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by: Deborah James

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The question of ethnicity: Pedi and Ndebele in a Lebowa village

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In the South African context, the question of ethnicity is a morally-charged and difficult one. This is mainly so, of course, because the enforcement of ethnic separation by the S A Government has been seen to lie at the heart of some of *Apartheid's* worst atrocities. The study of ethnic identities, by *volkekundiges*, for example (see Sharp 1980), has appeared as an unquestioning acceptance - or even an ideological justifying - by academics of this official policy. Because of this, scholars critical of state policy have tended to underemphasise these identities, and to stress instead uniting factors such as a common working-class identity. In recent years, however, a number of studies have singled out for analysis precisely this kind of strong group identification (see for example Clegg 1981; Marks 1986; Erlmann 1987). While these works do acknowledge that the outer parameters within which strong ethnicity emerges have been set by state policy, they are equally concerned to examine the local-level processes through which it develops and is maintained. They also have in common an insistence that these group identities must be understood not in terms of primordial loyalties, but as affiliations established by specific, and recent, historical developments.

Pursuing a similar line of argument, I look in this paper at deep-seated ethnic divisions between Pedi and Ndebele in a Lebowa village. An understanding of these requires both a knowledge of the present constraints on resources and political power in the Homeland context, and an awareness of the two groups' recent histories which have led them, in

some measure, to constitute themselves as ethnic groups in the contemporary situation. A body of literature in anthropology and history proves useful in stressing the point that ethnicity must be understood as something newly-invented or revitalised rather than as something which has tenaciously survived from the past.

Morotse is a village situated on the peripheries of Lebowa, on one of a group of "Trust farms" which were bought from white owners after 1936 to add to the existing Homeland area. Almost all the village's present inhabitants - Pedi and Ndebele - moved to their present home since the 1930s from the white farms of the southeastern Transvaal where they lived as tenants.

Administratively, although the village is part of the official Pedi Homeland of Lebowa, it is presided over by an Ndzundza Ndebele chief, Mphezulu Jack Mahlangu, and is part of the Mahlangu Tribal Area which takes its name from this chief's family. To understand this apparent anomaly one must look, again, at the history of the area's populating by labour tenants. Among the people that settled here during the 1930s was a group of Ndzundza Ndebele under their chief, a predecessor and grandfather of the present incumbent. By the time an official head of the Tribal Authority in the area came to be appointed, in 1957, there had been no recognition by the South African Government of the Ndebele as a group to which land or political status would be allocated within the Homeland system. It was in this way that the leader of the Nebo Ndebele - as the group is often called, taking its name from the magisterial district of Lebowa where it resides - came to occupy the position of chief in the area, under the rubric of the Lebowa Government.

In later years, as is now well known, a Homeland did come to be designated for the Ndebele. Its creation was prompted by the continued departure from white farms of labour tenants who were now too many to be accommo-

