Persistence and Change

From BaNkuwa’s perspective, the position of servants in relation to other occupational groups has changed for the worse since Zambia became independent in 1964. A servant during the colonial period, dressed up in his Sunday best, was indistinguishable from a clerk. Today servants not only look miserable, they are also underpaid, most certainly when com-
pared with those who employ them, no matter their color, and when
compared with other unskilled workers.1 Their occupation is alive, but not
well.

In this chapter I explore the meaning of BaNkuwa’s statement, beginning
with a discussion of the growing inequalities in postcolonial Zambia and the
widening gap between the tiny segment of well-situated urbanites and the
rest of the population, most particularly between servants and other low-
income workers. Next I present the findings of the large sample survey of
servants and their employers I undertook in Lusaka in 1983 and 1984. With
the survey as background and refering also to my subsequent research in
1991, I discuss the contemporary domestic service institution: who are the
servants and the employers and how is the employment relationship char-
acterized? The changes that my survey revealed, which taken together
have transformed the occupation of domestic service, are the subject of
Chapter 6. These changes stem largely from the nature of postcolonial
economic developments, or lack thereof, in the new nation, and they affect
the employers, the servants themselves, their work relationship, and the
labor process in private domestic service. Throughout Part III, my discus-
sion is focused on Lusaka, which after independence surpassed the oppor-

1. See Table 7 in Chapter 7.
Main, 1. Zambia main towns and cities 1944
belt towns as the country’s hub, the center for its elite, its politicians, and the international aid and development workers who are replacing the colonial era’s predominantly British and South African expatriates.

Independent Zambia: Growing Inequities

A former colonial resident returning to Lusaka in the mid-1980s—twenty years or so after independence—would feel curiously at home in the social landscape. To be sure, many more black faces appear behind office desks, and tall office buildings break the horizons of a rapidly growing capital that for a long time looked like a ramshackle town. The increasing traffics still employ servants, as does access of influence as well as persons of honor reason. While their discourse would seem familiar when they express their problems regarding servants, their complaints have become more pronounced. In spite of presence of an entire occupational domain, there have been changes that are making the relationship between servant and employer more troublesome than it ever was before.

These processes must be examined against the background of overall changes in the postcolonial Zambian economy. At independence the rules and regulations that had structured the migrant labor system and gave access to housing and work by race were scrapped. The educational system was greatly expanded. The government set about developing the economy by opening jobs for people with white-collar skills in its many new departments; import-substitution industries were built, offering work to workers, and the construction business grew. Economic reforms in the late 1960s and early 1970s stimulated the indigenization of many commercial establishments. The government entered into a 50 percent partnership with a number of foreign firms and with the mining companies, placing them under the control of parastatal agencies. The multiparty government established at independence gave way to a one-party system in the late 1970s to the end of 1991 by a one-party system and increased involvement by the state in the running of the economy. A good deal has been written about these processes from economic and political perspectives, and it suffices here to mention just those issues that directly affected the employment situation. The country inherited a lop-sided economic structure, geared toward the export of mining products,

and a tiny manufacturing base. After independence the structure of production continued to be grossly dominated by mining. Despite the rhetoric of successive development plans, agriculture was neglected. Rural livelihoods deteriorated because of the government’s inability or unwillingness to improve the rural infrastructure and its reluctance to provide producer prices conducive to improving agricultural production. This situation was exacerbated in the 1980s by recurrent droughts. The rate of urbanization, already advanced by sub-Saharan African standards, accelerated from 20 percent of the total population in 1964 to 43 percent in 1980, as more and more people, especially women, moved to the towns, anticipating new developments and improved working opportunities.

Party officials made many statements emphasizing equality of opportunity for women and men in the new nation. Throughout the 1960s, when export earnings from mining were booming, some of the economic and gender inequalities that colonial policy had helped generate were temporarily covered up. Some women benefited during the initial employment boom, as the first and few cohort of better-educated women obtained jobs as typists, clerks, airline hostesses, secretaries, and lower-level administrative assistants in government and parastatal offices. Their aspirations were beyond the reach of most urban Zambian women, and they became less attainable, even for women with some education, when export revenues from the sale of copper began to decline in the early 1970s. In 1974 the richest 2 percent of the households took home roughly 20 percent of the income, which was about the same as the share of the poorest 50 percent. Public-sector employment has grown steadily since independence, prompted by the indigenization process. It continues to grow, so that when overall employment stagnated in the mid-1970s, increasing numbers of people came to look upon the government as their primary source of employment. Since the mid-seventies, the Zambian economy has been and more and more forced to rely on infusions of foreign aid and loans, among them substantial amounts from the International Monetary Fund. Several devaluations, decontrol of prices, phasing out of food subsidies, wage freezes, and runaway inflation have turned the making of a living into an uphill battle for most of the population.

In spite of policy speeches that stress sexual equality, the new men in power retain several of the colonial government's biases. Gender is still not considered a critical factor, as evidenced in the first comprehensive census taken in the country on the eve of independence in 1963, which did not break down employment statistics by sex. The first postindependence census of 1969 did not exhibit any radical improvement. Gender statistics were given for the total labor force—men comprised 71.2 percent and women 28.9 percent—but no further categorizations were provided. The compilers of the Monthly Digest of Statistics from the Central Statistical Office in Lusaka have of late begun to include a listing of female employees. The 1985 publication, using statistics from June 1980, lists a total of 26,310 Zambian women in wage employment across the country, slightly less than half of whom (11,080) were in community, social, and personal services. This figure can be compared with the total of 360,980 Zambian men, the majority of whom (101,030) are also clustered in the same occupation. The second-largest category of male wage employment, mining and quarrying, employed some 56,710 workers in June 1980.6

