

https://dspace.org/

Race and class in the South African countryside: Cultural osmosis and social relations in the sharecropping economy of the south-western Transvaal, 1900-1950

Van Onselen, Charles

1988-08
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/9917

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

A F R I C A N S T U D I E S I N S T I T U T E

African Studies Seminar Paper
to be presented in RW
4.00pm AUGUST 1988

Title: Race and Class in the South African Countryside: Cultural Osmosis and Social Relations in the Sharecropping Economy of the South-Western Transvaal; 1900-1950.

by: Charles van Onselen

No. 237

RACE AND CLASS IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN COUNTRYSIDE:

Cultural Osmosis and Social Relations in the Sharecropping Economy of the South-Western Transvaal; 1900 - 1950

a) Introduction

'Race relations' in the South African countryside have never made for a particularly pretty picture. Several recent studies, including, for example, a finely etched portrait of the notorious Abel Erasmus have served to remind us that the birth pangs of commercial agriculture in the Transvaal during the late 19th century were characterised by considerable violence between white landowners and black tenants.1 Nor did matters improve significantly over the half century that followed. In the course of an exceptionally sensitive study of black protest on the land during the late twenties it is suggested that: '...fists, whips and guns were central in maintaining master-servant relationships on farms'.2 And, while writing what was the classic work of its genré in the mid-thirties, I.D. MacCrone was moved to comment on 'cases of violent physical treatment which are such a feature of the relations between white and black in country districts'.3

There was - and is - little reason to doubt the veracity of these accounts. And, perhaps as a consequence of this, images of **sjambok**-wielding white landlords and cowering black farmworkers have come to occupy some of the most prominent positions in the galleries of latter-day academics, analysts and activists. But, as is the case with most icons, problems sometimes arise when smaller figures - no matter how accurate or truthful they may be in their own right - are inserted into a wider tableau. Thus, images of subordination drawn from black-white interaction on the **platteland** have on occasion - and perhaps a little rashly - been presented as the progenitor of modern South African 'race relations' in general, and the social formation associated with capitalist '**apartheid**' in particular.

These more questionable linkages - which most authors tend to leave implicit - sometimes slip unnoticed into the work of others during less guarded moments. Thus a contributor to **The Oxford History of South Africa** suggests that: '... the isolation of the farms, combined with the master-servant relationships of a semi-feudal situation, led to the growth of communities which not only differed from, but greatly influenced, those developing in the towns and the reserves'.4 In a more recent study, an astute analyst charting the roles of 'race and state' in South Africa's capitalist development in an admittedly different context came to a rather similar conclusion. 'Racial domination', he noted, 'is rooted in the pre-capitalist countryside'. 'Long before there were businessmen demanding controls or subordinate labour or trade unions structuring racial job barriers, there were dominant landowners and farmers'.5 Or, in the words of yet another observer: 'The roots of apartheid are not to be found in the white cities, nor even in the endless tunnels of the gold mines of the Rand. They are buried deep in the red soil of the white owned farms, where for some 200 years, before ever South Africa became an urban industrial economy and the word apartheid was thought of, relationships were being forged between white master and black serfs'.6

b) The Problem

Contemporary historians, benefiting from the burgeoning range of sophisticated studies of the South African countryside that have appeared over the past ten years, feel uncomfortable with such over-arching formulations. From recent work it is not only clear that this 'racial domination' was strongly challenged by the black under-classes at various historic moments, but that complex stratification which went well beyond the confines of 'master and serfs' helped both to shape and inform these patterns of resistance.

Indeed, the presence of 'layers' of wage labourers, labour tenants and sharecroppers, each of which occupied a very distinctive social and economic niche in the rural social order, always made it most unlikely that South African landowners or white farmers would interact with **all** blacks on the land in the same uniformly harsh and dismissive fashion. This fact has long been known and appreciated in the countryside where the politically dominant language, Afrikaans, is well endowed with words which point to the more complex nuancing of social relations on the land. Only English-speakers could gloss over the real distinctions that separate **'plaas kaffers'** from **'volk'**, **'mense'** from **'diensbodes'**, **'basters'** from **'oorlams'** or a **'kneg'** from a **'voorman'**. While most of these words undoubtedly have racial overtones and some are unambiguously racist, others - such as **volk** and **mense** - are far more complex and convey a distinct sense of social intimacy. From this it should be clear that, although race may arguably have been the single most important factor in shaping the pattern of interaction between whites and blacks on the land, it has never been the **sole** determinant of 'race relations' and that the complex processes involved in these interactions have always been powerfully influenced by the dynamics of class. And, while it is undoubtedly true that the denial of the franchise and the inability of Africans legally to acquire land forever mark the servitude of blacks of **all** classes in the land of their birth, it will do little to enhance our understanding of the social dynamics involved if we continue to concentrate on elements of race to the exclusion of class.

All of this is perhaps a rather circuitous way of arriving at what, for many, is perhaps a rather obvious conclusion - viz. that it is only by paying attention to the dynamics of both race and class that we can extend our understanding of the historic patterns of black-white interaction on the highveld. But, having arrived at the self-evident, we are perhaps now also in a position to push the logic of the analysis a little further and to start the complex task of examining more precisely what the exact nature of Afrikaner landlords and farmers' behaviour was when they confronted black wage labourers, labour tenants or sharecroppers during the course of the twentieth century.

c) The Task:

The magnitude of this task is clearly of awesome proportions and obviously exceeds the bounds of a single essay. Indeed, even with the current advances in the historical literature it will probably be several years before any social historian is in a position to provide us with anything approaching an exhaustive account of 'race relations' across the rural class spectrum. Under the circumstances, little more can be attempted in the course of this exercise than to probe one

dimension of the problem - that is, to try to determine the extent to which a cultural synthesis and a measure of social equality tended to develop between those Afrikaner landlords and **bywoners** whose economic position on the land most closely approximated that of the most privileged black tenants - the sharecroppers. By concentrating on the social and economic proximity of these historical protagonists it is hoped to demonstrate that the behaviour of significant numbers of blacks and whites on the platteland often transcended the stark and restrictive code of 'race relations' which underpins much of the literature. In order to do this with a measure of precision it may be helpful to look at the South-Western Transvaal in general, and then to focus more specifically on the triangle situated between the towns of Bloemhof, Schweizer-Reneke and Wolmaransstad.

d) The Setting:

In geographical terms, the 'carrot-shaped' South-Western Transvaal has never been quite certain where exactly it wanted to be inserted in the sub-continent. Bounded in the north by the lower-lying Bushveld country of Herman Charles Bosman fame, it is flanked in the west by the drylands of the North-Western Cape and the Kalahari while, to the east, it is hemmed in by the lethargic Vaal and the more fertile soils of the North-Eastern Orange Free State. To the south the 'root' points unerringly to the junction of the Vaal and the Orange rivers and, beyond it, to the city of Kimberley.

Unfortunately, this rather awkwardly shaped wedge is equally ambivalent about its climatic disposition since the all-important twenty inch isohyet chooses to meander through the point where the boundaries of the Bloemhof, Schweizer-Reneke and Wolmaransstad magisterial districts meet. Areas to the west of this lazy looping line are considered to be economically marginal as regards arable farming, while those to the immediate east of it are only slightly better placed. In 'wet' years the isohyet moves west, but in the 'dry' years which somehow always seem to outnumber the wet, the line moves east. In practice this has meant that the monotonous surface of Kalahari sands which are only occasionally broken by extruding veins of chalky limestone, have been best suited to that most elusive of all forms of agriculture - 'mixed farming'.

Having been handed such an unpromising dowry by nature, the sand and gravel plains of the South-Western Transvaal have always found it difficult to attract suitors interested in longer-term relationships. During much of the 18th and 19th centuries the flood plains between the Vaal and the Harts rivers were largely the preserve of bands of nomadic and semi-nomadic San and Korannas. More settled Tswana-speakers, concentrated to the south and west of the area, tended to make use of the grassland and Acacia bush largely as a hunting preserve, or to provide supplementary grazing for their cattle when the need arose.7

During the late 19th century, however, this Cinderella region suddenly found itself on the edge of two glittering occasions as first diamonds were discovered in the North-Western Cape in the late 1860s, and then gold on the Witwatersrand in the mid-1880s. The rise of urban markets and industrial capitalism in Kimberley and Johannesburg transformed the face of much of southern Africa, including a good deal of the much neglected South-Western Transvaal.

The land between the Vaal and the Harts rivers was quickly stripped of its Acacia tree covering by local entrepreneurs in order to provide badly-needed fuel for the diamond fields, and then - during the 1870s and 1880s - invaded by hopeful **burghers** of the South African Republic who carved out large farms within the Bloemhof - Schweizer-Reneke - Wolmaransstad triangle. But, when the newly demarcated tracts of land failed to show signs of immediate wealth in the form of precious minerals, many of these citizens sold their farms to land speculators or the large land companies that tended to dominate the Transvaal countryside by the turn of the century. Others stayed on and attempted to wrest a living from the maize, sorghum, beef or mutton that eventually found its way to more distant urban markets.