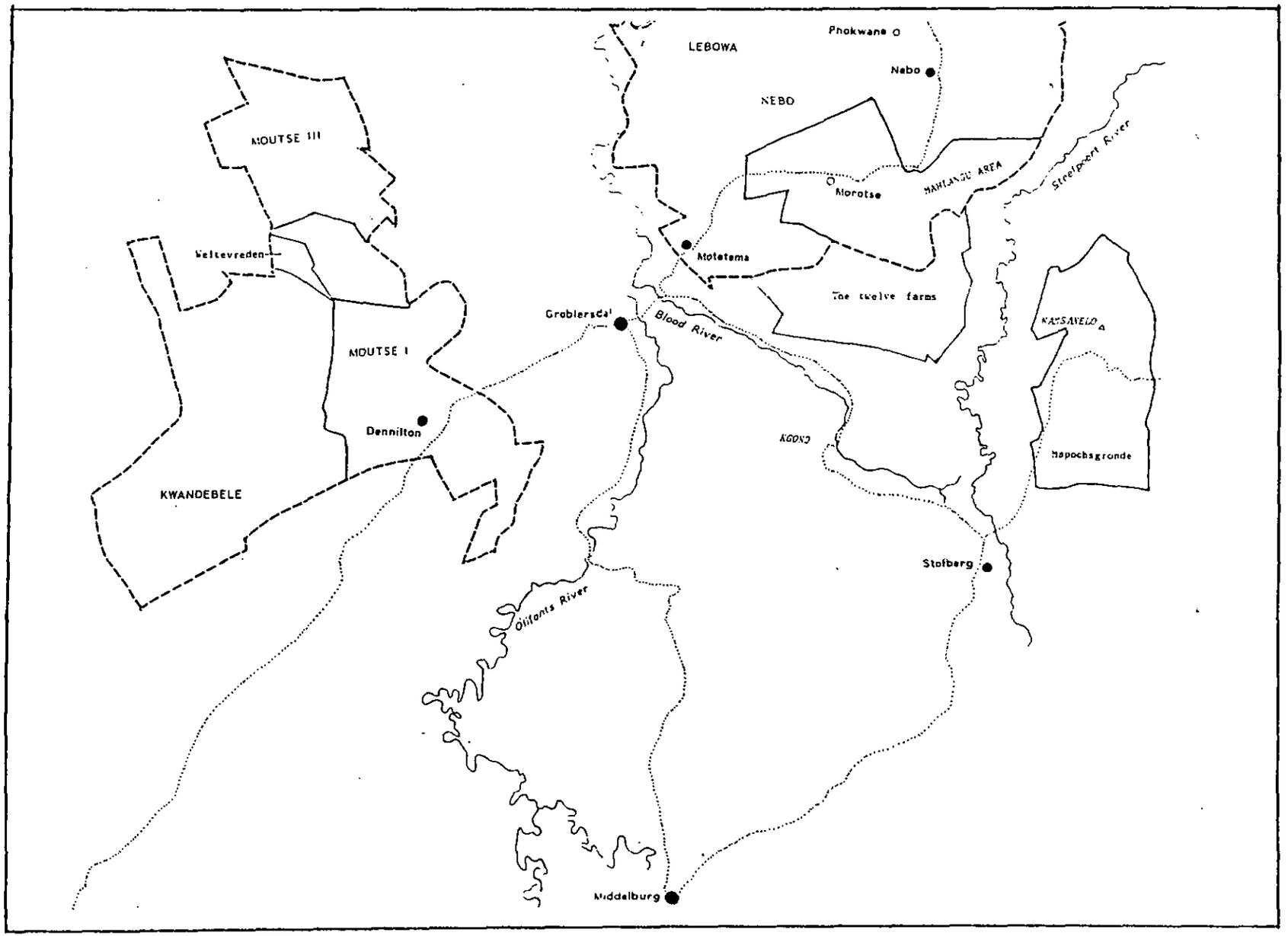

Figure 1: Map of northern Middelburg district; southern Nebo district, Lebowa; and KwaNdebele (including Moutse I and II)

dated alongside other groups of people in the various other Homelands. A tense and antagonistic relationship developed between the leaders of the Ndebele who eventually opted for Homeland status in this newly-allotted territory of KwaNdebele, and the leaders of the Nebo Ndebele who were adamant that they would never accept any territory remote from the original Ndebele heartland, now known as Mapochsgronde.[1] The split between these two branches of the chiefly Mahlangu family and their respective groups of followers forms an important background to the lives of Nebo Ndebele living in Morotse, as will later be demonstrated.

Against this background, we may look at local-level relationships between members of the two groups in Morotse. The spatial division of the village into Pedi and Ndebele sections which I observed during fieldwork extended into, and was reinforced by, many aspects of village life beyond the purely geographical. Some differences between the two communities were commented-on by villagers and enshrined in ethnic stereotypes and categorisations, but other abstract, structural differences were more clearly visible to me, an outsider.

On the level of folk interpretation, Pedi people revealed in conversation that they thought the Ndebele to be old-fashioned, with excessive respect for traditional authority, and mostly pagan in their beliefs. Ndebele,

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[1] For more detail on the split between these two groups, see James (1987: 22-3, 44-61). The account is based on two strongly contrasting sources. One, by Coetzee (1980), attributes the split to tendencies of fission inherent in the tribe's social organisation and to succession disputes during the 19th century. It follows that the one "rightful" Ndzundza chief can be identified through a careful application of tribal traditions, and that an Ndebele nationalism and pride in ethnic unity can thereby be fostered, thus healing the split. The other source is a set of oral traditions originating in the chiefly family of the Nebo Ndzundza. According to these, the split was caused by S A Government legislation during the 20th century. Given that the Ndebele were refused permission to settle in their original heartland, leaders from each group accused the other of having capitulated by accepting alternative land for settlement: one in Lebowa, and the other - eventually - in KwaNdebele. The bitterness later increased and assumed its most violent dimensions over the issue of whether the Ndebele should accept independence in their new Homeland.

on the other hand, thought the Pedi were fierce and angry, and too prone to create trouble with the whites or with any other form of authority.

