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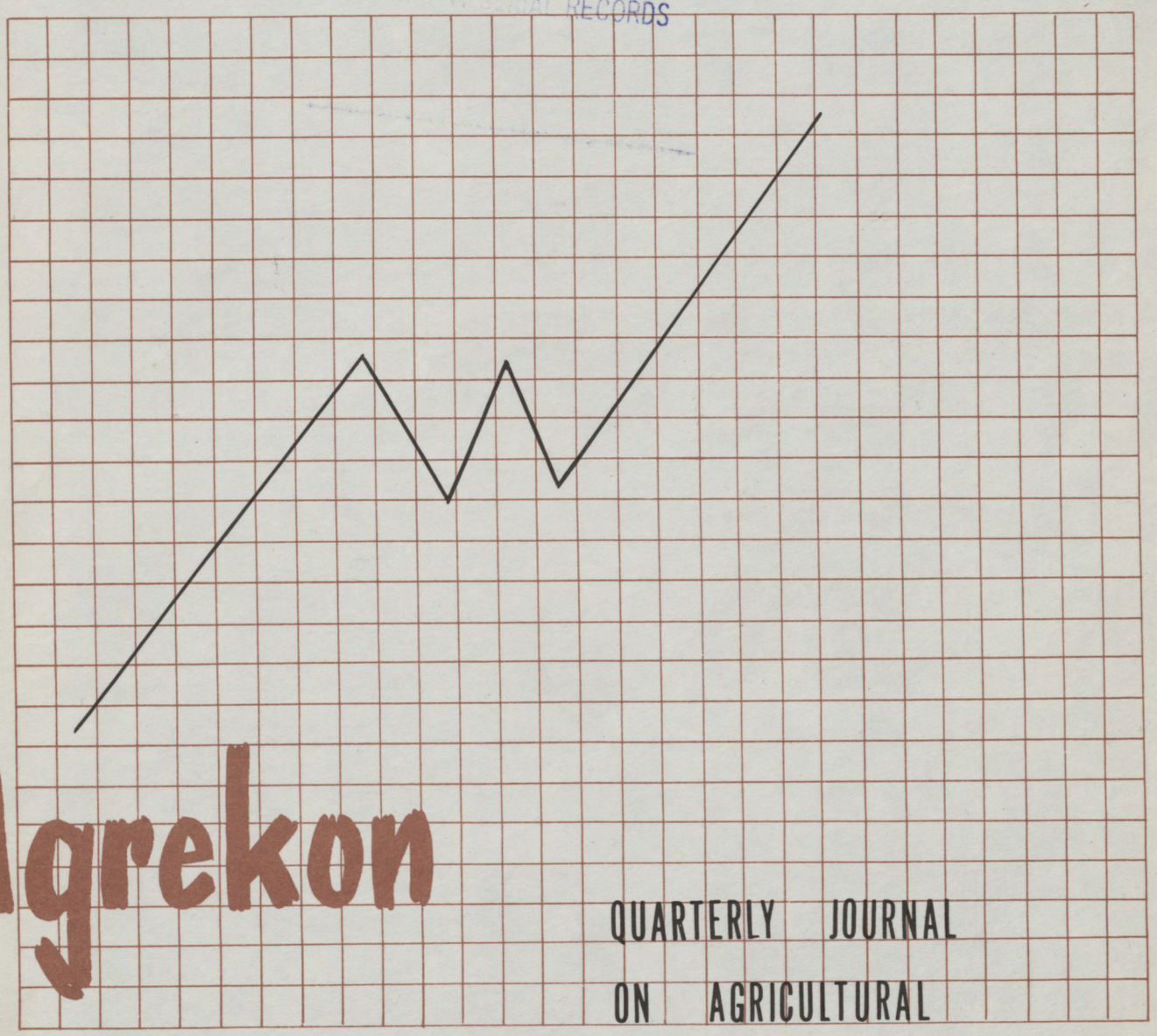

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PROBLEMS AND APPROACHES OF THE LABOUR FORCE ON FARMS

by

C.L.S. NYEMBEZI
Shuter and Shooter (Pty) Ltd, Pietermaritzburg

May I begin by conveying my thanks to the Agricultural Economics Association of South Africa for inviting me to participate in this way at this conference. I believe it is for the benefit of our country to concern ourselves with labour relations on farms because farming is one of the major industries of our country. It is in the interests of good farming that human relations be healthy on the farm. Farmers are mainly White and the labour force Black. White and Black have different cultural backgrounds and as may be expected, problems arise owing to these differences and these may vitiate good relations if not properly handled. But first and foremost we should acknowledge that farm labourers are human beings and expect to be treated like human beings. They will respond to considerate and humane treatment.