But the anxious patriots, as sometimes happens, withdrew too rapidly. Once the diamond pipes of Kimberley had been effectively monopolised by the De Beers' Company, smaller diggers started working their way up the course of the Vaal in pursuit of the alluvial diamonds to be found on the adjacent flood plain. From 1910, and for a decade and a half thereafter, Bloemhof and the surrounding alluvial fields enjoyed an unprecedented boom. Not only did the discovery of small high-quality gemstones revitalise the local economy, but the influx of diggers and their families created - for the first time - a sizeable, albeit volatile market for agricultural products within the triangle itself. It was only after the focus of the diggers' attention had shifted unequivocally to Lichtenburg in the north-west in 1927 and the Great Depression had set in two years later, that the South-Western Transvaal slumped back into its more accustomed economic posture.

Badly-scarred by this boom-slump economy and deeply suspicious of all traders, grain merchants, diamond buyers, property speculators and land companies, the triangle and its immediate hinterland spawned several generations of radical populists, religious fundamentalists and militant republicans. The region that gave birth to Stellaland and Goshen in the 19th century provided more than its fair share of **bittereinders** during the South African War, spawned 'Siener' van Rensburg and the Rebellion during the First World War, and hosts of uncompromising Afrikaner nationalists in the two decades that followed. When the economic tide of the Great Depression eventually withdrew from the South-Western Transvaal in the mid thirties there were - as always - scores of badly under-capitalised landlords, hundreds of **bywoners** and several thousand 'poor whites'.

But long before that - indeed not long after the initial diamond discoveries had been made in Griqualand West nearly sixty years earlier - the South-Western Transvaal had already succeeded in attracting its first wave of black immigrants. Composed for the most part of unskilled wage labourers, wood-cutters, transport riders and farmers, significant numbers of these immigrants were drawn to the triangle and the surrounding districts from Basutoland, the northern Cape Colony, the eastern Free State and parts of the north-western Transkei. Yet others came from even further north and east and, by the turn of the century, the area between the Vaal and the Harts was already noted for the wide variety of languages spoken by its African inhabitants. These included Afrikaans, SeSotho, Shangaan, SeTswana, SiXhosa and Zulu and the situation thus contrasted sharply with the areas further north and west where SeTswana held sway.9

Amongst the hundreds of immigrant families who established themselves in the triangle during this early period there were several outstandingly successful grain and livestock farmers. Their ranks were augmented not long thereafter when - in 1913 - the infamous Natives Land Act did much to undermine sharecropping as a legal institution in the Orange Free State and pushed a second wave of black farmers across the Vaal and into the triangle. During the years between the two World Wars, and more especially during the more 'successful' decades such as the twenties and the forties, the names of - amongst others - the Marumos, Maines, Masihus, Seiphetlhos, Tabus and Tjalemepes assumed almost legendary proportions amongst farmers of all classes and colours in the South-Western Transvaal.10

e) <u>The Deal:</u>

There were good reasons for this fame. Besides being talented arable and livestock farmers, members of these large sharecropping families often possessed a modicum of formal education and an formidable array of supplementary skills. In addition to his undoubted ability with the plough and the ox, for example, Kas Maine was also a qualified traditional herbalist and a more than competent blacksmith, carpenter, cobbler, saddle-maker, stonemason, tailor, thatcher and transport rider. Moreover, most of these families came armed with a battery of farming equipment such as harrows, planters, ploughs and waggons as well as all the necessary accoutrements. But - perhaps above all else - it was the draught power and considerable livestock resources which these families commanded that characterised them as being amongst the leading sharecropping families in an area dominated by sharecroppers.

When Kas Maine, the Transvaal-born son of a 'first-wave' MoSotho immigrant was finally pushed out of the triangle by the triumph of the tractor and the action of white farmers in 1949, he had just completed a season in which his share of the harvest amounted to over one thousand bags of sorghum and the family drove before it two spans of oxen, eight horses, fourteen donkeys, over forty head of cattle as well as one hundred and fifty sheep.10 Willem Mosamo Masihu, a 'second wave' MoSotho immigrant extruded from the Orange Free State by the provisions of the Natives Land Act not only ordered his own imported maize seed by mail-order catalogue, but taught all six of his daughters how to ride horses so that they could help round up a flock of sheep which, even in the 1930's, numbered well over a thousand.12

Nini Tjalempe, yet another 'second wave' immigrant who hailed from the Herschel district of the Cape Colony eventually found his way into the triangle after a farming odyssey that had taken the family through Basutoland, the Orange Free State and the Eastern Transvaal. By the early 1920's this highly respected elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Church had sent a daughter back to the Transkei for schooling, and was the proud owner of scores of donkeys, horses, goats and sheep as well as over two hundred head of cattle.13 The holdings of Mdebeniso Tabu, like Tjalempe a 'second wave' Xhosa-speaker who had entered the South-Western Transvaal via the Free State, were even more impressive. In 1925, a herd of over four hundred cattle on the farm **Pienaarsfontein** helped him earn 1,600 bags of sorghum from J.J. Meyer the so-called 'Kaffir Corn King' of the triangle.14

Virtually the only thing that black men of this economic stature could not aspire to own in the rural universe was the land itself. They knew it, and it hurt. Thus Kas Maine once warned the very same Meyer that: 'Baas Koos, one day God will allow us to purchase land just like you, and I will hire you, and over-work just as you are doing to me'.15 But, until such time as the good Lord did intervene to reverse the social order, the position remained as Kas sketched it: 'The seed was mine, the ploughs were mine, the oxen were mine. All was mine, only the land was his.'16 It was ownership of property alone which gave the white landlords the edge over black farmers who, in virtually every other respect, outclassed them. And it was access to the land alone that drove these men - and scores of others like them but with proportionately fewer resources - into the sharecropping agreements that formed the very foundation of the triangle's economy between the two World Wars. Perhaps too it was this that helped account for the fact that, long after the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (I.C.U.) had collapsed elsewhere in the South African countryside, it continued to boast a vibrant branch in the unlikely little centre of Makwassie.17

But, if this deal between badly under-capitalised white landlords and marginally better-off black farmers appealed greatly to the vast majority of the South-Western Transvaal's inhabitants for the better part of half a century, it also managed to alienate at least one other class of rural producer.17 Aspirant white capitalist farmers in search of a pool of cheap black wage labour found little to commend sharecropping. As a self-styled 'Progressive Farmer' from the Makwassie district put it in the course of a lengthy article pleading for genuine **'Farming Reform'** on the eve of the Natives Land Act warned: '...as long as landowners (they cannot be called farmers) are content to enter into partnerships with Kaffirs on the half-share system, the genuine farmer will never be able to get Kaffirs to work for wages'.19

The author of the article was not only concerned with the economic problems which the overwhelmingly dominant sharecropping system gave rise to, however, but with the way that it informed the emerging social order. Thus, in the course of the same piece 'Progressive Farmer' intuitively linked the two otherwise discrete issues by suggesting that:

> 'So long as these landowners are willing and do not consider it "infradig" to enter into partnership with niggers any amount of legislation will not stop the practise any more than it will stop white men from living with Kaffir women on the farms, as is so often the case. At the same time it would be a great step in the right direction if these people could be advertised in some way and exposed to public ridicule, and in some cases obloquy. The list of offenders would be interesting reading'.20

Certainly, at the time of his writing, there were already several children growing up in the triangle who were the products of exactly such cross-colour liaisons and at least some of them - including men such as Ishmael Moeng and Mmereki Molohlanyi - went on to become prominent 'black' sharecroppers in their own right.

From this it would appear that all was not well within the colonial social order in the South-Western Transvaal on the eve of the 1913 Natives Land Act. Nor was this simply the familiar problem of the victorious coloniser exploiting his position to gain sexual access to the women of the vanquished for, had the author chosen to examine social relations between white and black men he would have found other - but equally distressing - cause for concern. The triangle's economy apparently facilitated a measure of cultural osmosis between landlords, sharecroppers and bywoners and this, in turn, tended to advance notions of social equality in the countryside.

g) Social Relations:

i) In Production

Wresting a living from the land in the triangle has always been a hard as well as a hazardous business and, given the historic shortage of a large supply of cheap black labour in the South-Western Transvaal, many of the white landlords did not hesitate to get involved in the more physically demanding work on the farm such as ploughing, planting and harvesting. There is little reason to doubt that the long hours of hard work spent together in the isolation of the fields tended - albeit briefly - to draw white landlord and black sharecropper closer together.

Thus, Kas Maine recalled how his older brother, Mphaka, while working with the Elliot's in the early twenties had been soundly berated for waiting for the arrival of the landlord before beginning a meal after a hard morning's labour in the fields. 'You say that you were waiting for the boss', Elliot admonished him, 'but there is no boss here. We are all workers here and the meals brought here are for everybody to enjoy'.21

Likewise, the Seiphetlho family's high regard for Gert van Lill was partly based on the same set of considerations - his ability to join the sharecroppers for a hard day in the field and then sit back and relax over a meal. As Andries Seiphetlho later recalled:

> 'When we had finished ploughing that was it. We would then harrow the fields. After that we would take the hoes to cultivate and remove weeds right through the day. Once we had finished that we would congregate at somebody's home. He [van Lill] was so much like a black man. We would then leave for a friend's homestead at about dusk. From there you could go to van Lill's house, make yourself some food, eat and that would be it for the day.'22

The quickening of the pulse that accompanied physical exertion, and the subservience of black and white alike before the demands of nature at the high tides of the agricultural year could help to bring a brief seasonal blur to the distinctions that otherwise separated landlord from sharecropper.