Paid domestic service has not been enumerated in the Zambian employment statistics since 1968, when a total of 36,491 men and 1,758 women were listed in the occupations. Although their numbers were large, knowledge about or concern with the livelihood of domestic servants has remained at the level of folklore. The sample survey I undertook in Lusaka in 1983 to 1984 is the first research effort ever made to ascertain substantively the nature of this occupational domain in Zambia. According to my own conservative estimate, some 100,000 persons are employed in servants across the country, of whom slightly fewer than 25,000 are women. This figure excludes young persons who do household work for relatives in exchange for their care. The size of the domestic servants' work force is almost double that of miners, who numbered 53,740 in June 1980.10 As in the past, three major economic sectors today dominate the Zambian labor market: mining, agriculture, and domestic service. The gradual emergence of secondary industry after independence has supplemented rather than restructured this pattern, and the main change has been a shift in the relative proportions of the three sectors. Judging from my estimate, paid

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6. Republic of Zambia. Census of Population and Housing, 1969. First Report, Annex 1A. Lusaka: Central Statistical Office, 1970, p. 105. In 1990, according to the preliminary census tapes on Lusaka's low-income urban population, 40.3 percent were women, using the definition of women as all persons 10 years of age or older, and 59.7 percent were men, using the definition of men as all persons 10 years of age or older.

7. See Table 6, Chapter 2.


Domestic service presently forms the largest single segment of the urban wage-laboring population in Zambia. While overall employment shrank in the economic decline that set in during the first half of the 1970s and still persists, domestic service, like government employment, has kept on growing. Domestic service continues to be an important entry-level occupation for people with few marketable skills and for migrants newly arrived from the countryside. But for most of them this occupation remains a trap, and they would rather not work as servants if they had a choice. Their main inducement for seeking domestic work may be the prospect of getting housing with the job. The pressures on the economy have had their impact on the housing stock. Because of the scarcity of low-cost accommodation, more than half of Lusaka's population lives in squatter housing.

Domestic Service in Lusaka

Lusaka, the transportation center on the northbound railway, the garden city which S. D. Adshead planned along racially segregated lines as the new site for the country's capital of 1935, had a population of 123,146 on the eve of independence in 1963. It has more than doubled in size every decade thereafter, from 262,425 in 1969, to 538,469 in 1980, to an estimated 750,000 in the mid-eighties. As the locus of government activity, this city has been the center for announcement of laws and regulations designed to eliminate the inequities of the colonial era. Some of these new laws apply to domestic servants as well as to other workers and at least in theory should have improved their position in relation to other segments of the labor force. According to the new legislation, it continues to be the employer's responsibility to house low-paid employees, either directly in local authority housing or by paying a housing allowance. There are provisions relating to the protection of wages, annual leave, and paid public holidays. Servants were included under the provisions of the Employment Bill of 1965, although only after lengthy discussion in the National Assembly during which white former colonial residents continued to argue that matters between servants and their employers were better left to the two parties concerned. To improve the servants' situation further, the Zambia National Provident Fund Bill of 1965 was amended in 1973, requiring among other things that employers of domestic servants in urban areas make a contribution toward their provision.

Many employers who were part of my sample survey were ignorant of, or chose to disregard, these regulations. According to Zambia National Provident Fund (ZNPF) figures, some 45,760 persons were employed in domestic service throughout the country’s towns as of June 1983. This figure includes house servants, cooks, maids, and gardeners who are working for wages in private households in municipalities and townships. In my sample survey of 187 servant-keeping households in Lusaka, only one-third of the servants interviewed were registered with the ZNPF. If the ZNPF figure reflects an overall registration rate in one-third of all servant-keeping households, as I found to be the case in Lusaka, my previous estimate that a total of some 100,000 persons work as servants in urban Zambia is indeed conservative. Since Lusaka’s population formed a quarter of the country’s total urban population in 1980, I estimate that at least one-quarter of the total number of servants working presently are employed in the capital city.

The majority of these servants are in the employ of other Zambians. The remainder work in households that represent many nationalities and whose members for the most part reside in Zambia on a short-term contract basis. To cover a broad range of these categories, I constructed a sample survey in which the chief domestic servant and his or her employer were interviewed in low-density areas. In Zambia the low-density areas are those where the white residences were in the colonial era, where houses were built on spacious plots. Distinctions in the housing market today follow not racial but class lines. While high-income Zambians have moved into the former white residential areas, the high-density areas have remained the homes of the poor black urban Zambian population. My sample survey covered Woodlands, one of the white residential areas laid out before the government buildings in Ashland’s plan for the capital. Most of it consists of high-density government housing, some of it rundown, built in the 1950s or just before independence. It houses mainly government sector workers and is heterogeneous in race and nationality. Several Zambian government employees live there, as do many foreign nationals on contract to the government’s plethora of departments. To include nongovernment employees, the survey was extended to cover parts of Kabulonga, a low-density residential area, in the main built privately on subdivisions of a large farm during the 1950s. The area has grown considerably since independence. Some residents own their houses or rent them from private developers. Although some pseudoneighborhoods remain and their quality vary, Kabulonga in Lusaka’s most posh residential area. It is inhabited disproportionately by people in private business, and white expatriates outnumber any other population group there. Interviews were also under-

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A good number of their shops and houses still cluster in the locale assigned to them in the colonial period, then known as Madras. The colonial city also had, from the mid-1950s and on, a residential area allotted to the European population, called Thorn Park. Interviews were undertaken there as well, although more black Zambians than Europeans live in the area today. The survey finally sampled some of the flats, operated by institutions such as the Bank of Zambia, Zambia State Insurance Company, Zambia Electricity Supply Corporation, and the University of Zambia. Construction of such flats was initially begun to alleviate the housing shortage in the postwar years and primarily to house single government employees as the lower echelons. These professionals are still to accommodate junior employees, but because of the housing shortage in Lusaka, they also house tenant households.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the purpose of the sample survey was to reveal patterns in employment practices possibly influenced by the employer's income, race/nationality, and length of time spent in Zambia, as well as patterns in the experiences of servants, shaped by such factors as age, sex, ethnicity, educational, and length of employment. In totality, the survey comprised a 5 percent sample of the areas investigated. Insofar as it covers the range of variation in terms of ethnic/racial and economic background characteristics of employers and servants throughout Lusaka, I consider the patterns revealed by the survey as typical for this occupational domain.

