

**NOT FOR PUBLICATION**

**INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS**

PBM - 21  
Frozen Labor

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Johannesburg  
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Mr. Walter S. Rogers  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
522 Fifth Avenue  
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

A few days ago I stood and watched a young African Native boy take a mechanical aptitude test in a second-floor room of the Germiston<sup>1</sup> Non-European Affairs Department. Dressed in a sport shirt, V-necked sweater and neatly pressed tan trousers, he was more than a 19-year-old boy looking for a job. He was one of an advance guard of detribalized Native Africans who do not mind being detribalized--who are occupying an increasingly important position in the economy of the country and who are being established in "European" areas as permanent residents. In his registration book he was listed as Samuel, a Zulu, but he resembled his ancestor who took part in the massacre of Piet Retief about as closely as the Anglo-American Corporation building resembles Dingaan's kraal where the massacre took place.

The external differences between him and his ancestor are immediately obvious: Samuel wears moderately expensive European clothing, his ancestor wore beads; Samuel's ancestor stretched his earlobe to eight or nine times its normal size by wearing ivory disks in a pierced hole, Samuel's ears are untouched; Samuel's ancestor never wore shoes, Samuel's feet are clad in highly polished brown brogues.

The biggest difference lies in the respective statuses of Samuel and his ancestor. Samuel is a member of the Germiston "frozen labor supply." Samuel's ancestor was a "bloody kaffir" and "if he didn't bloody well get that bloody bucket over here in one minute flat his baas would rise off his back side and bloody well hammer him." Nobody ever thought of giving Samuel's ancestor a mechanical aptitude test--or Samuel's father, for that matter. It is not a common thing, even now. The non-European Affairs Department at Germiston has been giving aptitude tests since 1948.

While a uniformed Native employee of the Non-European Affairs Department explained the testing devices in Zulu, Mr. de Villiers, the man in charge of the tests, told me something about Samuel. "He was born in Germiston," de Villiers said. "He's never, as far as I know, even seen a Native Reserve, let alone live in one. He left school after reaching Standard Five (Seventh Grade). He's had"--de Villiers thumbed over a few pages in Samuel's registration book--"four jobs in the past four months."

"Obviously the kind of boy that we have to worry about most," commented my host for the day, Mr. Muller, second-in-command of the department. "There are probably two reasons that he's had such a poor work record. One, there's usually quite a gap between the time he leaves school and the time he starts work. The gap gives him a bit of free time to try his hand at brewing skokiaan (Native home-brewed liquor) or shooting dice with a lot of his idle friends. With that kind of relaxation behind him, he finds it hard to settle down once he finds himself doing hard work. It just isn't as much fun as smoking dagga (hashish).

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1. An industrial town bordering Johannesburg to the southeast.

"The other reason is the one we're trying to correct right here." He pointed at the testing devices. "He may be a square peg in a round hole and he may have left his job or been fired because he didn't suit the job or the job didn't suit him. The test will tell us, roughly, what sort of work he's best at."

The testing devices were simple ones I had seen a few times before in the United States. The first device tested linear perception--Samuel was told to place different lengths of wood into their appropriate slots in a definite order (from short to long or vice versa) against a stop watch. Samuel was not sure of himself during the first test--he picked up the sticks of wood as though they were dynamite and laid them gingerly into the correct slots. After a few seconds de Villiers said something in Zulu and Samuel picked up speed.

Beside me, Muller chuckled. "He told him the watch was winning the fight," he said. Samuel got a 70 out of a possible 100 per cent, then turned to the second test. It was a test of manual dexterity--taking washers from an open box one at a time with the right hand and dropping them over a tall spindle. The second half of the test was a business of using the left hand to remove the washers, again one at a time, and replacing them in the box. Samuel screwed up his face in concentration--and at the signal to start picked up three washers at once and dropped them onto the spindle.