These reciprocal ethnic stereotypes acquired their most stark form during an incident of protest in which the chief's authority was, momentarily, fundamentally challenged. Villagers had united to speak out against a so-called Co-op, which had for several years controlled their farming in an authoritarian manner, and in which the chief played an important guiding role. When the chief addressed them and implored them to abandon their protest, some villagers agreed to do so while others wished to carry their action still further. The division between "capitulators" and "resisters" was thought by many - on both sides of the ethnic divide - to be synonymous with that between Ndebele and Pedi.

The more etic differences, observable on the level of social structure, in many instances bore out the emic image of Pedi Christian modernity contrasted with Ndebele traditionalism. The typical Ndebele household, for example, was extended along agnatic lines, with a man and several sons - or, more accurately, a woman and several daughters-in-law - living together and sharing resources. In contrast, Pedi households in the village were generally smaller or, where a household was extended, it was most often through its unmarried daughters and their children.[2] The logic of these differing household structures was evident, too, in the way in which the rule of last-born inheritance - equally tenaciously clung-to in theory by both Pedi and Ndebele - was carried out by members of the two groups. In Pedi families it was more common for the older sons to move away from the parental home, leaving the younger son to take care of his parents, to set up home on their plot, and use their fields. Ndebele families, so strongly united by agnatic ties, failed to undergo the fission which normally occurs with impartible inheritance. Instead, the family would

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[2] See James (1985) for a more subtle account of this rather crudely-drawn contrast.

stick together and continue to use the field jointly.[3] In line with these structural differences, the role played by women in domestic and village life differed strikingly between the two communities, with Ndebele women more apparently "traditionalist", subject to stricter rules of *hlonipha*, and more often dwelling in orthodox households with their in-laws where such rules would have to be observed.

Within the broad context of the division between the two groups, it can be seen from this brief description that the Ndzundza group is more "ethnic" than the Pedi: that is, it is seen and sees itself as more culturally distinctive, and its members are subjected to cultural stereotyping by the "outgroup" more frequently than they, in turn, construct stereotypes about the members of this outgroup. A framework for understanding these strongly-marked divisions, and the particularly noticeable ethnicity of the Ndebele, is provided by some writing in history and anthropology from the last two decades.

Ethnicity in the Literature

The collection of writings I will refer to here has developed a critical stance towards the "conventional wisdom" on ethnicity. Briefly, the structural-functionalist approach in anthropology presumed tribes to be logically bounded units, each with an organically patterned and coherent social system. When adherence to these tribal systems or cultures was in evidence in a modern, postcolonial context, this was seen by modernisation theorists as an anachronistic and irrational persistence of tradition (see Kahn 1981:49). The alternative interpretation emphasises that, even if the cultural practices and symbols used to emphasise ethnicity are apparently primordial, they are invoked for reasons deriving from the contemporary political and economic situation.

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[3] See James (1988, in press) for more details.

Such a view was presaged by Mitchell (1956), who shows that the significance of tribal membership in the urban setting is of a completely different order from that of belonging to a tribe in a rural area. In the urban context, "tribe" provides a way of interacting with and a system of social categorisation for strangers never previously encountered (*ibid.*:30). Indeed, even the symbols used by Copperbelt workers to denote tribal membership are not primordial or imbued with apparent tradition as one might expect: the Kalela dancers wear western outfits such as doctors' and nurses' uniforms.