The Employers

In terms of broad ethnic/racial categories, the plurality of the households, 42 percent, who employed servants were black Zambians, followed by 33 percent whites and 25 percent Asians. Most of these households were comprised of married couples; in only 1.8 percent were women single heads of households, mainly because of divorce or widowhood, and 1.2 percent were headed by men who lived without any permanent female companion. The majority of the men, 69 percent, worked in middle- to upper-income households.
upper-level executive, managerial, technical, and consultant positions, most of them in government and parastatal companies, some in private firms. Some of these men pursued the professions of medicine, teaching, and law. Eleven percent were members of various diplomatic corps, mainly in advisory positions, and some were employed by foreign governments or international development agencies. Six percent, all resident Asians, engaged in local commerce. The sample also included two missionary households, one from Great Britain, the other from the United States.

More than half of the Zambian wives worked away from home, mainly in teaching, medical, and clerical positions. In contrast, only one-fifth of the expatriate Asian wives were in wage employment, and some among the expatriate Asian population. Most of the expatriate Asian wives were teachers, and slightly fewer than one-third of the white women were engaged in teaching, medical, or clerical work. The expatriate husband is often the chief contract employee when the couple arrives in Zambia, and women’s low employment figures are likely to reflect the difficulty they experience in obtaining their own work permits. A total of 44 percent of the women surveyed did not earn any wage income. Close to 8 percent of these women did “hidden work,” some of them painting, others did food catering, tailoring, hair care, and clerical work from their homes without a work permit. Some Zambian women conducted businesses, including fashion design, hairdressing, and beauty salons, from their homes, and a few had shops in nearby markets.

Employers of servants were not always willing to reveal what they earned. Fifty-one percent gave an estimate of their annual income before taxes; the remainder said either that they did not know or that they would not tell. The estimates they did volunteer for the chief wage earner ranged as follows: 24 percent earned between K5,000 and K15,000, 24 percent between K16,000 and K25,000, and 3 percent from K31,000 to more than K50,000 per year. The Zambians earned the least. Most employers also enjoy many additional benefits, such as free or very inexpensive housing, free access to government hospitals and clinics, and, until the end of 1985, free education for their children in government schools. Many do not use the medical facilities and schools because standards have dropped. Expatriates on local contracts receive paid overseas leave at regular intervals as well as free transportation to and from Zambia and baggage allowances for themselves and members of their families at the beginning and conclusion of their contracts. In addition to their local wage in Zambian Kwacha, 21 percent of the employers, all expatriate, received “topping up” in their

16. The bank exchange rate for one U.S. dollar was approximately K1.60 in 1983. The rate had changed to K2.20 by mid-1985.

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The white expatriates had lived in Zambia for periods of time ranging from a few months to most of their lives, with eight years the average length. Among them were 3 percent who had remained since the late colonial period. The expatriate Asians had spent an average period of seven years in Zambia, and the Zambians about five years in Lusaka, preceded and interrupted by tours to other parts of the country and trips abroad.

The majority of all employees fell within the thirty-to-forty-year-old age bracket, although among whites there were as many in the forty-to-sixty age bracket as in the thirty-to-forty one. Half of the white households had no children, that is, the children were either grown up or away in boarding schools. The same was true for the expatriate Asian households. Household structures in the resident Asian communities were more complex, however, because of the presence of extended-family members and their dependents. So, too, were Zambian households; they contained an average of seven persons, and three-quarters of them were comprised of extended families.

Regardless of background, these employers were a cosmopolitan crowd. More than half of the white employers, most of whom were from Western Europe, had spent several years elsewhere in Africa, the Middle East, the Far East, or Latin America. Most of them had employed servants when living in these countries, whereas fewer than 3 percent had ever done so in their country of origin. Slightly less than half of the expatriate Asian employers, who included members from many Indian language groups as well as persons from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, had lived elsewhere in Africa before taking up contracts in Zambia; they were, from their countries of origin, also used to employing servants. More than half of the Zambian employers had spent time abroad, mainly for study purposes, most of them in Britain, others in North America, Scandinavia, or Eastern Europe. They represented many ethnic groups, with Bemba predominating, followed by Lozi and Ngoni. Taken together, various ethnic groups from Zambia's eastern province (for example, Nsenga, Chewa, and Tonga) comprised another large category of these householders. In the distant past, some of these groups such as the Bemba, Ngoni, and Lozi engaged in practices ranging from slavery to dependent labor. Most of the Zambians surveyed did not grow up in the rural areas where remnants of these practices might have persisted; they had their first encounter with paid domestic service in towns. Some, the sons and daughters of the tiny
African elite, had grown up in households that employed servants. But many never had their first exposure to paid domestic service once they were married.

Most of these employers had seen several servants pass through their households. While 14 percent had only had one, the chief servant presently in their employ at the time of the survey, 45 percent had had between two and three, 26 percent between four and five, and 15 percent had had six or so many that they did not care particularly to be reminded of the turnover. The number of servants gone through did not necessarily reflect the length of time a household had been a servant-employer in Zambia; some householders had dismissed several within their first year of employing servants, and others who had kept servants over the course of several years had only had a few.

**The Servants**

About two-thirds of the servants interviewed in the survey were men ($N = 131$), the rest women ($N = 56$). Given that we interviewed only the chief domestic servant, male or female, and that several of the households employed more than one servant, most of them men, and that in households where women were employed, any additional workers were always men, the overall male-to-female ratio in the sample is in reality even more skewed in favor of men. Since these 187 households employed among them a total of 311 full-time servants, 232 of whom were men and 79 women, women comprised about one-third of this occupational group. Of these households, 46 percent employed only one general servant; 41 percent had two servants: one inside the house and one in the garden or, alternatively, depending on the needs of the household, a nanny and a general servant; 10 percent kept three; and the remaining 3 percent of the households employed between three and four servants. In addition to servants, 34 percent of the households employed watchmen on the grounds.