"Stop!" said de Villiers. Samuel stopped. "Explain it to him again," de Villiers said to the interpreter. There followed a short session of emphatic enunciation by the interpreter and nods by Samuel. Then he began again, picking up the washers smoothly and dropping them quickly over the spindle. At the end of the box-to-spindle exercise de Villiers read the watch, noted the time and set the watch back to zero. Then Samuel began to take the washers off the spindle and replace them in the box with his left hand. Smoothly and competently the dark hand moved down the side of the spindle, closed, lifted and opened again over the box. When there were no more washers Samuel looked up and the stop watch clicked to a stop. De Villiers looked at the time, glanced sharply at the Native, then beckoned to me and Muller. We walked over and Muller, glancing at the watch dial, said "A good time."

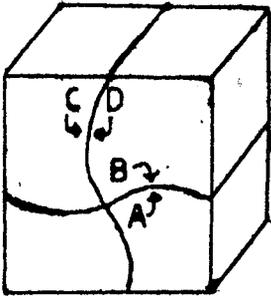
"Yes," said de Villiers, "but I'm going to have to take 30 points off his score. You probably didn't notice; but three times he took two washers off at one time. You couldn't see him do it because his hand hid the washers--but there are 20 washers in that box and it only took him 17 movements to get them all transferred. It's a little early to tell, but it can mean one of two things--either he is dishonest or he has difficulty in following out orders without supervision. The next test will tell us something about that--it's designed to test his ability to follow orders."

He pointed at a black-painted board bristling with wooden pegs. Attached to a peg at the top edge of the board was a long string with a looped end. When I had taken the test a few minutes before I was instructed to take the string and follow a white line painted on the board which zig-zagged in and out of the pegs; looping clockwise here and counter-clockwise there until the string was used up. If the white line was properly followed, the loop at the end of the string would fit on the final peg. The interpreter explained carefully to Samuel just what he was supposed to do, demonstrating by passing the string through the first three pegs. Samuel nodded--then picked up the string and went to work. After two false starts the watch was stopped and the interpreter re-explained. Then Samuel went to work again, looping string with commendable vigor. At first he made a stab at following the white line--

then he began to concentrate on getting string around pegs regardless of the white line. When he finished he had about eight extra inches which should have been taken up in clockwise and counter-clockwise loops.

De Villiers got up, walked around the table and gazed mournfully at the aimless tangle of string and pegs. "At least," he said, "we can rule out dishonesty. That's the most honest mess I've ever seen."

The next test also flummoxed Samuel. It consisted of fitting together four blocks of wood, each with two curved sides, to form a rectangular solid block (see illustration). Since the assembled block was higher than it was wide, curve A would only fit with curve B, curve C would only fit with curve D and, consequently, there was only one way to fit the four blocks together. Samuel was shown the assembled block, was allowed to watch while it was disassembled, and then was told to put it back together.



It was almost embarrassing, standing there in the corner of the room during the four minutes while Samuel tried to fit the four blocks together. He tried flat surfaces against curves, convex curves against convex curves--almost every combination but the right one--with a look of agonized concentration on his face. At the end of four minutes de Villiers put down the watch and talked to Samuel in a pleasant tone of voice. After a few words Samuel picked up two blocks, turned them easily in his hands and fit them together smoothly. He hesitated a moment, then picked up the other two blocks while de Villiers continued to give instructions. Without hesitation he put them in their proper places.

While Samuel was running smoothly through a test which involved threading thumbscrews of different sizes into appropriate holes, Muller explained the inference that could be drawn from the peg-and-string and the block tests. "Of course, we can't draw hard and fast conclusions," he said, "but the indications are that Samuel can do a good job of work under close supervision. However, he shows a tendency to forget instructions--and on his own is liable to make hash of a job which requires reasoning or a combination of motions. I think that de Villiers will most likely recommend that Samuel be given supervised, fairly simple repetition work--perhaps subassembly of small parts," he added, nodding his head towards Samuel who was tightening the smallest thumbscrew with unmistakable finesse.

On the final test, which called for simple steadiness-of-hand, Samuel made me feel quite a fool. The test looked simple--in a metal plate set up on a table nine holes of different sizes were drilled. The person to be tested was given a metal pencil and was told to touch the bottom of each hole without touching the sides. If the sides were touched an electrical circuit was closed and a soul-shattering bell went off. I had managed to get through the first three holes (starting with the biggest) but Samuel, with arm that looked as if it were carved from granite, went through all nine holes without so much as a tinkle from the bell. When he was through, by way of flourish, he touched the side of the smallest hole, grinning at the resultant clamor.