Subsequent writings lay a similar stress on the contemporary dimension. Leys (1975), writing on underdevelopment in Kenya, espouses the radical view that tribalism, far from having any roots at all in precolonial society, is the child exclusively of colonialism and of capitalist processes of production and exploitation. The real divisions that developed between people in the post-colonial era in Kenya, he says, were those of socio-economic class, and where tribal divisions were stressed these served, either to express the materially grounded class interests, or, at times, to disguise these class interests by providing links between people whose material interests were in fact radically opposed.[4]

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[4] In support of the first claim Leys cites the example of ethnic conflict between the Luo and the Kikuyu in the era immediately following the departure of the colonial authorities from Kenya. It was because the Kikuyu had an especially early experience of underdevelopment and were soon integrated into the capitalist economy, he claims, that many of them in turn took early advantage of opportunities for land purchase and the possibilities of accumulating capital, and so began to constitute a bourgeoisie (1975:199). Here, "tribe" was equivalent to "class", but in other cases the call of "tribe" served to blind people to their class interests. This happened through the formation of patron-client relationships, in which - to refer again to the above example - members of the Kikuyu tribe who had not acquired bourgeois status attached themselves to middle-class Kikuyu patrons, hoping for help from them in finding jobs, while the patrons in turn need substantial mass support in their quest to acquire business licences, contracts and the like (*ibid.*:203). The ties of "Kikuyu-ness" thus cut across ties which might have united the mass of peasants and/or workers against the new African elites which exploited them. For another analysis of ethnicity in class terms, see van Onselen and Phimister (1978).

A related body of writing suggests that, not only did tribes become significant categories of interaction post-colonially due to the juxtaposition of and competition between hitherto remote peoples, but that particular groupings were only constituted as "tribes" at all as a result of colonial processes. Thus, Ranger (1984) and Gulliver (1969:13) show how missionaries, keen to find a medium for prosetylising, would identify a tribe and its area with a particular language, while anthropologists aligned it with cultural traits and artefacts. But even more important than these processes was the way in which groups were designated and reinforced - or even quite newly created - by the system of colonial administration (Iliffe 1979:329-30). A tribe became identified with an area, a system of courts, and a definite leader whose rule was reinforced by the colonial authorities (Gulliver 1969:13).

Here, political identity and awareness of tribal membership are inseparable, having been rigidly imposed from above by the colonial authorities. In contrast, Cohen's book on Hausa traders living in the Yoruba town of Ibadan (1969) looks at informal, grass-roots political activity - also expressed through ethnic affiliation - which occurred only in the postcolonial era after the end of indirect rule. Within the formally-structured political state system, small groups emerged which defined themselves in cultural "ethnic" terms, but which served primarily to maintain their members' hold over scarce resources, and were therefore political in nature. In the case he describes, Hausa traders in Ibadan have developed an ethnic exclusiveness, expressed mostly via Islamic mysticism, which distinguishes them from the indigenous Yoruba population. Cohen claims that this is not merely an attempt to "make a statement" about cultural distinctiveness in a foreign situation, but is rather a way of enabling these traders to maintain strong group identity and thereby to establish a monopoly over the region's long-distance trade in certain commodities (*ibid.*:188-90).

Like Mitchell, Cohen stresses that this ethnicity does not merely represent a survival of tenaciously held-to traditional practices. The manifestation of "Hausa-ness" among Ibadan Hausa traders bears little resemblance to the behaviour of Hausa still living in their heartland (*ibid.*:15). The former cannot, then, be assumed to be a conservation of the latter, but rather involves a dynamic rearrangement of customs and relationships (*ibid.*:198).

In this stress on the newness of ethnicity's significance, Cohen's approach also resembles that of Marxist and underdevelopment theorists such as Leys. Unlike these writers, however, he is not concerned to demonstrate a necessary link between the phenomenon of ethnicity - or what he calls "retribalisation" (*ibid.*:1) - and capitalism. His emphasis, which could be applied in capitalist or non-capitalist situations, is on the way in which groups in competition with each other endeavour to safeguard their own political and economic interests.