Close to half of these servants ($N = 94$), regardless of sex, originated from the Eastern Province (Ngoni, Chewa, Tumbuka, Nsenga). The rest represented a variety of ethnic groups, with Tonga, Bemba, and Soli dominating. Some Shona from Zimbabwe, Chikunda from Zimbabwe and Mozambique, and Yao and Tonga from Malawi were among the menservants, and Ndebele and Shona from Zimbabwe, Chikunda from Mozambique, and Xhosa from South Africa were among the women servants.

About one-third of all the servants were in the twenty-to-thirty age bracket, but 21 percent of the men ranged between the ages of forty-five and sixty-five, if not older. Twenty-one percent of the women servants were below twenty years of age, compared with 9 percent of the men. Twenty-seven percent of the women servants clustered toward the end of their prime working years, while 27 percent of the men were within the thirty-to-forty age bracket. The reasons for the gender difference in age distribution may be that women are more likely to move in and out of the labor force as they marry men of different ages or as they have children of their own, and that men are more likely to serve for many years in the same households.

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the childbearing years and older, ranging from the age of thirty-five to sixty
or older. Twenty-two percent of the men were doing the job of a servant for
the first time as compared with 24 percent of the women; 10 percent of the
men, compared with 5 percent of the women, had worked as servants since
before independence, many of them in long-term employment in white
households, and most had worked exclusively for whites. The rest of
the servants had held several servant jobs for varying lengths of time for em-
ployees of different nationalities before entering their present position. Some
of these servants had been in and out of service and other unskilled jobs.
They explained these shifts as the result of the departure of employers,
being fired, or their own decision to quit. Such decisions are prompted by a
combination of factors including low wages, harsh treatment, and the ser-
vant’s personal circumstances. In between jobs, several servants had re-
turned to the rural area for a rest of shorter or longer duration. Some had
intended that such periods of rural rest would not be succeeded by a return
to the job as an urban domestic servant. Yet all these servants did return,
including Zacchi in his mature years after realizing the difficulty of making
a living in the rural area. Servants who for most of their time as able-bodied
workers had been employed in towns found it difficult to adjust to village
life and the work required in cultivation, which they had never done
before. Half of the servants had gone to school for fewer than seven years.
Twenty-two percent of the men compared with 30 percent of the women
had less than a year’s or no education at all, whereas 8 percent of both sexes
had more than seven years of school.

Men and women servants had very different marital experiences, and I
discuss the implications of this in Chapter 6. As many as 67 percent of
the men were married and lived with their wives. Twenty percent of the men
had not married, and 13 percent were divorced, widowed, or their wives
lived in the rural area. Thirty-five percent of the women servants were
married and living together with their husbands. 13 percent had not mar-
rried, and 52 percent were either divorced, widowed, living away from their
spouses, or supporting children without the help of a husband.

Hiring
There are a variety of ways to go about hiring a servant. Judging from my
survey, only 2 percent of the employers used the government’s labor ex-
change office and newspaper advertisements. They were either newcomers
to Zambia or, more commonly, persons who had had a large turnover of
servants, were thoroughly frustrated and looking for a last resort. Before
reaching that point, employers can call on several informal labor exchanges
that exist in expatriate circles. From embassies and various development and
organization servants are often passed on together with the house ever as
employee leaves the country and a successor moves in, and these agencies often keep a listing of servants. Many prospective employers seek the advice of a trusted friend or another servant when hiring. The majority of Asians hired on personal recommendations. A total of 40 percent of the servants surveyed had been taken on after such personal recommendations. In contrast, Zambian employers are more likely to hire right "at the gate": servants on the lookout for work walk from door to door in the low-density areas, and 27 percent had been successful when inquiring about a job in this way.

The chief skill in short supply in this glutted market is cooking, especially among the small segment of the servant-keeping households who are entitled to several servants on company payroll. These are primarily top-level government civil servants, managers in parastatal and private companies, and the like. Ten percent of the employers enjoyed such privileges, and an additional 12 percent had a portion of their servants' wages contributed. Good cooks, these employers claim, are few and far between, and embassies serve as the main recruiting platforms. Such cooks charge higher than average wages. They are hard to get, and this difficulty is reflected in newspaper advertisements, which frequently feature requests for cooks.

Education was rarely considered a critical factor except by newly arrived white householders who preferred servants conversant in English. In 49 percent of the households, employers spoke to servants in English. Most of the one-quarter of Zambian employers who employed servants they had hired at their gate preferred young men newly arrived from the countryside with little education and no previous work experience. Such young boys, they say, can be better trained to perform the work in and around the house the way they want it done. Once thoroughly familiar with the running of the household, these young men are said to begin to take things for granted, become lazy, and are laid off and replaced by another newcomer. Thirty-four percent of the Zambian householders communicated with their servants in Nyanja, a language spoken in parts of the country's Eastern Province and the neighboring region of Malawi and which often used instead of English. Another 12 percent spoke a variety of Zambian languages with their servants. Five percent of the householders, mainly resident Asian and colored, spoke to their servants in Chilapalapa, and they also used Nyanja to some extent.

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appearance, neatness, and cleanliness were the chief qualities employers, regardless of background, looked for when hiring a servant. These were followed, in order of importance, by traceable references and previous work experience. "We see how they look," one Zambian employer said. "If they don't look nice, we don't hire." Honesty was asked for as well. Other factors frequently considered were drinking habits, family status, church membership, and regional background. Depending on the household, employers looked for servants who were "good with children," "good with dogs," willing to do garden work, or any combination of the above. In one expatriate household without children, the treatment of the dog was the key to whether or not the employer, so he said, was satisfied with his servant.

The majority of the remaining employers of men servants preferred them to be married, on the assumption that a "family man" takes his job seriously since he has wife and dependents to support. An additional attribute desired by the minority of white employers with long-term residence in Zambia is membership in a fundamentalist church, such as the Watchtower Society. The employers assume that "church men" are more honest, hard-working, and do not drink or play around with women. Of the 20 percent of the servants who claimed active church membership in the survey, a minority were Watchtower members, some of them working as lay preachers on their days off. A few employers who had been in the country for a long time said that Muslim men make good servants for they do not drink. Since Islam's presence in Zambia is minimal, Muslims were barely represented in my survey: only two servants claimed to be Muslim, one a Yao man from Malawi, where Islam is more widespread, and the other a long-term servant in a Muslim resident Asian trading household.