HAVE SOME UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR WAY OF LIFE

I think it is true to say that a large percentage of farm labour comprises country people who are, in the main, illiterate. Even those who have been to school have probably had only two or three years of schooling. For this reason people on farms will, to a large degree, be people who are still rooted to tradition and custom. Having said that, we should acknowledge, nevertheless, that even country folk have not been left untouched by contact with White culture.

It is to the farmer's advantage to know something of the customs and way of life of the people who work for him. A poor understanding of the workers' way of life may lead to the creation of otherwise avoidable tensions and grievances, with consequent unwillingness to give of one's best and resulting in lower productivity. For the purposes of this paper I shall draw examples from the Zulus to illustrate how important it is for a farmer to know something of their customs.

The man who comes to the farmer to ask for work is probably a married man. What does that mean? It means that he is the head of his family. It means that as such, his wife and children and other people must show due respect to him. It means that in a hut there is a special place for him where no one else may sit. He has his special seat or stool and his special eating utensils which no one else may use. He is the symbol of authority. His wife will not speak to him standing upright. She will bend with hands resting on her knees or sit down. In fact, any woman talking to a man must show this respect. When the head of the family is seated, all the others in the room must also be seated. It is improper to remain standing in the presence of superiors if they are seated. Perhaps you will now appreciate why your worker on the farm walks into your house and squats - it is out of respect for his employer.

When one receives something from a superior one extends both hands. It is discourteous to extend one hand only. Similarly, when a child hands something to an older person, he does not do it with one hand only. In the work situation the worker will extend both hands to receive anything handed to him. Here again is an area where White and Black differ culturally.

Children sometimes find themselves accused of doing certain things, perhaps quite unjustifiably. But once a child has declared his innocence, he keeps quiet. He is not expected to enter into an argument with his seniors just because they refuse to believe him. Similarly, it is improper for one to answer back in an argument with a superior. This behaviour is often misunderstood by those who are not conversant with the ways of the Zulus. When allegations are made against an employee he may keep quiet and this may be construed as an acceptance of guilt. When an employee answers back and engages in a heated argument with his employer it is an indication that he has reached a point when he can no longer control himself and is even prepared for dismissal.

The Zulu people regard it as improper to look one's superior straight in the eyes. One looks down or away. But this is regarded by those of other cultures as a sign of unreliability.

A married man is never called by his first name except by his father, paternal uncles or other senior members of the family. But even they will most probably use a clan name. As a result, some children grow up not knowing their father's first name. A man is called by his surname or by the name of his regiment if he belongs to one, or isithakazelo, which is a family praise name. A wife never calls her husband by his first name. She

addresses him as "father" or calls him by his surname or family name. If they have children she will refer to him also as "father-of-so-and-so", mentioning the name of the eldest child. It is this custom which has given rise to a special language of respect developed by women - the ukuhlonipha language. A woman avoids in her speech sounds which occur in her husband's first name or that of her father-in-law or his brothers and senior members of his family.

In public a man does not call his wife by her first name. He calls her by her maiden surname with a prefixal element added. Also he may use her family praise name. If they have children he may address her as "mother-of-so-and-so", mentioning the name of the eldest child. Let me add, however, that because of contact with White people, one finds some men now calling their wives by their first names and some wives calling their husbands by their first names, particularly in the urban areas.

In the work situation it is embarrassing for a man to be called by his first name, particularly in the presence of other people. It is even worse when women and children call him by his first name. It takes away from him something of his manhood. I leave it to you to imagine how he feels when he is called by his first name in the presence of his wife and children. Some White people have said to me, "I always call my worker by his first name and he has never objected". Of course he will raise no objection as he has no way of knowing how his master will react. There is fear that it may cost him his job.

Some White people find it difficult to pronounce and remember names of Black people. They should nevertheless make a special effort to overcome that problem. For young unmarried men, no offence is taken if the first name is used. This is also true of young unmarried women.

Some Black people who have grown up in an urban situation are no longer particular about this custom. But even with them it is better to make quite certain that they are not offended by the use of their first names. Among the Xhosa, a woman, on getting married, is given a new name by her inlaws. That name is used freely and no offence is taken.

The operation of the extended family is something which many White employers fail to comprehend and is thus a source of great irritation to them. As a result one sometimes hears questions such as: "How many fathers have you?" when a labourer comes along to seek permission to go and attend a funeral of "another father". One also hears remarks such as: "I hope you have put to rest the last of your many aunts." Here it is important for employers to understand the Black man's attitude to bereavement. If your employee is also head of the family, i.e. the most senior, he is like the priest of the family and has a religious role to play. He is the only one who is in a position to communicate with the ancestors. A labourer may even risk dismissal from work by going away without permission rather than fail to fulfil his functions as prescribed by custom.