Part of the same process was in evidence during harvesting when landlords and - on occasion - even their wives, were drawn into the fields at a time when nature would brook no procrastination. On the farm **Zorgvliet** the Maines saw how, in 1928, an I.C.U.-led mood of defiance drove Koos Reyneke and his bride of a few weeks to join them in the fields and pick maize until the whites' fingers bled.23

Across the district on the farm **Witpan** Cornelius Du Toit, a tall man whom the blacks called **RaMotelele** needed no such special prompting to get involved in the season's labour. His efforts in the fields during the early thirties left a lasting impression on members of the Marumo family:

> 'You would find Du Toit, taller than the BaTswana, busy harvesting. There he was, white skin and all, with a bag in his hands and his hands covered in blood from the way that the skin had been pierced by maize stalks. We would comment in amazement at this man who was so determined to get involved in harvesting although, strictly speaking, it was unnecessary for him to do so'.24

At moments like this, it would seem, no great distance separated ' **Baas** from **Klaas**'.

Yet, for all such joint activities, the painful fact remained that by the end of the agricultural cycle the vast majority of sharecroppers had invariably undertaken far more manual labour than most white landlords ever dreamt of doing. And, perhaps it was this fundamental inequality and the basic injustice of the system as a whole which partly informed the sharecroppers' behaviour at harvest time. J.P. Pienaar who, in 1930, acquired the first steam-driven 'Ruston and Hornsby' thresher in the triangle remembered the tension that he and his son 'Wikus' encountered at the five 'feeding points' which they had established in the Bloemhof district. As the strongly disapproving son recalled many years later, at such moments the sharecroppers 'would play the gentlemen', refuse to assist the seasonal harvesting teams that invaded the South-Western Transvaal from the nearby reserve at Taungs, 'arm themselves with notebooks' and check constantly on both the thresher and the landlord to ensure that they were not cheated of their portion of the harvest. Any mutual respect that there might have been between landlord and sharecropper clearly did not exclude the need for great vigilance at the culmination of the season's activities.25

But, if the better-off landowners and accumulating sharecroppers tended to be pulled apart at this crucial juncture, then there were always those bywoners who - by virtue of the work they performed and the under-privileged social and economic position which they occupied in the rural order as a whole - were locked into more permanent structural proximity to most of the blacks on the farms. Andries Seiphetlho, for example, likened the lot of the unfortunate Gert van Lill on Witpan during the late twenties to that of an ordinary African labour tenant - one rung down from that occupied by black sharecroppers. 'He shepherded sheep, he herded cattle. He looked after all the animals and everything on the farm. He was fed just like you [a landlord] would feed a black person whom you owned'. 'He lived', Seiphethlo concluded, 'just like a black man'.25 Even lower down the ladder were the **amaqaqa** or 'poor whites' - men like Gawie Vorster who, in the 1920s was resident at **Oersonskraal**. He not only lived like most other blacks in the triangle, but habitually addressed those with whom he was on more intimate terms as 'my brother' - **ngwaneso**.27

Lest it be thought that such encounters were rather exceptional and confined to a few years on either side of the Great Depression, we should perhaps be reminded of the experiences of the Maine family. As early as 1898, when the family was resident in the Schweizer-Reneke district, they encountered the widow Swanepoel and her youngsters who lived in the **stadt** on the farm **Holpan.** Not surprisingly, the three Swanepoel boys grew up speaking fluent SeTswana and, when they were adults, Kas Maine's close friendship with Hendrik Swanepoel culminated in a most successful transport-riding venture.28

And, still twenty years later, during World War II, Kas developed yet another association with a bywoner by the name of Cornelius Fick whom he described as being Hendrik Goosen's **kneg** or foreman on the farm **Klippan** in the Bloemhof district. 'He could speak SeSotho just like me', Kas later recalled, and - on at least one occasion - the sharecropper and the bywoner sided with each other in a legal dispute with the landowner when Goosen allegedly attempted to defraud Fick of a sheep that was owed to him. Moreover, when Fick's son got into trouble with the police in Johannesburg it was to the black sharecropper rather than the white landlord that the bywoner turned for the necessary financial assistance to enable him to arrange for the legal defence.28 As late as the mid-fifties and in the twilight of his career as a sharecropper, one of Kas Maine's last farming ventures was still with a 'poor white' by the name of J.J.N. Smit - **Dinta** - 'The Louse'. Even after the accession of the Nationalist government to power in 1948, poverty and the demands of agricultural production could, on occasion, still draw together those whom the law wished to force apart.30

The fact that many such cross-colour friendships were cemented by similar class interests was not lost on the black sharecroppers. 'Rich whites tried to pull you down', Maine once observed, whereas 'when they were poor we got on well'. Asked whether there were any whites whom he would call 'close friends' the laconic sharecropper replied: 'man there were many, people like Swanepoel and Reyneke. We got on well'.31

ii) In Recreation.

But, just as the need for a more broadly based physical effort by all those able-bodied members on the farm could pull under-capitalised white landowners and some of their better-off black sharecroppers together at certain seasons, so too could the celebration that marked the culmination of the agricultural year. On most farms in the South-Western Transvaal the successful bringing in of the harvest and, more especially so in good years, was celebrated by a party attended by all the men, women and children resident on the property.32

On these special occasions, when it was left to the white landlord to provide both the beast for slaughtering and the grain which the black sharecroppers used to produce a liberal supply of traditional beer, social relations were - almost by definition - far more relaxed than at other times. High spirits, further facilitated by the judicious intake of alcohol - especially amongst the males present - allowed for more spontaneous interaction than normal, and for the social order to be challenged and questioned through joking-relationships. Hardly surprising then that such events, often officially sanctioned by the

dominant classes in the countryside because they incorporated important elements of christianity, should be so well remembered by blacks on the farms. Yet, for all this greater flexibility and the leavening of social relations which it might have occasioned, there were also structural constraints to the festivities which tended to limit the extent to which the dominant order could be questioned. Mmakwetsi Marumo, for example, not only clearly recalled the dances and songs that the immigrant BaSotho sharecroppers seemed to specialise in, but was also careful to point out that it was only the blacks that did the singing and that the whites remained 'seated in chairs because they did not sit in the Africans' places'. Likewise, she suggested that the whites often limited their intake of alcohol and took home the greater part of their share of the beer because 'they did not drink in front of the people'.33

That much having been conceded, however, it perhaps again needs to be emphasised that, despite these limitations, there were still significant cross-cultural flows taking place through the permeable membrane of ritual and seasonality. Thus, on the very occasion at which Mmakwetsi Marumo filed away these recollections she also noted that everybody paid respectful attention to the opening address in which the landlord paid tribute to God's generosity, and to the fact that it was traditional BaTswana beer - **bojalwa** - that the whites took home to drink with such obvious relish.

Larger-scale celebrations, such as the one sketched above that took place at the farm Witpan during the early thirties, involved not only the landlords and sharecroppers but sometimes also drew in the labour tenants and wage labourers resident on the property. Perhaps it was for this reason - the scale of the gathering and the cross-section of rural society that it reflected - that these celebrations sometimes assumed an almost ritualistic aspect. This did not, however, exclude other less formal and more intimate exchanges from taking place in the shade of greater privacy.