Cohen resembles Marxist writers, too, in viewing ethnicity as a mask for other underlying relationships: for the Marxists, these are class relationships, while for Cohen they are political in nature. But he demonstrates in a much more thorough and detailed way than most of the Marxist writers the bridging of the gap between ethnic symbolism (the "language") and political organisation (the thing expressed). He shows firstly how, through myths of origin and of superiority, through shared and strongly adhered-to cultural features, and through the accompanying practice of co-residence and endogamy, a group acquires distinctiveness. Given this, aspects of informal political organisation - such as decision-making, the exercise of authority and discipline, and the presence of a strong ideology - may be provided by means, say, of kinship (a commonly occurring manifestation of ethnicity) but even more frequently by means of ritual, with its rules, its personnel, its frequent meetings and its all-pervasive sense of moral coercion. In this way, a group such

as a separatist church, or an Islamic mystical movement, may provide the organisational and ideological vehicle for informal political activity (*ibid.*:202-11).

In an article published at about the same time, La Fontaine discusses tribalism among the Gisu of Uganda (1969), and makes some similar observations about the latent political functions of a group's adherence to apparently cultural, tribal traits. The growth of Gisu tribalist consciousness in the colonial era involved various cultural elements, but most important of these was male initiation, since it equipped a youth to enter the adult world in which political power could be exercised. As with the Hausa, a grouping which defined itself primarily in moral, ritual terms was functioning, albeit informally, on a political level. Initiation was the membership badge of a political grouping.

Apart from this central concern of her article, Fontaine has an additional preoccupation - shared by a different group of anthropological writers on tribalism - with the question of how one may accurately define a tribe. Somewhat puzzlingly, despite her insistence that a ritual, cultural grouping defines a political one, she is still concerned to answer the question of which of these factors - cultural homogeneity, or allegiance to a political authority - should be used to identify a tribe (*ibid.*:178-80).[5] The question can be answered by looking at the work of Barth (1969), who shows that the important question to ask in studies of ethnicity is not what features characterise a tribe, but why it is con-

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[5] When, fairly recently, anthropologists began to be aware of such questions of definition, there were some serious attempts to enumerate a set of criteria for measuring where one tribe ended and another began: Naroll, for example, listed "trait distributions, territorial contiguity, political organisation, language, ecological adjustment, and local community structure" (1964, cited by Moermann 1965:1215). But quite apart from the difficulties involved in determining discontinuities in each of these criteria independently, there is the more fundamental problem that their limits or boundaries do not necessarily coincide with each other. So, for instance, a political unit may encompass two distinct language areas, or several different areas of trait distribution.

cerned to maintain itself as so strongly distinct from other groups. His emphasis is on the dynamic process whereby a group maintains its own boundaries rather than on a static, morphological enumeration of the group's cultural features (*ibid.*:10). He is interested in the folk definition: in those differences which actors themselves - both within and outside the group - regard as important in marking themselves off as distinct from other people (*ibid.*:14).

The emphasis on understanding how and why boundaries are so strongly maintained provides a unifying device, allowing for the incorporation of many of the other elements of ethnicity mentioned so far. The resulting eclectic model utilises the strengths of the various approaches, thus providing an escape from the limitations of a monocausal explanation. The composite argument might be summarised as follows. A group of people is thrown into a situation in which it is forced to compete with another, or with several other, groups, for resources which have become scarce. This is most common - but does not occur only - in a post-colonial situation, and it may be heightened by the fact that most members of the group have been incorporated into a capitalist economy as members of a distinct class, whose interests are thus opposed to those of another such class/group. Where the group alignment overlaps with or incorporates membership of other classes, this may be disguised by an emphasis on the importance of the group and its origins, and a denial of the importance of its precise class composition. In the process of interacting with various other groups in the social field, the group may come to be defined in terms of particular cultural traits. The defining may be done by members of the group itself - "I am an X because I have been initiated by X rituals" - or, in negative or positive terms, by members of another group with which it is competing for socio-political resources - "The X always behave with great respect to their in-laws", or "The X are very backward and primitive". A definition may also be elaborated by members of a ruling group which has its own interests in, or has evolved its own

way of, attributing particular features to the group - "The X occupy this region, speak this language, and we will place them under such and such a ruler for the purposes of administration". Similarly, those who act most often as employers of the group's members may categorise them as possessing definite traits as a tribe - "the X make very good boss-boys" - a definition which will probably reflect the way in which the group was incorporated, as a class or section of a class, into the labour force of the capitalist economy. In these various folk definitions, from outside of or within the group, the features selected for emphasis may be primordial - that is, referring to apparently ancient tradition - but whether these are genuinely, authentically traditional is unimportant. Equally, but perhaps less frequently, the stressed features may be modern - like the clothes and behavioural trappings of the Kalela dance described by Mitchell - or may involve some kind of cultural reconstruction or revivalism - like the prayers and religious meetings of Cohen's modern-day Hausa mystics.