Death is always a traumatic experience. It is regarded as improper to work when death has occurred. Work such as ploughing, cultivating and building must be suspended until after the funeral. This does not only apply to the immediate family and relatives, it applies to everyone in that locality. In the olden days this custom did not create any problems because one was buried on the very day of one's death. Now, however, with the advent of mortuaries, burials may be delayed for several days.

The period of mourning is fraught with all sorts of dangers for the bereaved. They are constantly under a dark spell and susceptible to all kinds of misfortune. When the period of mourning comes to an end, special rites must be performed and all members of the family must be present. Failure to attend means that that individual will remain susceptible to all sorts of misfortune or danger. When your employee asks for permission to attend this ceremony, permission should not be lightly refused.

In Zulu society there is division of labour - men's work and work for women. Men plough, chop wood, build houses and cattle kraals, look after cattle and milk the cows. Women make fires, cook, fetch water, collect fuel, wash dishes, pots and clothes, sweep, scrub and polish floors etc. At his own home a man never makes fire, never cooks, never washes dishes and pots, never sweeps or scrubs or polishes floors. You can imagine what goes on in his mind when in the work situation he is made to do these things. He finds it very embarrassing, particularly if he is watched by women. It is a terrible experience for him to be found by his wife or children performing such tasks, while it is also embarrassing for a woman to find the father of her children performing some of these tasks.

In the home a wife advises her husband but never instructs him. In the work situation a man has to take orders from the employer's wife and sometimes even from his children. This is an area which may cause problems and needs to be handled carefully.

TREAT WORKERS WITH DIGNITY

Farm labourers, as I have already mentioned, are human beings and appreciate being treated with dignity. Recognition of this goes a long way towards developing harmonious relations which will encourage greater productivity.

Some time ago I had the good fortune of visiting a few farms at the invitation of the farmers. It was the wish of those farmers that I should meet their labourers to chat with them and perhaps make suggestions. I was impressed by the genuine concern of those farmers that was reflected in the way in which they treated their labourers.

In the Black community those of us who do not move in farming circles speak of farmers as a group. We do not see or regard them as

individuals. We judge them collectively. I believe this is the way in which White people also think of us and judge us as Black people. My visit to these farms emphasized to me the danger inherent in such collective appraisal of people.

FEELING OF INSECURITY

On one of the farms I was aware of the feeling of insecurity on the part of the employees when a farm changes hands. The master does not have to consider the feelings of his workers when he decides to sell his farm. In a sense the workers go with the farm. Some workers will leave the farm rather than wait for the unknown, while others will stay on but be ready to move out at any time as soon as they have assessed the new master and concluded that life under him would be unbearable.

This feeling of insecurity again came up in a different form. Some of the labourers said that they would feel happier to remain on a farm if they knew that their future or old age was provided for in some way, for instance by some form of insurance. Their fear was, having given the best years of their lives in the service of a farmer, what was there to stop him from throwing them out once they reached the age when they were regarded as too old to be productive. Perhaps there is a form of insurance for farm labour - I do not know. If there is, and the labourers are insured, then they must be made aware of it and the sort of benefits they can expect. This will give them the feeling of security which they long for and they will be able to concentrate on their work and achieve better results. People harbouring this feeling of insecurity cannot be expected to give of their best.

DELEGATE RESPONSIBILITY

On one farm I had an opportunity to chat with the induna who was in charge of the dairy section. The farmer was not with us. This man was very keen to explain to me and show me his work. As he spoke to me and showed me around, there was no mistaking his obvious pride. He showed me the stock records and the milk records. He knew exactly how many cows were in milk, how many in calf and seemed to have all the information at his finger-tips. He was also responsible for artificial insemination. Later, when I met the farmer, I gained the impression that he had complete faith and trust in this induna. When I met other labourers on the farm, I realised that a genuine understanding existed between employer and employees. The farmer had no complaint about the productivity of his men.

A point made by workers on all the farms that I visited, was that they appreciated being recognised and treated as responsible people. The indunas on one of the farms appreciated the fact that the farmer showed sufficient confidence in them by discussing programmes and projects with them before putting these into practice. The farmer did not make decisions before consulting his top men. He regularly held meetings with them and allowed them to make their views known and treated those views with respect. I must say that I was much impressed. It takes some doing to reach a point at which labourers express themselves freely and not merely repeat what they think their master would like to hear. This particular farmer had succeeded in getting his men to participate in a meaningful way in the running of the farm and had also succeeded in developing in them a feeling of belonging.

The indunas on this farm were concerned that the men in charge of the milking had a lot of time on their hands in between milking times. In order to keep these men usefully occupied and stop them from indulging in excessive drinking, they approached their master with the request that they be given a plot in which to grow vegetables. The men would work on this plot in between milking times. It was agreed that they would grow cabbages, a vegetable which had not been grown on the farm. When the crop was ready it was sent to the neighbouring municipal market where it fetched a very good price. The farmer was so pleased with the result that he raised the wages of all his workers.