Across the way, at Oersonskraal, where it was said of Gawie Vorster that: 'he behaved just like any of the local blacks' - '**o itshwere SeSotho**' - the bywoner linked up with the Seiphetlhos and other sharecroppers to drink bojwala throughout the year. Indeed, so frequently did this happen that some of the BaSotho immigrants felt that his behaviour bordered on the improper and that it involved an element of social coercion or - '**kgang**'. Others, however, simply found him to be hospitable while almost everybody was impressed with his fluency in SeSotho and a vocabulary which could, on occasion, amaze even mother-tongue speakers. Many of the local Afrikaners found this degree of social integration to be distinctly threatening, however, and according to Andries Seiphetlho, they muttered darkly amongst themselves that: Gawie Vorster 'was not a white man'. He, in turn, clearly had little respect for whites in the triangle whom he habitually described as '**makgokgotsane**' - 'dirt'.34

Kas Maine's experience of drinking with white men on the farms spanned more than two decades of a long life and took place in rather different social settings. While on the farm **Kommissierust** during the mid-twenties, he developed a particularly close relationship with '**ouderling**' Piet Reyneke's ebullient son, Willem, when the landlord asked the sharecropper to keep an eye on the younger man as he set about courting the ladies of the Bloemhof district. On at least one occasion,

however, the two made use of this time and space to make their way to the hotel at London where Willem made unselfish use of his privileged status to purchase several bottles of brandy. Some of this the friends consumed on the way home and then, suitably fortified, made their way back to Kommissierust where - unbeknown to them, and carefully observed by the deeply-religious Piet Reyneke - they unsuccessfully attempted to hide the remaining bottles of spirits in a clump of Bluegum trees. Such was Kas's standing as a sharecropper, however, that the landlord took no action other than to discreetly remove the bottles at the first available opportunity.35

But, if Willem Reyneke's behaviour is to be written off as simply another example of the folly of youth in more tolerant times, then across the way at **Vaalrand**, Piet Labuschagne - a mature and successful grain and wool farmer during the economically bouyant mid-forties - had no such excuse. Labuschagne, like many other white farmers in the triangle, had a great liking for bojwala and delighted in taking a break from his work in the fields in order to share a drink with the hands. Nor did he hesitate to call in at the Maine homestead for a drink whenever there was a chance that Leetoane Maine might have produced a freshly-prepared supply of beer. On more than one occasion Labuschagne arrived at the Maine home to find Kas and three other sharecroppers drinking whilst their youngsters were out at work in the fields. The amiable Piet would then laughingly rebuke the older men for their idleness, join the circle and say: 'Come on fellows, what's the problem? Pass me the calabash so that I can put it back'.36

And, perhaps it was precisely because he had enjoyed the hospitality of the Maine home so often, that the landlord did not hesitate to demonstrate **his** willingness to reciprocate and entertain Kas. Thus one afternoon in mid-week towards the end of the Second World War, Labuschagne got the sharecropper out of the fields and invited him to get into his truck so that they could make their way into town and search out a little amusement at an amateur boxing tournament being held in Bloemhof.

In town Labuschagne bought them some food and then made his way to the bottle store where he purchased a bottle of brandy. The two friends then drove to the edge of the town, ate their meal in the privacy of the cab and drank a good part of the spirits. Much cheered, they then made their way back into the town centre where the son of a white Bloemhof railway worker remembered only as 'Arrie' was scheduled to meet an outsider by the name of van Rensburg who had the misfortune to be drawn from across the river at Hoopstad. At the entrance to the tent the two men from Vaalrand parted ways and, while Labuschagne made his way across the floor to link up with the white farmers at one end of the ring, Kas made his way to the other which was patronised by sharecroppers and black farmworkers.

In the main bout of the evening the unfortunate Free Stater found himself on the receiving end of some heavy punishment from the son of the railway worker and much good-humoured heckling from the black farmworkers who were not slow to warn him about the Transvaalers' prowess with their fists! Eventually - and much to the delight of the home crowd - the local lad succeeded in knocking the visitor to the floor. 'He stood up, and the boy from Bloemhof threw another punch which again sent his opponent crashing to the floor and then everybody shouted: "Hip, Hip Hooray. All the way from Hoopstad to be defeated here."'!

At the end of the contest the friends from Vaalrand re-established contact, got into the truck and made their way back to the farm. Labuschagne was clearly most enthusiastic about the outing, while Kas was polite and correct. Some time thereafter the landlord again drove up to the fields where the sharecropper was busy collecting maize and invited Kas to join him on yet another expedition to town. 'Hey, let's go', Labuschagne shouted from the truck. As far as Kas was concerned, however, this insistent invitation transgressed the bounds of friendship and jeopardised their joint enterprise. As the hard-working sharecropper recalled it many years later: 'I refused to go and told him that I could not stomach that shit - sitting in a tent all day watching others do their work while we left our own unattended'.37

But few sharecroppers in the triangle were as single-minded about approach to work as was Kas Maine and many others had fond memories of the many hours of leisure spent on the farms and elsewhere. And, while it was undoubtedly true that most of this recreation centred on beer-drinking and dancing that was heavily informed by 'traditional' BaSotho or BaTswana music, there were also other occasions when the proceedings were clearly influenced by Afrikaner and other, even more distant, cultural practises.

Andries Seiphetlho, for example, clearly remembered how he first met and courted his wife, 'Miriam Doek', at the all-night dances held on Koos Hoffman's section of the farm **Heuningkrans** in the period 1922-24. On most weekends people from miles around would gather at the home of the old Koranna Flip Jonker to drink, sing and dance the night away to the accompaniment of the autoharp, banjo and concertina which the older Jonker children apparently played with considerable distinction. Some of their tunes were SeTswana ditties like **serantlhatlha** which celebrated the achievements of a home-made guitar. But the real rage at the time was three exotic dances which were far from the mainstream of any 'black culture' - a Boer 'waltz' called **'Tannie en die Roos'**, the **Mazurka** and a lively hop in which the men and women lined up to perform the **'Cobben'**.38

iii) And Christianity

In an area of marginal rainfall, however, life was not all beer and skittles and while the inhabitants of the triangle clearly enjoyed their fair share of recreation, the vagaries of nature also left them with the time to contemplate more serious matters. And, if there was any one set of ideas which somehow or other linked the vast majority of these rugged and sometimes competitive individualists, it was their adherence to the christianity that dominated in an area where Islam and Judaism were largely linked to merchants and traders who traditionally occupied positions of low esteem in the eyes of most white farmers.

Christianity, in its various guises, put in an early appearance in the South-Western Transvaal.38 Indeed, it was one of the first areas in the southern African interior where Africans were to be systematically exposed to the activities of the missionaries - a field of endeavour in which the Methodists and Lutherans were particularly prominent. On the white farms, however, the Afrikaner landlords' loyalty lay with one or other of the two 'traditional' churches - the theologically ultra-conservative **Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk** (N.G.K.) or the

conservative **Hervormde Kerk**.39 While at least some of the black farm workers and labour tenants followed in the footsteps of their landlords to enter these institutions, yet other - perhaps more independent-minded souls - found a home in one of the many other churches or occasional Zionist sects to be found in the triangle. A little higher up the socio-economic ladder some of the sharecroppers found a foothold in the Lutheran Church but there can be little doubt that - above all others - it was the African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.C.) with its black American connections that won the hearts and minds of the most successful sharecroppers in the years between the two World Wars.

From this it should be clear that in the triangle - as elsewhere in the country - organised religion for the most part found that it could somehow accommodate God, the social order and racial segregation in a set of structures which did violence to neither logic or theology. The only exception to this which came readily to mind was again to be found at the farm Oersonskraal where the iconoclastic Gawie Vorster was said to be an elder in a Pentecostal Church which regularly held racially integrated services - a practise which, the sharecroppers recalled, earned the strong disapproval of not only Rev. Thompson of the Lutheran Church but several of his Afrikaans-speaking neighbours.40

Yet, for all their mutterings about the social subversion that was bound to follow from any officially sanctioned form of racial equality in church or state, Afrikaner behaviour - in the privacy of the house and the isolation of the farm - was often far more flexible. Thus at **Hartsfontein**, W.A. Nieman a tough, irascible founding member of the local branch of the National Party, a man who would never deign to offer 'Ou Vel' Gabbe the Jewish **'smouser'** a bed for the night and an ouderling in the N.G.K., found nothing incongruous in inviting the farm hands into his dining room each night for the prayers that formed an integral part of the **'huisgodsdiens'**.41

Nor was it simply a question of such gatherings always being held in the landlord's idiom or in the innermost sanctuary on his domain. Across the way at Kommissierust during the drought-stricken twenties, Piet Reyneke - yet another elder in the N.G.K. - on more than one occasion attended a 'Day of Prayer' that was presided over by the Rev. Makhwanazi who happened to enjoy a following amongst both the sharecroppers and labour tenants on the property. At this, and other services which were conducted in at least two languages, the landlord frequently called on Kas Maine's mother, Motheba, a stalwart in the women's guild of the A.M.E.C., to lead the gathering in a prayer. This was invariably rendered in Afrikaans that was at least as good as Reyneke's fluent SeTswana which he, in turn, put at the disposal of the sometimes puzzled SeSotho-speaking sharecroppers.

Likewise, it was not at all unusual for sharecroppers, labour tenants and wage labourers alike to be invited to funerals or marriages conducted on the farm. But, given the more formal and public nature of such rituals which were embedded in the culture of the politically dominant group in the countryside, such occasions were invariably governed by a stricter code of racial etiquette and those blacks attending were expected to make their presence as unobtrusive as possible.42 Still, it is reasonable to assume that it was precisely on occasions such as these that blacks were exposed to some of the changing

elements within Afrikaner culture and that - if it suited them - such elements were later reincorporated into their own practises. How else did 'Tannie en die Roos' find its way from the big house at Heuningkrans into Flip Jonker's **kia** which, on Saturday nights, became the local shebeen?

iv) **In Mysticism, Health and Healing.**

But, if the major cultural exchanges within the triangle took place along the political fault lines of colonial power - that is, from white landlords to black tenants - then it certainly did not exclude the possibility of some traffic moving in the opposite direction. Indeed, given the prevailing poverty, relative isolation, low levels of education and the class proximity of the poorer landowners to the sharecroppers and - more especially - the bywoners to most of the other black tenants on the land, it was always likely that some of the whites in the South-Western Transvaal would be strongly influenced by elements of black culture.