The colonial-era preference for servants from the Eastern Province and Malawi persisted in 15 percent of these employers. They said the servants from those parts of the country were hard workers, more reliable, and more used to domestic service work than others. The second-strongest preference, though expressed only by 6 percent of the employers, was for persons from the Southern Province, mainly Tonga speakers, who were said to be very industrious. Several other regional preferences probably reflected the experience of individual employers when living in different parts of the country. Some Zambian employers preferred servants from their own linguistic group, whom they claimed would more readily understand and execute the work in the household to the employer's satisfaction. But just as many took the opposite stance: servants from their own linguistic group would listen in too closely and get privileged information about the private affairs of the household. Since most servants and their Zambian employers know several African languages, these are not so much explanations as justifications for the employer's attitude to servants they want a
working relationship, and probably one marked by distance. Fourteen
percent of the employers considered ethnic or regional background irrele-
vant when hiring a servant; their decision "depended on the person." But
15 percent of the employers, mainly expatriate Asians and whites, had
never bothered where their servants came from and had no idea of, or
interest in, regional preferences. In their view, servants were all the same.
Many of them did not believe much of what their servants said about their
backgrounds anyway, for ethnicity can be assumed and reference letters
and national registration cards fabricated.
Regardless of background, all the households in the survey employed
men servants. Asian householders, except in a few cases, did not employ
women. The question of whether to employ a man or a woman servant is
influenced by the needs of the employing household, its willingness/ability
to pay servant wages, and the personal idiosyncracies of the employers.
Householders employing only one servant tended to prefer men. They
claim that men servants are more flexible, able to do various tasks inside
and outside the house, such as lifting and moving heavy furniture as well as
the garden work. They are also "good to have around" for security reasons.
Householders employing several servants preferred they did so out of
what they called "Zambian habit," that it did not occur to them to employ
servants, that women rarely avail themselves for hire, and/or that the em-
ployment of women was fraught with problems. "Zambian habit" in this
context appears to be a contemporary term for the employment convention
that developed during the colonial period.
The women who did work as servants were employed largely in Zambian
or white households. In cases where the wife of the household worked
away from home for wages, these women had often been hired as nannies
but in last many did general housework. Between fifteen and twenty years
old, relatively new to domestic service, after school dropout after grade
seven, and sometimes single mothers, these young women servants rarely
stayed long in a job. Most of them were not accommodated on the prem-
tises, and their own domestic problems with children and struggles either to
find or to get rid of a man interfered with their work performance. They
were the category of servant about whom employers made the most insid-
ious remarks. Perhaps reflecting employers' problems in finding and re-
taining them, requests for "reliable nannies" came second to skilled cooks
in frequency in the newspapers' employment-offered columns.

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with several other servants; they worked as maids together with male house servants, gardners, and occasionally a cook. These women, whose ages ranged from thirty-five to sixty years, included all the non-Zambian women servants in the survey. Several of them had held many servant jobs before, some long term. Half of them had never been to school, and most were single heads of households. Some of them had settled down to a life as professional servants: they stipulated the terms and conditions of their employment when being interviewed and, according to some employers, were the kind of women who would take over the running of the household, making the madam feel she was being bossed around.

Aside from the servants who "came with the house" and those recommended by the employer's trusted friends, most servants were initially taken on for a probationary period, referred to by those involved as a "trial." First there would be an interview, in most cases by the wife in the employing household, who examined the servant about his or her prior work experience and stated the terms of the job. Most employers do not expect prospective servants to dicker over terms; if they do, their attempts are interpreted as signs that they are rude and may be likely to cause discipline problems. Only the newcomer, say the old hands, will allow herself to be duped this way. According to the servants, some employers are deliberately unclear during the interview about their intentions concerning wage increases, vacations, and ZNPF registration, saying they first will have to see how the relationship works out before settling on terms. The trial period ranged from one to three months in white and Zambian households to a couple of days to a week in Asian households. Some servants were not allowed to have their family living with them in the quarters during this time. In some Zambian households the trial period kept getting extended and many servants quit before their terms of employment were ever formalized. Many Zambian employers supervised the servant during this time, the wife sometimes taking time off from her own work to instruct the servant in the ways of her household. Such women spoke of "breaking in" their servants, a term that perhaps is shaped by their preference for hiring young adult workers, just arrived from the countryside. In some Asian households, during the first days of the trial period the householder would follow behind her servant to make sure that the work was done to her precise specifications. Most servants were promised higher pay on completion of the trial period, to be paid at monthly intervals, and many Asian employers gave their servants daily pay during this time. In addition to scrutinizing the prospective servant's personality and work habits, many employers also tested his or her honesty by leaving money, alcohol, items of clothing or food around. Most servants are aware of such testing practices and will work hard to make a good impression during the trial period. Just as servants vary in the view of most of the people who hire them so
do the employers in the opinion of servants. Although slightly more than half of all the servants interviewed were reluctant to indicate any preference for a particular type of employer, and 27 percent said that the quality of the job depended on the persons regardless of color and background, the rest preferred, if given a choice, to work in white households. Their preferences were based on pay, treatment, and assistance. Whites do pay better, as I discuss shortly. The duties are more clearly defined in white households, servants say. And whites are more inclined to help a servant. But in Zambian households, especially where members of the extended family are present and others visit for short or long periods, servants are called on constantly without regard for them as people or consideration of their needs. Payment of wages is not always certain, because the Zambian householders themselves are often in an economic bind: their own children, relatives who are being supported while they go to school, and a continual stream of visiting relatives place strain on the salaries of civil servants, teachers, nurses, and bank clerks, even in households where both spouses work. In these households, servants say, there are few handouts, for the employer’s dependents will get them first, but at least there is no language barrier. In Asian households the work of servants is more closely supervised, their entry into and exit from the main house often tightly regulated, and some never get a day off. The wages may be better than in some Zambian households, but handouts are few. Servants understand, they say, why their Zambian employers may have a hard time economically, but Asians are stingy. According to servants, Asians always sell used clothes and worn-out things; if they give something to a servant, they think it is money wasted; they never trust you. Although these stereotypes do not always hold true, the statements from the servant interviews capture some of the existing differences in employment practices. With regard to the Asian employers, my survey shows that expatriate Asians pay less than members of the long-term resident Asian population. According to the resident population, the new expatriate Asians are concerned to make as much money as possible while on contract in Zambia, for they came from countries where jobs even for highly skilled persons are limited. To reduce their local expenses, they pay their servants as little as they possibly can.