To me a lesson that stood out clearly on this farm was that once the indunas are given responsibility, they should be trusted to carry it out. An impression should not be created that although they have been given responsibility, it is not expected that they will discharge their task satisfactorily.

At a farmers' meeting I met a farmer who told me how, initially, he had tried to do everything and be everywhere on his farm, how he used to think that he had to supervise every operation. He found it almost impossible to be away from the farm and, if compelled to do so, he always had a feeling that things were going wrong. Then he met another farmer who had a different approach to his workers, who showed trust in them and gave them responsible tasks and who assured him that his approach worked very well. Although sceptical, the first farmer decided to give it a try and has never regretted the move.

Another farm that I visited provided a good example of the importance of a farmer knowing something about the culture of his Black workers. He informed me that the past year had been a very good one for him and he had decided to share some of this with his workers. This was done in the form of a generous Christmas bonus. "But", said the farmer to me, "I was very disappointed, for not one of those people came back to say thank you."

Now that really puzzled me. In our society, children are taught at a very early age to say thank you when receiving a gift. For grown-up people to behave in such a manner was incomprehensible. I told the farmer that I wished to hear more about that incident from the workers. When I broached the matter of their ingratitude, the men were genuinely puzzled. They admitted that they had been given a Christmas bonus but insisted that they had thanked the farmer for it. I asked them to

explain exactly what had happened. The pay and the bonus were contained in separate envelopes. The farmer himself handed these out to the employees one by one. As each employee received his envelopes he said thank you. At that time of course they did not know how much was contained in the envelopes. The employer thought that after opening the envelopes and seeing the amount contained they would come back to say thank you again. But, as far as the employees were concerned, they had already expressed their gratitude for whatever was contained in the envelopes, be it large or small. The farmer was relieved when I explained to him how the misunderstanding had arisen. The men were also upset that they should be taken for ungrateful people.

LEISURE TIME

Leisure time for farm labourers should be regarded as a must. It is also essential to make provision for proper use of such leisure time. Some farmers provide a soccer field but this only caters for the younger men, older men and women are not provided for.

One farmer informed me that he was thinking of putting up a building where his workers could gather after work in the afternoons and evenings. But in discussing the proposed project with the workers, I found that they had many questions as to what would happen in that building. It became clear to me that is was essential for the farmer to discuss the matter with his workers first in order to avoid putting up what might turn out to be a white elephant.

One of the workers asked: "Why can't such a place be used to teach us to read and write?" The farmer and his wife were very impressed by this comment and promised to investigate the possibilities of providing instruction. Many farmers employ youths for whom literacy classes would be very beneficial.

I do not believe that it is necessary at a gathering such as this to emphasize the need to pay fair wages. Salaries and wages are areas which always create problems. Payment in kind is not always appreciated. Some workers prefer to receive money so that they can decide for themselves what to do with it.

HOUSING

On two farms that I visited I was shown the houses for married employees. These houses looked attractive and well kept and workers were encouraged to plant trees. Each home had a plot where vegetables could be grown. Recently I travelled through the Free State and was favourably impressed with some of the houses that I saw as I drove past. The exterior was attractive and a vast improvement on what one finds on some farms. It is essential to provide good housing. In building houses it should be borne in mind that sleeping accommodation should be available for children of different sexes. Traditionally children of different sexes do not share rooms.

DISCIPLINE

A word on the question of discipline. On one of the farms I found that the matter of discipline was left mainly in the hands of the indunas. They formed a disciplinary committee and could even impose fines not exceeding a certain amount. Such fines were paid into their sports fund. The farmer was the court of appeal. The workers appeared happier to be dealt with by this disciplinary committee rather than be handed over to the Police, unless, of course the matter was the concern of the Police only.

TAKE AN INTEREST IN THEIR WELFARE

Workers appreciate it if a farmer takes an interest in their personal welfare. On one of the farms I visited I was informed by the workers that although the farm was a good distance from the nearest doctor, illness among their families was not such a source of anxiety because their master was always ready to help. If necessary, he provided transport to take members of the various families to a doctor or to hospital. This help was never given grudgingly.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion I would like to mention the following:

1. Cultivation of a harmonious relationship between farmer and workers is of paramount importance and this requires that the farmer should have some understanding of the way of life of his workers. Conditions should be created on the farm which will make them refer to the farm as Kwethu, i.e. home.
2. Workers must feel that they are getting fair compensation for their labour.
3. They must be treated as responsible people. When responsibility has been delegated they must be trusted to carry it out.
4. Let the workers discipline themselves in the first instance. The farmer should be a court of appeal.
5. Workers must be involved by inviting suggestions from them.
6. They must know what to expect in their old age if they choose to stay on the farm.
7. Serious attention should be given to the provision of good housing.
8. As much as possible meet their reasonable requests.