

Migrancy and Its Legacies in Barotseland

Michael Barrett¹

¹·Museum of Ethnography, Stockholm, Sweden

michael.barrett@etnografiska.se

Labour migration to the Witwatersrand in the 20th Century has come to define irrevocably not only the social and political history of Johannesburg (including the violent geographies of exclusion found there today), but also the practice and the experience of mobility in much of Southern and Central Africa. Certainly, this is the case for Zambia's Barotseland.

Transnational conglomerates of capitalists, colonial administrations and local authorities transformed the landscapes, redrew its social and political boundaries, and reduced, through new technology and infrastructure, cultural and economic distances. References to the ensuing existential and societal transformations are obvious in the life histories of former labour migrants in the region. The virtual transhumance between Barotseland and the Rand (most intensely in the period 1935-1965) presented migrants with alternative life styles, gender relations, consumer goods, working relations, social identities, and ways of relating to the extended family. Despite unstable life improvements in the second part of the 20th century, migrancy's legacy for current generations has been a steady existential reorientation towards urban-like regional centres.

Based on long-term anthropological fieldwork among several generations of migrants in Barotseland, this paper traces the sustained effects of migrancy into the 21st Century. What relationships exist between these earlier (and now defunct) mobility practices and a permanent (?) shift in orientation towards the urban centered, wage earning, income diversified, long-distance family units - existing in delicate webs of balanced reciprocity - found in the region today?