"You must smoke too many cigarettes," Muller said to me as we walked over to where de Villiers was just finishing the tabulation of Samuel's test results. He

confirmed Muller's assessment of Samuel's mechanical ability--then tapped a finger on the registration book that was still open before him.

"I don't know what we're going to do with him if he can't keep his next job," he said. "Born in Germiston, so we can't get rid of him. I'll have to have a talk with him, I guess. Perhaps I can straighten him out." As de Villiers said this, he beckoned to Samuel and pointed to a chair next to the table. Muller and I left what promised to be a stiff lecture of the Dutch uncle variety.

Why all this fuss about a simple mechanical aptitude test? Because the mere fact that there is a need for aptitude testing of Natives reveals that the Africans have quietly passed another milestone in the process of integration into European life and economy. Because when I mention these tests to reasonably intelligent, well-informed South Africans their reactions are usually various degrees of unbelieving surprise--showing that the tests are new, unpublicized and unexpected. Because it pin-points a stage of development of the African that must be compared to the past and applied to the future to fill out any study of the South African Native.

It was in the governmental year 1948-49 that control of the movement of Native labor was turned over to local authorities and the policy of frozen labor was introduced. "Before that you could go along to any factory in the Germiston area and find 500 or 600 Natives sitting on their haunches outside the main gate," Mr. F. W. C. Buitendag, head of the Germiston non-European Affairs Department, told me over a cup of tea and a slice of his secretary's birthday cake. "The Natives would sit there, day after day. When it was cold they would build little fires and roast stolen mealies (corn-on-the-cob). When it was hot they would just sit and talk. They were just waiting--waiting for a Native inside the plant to be fired or to quit. As soon as he came out there would be a struggle among the waiting Natives to get in and get his job. It didn't matter whether they were suited for the job or not--they would take any job that was open."

At this point Muller came into Buitendag's office. The following is a paraphrased version of our conversation: At night all the unemployed Natives--and a lot of the employed Natives would sleep anywhere. And when they got hungry or bored and had no way of getting food or finding entertainment, they stole or brewed skokiaan. The crime rate among the Natives was very high, all because there were thousands of unemployed Natives wandering around Germiston.

Then, in 1948, came influx control administered by the local government. That meant that every Native who came into the Germiston area looking for a job first had to go to the non-European Affairs Department to obtain a permit to seek work. Then he could go to the factory and ask for a job. And in 1948 came frozen labor. In other words, the non-European Affairs Department had to see to it that there were only slightly more Natives in Germiston than there were jobs--to keep the labor surplus low.

Of course, that presented problems. In what some industrialists call the good old days, if a Native was no good in a job, he was fired and one of the gate-hangers was called in to take his place. If the gate-hanger was no good, he was fired also and there were always dozens of Natives eager to take his place. It made for a lot of labor turnover and it was inefficient, but the employers never had to go through any "red tape" to hire a Native.

As things stand now, there is no big surplus of labor for employers to fall back on. They have to make the best use possible of the labor they have and they have to coax Natives to stay on the job as long as possible. At first the task seemed impossible, but then employers stopped moaning and began to take care in their hiring and firing. They began to give interviews to determine the Native's past experience--which helped some although past experience was of little value following on the heels of a system whereby Natives took any job that was open whether they liked the work or not. Still, labor costs dropped as labor turnover decreased.

Then came the Germiston labor bureau and aptitude testing. In the present records of the non-European Affairs Department is a complete file on each Native who has ever worked in Germiston since the beginning of frozen labor and influx control. Included in the record are past experience, length of time spent in specific employment, age, health condition, marital status, number of children, place of birth, police record and most important of all, degree of mechanical aptitude.

