life histories illuminate how workers navigated the different and changing options, going into the *contrato* voluntarily, bribing their way out through personal networks or goods acquired abroad, or evading labor conscription by migration to urban centers like Beira or to neighboring Rhodesia or South Africa.

The third chapter interrogates the intersections between labor mobility and gender and also looks at the affective ties that shaped the movement of workers. Despite the fact that the *contrato* targeted only men, and women were “tied” to the rural home (though they cultivated cotton and rice and engaged in other economic activities, like alcohol production), women considerably shaped the decision-making process of men’s work as men sometimes rejected otherwise attractive labor options far away to be closer to their families. Chapter 4 highlights the role of the local “chiefs”—the *régulos*—who functioned as important mediators of colonial rule since they were made responsible to control people’s mobility and extract taxes. Yet Guthrie points to the uneven distribution of colonial power since the *régulos* would adapt some powers given to them by the administration to exert control over workers’ labor and conscription but reject other tasks, such as border controls.

Chapter 5 looks in detail at the wide gap between law and practice in the Mozambican labor system in light of the continuous violation of law by the colonial authorities. The *contrato* regime did not allow for much negotiation between workers and administration. Guthrie instead highlights their *Eigen-Sinn*: “both sides ignored legal restrictions that would have curtailed their power, instead operating within their own fields of autonomy, pursuing their objectives through whatever means were available to them” (p. 105). The sixth chapter—“New Horizons”—emphasizes that old abusive practices of coerced labor remained well entrenched in central Mozambique despite the formal abolition of the so-called Native Code which was in place from 1942 until 1961. In the conclusion, the author again emphasizes the importance of the labor mobility approach and its wider implications for colonial, economic, and labor histories of southern Africa and beyond.

With this thematic panorama, Guthrie’s book makes a number of important contributions to the study of African labor history. First, he convincingly

argues that a focus on labor mobility “provides a much more complete picture of the myriad ways in which workers conceptualized and utilized their labor” (p. 8). The various types of migrant labor each offered a different set of material as well as emotional advantages and disadvantages, allowing workers to maximize their rewards by “pursuing different jobs, at different times, towards different ends” (p. 43). The lens of mobility, therefore, complicates and dynamizes rather static portrayals of southern African migrant labor, which by looking at migrant laborers as finished “products” of the colonial political economy did not pay too much attention to the variety of wage labor options and workers’ ability to navigate between them.

The book further contributes to a better understanding of women’s role within the colonial labor regime by demonstrating in detail how labor mobility was linked with family considerations, since couples’ affective feelings influenced their decisions. Guthrie also shows how colonial administrators aimed to exploit these ties for their ends by linking labor policies with gender politics. The crucial role of women is also apparent in the post-1961 attempts of the colonial administration to make voluntary wage labor more attractive. Women were another crucial anchor to instill a household’s desire for new consumer goods and a more varied diet. Another strength of the book is the emphasis on emotional considerations in workers’ life and work choices. A number of life trajectories recounted in the book show that emotional ties were important in the decision to return home from abroad, even though economically this was not “rational” or may be judged as a “step back.” By including emotional factors, Guthrie hopes to “humanize and analyze migrant labor, showing how workers integrated material incentives and emotional affinities, personal desires and professional demands” (p. 9).

To some extent, the book could have benefited, however, from a more structured present-

ation of the differences between different types and categories of work as well as quantitative data on wages in the various sectors going beyond the often-used markers “high” and “low.” For example, Guthrie states that central Mozambique’s large employers—sugar plantations, railways, white farmers, and sawmills—relied not only on coerced labor (*contratados*) but also on “volunteers” (*voluntários*) who generally received “better jobs and better treatment than their *contratado* counterparts,” since they could leave a job if they saw fit (p. 45). Therefore, the advantages of *voluntário* work were “higher wages and better working conditions” (p. 46). This assessment is seemingly refuted by the author on the next page: “regardless of whether a worker was *contratado* or a *voluntário*, he could expect to perform the same difficult tasks for the same low wages” (p. 47). Since we as readers are not informed about the wage levels of both *contratados* and *voluntários* in the various sectors in detail, it is difficult to handle apparently contradictory accounts.

Moreover, with a view to African agency so vividly captured in many of the oral accounts, the concept of labor mobility may have been expanded even further to integrate social upward mobility—new skills, social status, cultural capital, etc.—into the analytical lens of labor mobility. A number of accounts show how certain types of labor mobility were connected to a higher status through acquiring certain goods and commodities, especially from abroad but this is not used for a systematic assessment of the relationship between physical and social mobility. Since workers were often “stuck” in one place or involuntarily and coercively confined for a certain period of time until they were allowed to move again to other workplaces on their own account, concepts like “immobilities” and “moorings” may also be considered in future discussions of Guthrie’s labor mobility approach.

Overall, Guthrie convincingly shows with his book that to understand the complex and shifting

histories that entailed many different routes and many different kinds of labor, the framework of labor mobility is a rewarding way to link together not only disparate stories but also “other aspects of Africa’s colonial past, from gender relations, to ‘native authorities,’ to colonial law” (p. 149). *Bound for Work: Labor, Mobility, and Colonial Rule in Central Mozambique, 1940–1965*, therefore, marks a very important contribution to the field of African and global labor history, underlining that the historical reality of migrant labor and labor mobility was more complex than most models suggest. As a “history of mobility from the margins,” it succeeds in complementing and complicating “the broader history of capitalism and labor, suggesting new ways of conceptualizing fundamental categories of economic analysis” (p. 155). For these accomplishments and meticulous research, the book deserves a wide readership and also one beyond academic circles.

#### Note

[1]. Jeanne Marie Penvenne’s study, *African Workers and Colonial Racism: Mozambican Strategies and Struggles in Lourenço Marques, 1877–1962* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995), mentioned briefly in Guthrie’s footnotes 11, 12, and 37 of the introduction, elaborates a “labor mobility” approach that Guthrie might have used more extensively. Penvenne not only employed “mobility” in two of her chapters and frequently used it as an analytical lens but also discussed the term “labor mobility” in some depth as it applied to African workers under Portuguese colonialism. See Penvenne, *African Workers*, 19, 80, 89–90, 99, 109–111, 116, 155. See also the index, 222.

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