A case-study of ethnicity

In the case of Ndebele and Pedi in Morotse village, one may observe many of the sociocultural means described by La Fontaine and Cohen for ensuring group distinctiveness. Among these are residential segregation, endogamy, and esoteric ritual.[6] My task now, however, is to look beyond

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[6] The few ethnically mixed marriages that occur in Morotse usually end in divorce, which informants explained by such phrases as "They are not like us", "They have different ways", but also by citing the fact that the two groups have different initiation rituals. Even if intermarriage does not pose difficulties to the adult parties concerned, it is when they have children, and when the time comes for these children to be initiated, that the ethnic blurring involved becomes most apparent, and most problematic. This is because a child cannot become an adult without also becoming "a Pedi" or "an Ndebele": the acquisition of such a status, for a child of either sex, involves undergoing rituals the details of which which are secret to members of other ethnic groups, but which are known to their own parents who have been through these rituals to become adults in their turn, and who may even have to perform crucial roles during the ritual process of bringing their children to adulthood. But in the case of an inter-ethnic marriage, one parent - the mother - will always be de-

such mechanisms and to try and explain the origins and persistence of these strong divisions, and particularly the strong cultural distinctiveness of the Ndebele.

The appearance of this group in Pedi eyes as primitive, backward and opposed to civilising influences has a parallel - though with less derogatory connotations - in the observations of anthropologists, who have seen them as clinging tenciously to their original Nguni culture (see Delius 1987:1). White officials employed by the Lebowa and S A Governments to run the agricultural Co-op, on the other hand, regard the Ndebele as industrious peasant farmers, who are down-to-earth and easy to communicate with.

The fact that each group in the broader social field emphasises a different "typically Ndebele" trait is an illustration of Barth's point that ethnicity is a situational phenomenon involving not absolute or objective cultural differences "but only those which the actors themselves regard as significant" (1969:14). In the case of the Ndebele, different features are seen as significant by a range of actors, each addressing its own agenda when interacting with the members of this group. It is only through an examination of these various kinds of contacts in a historical perspective that we may understand why such identifying characteristics - sometimes so unlike each other as to be positively contradictory - have been selected.

I start by examining the claims of anthropologists. It has been noted that the Southern Ndebele, despite their close contact with Pedi people over the last century and a half, have a social structure and culture remarkably distinct from that of the Pedi (van Warmelo 1974:67, Schapera

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fined as being outside of the group in whose rituals her children are to be initiated. The process of initiation thus makes tangible her exclusion from that group, and - in a way - from the very family she has married into and helped to perpetuate.

1949:206). Their language, form of initiation, descent groups and marriage rules appear to be typically Nguni, and since the group is known to have moved away from Natal Nguni territory during the 16th century, it is thought that these features are Nguni traits which have been tenaciously clung to.

What is problematic in this interpretation is its assumption that all apparently traditional traits are necessarily Nguni survivals of the group's Nguni origins. And even if one were to accept that these characteristics do derive from the distant past, this interpretation begs the question of what historical or contemporary circumstances have led to the retention of these customs. This question demands an answer especially urgently in the light of the fact that another group - the Northern Ndebele - who shared the same Nguni origins and have lived close to Pedi influence for an equivalent amount of time, did *not* retain Nguni language or tradition in any measure.

A more detailed look at the attitudes expressed by Pedi villagers provides some clues about the circumstances that gave rise to apparent Ndebele conservatism. It is said that whereas Pedi are modern, civilised, educated and Christian, Ndebele prefer their customs, and this makes them backward. Pedi are townspeople who understand town ways, but Ndebele are country bumpkins. Proof of their primitiveness is their dislike of education, and even when an Ndebele child does attend school, he or she will leave as soon as possible: if a girl, she will never regard herself as truly grown up unless she has worked as a domestic servant in Pretoria for a few years before returning to build a house: if a boy, he will get work so that he can buy an old car which will be parked in his parents' plot and then left to rust. When going to town to look for work, the Ndebele find jobs easily, because they will work for much less money than a Pedi would. Also, they often do not have passes, which puts them in a weak position and means that the employer can pay even less. A final

indication of their backwardness is Ndebele dislike of church, and their favouring of traditional ancestor worship.