There are two ways in which this helps. First, it helps the employer. He calls the Department saying he needs a man to run a grinder or polisher. The Department checks through the records of Native workers who are available and seeking work and finds a man whose qualifications indicate he is the man for the job. He is sent along to the employer--who benefits in that he wastes less time in training and can depend on the man to do the job to which he is assigned for a reasonable length of time. Second, it helps the Department. The available labor supply can be placed efficiently and, since the system tends to make Natives want to stay in Germiston, the Department can plan medical, recreational and educational facilities and housing more exactly. In the old days, with a surplus Native population of more than 5000, planning was almost impossible. Today, with a surplus considerably less than 1000, plans can be made, financed and carried out.

The ultimate aim in Germiston, in spite of the Government's back-to-the-reserves policy, is to make the labor force static. In other words, make the Native laborers permanent residents of Germiston. Right now, out of the 42,000 Natives accommodated under the frozen labor system, about 24,000--more than half--consider Germiston their permanent home. The figure is determined by counting the Natives who have not left Germiston in the past five or six years. If a Native feels that his home is in the reserves he goes back, on the average, once every two years.

The Department tries to help Natives make Germiston their home by lending money with which to buy European-standard houses big enough to accommodate their families. And family-sized sub-economic housing is provided to encourage the ordinary, low-paid worker to bring his wife and family to Germiston. Eventually the Department plans to raise its own labor supply, taking fewer and fewer Natives born outside of Germiston.

It's too soon to make any definite statement about how well the aptitude tests are working, but a rough survey of the results has been made. The Department studied the records of a hundred men who had been tested. The records were tabulated for the year before the men were tested and the year after they were tested. It was found that of the hundred, 14 remained in the same job for one year before the test. After the test, 38 of the hundred stayed in the same job for a year--almost a 300 per cent increase.

Buitendag seemed most interested in the increased economy and efficiency provided by frozen labor cum aptitude tests cum labor bureau--Muller was more interested in

the help it gave the Native African. Muller, going a bit grey along the sideburns, learned Zulu before he learned English and has spent his life working with Natives.

On the way out to Natalspruit, the unusual new Germiston Native location, he gave me his ideas about the advantages of frozen labor. "One thing, it forces us to try to rehabilitate Natives who have got into bad habits. When a boy is born in Germiston, we consider that his home is Germiston. Other boys coming from outside are given 14 days to find work. If there is no work, the boy must leave. Germiston boys can look for work as long as they like--we can't send them away. If they get off on the wrong foot it's up to the Department to get them back into line. That's why de Villiers said he would have a talk with that boy--Samuel--this morning. He's a Germiston boy and he is our responsibility. In the old days, if he had gone without work for too long he would have been arrested as an 'idle Native' and sent to a work farm. Chances are that after that sort of experience he would have been a problem for the rest of his life. We made the Natives what they are today--for the first time the frozen labor business forces us to help the Natives as well as use them. It's a good thing.

"The fact that labor is frozen means that we have to utilize every bit of labor. Almost all Native children born here go to school here, often to Standard Five. In the old days, employers wouldn't hire a Native until he was adult. That gave the average Native several years in which to do nothing at all but get into trouble. Now there is a need to employ young Natives much sooner. That means that boys like Samuel start working earlier, can earn spending money and keep out of temptation's way.

Figures of the 1951 census, released yesterday, show that 2,292,228 Natives out of a total Native population of 8,537,375 live in the "European" urban areas. On a national, government-policy level, these urbanized Natives are being harassed, restricted, segregated and conditioned for what Dr. Malan calls "vertical apartheid"--separate but equal white and black states. On the local, practical, face-to-face level the African Native is being made a more firmly permanent resident in the European towns. He is being educated (on a limited basis), housed and urged (outside Johannesburg) to bring his wife and children to live near his place of employment. He is being encouraged to own his own house and he is being tested and evaluated in order to find him a more permanent spot in the Europeans' economic life. He is made to feel that the European area in which he is born is his home--not a tribal reserve.

Dr. Verwoerd--and other South Africans who believe with him that strictly applied apartheid is still the only thing that will save the white man--is rushing headlong in the opposite direction from reality. The Germiston non-European Affairs Department has to deal with the Native question on a day-to-day basis. Its policy is based on necessity--on the facts as they exist. It is hard to reconcile the two viewpoints.

Sincerely,



Peter Bird Martin

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