Certainly the Afrikaner churches were aware of this process of cultural osmosis since, as one astute observer has noted:

> '...the Reformed Church took a strong stand against magic and folk medicine. Between 1906 and 1911 there seems to have been an epidemic of such things in many parts of South Africa. Reports of people being censured for "magic", "witchcraft" or consulting "sympathetic doctors" came in from a number of congregations and the issue was discussed at various Provincial Meetings of the Church. So great was the problem that the Synod decided to produce a brochure condemning magical practises and giving Biblical grounds for their avoidance'.44

There is little to suggest that there was a dramatic falling off in such practises after the issuing of a pamphlet which - in the triangle at least- many whites would have had difficulty in reading. Herman Charles Bosman constantly returned to the theme of 'witchdoctors' and their strange powers in his Marico novels and, when C. Louis Leipoldt published his experiences as a **Bushveld Doctor** in 1937, he still felt it prudent to include a chapter on 'Bush Magic'.45

Landowners within the dusty triangle of the South-Western Transvaal were no more immune to this 'cultural contagion' than their bushveld cousins who happened to live a little further north. Throughout the twenties Kas Maine, prominent herbalist as well as successful sharecropper, routinely protected his fields from the onslaught of Redbilled Quelea and other grain-eating birds by spreading a magic potion around the perimeter of his fields at the start of each new season. The success of this practise was evident not only to the landlord, but to several other white farmers in the district who called on him to perform the same ritual on their fields in private. This he discreetly did for the standard fee of five bags of grain which was handed over at the end of a successful season. Forty years later - in the mid-sixties - his nephew, Hoai Maine, who had made something of a speciality of this practise, was still being called upon to perform the ritual by prominent white farmers in the Bloemhof and Schweizer-Reneke districts.46

But while the landowners showed a certain amount of interest in 'traditional' magic that could be linked to agricultural production in an area where nature was notoriously capricious, bywoners, 'poor whites' and blacks on the farm appear to have been more anxious to get the herbalist to restore their health. Thus Maine used a potent combination of christian symbolism and traditional herbs to cure his friend Hendrik Swanepoel's chronic backache.47

But perhaps Piet van Schalkwyk was more 'typical' of the white patients that Kas Maine treated during the 1920s. A 'poor white' drawn from the Bloemhof diamond diggings, van Schalkwyk, or **RaMatekwane** - 'The Father of Dagga' - as he was known to SeTswana speakers, had contracted what he felt to be an embarrassing sexually-transmitted disease which he was reluctant to have treated by the local general practitioner who might feel disposed to have a word with the **dominee** in a small town. Maine arrived at a different diagnosis, however, and - by administering the correct herbs - succeeded in draining off the fluid that had collected in the man's scrotum.48

The majority of sharecroppers and black farm labourers that consulted Kas Maine during the twenties and thirties, like his white patients and the occasional Asian and 'Coloured' storekeeper, came in search of the traditional herbs which the **ngaka's** reputations were based on. But even on the firmer ground of Sotho or Tswana 'traditional' custom there were often more subtle cultural interchanges taking place since Kas, as with most of his professional colleagues, was not beyond prescribing cheap efficacious patent medicines to his black patients should the occasion or the ailment demand it. Besides the usual range of laxatives and 'Dutch remedies' such as **'Staaldruppels'**, his collection of patent medicines at the time included popular items such as **'Blue Butter', 'Buchu Rub', 'Dr. Kiesow's Essence of Life', 'Evan's Throat Pastilles'** and **'Zam Buk'** ointment. In mysticism, health and healing - as in so many other walks of life in the triangle - it was often an untidy and rather ragged line that separated black from white cultural practises.

v) And the Etiquette of Race Relations.

In the South-Western Transvaal, no less than anywhere else in South Africa, a complex unwritten code of racial etiquette governed the daily patterns of social interaction between the politically dominant whites and the large mass of oppressed blacks. And, since one of the most important implicit functions of this code was both to mirror and reproduce the colonial power structure in inter-personal relations, much of the onus for acquiring the appropriate racial etiquette was shifted to blacks who found themselves occupying a subservient position in what was often an unremittingly hostile social environment.49

Although perhaps accurate in its own terms, this exceptionally crude portrayal - cast exclusively in racial terms - fails to do justice to the far more elusive, complex and often quite insidious ways that the code governed inter-personal behaviour on the farms on a day-to-day basis. Kas Maine, who undoubtedly mastered the code in his fifty years on the land in the South-Western Transvaal felt that, if a black man were to survive in the triangle he had to be like; **'A Chameleon amongst**

the Boers'.50 In his experience, success was partly predicated on an ability to read the subtle ways in which space, age, gender, language, dress, gesture and tone - amongst dozens of other variables - could effect inter-personal relationships across the colour bar. The fact of the matter was that there was a world of difference in the way that one set about transporting a poor Afrikaner farmer's wife like Mrs. Willem Griesel to the trading store at Bloemhof by cart, and the way that one made use of the coach to escort the English-speaking Mrs. A.V. Lindbergh on her shopping expeditions to Paradise Brothers in Wolmaransstad.

What the present exercise demands, however, is not so much a detailed exploration of that code in its entirety - something that would make for a fascinating and lengthy study in itself - but to focus very briefly on the extent to which racial etiquette in the triangle was predicated on considerations of class. What, in the broadest possible terms, characterised inter-personal behaviour between black and white men in a marginal area where under-capitalised landowners, sharecroppers and bywoners were perhaps pushed into a greater social and economic proximity than elsewhere in the South African countryside?

As we have already sensed, Kas Maine was of the opinion that this difficult terrain was more easily negotiated where the bulldozer of poverty had cleared the way for humility and the prospect of genuine economic co-operation. Asked to look back and survey his career as a sharecropper during the two decades between the wars, he observed: 'Men like Swanepoel were not rich Boers, they were poor and they liked us. Those who were rich and of some social standing, like Meyer and Nieman, were bad'. As a rule of thumb it was those with least capital '... who liked and cared for blacks because they benefited from their association with them. They knew that we would pick them up and make them rich'.51

It was largely for this reason - class affinity - that Maine experienced little difficulty in getting on with Piet Reyneke as a landlord, or Hendrik Swanepoel as a partner in a transport-riding venture. Thus, on the long grain hauls to the rail sidings located on the very margins of the triangle he and Swanepoel would work together at every phase of the job, share meals from the same **kaffirpot** and sleep beneath the waggon at night. 'When men are travelling together they do not care'.52

Yet, even with these two Afrikaners whom he counted amongst his close friends, Kas Maine was often aware of the fact that their relationship was testing the limits of the code and that it was therefore sometimes necessary to defuse any residual tension with a dose of humour. Thus on occasion, when approaching Piet Reyneke with a request to release the harvesters from the fields, 'I would say - "Hey, take that pipe out of your mouth". [Laughter] Then he would say: "What"! And I would say: "Take that pipe out of your mouth, you are talking with a pipe in your mouth. Look here..." However, he would not feel threatened and simply say: "Lord"'!52

Other white landowners, however, were distinctly uncomfortable when dealing with the sharecroppers. Take, for example Maine's experience in dealing with J.J. Meyer, the upwardly mobile 'Kaffir Corn King' of the triangle. 'When I approached him I would say: "Hello Baas Meyer". He would then shake my hand very rapidly so that other Boers could not see and say: "Yes, morning you arsehole, so you are still alive"! And I would say: "Yes, Baas".53 Here again, the experience was perhaps class-coloured if not class-determined since his relationship with Hendrik Goosen - a poorer and somewhat eccentric landowner with whom he worked in the early forties - was rather different. If Goosen saw a black man approaching he would extend his hand and say 'Good morning': '...he did not care whether other whites were watching him'.55

Likewise, it was precisely because of the existence of such an elaborate code of racial etiquette that black sharecroppers vividly recalled transgressions by white landowners. Thus, when Piet Reyneke's unashamedly racist brother-in-law, Willem Griesel, arrived to bury his wife on the family farm, the working people on the property were shocked to discover that black mourneres were not to handle the coffin, or to mix with whites on the short journey to the cemetery. But even here, the implacable Griesel had to give way before the black expectation to be allowed to place the customary spadeful of earth on the coffin of the departed one once it had been lowered into the grave. In death, as much as in life, black sharecroppers and others on the land sought to be accommodated in the great rituals of the countryside.

vi) And Justice

Although technically outlawed by the provisions of the Natives Land Act in 1913, inter-racial sharecropping was widely practised in the South-Western Transvaal. Right from the turn of the century until the arrival of the tractor in significant numbers in the mid-forties, black patriarchs commanded both the draught oxen for ploughing and family labour for harvesting which somehow eluded chronically under-capitalised white landlords. In all his fifty years in the triangle, Kas Maine could recall of only one instance of a white landlord being prosecuted for sharecropping - and that was hearsay. For whatever reasons, it would appear that the local representatives of the South African state chose to turn a blind eye to the widespread practise of sharecropping in a part of the country which, from well before the South African War and right through to the Rebellion of 1914 - and for at least six decades thereafter - has provided a political homeland for radical white populists.56

Yet, for all this flaunting of the law by fundamentalists, there seems to be little doubt that many - if not most - white landowners lived in fear of prosecution. A few, like J.J. Meyer, took the precaution of issuing their partners with false written contracts which suggested that the scores of blacks to be found on the properties they controlled were labour tenants rather than sharecroppers. Many more simply told their black partners to lie about their contractual arrangements if questioned by inquisitive outsiders. And, especially in the thirties, a minority did indeed take a step away from sharecropping by sharing labour-time rather than crops with their black tenants.