While some of these stereotypes - like the early age at which youths leave school and look for work - are borne out by observation, others have no referent whatsoever in present reality. Most notable among these are the assumptions that the Pedi/Ndebele divide coincides on the one hand with that between town and country people, and on the other with that between Christians and traditionalists. This stereotype in fact harks back to contrasts beween Pedi and Ndebele when both were tenants on white farms, and it is to this historical experience that we must now turn.

During the first few decades of the 20th century, members of both groups were living on white-owned land in the Middelburg district and in further-flung areas of the south-eastern Transvaal. For Pedi families in this situation the proximity and availability of various alternatives gave them a degree of choice in the tenancy contracts they entered into. Firstly, although political autonomy was a thing of the past, there was still the freedom afforded by having a separate and partly independent domain, the limits and administration of which was to take many years for successive governments to establish. Secondly, especially in the period before the 1920s, the labour demands of different landowners still varied widely, with richer farmers and land companies using some land simply as "labour farms" to house large numbers of rent-paying tenants, while poorer farmers struggled in the face of this competition to retain even a few families as labourers under arduous conditions. Thus when a Pedi family did enter into a tenancy agreement which they found too heavy, or which was altered after some time to increase the number of months' work to be performed for the farmer, it was relatively easy for them to move - to the Pedi reserve, to white-owned land which they could rent for a period, or to missions or freehold Christian communities in the Middelburg district. Even after the 1920s, when contracts became far more uniformly

restrictive and less land was available to rent, Pedi were able still to exercise at least the option of becoming labour migrants and thereby escaping from the conditions of farm work.

In contrast, the Ndebele were in a position to exercise far less choice. After their defeat by the Boers in 1883, they had been given out to these farmers as indentured labourers. Although the official period of indenture only lasted for five years, and despite attempts made to break free of the original farms to which they had been allotted (Delius 1987:8-10), these people still appeared, by 1914, to constitute a "trapped labour force" (Morrell 1983:137). Partly, this situation of virtual slavery derived from their extreme poverty - they were described by SNC Edwards as being "as poor as church mice ... they work for no wages and going out to the mines is, to say the least, openly discouraged" (Morrell 1983:137). With minimal access to wages for farm or migrant work, these tenants had no opportunity singly or as a group to purchase or rent land which might have served as an independent residential or agricultural base, and they thus lacked the options which allowed their Pedi counterparts some choice about the conditions under which they lived in white areas.

It is argued by Delius (1987) that only during the period of indenture did the Ndzundza - whose chiefdom in the 19th century had included a wide range of heterogenous groups besides Nguni - forge a homogenous culture. One response to the life of the farms, he suggests, was to attempt "to regroup and to revive key social institutions like the homestead and male initiation" (*ibid*:18), and that these socio-cultural reconstructions provided the tenants with a template of a lifestyle beyond the one dictated by the restrictive environment of the farms.

Thus, the alleged adherence to tribal ways of the Ndebele - and their apparently traditional agnatic family structure - has its origins in the

farm era. While this family type may have been partly due to socio-cultural reconstruction as Delius suggests, it also owed something to the conditions of farm labour. A large family size was favoured by landlords, and the stipulation that every member render service to the farmer, and that failure to do so would result in eviction for the whole family, prompted an intensified interdependence within the family. In addition, the authority of male household heads, through whom the landlord issued all instructions and demands for labour, was thereby artificially bolstered.[7] After resettlement in the Trust, continuing poverty and lack of access to wider social groupings ensured a continuing interdependence of family members, resulting in the survival of such extended families into the present day.[8]

A further dimension to this creation of ethnicity was the fact that aspects of traditionalist behaviour - such as the wearing of skins rather than western clothes - were positively insisted on by farmers, who appear to have found the possibility of Ndzundza westernisation threatening to their security in retaining this all-but-captive labour force. Along the same lines, Delius demonstrates the farmers' reluctance to allow schools on their farms, or even to envisage the possibility of their tenants' children attending school elsewhere (*ibid.*:19-20).

