

Pensive tribesmen, newly recruited to mine labour, awaiting processing and assignment. South Africa. 1960s.

This black and white photograph in portrait format shows five young black men facing us, one behind another, as if waiting in a queue. The man at the front is looking off to the side watchfully. He is carrying a blanket and a bag over his shoulder, and holding a crumpled document covered in small print. He wears a straw boater with a print ribbon and multiple layers of tattered clothes – gaping holes in the knees of his trousers reveal another pair underneath. Behind him, two men look directly at the photographer: one, perhaps a bit older, bearded and wearing a peaked cap, jacket and open-necked shirt, carries a wooden case. The other wears a beret and has a striped blanket wrapped around his body. Behind are two further men, one tall with high cheekbones, a bright earring, woollen pointed hat and checked scarf; the other, wrapped in a blanket, wearing a soft hat with a brim. The five men appear as distinct personalities, expressed not only in what they are wearing, but also the play of emotion across their features.

The accompanying text explains that miners were recruited by mining company agents from tribal areas of Lesotho, Botswana and as far away as Zambia and Angola. They were brought to a depot in Johannesburg for processing before being sent to the mines. Each man was committed to an initial work period of nine or twelve months, working nine or ten hours a day, six days a week.