But, whatever they did, the uncomfortable fact remained that, in terms of the law, the vast majority of the triangle's inhabitants - black and white alike - were forced to live an economic lie. Perhaps it was this, at least as much as the small man's traditional suspicion of the rich, the powerful and city lawyers that helped to inform the search for natural justice that emerged not so much in the courts of Bloemhof, Schweizer-Reneke and Wolmaransstad, but on land that was dominated by a sharecropping economy. Here again there is undoubtedly much room for an extensive and fruitful study but, for present purposes, we shall confine ourselves to just two examples drawn from the rich life of Kas Maine.

While resident on the farm Vaalrand in the early forties, Kas Maine and his family became close friends with one of the other sharecroppers on the property - a fellow MoSotho by the name of Thloriso Kadi. When, in due course Thloriso's oldest son, Padimole, decided to get married the Kadi family not only chose Kas Maine to act as an intermediary with the bride's family, but asked him to assist their relatives - the Marumos - with the catering arrangements for what was, in triangle farming circles, a society wedding.56

The wedding, at which Padimole's young bride wore a white dress and a veil, was attended by representatives of several of the leading black sharecropping families as well as the landlord, Piet Labuschagne. The occasion was undoubtedly a great success and, in the months thereafter Kas's friendship with Thloriso Kadi became even firmer. Padimole, however, apparently found the marriage to be less than satisfactory since not long thereafter, he developed a liaison with Kas's oldest daughter, Moroesi, who soon found herself pregnant.

This unfortunate development angered the older Maine who was very much of a 'traditionalist' in such matters as was his wife Leetoane who, like his mother, was a staunch supporter of the A.M.E.C. Kas therefore took both his complaint and a demand for compensation to his friend Thloriso who - after consulting Padimole - denied any Kadi responsibility for the Maine daughter's condition. This denial produced great acrimony between the two families and, some allege, culminated in an ugly confrontation and a stick fight between the two patriarchs.

When this encounter proved inconclusive, however, Kas got the local scribe, Lerata Masihu, to write Thloriso a letter summonsing him to appear at a **kgotla** or family court which, in the absence of any resident BaSotho chief, would be presided over by their landlord. This the Kadis readily agreed to and, when Padimole again denied his role in the affair, Piet Labuschagne deferred judgement until such time as the child was born so that both of the families could get a chance to inspect the infant and see if its physical features did not reveal the father. In the fullness of time this produced an amicable settlement between the two BaSotho 'traditionalists' who accepted the verdict of a white landlord who had been called upon to pass judgement in what was, to all intents and purposes, a traditional family court.57

But, the search for natural justice, the desire to avoid the orthodox courts and a respect for the standing of black litigants was not confined to cases between sharecroppers. There were also occasions when magistrates in the South-Western Transvaal were drawn beyond the

confines of their courts to intervene 'unofficially' in cases between white landowners and black sharecroppers in order to ensure that justice on the land prevailed. In short, the shrewdness, farming experience and economic standing of sharecroppers in the triangle ensured that their pleas for justice were perhaps more seriously entertained than those of either labour tenants or wage labourers.

In the lates thirties Kas Maine entered into a sharecropping agreement with an impoverished absentee landlord, Koos Klopper, who had hired a section of the farm **Klippan** in the Bloemhof district. Unfortunately, the portion of land occupied by the partners was unfenced and, for Kas, this led to several problems with his closest neighbour, a dynamic but agrestic farmer by the name of Hendrik Goosen.

One morning in 1937, sixteen of the sharecropper's cattle strayed into his neighbour's maize fields. Goosen, angered by this intrusion, instructed his labourers to round-up the cattle, impound them in his **kraal** and then promptly left for Bloemhof where he had business to attend to. As soon as Maine's eldest son, Mmusetsi, discovered what had happened he informed his father who made his way across to the white farmer only to discover that he was away in town. In the late afternoon he returned to Goosen's where the farmer informed him that he would release the cattle on condition that the sharecropper paid him compensation of three shillings per beast. When Maine informed him that he did not have the ready cash, Goosen said that he would accept three bags of sorghum which Kas duly handed over to the farmer. But, being aware of both Goosen's reputation and the power of the written word in a world where the law and literacy often went hand in hand, he insisted on Goosen issuing him with a receipt in order to prove that he had met his commitment. This the farmer did.

During October of the following year, however, their roles were reversed when sixteen donkeys and fourteen unattended oxen belonging to Goosen invaded the sharecropper's maize fields. Like the white farmer before him, Kas ordered Mmusetsi to round up the cattle and place them in his kraal and then sent a message across to Goosen to inform him of what had transpired Goosen sent back a letter, written in Afrikaans, which the timid Klopper read to Kas: 'Hold back one ox and I will come across to assess the damage. Release the other animals so that they may be used for ploughing'. The sharecropper then set free his team of oxen, retaining only a blueish hind-ox named **'Bloubank'.**

But Goosen realised that if the law of the Medes and the Persians was to prevail, he owed Maine the better part of five pounds and therefore failed either to collect the ox or to inspect the damage that his animals had done to the sharecropper's fields. Maine kept the ox amongst his own animals for more than two months.

On Christmas Day 1938, Kas Maine had slaughtered a sheep for a small family celebration when he was informed that fourteen of Goosen's animals had again invaded his fields where the new season's crops were already at knee-height. Once again, Mmusetsi was sent to round-up the animals and impound them while Kas sent a message across to the farmer to inform him of what had happened. But this time, perhaps still smarting from the loss of Bloubank, Goosen sent back a note which - he thought - would confound his neighbour. Its message and sub-text could not have been simpler: 'I am not interested in assessing the damage; do with the animals as you will'.

The following morning Kas showed this abrasive note to an increasingly anxious Klopper who, fearing Goosen's wrath, advised the sharecropper to take the animals to the nearest municipal pound. With the assistance of a friend, Hendrik Lefifi and his son, he set off in the direction of **Sewefontein** for the long journey into town. On the outskirts of Bloemhof, however, the three blacks were overtaken by a party of whites comprising Hendrik Goosen, his father, and a younger brother who asked the sharecropper where he thought he was taking the animals to. When Kas told him that they were on the way to the pound, Goosen asked him if he realised whose animals they were - to which Maine responded by saying that he had no idea as to whom the beasts belonged. 'Today you will find out', Goosen warned him, 'By tonight both you and the cattle will be in the custody of the police'.

The posse of whites then drove off in the direction of the Bloemhof Police Station where Hendrik Goosen allegedly told the officer on duty that it was Mmusetsi who had been responsible for driving his cattle into the Maine fields and, that because the older Maine had taken illegal possession of the stock, he should be charged accordingly. The police it would appear, were less than convinced by this unusual story and when Kas and his entourage arrived at the Charge Office and asked for the farmer's cattle to be impounded, they told him to wait at a nearby window where the magistrate would attend to him.

When the magistrate eventually appeared, he asked the sharecropper to explain the problem. Kas started by handing him the receipt for three bags of grain which Goosen had issued him on the occasion when his cattle had invaded the white farmer's property during the summer of 1937. 'When he had finished reading that one, I handed him the second one, the one that suggested that I keep back one beast until such time as he had time to come across and assess the damage'. When the magistrate still expressed some puzzlement, Maine handed him the third and decisive note in which Goosen suggested that he was unwilling to assess any further damages and that the sharecropper was free to do with the cattle as he pleased.

Once the magistrate had read this document, he ordered that Goosen's cattle be impounded and Kas and his helpers drove the animals towards the pens. At the pound gate, however, they were accosted by yet another policeman who demanded to know why it was that the farmer's cattle were being impounded. Kas, by now well aware of the gathering strength of his position, again went through his well-rehearsed routine with the three notes. The police then discussed the notes amongst themselves and, after Kas had paid the standard fee of a shilling a beast, reluctantly let the animals into the pound.

Before he could leave, however, the officer in charge asked the sharecropper to describe where exactly his fields were situated on the farm so that he could dispatch two men on motorcycles to inspect the damage done to the maize. 'I directed them well, and they departed on two steambikes'. At Klippan the police interrogated one of Goosen's tenants who confirmed the sharecropper's version of the story, and the police then returned to Bloemhof where they informed Maine to present himself at the pound on the following day.