The Chores of Domestic Service

Once the trial period is completed and the employer is tolerably satisfied with the servant’s work performance and does not dislike his or her personality, the servant settles into the work routine and requirements of the new household. The tasks and duties vary with the job description, which was that of “general servant” for 41 percent of the servants interviewed. These servants were men who worked inside and outside the house. In
white and Asian households they cleaned the house, did the laundry, ironed, set the table, washed the dishes, assisted in chopping vegetables for cooking, and did the garden work. In an additional 7 percent of these households, all of them Zambian, the general servant did the cooking as well. In almost all Zambian households, bedrooms and their cleaning were off limits to servants, as was the washing of the madam’s underwear. In some households, the servant’s work followed a routine with distinct tasks such as laundry and ironing, assigned to specific days, whereas in other households the servant would be expected to do some of all these tasks every day. Most of the work was manual and labor intensive and done without the aid of labor-saving devices. In addition to having an inside staff of one or more servants, 38 percent of all households employed men for the sole purpose of gardening.

The second largest category of servants in the survey, 27 percent, did housework inside the house and some food preparation or cooking. Only 4 percent of the households surveyed employed servants exclusively for cooking and 41 percent had hired servants exclusively for housework. Ten percent of the servants did inside housework and childcare, and another ten percent engaged in these tasks as well as some cooking. This 10 percent were all women servants.

Given the diversity of chores most of these servants were expected to do, work never stopped and there was always some unfinished business for the
next day. The actual hours spent on the job were long—approximately ten hours a day—divided by a lunch break of one to three hours. Servants with long lunch breaks usually worked in the evenings until the dishes from the employers’ dinner were washed and the kitchen closed up. Although most employers contended that their servants’ jobs were easy, their work burden light, and that servants were slow and spent too much time doing the chores, they had difficulties separating hours required on the job from time off, especially when their servants lived on the premises. Servants’ proximity to the workplace was often assumed to mean open availability, and demands were made on their time at the employers’ convenience, particularly for purposes of watching the house. “They have got nothing to do and are here anyway,” some employers would say. Increased workloads due to the presence of houseguests or the preparation for an entertainment function in the house were not generally considered extra work. The servant is employed anyway, supposed to be available, so why pay extra? Some, but not all, white employers with many social obligations stipulated at the initial interview that such work would be the servant’s duty. In Zambian households servants were rarely given extra remuneration when the presence of extended family members and/or visitors necessitated that food be prepared and served at odd hours. In some households, guests were made to pay, or paid extra on their own initiative, and at times also left used clothes behind. In Asian households, some guests tipped the servants.

According to the statements of employers in the survey, most white employers gave their servants one and a half to two days off per week, typically the weekend from Saturday noontime onward plus a half day during the week. Most Zambian employers gave servants one day off per week, as did the majority of Asian employers. Yet one-quarter of the servants in Asian households had only one day off per week, and one-fifth none whatsoever. When the servants themselves were interviewed, they reported getting less time off. Judging from their answers, as many as 44 percent never had any day off. This discrepancy in reporting likely reflects the fact that employers exploit the availability of servants domiciled on the premises on their days off, ignoring that the servant might have made his or her own plans.

Most white and Asian households usually give their servants an annual leave, ranging from two to four weeks. But in many Zambian households the turnover rate of servants is so fast that the majority rarely stay long enough for the question of leave to be considered. Some, but very few, servants in this survey went on vacations with their employers, as was the custom in the past. Some well-paid western servants had been on such trips to Zimbabwe, the Seychelles, and as far as Italy and England. One of the few cooks surveyed accompanied his employers on game-watching trips in Zambia’s extensive game parks. Such “holidays with the family” do not
provide time off for the servants, but simply shift the locus of work to a
different place.

Remuneration

It is an oversimplification to state that whites pay better wages and
provide better work conditions for their servants than do Zambians and
Asians. Black Zambians also overwork their servants the most. Expatriate
Asians pay the best of any householders and offer worse terms than do
long-time resident Asians. Within each of these categories in the survey
there were variations, depending on whether or not the chief wage earner,
usually the man in the house, was an upper-level government or company
employee whose servants' salaries were paid as part of his contract. The
actual wages varied from a monthly high of K390 to below K30, sometimes
with no housing or housing allowance provided, but these figures are the
extremes, the high of K390 was the wage of one embassy cook, and the low
under K30 the amount paid to two young girls who worked as servants in
flats. Between these extremes there appears to be three commonly accepted
wage levels: a low-to-median range of K40-70 per month paid to 51 per-
cent of all households, regardless of background; a middle range of K70-
100 paid to 25 percent of the servants in white and some Asian households;
a high range of K100-140 paid to 16 percent of the servants in white and
some Zambian households on company payroll. Six percent of the servants
received substandard wages, between K30 and K40. In terms of percent-
ages, more women servants than men received low wages, whereas women
slightly outnumbered men in the best-paying jobs. Thus 16 percent of
nonwhite servants compared with 25 percent of women received wages below
K30. 51 percent of men vs. 32 percent of women were paid below K30. 16
percent of both sexes received wages under K100, and 17 percent of men
compared with 10 percent women were paid between K100 and K140 per
month. In terms of specialization, more servants and women serv-
ants earned the least. Male inside house-servants and women working as
nannies and doing some food preparation earned the middle range of
wages, and servants of both sexes who cooked and did householdwork earned a
little more. The few servants employed exclusively to cook were men, and
they claimed the top wages.

