

# Book Review

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**Lincoln Addison. *Chiefs of the Plantation: Authority and Contestation on the South African-Zimbabwe Border*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019, 196 pages.**

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One of the most significant developments in the South African agricultural sector in recent years has been the displacement of the “family” farm by agribusiness. This short, pithy ethnographic monograph provides valuable sociocultural insights into how these new institutions, which Lincoln Addison terms plantations, go about the business of trying to turn a profit. Treating these organizations as plantations immediately opens intriguing and comparative possibilities, suggesting similarities and dissimilarities with other work organizations. Addison also documents aspects of another important story, namely that of Zimbabweans seeking to accumulate capital and goods in South Africa for use back home.

Given South Africa's past labour practices, access to these new institutions by researchers is notoriously difficult to obtain, yet Addison managed not only to gain entrée but to live in the labour compound for an extended period. Addison's open profession of Christianity, reinforced by facilitating the donation of 50 Bibles from the US, undoubtedly greased the wheels of access, since the owner and all the senior white management were “born again” Pentecostal Christians. Not that this was a convivial relationship, as Addison describes his various hassles and conflicts with white management. While the plantation workers initially thought he was a missionary, his knowledge of conditions in Zimbabwe and ability to converse in Shona allowed him to establish rapport. The monograph is worth reading for his saga of doing fieldwork alone.

Situated on the southern banks of the eastern Limpopo River bordering Zimbabwe, the tomato plantation drew a fluctuating number of workers ranging from 200 to 600 part-time, seasonal or “stepping-stone” Zimbabwean

labourers, depending on the agricultural cycle. These Zimbabweans had largely displaced local Venda workers and were provided with rudimentary housing and subsistence shaped by the new post-Apartheid public and private regulations designed to improve working conditions. Perhaps most significantly, and the focus of this readable and engrossing ethnography, is the rise of mid-level black managers exercising increasingly delegated authority in a form of what Mamdani called “decentralized despotism.” Of course, the “intercalary,” or what Gluckman later termed the “inter-hierarchal” role of the Village Headman, has a long genealogy in Central Africa courtesy of the erstwhile Rhodes-Livingstone Institute. Addison terms these satraps Chieftains; although their authority is limited to the plantation, their influence extends to their Zimbabwean domicile as they serve as recruiters in their home areas and thus provide their fellow villagers and others employment in exchange for “favours.” Prominent among their illicit acts is selling liquor. These acts are tolerated by the White management because the Chieftains are essential for ensuring that the work is done. Addison labels these interstitial roles Chieftains, rather than the more common South African parlance terms like “Boss-Boys,” Induna, overseer, etcetera, because they have more power, an attribute difficult to verify, but facilitated by the plantation’s physical location, social situation, and networks extending to the recruitment areas. A clear case perhaps of the mutation of paternalism. Anyone who has been conscripted might recognize another analogy—the Black managers are the Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) of neo-liberalism. It is the organizational down that settles between the strands of formal and informal rules that enables these Black managers to feather their nests.

The social organization of the plantation with its increasing casualization of labour generated a fragile moral economy epitomized by various sites of contestation and high turnover, not only of workers, but also, it turns out, of white management. In short, to use a term fashionable in earlier industrial sociology, the central life interests of both workers and management lay elsewhere.

Apart from the usual pilfering, fiddling, and evasive enrichment strategies common in organizations of this type, two stand out in Addison’s ethnography: Cigarette smuggling across the uncontrolled border, and, most important, the role of the sexual economy in the underlife of the plantation. The estate has seen a significant rise in the employment of single women occupying the lowest organizational rungs, who are subject to the prey of the chiefs and petty

chiefs. While talk of sexual peccadillos filled the air, the sexual economy is difficult to observe in practice, even as its consequences of pregnancies and HIV/AIDS are noticeable. Dialectically opposed to the sexual economy and its promiscuity are the Pentecostals, who are part of a wider regional movement sweeping southern Africa. There were two groups on the plantation when Addison was there: a larger major Zionist-oriented Pentecostal affiliated church largely in the pocket of the Chieftains and a smaller short-lived Inter-denominational church organized by some semi-skilled workers a rung lower than the Chieftains. Church attendance at no time exceeded fifty people, as most workers preferred to spend their Sundays in other leisure activities like soccer, drinking, or fishing. Addison spent much time with these Pentecostal groups and has many important insights into their operation, but at the same time his heavy involvement in Church activities might have led him to miss other aspects of belief and action, namely witchcraft, magic, and sorcery. In a situation rife with uncertainty and insecurity, might resorting to oracular and supernatural modes be likely? The plantation is, after all, located in an area where the post-Apartheid government established a commission of enquiry into witch-burnings.

Such lacunae notwithstanding, *Chiefs of the Plantation* is, overall a highly readable ethnography well-suited to undergraduate and graduate courses and a valuable companion to Max Bolt's award-winning *Zimbabwe's Migrants and South Africa's Border Farms: The Roots of Impermanence*. Addison's book also highlights Max Gluckman's prescient 1944 insight that labour migration was central to understanding Central Africa, albeit Addison's story tells of a form that Gluckman did not anticipate.