'On the following day', Kas later recalled,' I drove a cart into town and when we arrived they told me that they had seen the damage. They asked how many people had driven the cattle to the pound and I told them that there were two of us. They calculated the distance from Klippan to Bloemhof and paid us one pound five shillings each for bringing in the animals'. The police then told him to allow two days to elapse and then to report back to the police station.

What exactly happened in the interim will probably never be known but, presumably, the police intervened to persuade Goosen where his interests lay for, as Kas later told the story:

> 'When we arrived there they told me that from the first two documents it was clear that he had impounded my cattle for straying onto his land and, although I did not own any land, I had impounded his cattle when they had invaded my plot. From the third document it was clear that I had again taken possession of his cattle. They then handed me ten pounds, saying that I should pay the person who had helped me drive the cattle to the pound. I took the money and paid Hendrik Lefifi a further two pounds. He added it to what I had given him on the first occasion and he ended up with three pounds and five shillings. I took what remained and put it in my pocket. I then asked them whether the matter would still be referred to the courts. They told me that the matter was settled.'

In addition to paying compensation, however, Goosen was also called upon to pay a substantial fee to have his cattle released from the pound.58

Yet despite this - and a still later round of legal conflict with Goosen which revolved around the alleged theft of a sheep - Kas eventually joined forces with the landlord in a very successful sharecropping and stock speculating venture in which both parties were guilty of rather dubious ethical practices. But the dynamics of their stormy relationship, even when refracted through the prevailing racist legal order, could hardly be characterised as being derived simply from some semi-feudal order in which white master inevitably lorded it over black serf. In the South-Western Transvaal, as elsewhere in the world, the scales of justice were suspended from the fulcrum of class and - in the sharecropping economy of the triangle - there was no guarantee that white landowners would invariably triumph over black sharecroppers.

h) Conclusion.

On a clear day, and with a view largely unimpeded by evidence, theory can see forever. From the pinnacle of scientific logic the far-sighted can peer down and detect one, at most perhaps two, hard macadamised roads that lead straight and true from the murky world of pre-capitalist modes of production in the 19th century to the destination of capitalist agriculture which - as if by magic - looms out of the mists of time in the election year of 1924. Messy detours, confusing by-passes or older dirt tracks that social historians habitually stumble along and which alegedly take them 'to the very borders of empiricist absurdity' have long since been sealed-off by the bulldozer of ruling-class politics which - as with that wonderful election of 1924 - are usually, and somewhat surprisingly for laodiceans, to be found garaged in the Houses of Parliament.59

Thus, it is sometimes suggested that the single most important instrument responsible for the destruction of sharecropping and the rise of labour tenancy in the South African countryside was the Natives Land Act of 1913. 'In the Orange Free State it effectively destroyed share cropping'.60 Perhaps it did, but there is little reason to assume that, at the stroke of the legislative pen, the sharecroppers - like the economic institution which gave birth to them - lay down and died to a man. After all, as another observer of such things once put it: 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past'. Indeed, from empirical evidence it would appear that many of these black farmers simply crossed the river into the South-Western Transvaal where, showing scant respect for theory, they continued to practise sharecropping. Nor did they show much inclination to turn themselves into labour tenants with any unseemly haste and they - as well as white landlords - would therefore have been a little surprised to learn that: 'In the Transvaal, labour tenancy was deeply rooted and the most prevalent form - indeed in the early 1930s - **the only form** of acquiring farm labour'.61

Likewise, it is possibly rash for social scientists to assume that the harsh and physically oppressive relationships that have all too often characterised the transition to capitalist agriculture over large parts of South Africa applied - willy nilly - to all parts of the countryside. Nor should it simply be assumed that the stark and undoubtedly racist social relations that appear to have dominated the interaction between capitalising white farmers and their emerging black labour force provide us with an unproblematic metaphor for either 'apartheid' or the social formation as a whole.

History, unlike philosophy, in an inexact science and many of its roads take unexpected turns and take the careful observer through strange and seemingly contradictory experiences. Perhaps Tom McLetchie, the crusty and semi-literate former Justice of the Peace in the Schweizer-Reneke district had some inkling of this when, in 1940, he sat down and wrote to Deneys Reitz, Minister of Native Affairs in the Smuts Government:

> 'What about some native labour? There is plenty for all our requirements but it is badly distributed. Those who do little work and the very many who plow on shares and are practically on social equality with them in everything but name, and shreiking "Seggregation" all the time, have surplus labor galore therefore the natives flock to such farms where they work for only a few weeks in the year and hold illegal Beer Drinks almost constantly. Suggest that before the end of session, a law be forced thro both Houses, making it illegal under dire penalities, for any white landowner or occupier to have on his farm any native possessing a Plow and Draft animals. Then, there will be some hope for a White South Africa'.62

Poor old Tom. Somebody had forgotten to tell him that, in South Africa, the '...landowner and capitalist farmer are one and the same in the process of rural accumulation'.63

'Progressive Farmer' from Makwassie had made the same mistake in columns of **'The Star'** nearly three decades earlier. But, the uncomfortable fact remains, that for close on forty years thereafter neither the legislation of the much vaunted South African state, nor the steady advance of capitalist agriculture in the countryside managed to eliminate the institution of sharecropping in the South-Western Transvaal. And, within the triangle, perhaps it was **because** rather than despite the fact that whites: 'were practically on social equality with blacks in everything but name', that radical Afrikaner populists 'shreiked' for 'seggregation'.

In this essay an attempt has been made to isolate some of the economic and social forces which nudged black and white South Africans towards 'social equality' in one small and neglected corner of country in the decades between the two World Wars. Regrettably, much of this has been achieved with 'tape recorders' and a goodly number of 'fashionable biographies'.64 And, if white landowners and black sharecroppers in the South-Western Transvaal proved to be a little closer than expected, perhaps social historians have less right than most to be surprised for, over thirty years ago, C.W. De Kiewiet warned us that: 'The oppositeness of black and white, or the antithesis of European civilisation and tribal culture is not a sufficient clue to the relations between black men and white men'.65 It is this fundamental - albeit elusive - fact of South African life which, for those who seek to uncover its troubled past and understand its tormented future makes for an optimism of the heart, but a pessimism of the mind.66

Charles van Onselen
African Studies Institute
University of the Witwatersrand
July 1988

****

FOOTNOTES

This paper was made possible by a grant from the Joint Committee on African Studies of the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies as part of their project on African Agriculture.

1. P. Delius, 'Abel Erasmus: Power and Profit in the Eastern Transvaal', in W. Beinart, P. Delius and S. Trapido (Eds.), **Putting a Plough to the Ground**, (Johannesburg 1986), pp.176-217.

2. H. Bradford, **A Taste of Freedom: The I.C.U. in Rural South Africa, 1924-1930**, (London 1987), p.55.

3. I.D. MacCrone, **Race Attitudes in South Africa**, (London 1937), p.282.

4. F. Wilson, 'Farming, 1866 - 1966' in M. Wilson and L. Thompson (Eds.), **The Oxford History of South Africa**, (Oxford 1971), Vol.11, p.105.

5. S. Greenberg, **Race and State in Capitalist Development**, (Johannesburg 1980, p.53.

6. R. Ainslie, **Master and Serfs**, (London 1973), p.7.

7. See, for example, K. Shillington, **The Colonisation of the Southern Tswana**, (Johannesburg 1985).

8. For a good overview of the processes involved see T.J. Keegan, **Rural Transformations in Industrialising South Africa: The Southern Highveld to 1914** (Johannesburg 1986).

9. See, for example, G. Relly, 'Social and Economic Change among the Tswana in the Western Transvaal, 1900-1930', unpublished M.A. dissertation, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1978, p.5.

10. The lives of these sharecroppers, which have been systematically recorded since 1979, are preserved in the M.M. Molepo Oral History Collection, African Studies Institute (A.S.I.), University of the Witwatersrand (U.W.), Johannesburg. The evidence used in this essay is drawn almost exclusively from this source unless explicitly stated to the contrary.

11. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape Nos: 130 and 131, Interview with Mr. K. Maine conducted by M.T. Nkadimeng at Ledig, 12 Feb. 1980.

12. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape No: 606, Interview with Mr. A.T. Seiphetlho conducted by E. Kgomo at 'Klipkuil', Makwassie District, 8 Dec. 1987.

13. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape Nos: 204, 205, 231, 479, 508 and 521, Interviews with Mr. K. Maine conducted by M.T. Nkadimeng at Ledig, between 2 July 1980 and 14 June 1985. Also, Interview with Mr. R.S. Meyer conducted by C. van Onselen at Devon, Eastern Transvaal, 15 March 1984.

14. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape No: 547, Interview with Mr. T. Tabu conducted by M.T. Nkadimeng at Letlhapong, Taung, 29 April 1986; and Tape No: 509, Interview with Mr. K. Maine conducted by M.T. Nkadimeng at Ledig, 16 Feb. 1985. See also, Interview with Mr. J.J. Meyer conducted by C. van Onselen at London, Schweizer-Reneke, 11 June 1984.

15. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape No: 477, Interview with Mr. K. Maine conducted by M.T. Nkadimeng at Ledig, 26 June 1984.