About one-third of these households, primarily white and Asian, had
registered their servants with the ZNPF and were paying the expected
monthly contributions to the servants' pension scheme. Employers com-
monly did not register servants until they had satisfactorily completed the

19. See Appendix 1 for my attempt to unravel the compounded effects of these factors by
means of a regression analysis.

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trial period. Since many servants in Zambian households never last beyond the trial period, Zambians rarely register them. "What is the point?" they would ask. "Servants come today and are gone tomorrow." They, as most of the other employers, also doubt that the ZNPF's pension scheme will work, and they question whether or not servants eventually will receive the money accumulated in their account on retirement. Because of their doubts, a tiny portion of the employers sought to make alternative arrangements to ensure their servants' future welfare. They established bank or post office savings accounts for their servants into which they placed a small sum of money, for example, K5 per month, admonishing the servant to do the same.

The level of servants' wages is not determined by any statutory minimum-wage legislation in Zambia, but the provisions of the General Employment Act of 1965 do apply to this occupation. These regulations stipulate lengths of annual vacation period based on how long a worker has been employed, sick leave, paid public holidays, and rules about dismissal—implications that most employers are unaware of or ignore. Rather, contemporary conventions, which parallel those of the colonial period with some innovations, guide payment practices. "The going rate" varies to some extent across neighborhoods, to a large extent influenced in part by socioeconomic factors. It also varies according to racial background and length of residence in the country. Many whites who have remained since the colonial period, complain that newcomers, especially those employed by international or foreign-based development agencies, are "spoil"ing their servants by paying them "exorbitant" wages, thus upsetting long-held standards and disturbing the going-rate system. They cast their complaints in terms of the servants' future welfare: such overpaid servants will have trouble finding jobs once their present employers leave, as no one will be able to pay the wages they demand. Newcomers learn the conventions from residents in their neighborhoods. They also have access to the hints on household management and servant-keeping in Zambia which several development agencies include in their information packages and which some voluntary groups make available.20 According to my survey, employers from Belgium and Holland pay the best wages, followed by North Americans and Scandinavians.\*\*

\*\* Going rates within neighborhoods, ethnic/national background of employers, the sex of the servant, and the employer's personal whims thus influence the wage paid to servants. Some servants on company payroll

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20. For example, a pamphlet compiled by the American Women's Club in Lusaka, Welcome to Lusaka: Information for Newcomers (Lusaka: Teresianum Press, 1981), pp. 39-42, and similar information packages that several international development organizations make available in their expatriate staff.
Persistency and Change

receive wages set by the firm, but in some cases, only a mini-

mum/maximum range is set and employers have discretionary power to
determine the exact wage.21 In the final analysis, most servants' wages are
decided by their individual employers and depend on the employer's will-

ings/ability to pay rather than on the servant's skills. Employers often
take on new servants at a lower rate than they received previously, promis-
ing an increase after the trial period. In Zambian households where ser-
vants rarely complete the trial period, wages are seldom increased and
servants are continually replaced at low wages. Most white and Asian
householders give increases about once a year. The size of the increase is
rarely adjusted to the rising cost of living but is determined by what the
employer thinks the servant deserves. Like the beginning wage, increases
are influenced not so much by the servant's skills and performance as by
the employer's like or dislike of the person. "I just don't like this man," said
one white woman. "He is not going to get a wage increase." This man was a
cook in her employ for less than a year. She had no complaints about his job
performance but could not stand him as a person.

Wages are also affected by what the employer assumes are the servant's
needs, depending on marital status, age, and household size. Sometimes
their reasoning is spurious at best: "Servants don't eat like we do. They
don't eat meat but like nshima and relish. They don't entertain." Some
wages were deliberately kept low by employers who contended that
their servants squandered money and did not know how to budget.

Some servants receive benefits in addition to their cash wages. Those on
company payroll usually receive free uniforms and work shoes, and some
private employers provide their servants with a yearly issue of work cloth-
ing, often at the servant's insistence. Most white and Asian households give
Christmas bonuses, such as a small sum of money, food, and sometimes
clothing. These same employers will also bring gifts to their servants when
returning from holidays abroad. Now and then, all employers give some
contribution in kind, such as irregularly issued rations of millet meal,
soap, meat, and other commodities that are in short supply. During the
time of this survey, Lusaka was experiencing shortages of almost all house-
hold basics: salt, sugar, cooking oil, flour, bread, and sometimes even, soap,
and detergent, and employers who had been able to stock up on these
items would ration some of them out to their servants, in several cases
deducting the cost from the servant's wages. Some servants also receive
leftover food and castoff clothing, although many employers appear to have

21. Of the firms we interviewed, Barclays Bank had set terms guiding the servant wages of
high-level officials; ZCCM had established a wage range within which such officials were free
to decide on the exact level of servants' pay; and Lonrho allowed the officials to determine the
servants' wages.
taken to the practice of either selling such items to the servant or letting him sell them on commission in the low-income neighborhoods. Many servants get small advances from their wages or borrow outright from the employer, repaying the debt by instalments from their wages.

Many employers claimed proudly that they extended medical care to their servants. Since medical care was free of charge in the university teaching hospital and government clinics spread across town, most of these employers only ensured that their servants went there when ill, either by giving them bus fare or by taking them by car. Some expatriate employers on company payroll had access to medical services in private clinics and health organizations. The privatization of health provision is a recent phenomenon in Zambia, a response to the deterioration of services and lack of drugs and supplies in the government hospitals. Some employers who are members of such clinics take their servants to the "private doctor" when illness strikes. Many employers considered such health problems as inconveniences, upsetting the household routine and interfering with the employers' jobs when servants had to be taken to and from hospitals and clinics.