16. For this and an early - and therefore incomplete - history of Kas Maine - see M.T. Nkadimeng and G. Relly, 'Kas Maine: The Story of a Black South African Agriculturalist' in B. Bozzoli (Ed.), **Town and Countryside in the Transvaal**, (Johannesburg 1983), pp.89 - 107.

17. See H. Bradford, 'The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa in the South African Countryside, 1924 - 1930', Ph.D thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1985, p.240.

18. The broad rise and decline of sharecropping on the highveld is documented in T.J. Keegan's **Rural Transformations in Industrializing South Africa: The Southern Highveld to 1914**, (Johannesburg 1986), pp.51 - 130.

19. **The Record of Klerksdorp and the Western Transvaal**, 15 November 1912.

20. **Ibid.**

21. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape No: 381, Interview with Mr. K. Maine conducted by M.T. Nkadimeng at Ledig, 10 March 1983.

22. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape No: 607, Interview with Mr. A.T. Seiphetlho conducted by E. Kgomo at 'Klipkuil', Makwassie District, 8 Dec. 1987.

23. Interview with Mr. J.C. Reyneke conducted by C. van Onselen at Olifantshoek, 21 May 1986.

24. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Oral History Collection, Tape No: 609, Interview conducted with Mrs. M. Marumo by E. Kgomo at Lebaleng, Makwassie District, 22 March 1988.

25. Interview with Mr. L.T. Pienaar conducted by C. van Onselen at the farm 'Schoonsig' in the Bloemhof District, 11 June 1984.

26. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape No: 607, Interview with Mr. A.T. Seiphethlo conducted by E. Kgomo at 'Klipkuil', Makwassie District, 8 Dec. 1987.

27. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape No: 628, Interview with Mr. A.T. Seiphetlho conducted by E. Kgomo at 'Klipkuil', Makwassie District, 30 March 1988.

28. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape Nos: 511 and 519, Interviews with Mr. K. Maine conducted by M.T. Nkadimeng at Ledig on 1 March 1985 and 11 May 1985.

29. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape Nos: 491 and 512, Interviews conducted with Mr. K. Maine by M.T. Nkadimeng at Ledig, on 2 Oct. 1984 and 2 Feb. 1985.

30. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape No: 408, Interview with Mr. K. Maine conducted by M.T. Nkadimeng at Ledig, 26 Jan. 1984.

31. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape No: 511, Interview with Mr. K. Maine conducted by M.T. Nkadimeng at Ledig, 1 March 1985, p.32.

32. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape No: 406, Interview with Mr. K. Maine conducted by M.T. Nkadimeng at Ledig, 24 Jan. 1984.

33. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape No. 609, Interview with Mrs. M. Marumo conducted by E. Kgomo at Lebaleng, Makwassie, 22 March 1988.

34. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape No: 628, Interview with Mr. A.T. Seiphetlho conducted by E. Kgomo at 'Klipkuil', Makwassie District, 30 March 1988.

35. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape Nos: 381, 479 and 490, Interviews with Mr. K. Maine conducted by M.T. Nkadimeng at Ledig on 10 March 1983, 10 July 1984 and 1 Oct. 1984.

36. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape Nos: 231 and 381, Interviews with Mr. K. Maine conducted by M.T. Nkadimeng at Ledig, 27 July 1980 and 10 March 1983.

37. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape No: 407, Interview with Mr. K. Maine conducted by M.T. Nkadimeng at Ledig, 26 Jan. 1984.

38. U.W., A.S.I., 'Field Report' by E. Kgomo on an interview conducted with Mr. A.T. Seiphethlo conducted by E. Kgomo at 'Klipkuil', Makwassie District, 27 March 1988. See also U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape No: 631, Interview with Mr A.T. Seiphethlo conducted by E. Kgomo at Klipkuil, Makwassie District, 29 May 1988. Some of the background to the use of these instruments - although not in a BaTswana setting - is to be found in The International Library of African Music, Grahamstown, Papers presented to the First Symposium on Ethnomusicology, 1980. J. Clegg, 'The Music of Zulu Immigrant Workers in Johannesburg: A Focus on Concertina and Guitar'.

39. Some of the background to this is to be found in B.A. Pauw, **Religion in a Tswana Chiefdom**, (London 1960), pp.1-11.

40. See, for example, T. Dunbar Moodie, **The Rise of Afrikanderdom: Power, Apartheid and the Afrikaner Civil Religion**, (London 1975), pp.60-61.

41. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape No: 628, Interview conducted with Mr. A.T. Seiphetlho by E. Kgomo at 'Klipkuil', Makwassie District, 30 March 1988.

42. Interview conducted with Mr. R.J. Nieman conducted by C. van Onselen at Brits, 12 June 1985.

43. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape No: 381, Interview with Mr. K. Maine conducted by M.T. Nkadimeng at Ledig, 10 March 1983.

44. I. Hexham, 'Modernity or Reaction in South Africa: The Case of Afrikaner Religion', Paper presented to the Consultation on Modernity and Religion, University of British Columbia, 15-18 December 1981, p.25.

45. C. Louis Leipoldt, **Bushveld Doctor**, (London 1937), pp.202-223.

46. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape Nos: 325 and 486, Interviews with Mr. K. Maine conducted by M.M. Molepo, M.T. Nkadimeng and E. Msimango at Ledig on 13 May 1982 and 29 Aug. 1984. See also N. Mokgatle, **The Autobiography of an Unknown South African**, (London 1971), pp.32-33.

47. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape No: 381, Interview with Mr. K. Maine conducted by M.T. Nkadimeng at Ledig, 3 March 1983.

48. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape No: 381, Interview with Mr. K. Maine conducted by M.T. Nkadimeng at Ledig, 3 March 1983.

49. See, for example, B.W. Doyle, **The Etiquette of Race Relations in the South**, (New York 1971).

50. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape No: 381, Interview with Mr. K. Maine conducted by M.T. Nkadimeng at Ledig, 10 March 1983.

51. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape No: 511, Interview with Mr. K. Maine conducted by M.T. Nkadimeng at Ledig, 1 March 1985.

52. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape No: 381, Interview with Mr. K. Maine conducted by M.T. Nkadimeng at Ledig, 10 March 1983.

53. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape No: 511, Interview with Mr. K. Maine conducted by M.T. Nkadimeng at Ledig, 1 March 1985.

54. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape No: 381, Interview with Mr. K. Maine conducted by M.T. Nkadimeng at Ledig, 10 March 1983.

55. U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape No: 381, Interview conducted with Mr. K. Maine at Ledig, 10 March 1983.

56. See, for example, the career of that fiery Afrikaner patriot, Rev. E.J. van der Horst, who was elected to parliament in 1915 to represent the Wolmaransstad district and who, in 1920, was eventually forced to abandon the church only after a lengthy legal wrangle. See Afrikaanse Kultuurvereniginge, **Afrikaanse Kultuuralmanak** (Johannesburg 1980), p.73. Perhaps it is also significant that this was amongst the first rural constituency in which the new Conservative Party made political headway in the 1980s.

57. These events are reconstructed from U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape No: 338, Interview with Mr. K. Maine conducted by M.T. Nkadimeng at Ledig, 29 Aug. 1982; and Tape No: 395, Interview with Mr. L.D. Masihu by M.T. Nkadimeng at Molelema, Taung, on 9 Sept. 1983.

58. These events are reconstructed from U.W., A.S.I., M.M. Molepo Collection, Tape No: 381, Interview with Mr. K. Maine conducted by M.T. Nkadimeng at Ledig, 3 March 1983.

59. M. Morris, 'Social History and the Transition to Capitalism in the South African Countryside', **Africa Perspective**, Vol.1, Nos. 5 and 6, Dec. 1987, p.12.

60. M. Morris, 'The Development of Capitalism in South African Agriculture: Class Struggle in the Countryside', **Economy and Society**, 5, 1976, p.294.

61. M. Morris, 'The Development of Capitalism in South African Agriculture: Class Struggle in the Countryside', **Economy and Society**, 5, 1976, p.295.

62. State Archives, Pretoria, NTS Vol. 2207, File 354/280, T. McLetchie to Col. D. Reitz, 5 May 1940. I am indebted to Dr. H. Bradford who drew this letter to my attention.

63. M. Morris, 'Social History and the Transition to Capitalism in the South African Countryside', **Africa Perspective**, Vol. 1, Nos. 5 and 6, December 1987, p.15.

64. The complaints are those of M. Morris, 'Social History and the Transition to Capitalism in the South African Countryside', Africa Perspective, Vol. 1, Nos. 5 and 6, December 1987, p.13 and p.21.

65. C.W. De Kiewiet, **A History of South Africa** (Oxford 1957), p.179.

66. The wording in this sentence is a clumsy modification of Steven Feireman's more memorable phrasing in a different context. See S. Feireman, 'Struggles for Control: The Social Roots of Health and Healing in Modern Africa', **African Studies Review**, Vol. 28, Nos. 2/3, June/Sept. 1985, p.129.