The colonial practice of giving a weekly ration of foodstuffs to servants has since independence persisted in changed form in some households. In this survey, 45 percent of the servants received ration money, that is, a small sum given to the servant before the weekend. It ranged from K2 to K10, with 30 percent of all servants getting less than K5 on a weekly basis. A few employers, 4 percent, bought a bag of mealie meal, the main staple, every month for their chief servant instead of providing ration money. In Zambian households, most of the unmarried servants were fed, a practice that employers alleged would prevent servants' pilfering from kitchen stores. Some servants got tea and bread, if it was available, in the morning or at mid-morning. It is difficult to estimate the economic value of these contributions to the servants' budgets. Most of these handouts are given irregularly, at the employer's whim; they are rarely agreed upon or promised in advance, so that servants do not know what to expect and have difficulty reckoning with such contributions when deciding how to allocate their meager wages.

Housing

People who build houses in postcolonial Zambian cities continue to erect servants' quarters on the plot. If servants are not accommodated in them, such quarters may serve other purposes: sheltering members of the extended family, serving as the loci for the wife's unrecorded business, functioning as storage or being rented out by the inhabitants of the main house, a practice that is illegal. But most of the quarters continue to house ser-
sixty, and 60 percent of the servants in this survey lived on the premises in tiny houses at the end of their employers’ gardens. Four percent lived in with members of the household; they were young girls working in flats. Nondomiciled servants lived in rented rooms or houses in Lusaka’s low-income areas, the majority of them, 17 percent, in squatter settlements. A few servants were prohibited from living in the quarters because of the size of their families: too many children, the noise, the coming and going of so many people on the plot inconvenienced their employers. None of the servants owned the houses they lived in. Only a small fraction of all servants, 4.3 percent, were given the statutory housing allowance to which low-income workers were entitled.22

Most servants who lived off-premises walked to work, spending between one-half and one hour to reach their work place. A few commuted on bicycle, often provided by a previous or the present employer. Most of those who lived so far away that they had to take the bus to work paid the fare out of their own pockets.

Of the servant-owned houses, the largest number, 6.4 percent, were in Mtendere, the first low-income settlement to be opened by the city council after independence, and the second-largest percentage, 5.9, were located in Mibawa, one of the oldest squatter settlements in Lusaka. The rest of the houses were built or were under construction mainly in more recent squatter settlements. In many cases, the servants who owned these houses bad provided long and faithful service to expatriates who on leaving the country had built or helped build a house for the servant. Most of these houses had been constructed from eleven to twenty years ago, a fact that indicates more recent employers have been less willing—or able—to help their servants in this way. Several of these servants did not live in their own houses. Slightly less than half of these housed relatives, the rest rented tenants who were charged monthly rents ranging from K15 to K35.

The servants’ quarters were dwellings of one to two rooms; they varied greatly in quality, some of them substandard at best. Where quarters comprised more than one room, employers sometimes used the additional space for storage. In most of these dwellings lived the servant’s spouse, children and/or kin, and occasional dependents. The average household size in the quarters was five. “Furnished” quarters usually meant only the

22. In the mid-1980s, the lowest paid government workers received K120–180 per month and a housing allowance of K30.
presents a bed frame and a mattress, if that. Any additional furniture consisted of modest chairs, tables, an occasional sideboard, cupboard, or shelf. All the quarters had piped cold water and latrines, though not always inside the house. Hot water was available in very few quarters, but most had electricity. Most also had showers, but no modern cooking facilities. If hot water was available, the servant's household was usually requested to refrain from using it at certain times of the day. In some parts of Lusaka, employers also rationed their servants' use of cold water during the dry season when the general water supply was scarce.

These houses were not so much the servants' homes as extensions of the employers' space. For employers often restricted their servants' company and leisure-time activity. Only immediate relatives were allowed in many households, and no overnight visitors without permission. Some white and Asian households did not allow the servants' children inside the main house; servants' children were permitted to play with the employer's children only in the yard. The reason most typically given when explaining such arrangements was "hygiene" or "disease": servants' children supposedly carry intestinal worms and bugs, and for this reason also, employers often do not permit their own children to eat any food prepared in the servants' quarters. Some employers prohibited radio playing in the servants' quarters during the noon-hour rest and object to loud conversation from the quarters. During the time of this survey, an informal curfew was practiced in the most posh areas of Kabulonga; employers there required their servants to be inside the gate by sunset. Those servants who were fortunate enough to reside on premises that had separate servants' entrances could still come and go at night, but at their own risk. Burglaries were rampant throughout the city, and in these particular parts of Lusaka, residents took their own precautions against nightly intruders.

Given these restrictions on servants who live on premises, it is perhaps not surprising that 36 percent of servants would rather live away from their place of work. In their view, they would have more freedom and more friends to call on for assistance in situations of need if they lived in a compound. But more important, it is better to have one's own living and working space. Only 22 percent of the servants preferred to live on the premises, where housing is free and they do not have to walk far to their place of work. Life is quieter in the high-density areas, some said, and not as dangerous as in the compounds. Burglars who come to the low-density areas are not after the servants' few possessions but the valuables from the employer's house.

Over the years, the houses on which servants live and work would not in 1985 impress the visitor to Lusaka with any semblance of the gardenlike atmosphere that Adshead had designed for the capital of 1935. The beautiful lawns and...
garden have been hidden by ugly walls with cut glass or metal spikes, some of them so high that they conceal the house and its surroundings. Lusaka's change from a garden city to a city of fortresses began in the economic decline in the mid-1970s, when security-conscious residents, fearful of increasing burglaries, started erecting walls to protect their possessions. Metal burglar bars on windows have also become widespread. In addition to security walls, many of the residents surveyed kept one or more guard dogs and had security guards on the grounds at night. Upper-level government employees and those in managerial and supervisory ranks of parastatal, private, and international agencies were provided with around-the-clock guard services, paid by their employer. The most posh houses built most recently have high walls and a guard house where visitors report before being admitted to the premises. Today, a significant proportion of Lusaka's servant-keeping population is ensconcing itself behind protective barriers and looking with suspicion at anyone, including their servants, who do not belong in their carefully guarded interiors.