And in similar vein, it seems unlikely that any church or mission activity on these farms or involving these tenants would have been tolerated. In contrast, many of the Pedi labour tenants on neighbouring farms came into contact with Christianity early on: either through white missions based within the nearby Pedi reserve, Trust areas, or Middelburg district itself; through independent African Christian communities living on

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[7] See Morrell (1983:181) for historical evidence of these trends.

[8] This explanation is more fully detailed in James (1985:182-4).

freehold farms such as that at Doornkop; or through migrants who converted during their trips to town.

Through a combination of external constraints and indigenous response, then, Ndebele identity came to be forged during the arduous years of indenture and tenancy. This interpretation usefully illuminates the modern-day Pedi ethnic stereotype of Ndebele villagers outlined above. Although the Pedi view of Ndebele as heathens is not true of the present time - there are roughly equal ratios of Christians to traditionalists in both Pedi and Ndebele sections of the village - it is an accurate reflection of the era of life on the farms, and of the culture of both groups when their members first began to arrive in the village in the 1930s.

One can explain in a similar light the Pedi stereotype of Ndebele as country bumpkins rather than townspeople. When, during the first two or three decades of the 20th century, Ndzundza were prevented from becoming migrants by the constraints of their labour contracts and the lack of resources or alternative accommodation which might have provided a basis for relative independence, farm-dwelling Pedi were managing to combine their tenancies with periods of migration to town, and were establishing networks, finding places to live, and gaining a foothold in certain defined areas of the urban/industrial economy.[9] And although Ndzundza were later to become as fully proletarianised as - albeit on less favourable terms than - their Pedi neighbours, the Pedi stereotype seems to hark back to the farm era in its insistence that Ndebele are primitive country folk.

At the same time, the aspect of the stereotype which emphasises the poorly paid jobs that Ndebele are prepared to settle for once in town is an accurate reflection of the fact that these people, when they did join the ranks of the industrial working class, stepped into it at a lower and

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[9] For an account of a similar process involving Pedi from a heartland area, see Sansom (1970:71-4, 97-8).

relatively less privileged level than did the Pedi. In this connection, one can accept the claims of writers like Leys (1975) that ethnicity may sometimes be a reflection of class position. The Ndzundza were uneducated, lacked resources and so were "relatively disadvantaged within rural society" as Delius suggests (*ibid:19*). Their change of domicile from white farm to Trust area had entailed a series of disadvantages: since many came from further-flung areas they were unable to bring cattle with them, and since most arrived after the 1950s they were unable to acquire land in their new abode. When they did begin to migrate to town for the first time, they lacked ready-made urban networks and know-how, and therefore were denied the possibility of getting jobs through friendships within the urban context: all these things had to be built up from scratch. Their class position was thus a lowly one in both rural and urban aspects.

It is this past status of farm labourers which lies at the basis, too, of Co-op officials' ethnic stereotypes of Ndebele villagers. In the context of the Co-op, Ndebele are seen as good farmers who produce high yields and who work with energy and enthusiasm on their fields, whereas the Pedi prefer sitting around in offices to engaging in honest labour. This excellence in agriculture, together with the "positive" initial response by the Ndebele to the idea of the Co-op in contrast to the "suspicion" of their Pedi neighbours, is seen as dating from the long period spent working for whites on farms. In addition, Ndebele are alleged to have a better sense of humour than their Pedi counterparts, and are said to be easier to get along with.

Interestingly, this view is the only one of the ethnic stereotypes mentioned so far which points directly to the experience of farm life as being formative of Ndebele identity - but it does so in an upside-down sort of way. There is little evidence, for example, that the experience of labour tenancy made "better farmers" out of the Ndebele: plotholders'

yields for the period 1979-82 indicate no significant difference between ethnic groups, and members of both groups had lived as labour tenants in the Middelburg district. Pedi ability to cultivate the soil while they were on the farms would not have been affected by the fact that they were freer to choose between farms and freer to migrate for part of the year from an earlier period.

What can be more readily attributed to the effects of farm life is the "easy communicability and good humour" part of the stereotype. The Co-op officials are all white Afrikaners with experience of farming in the district, to whom the idea of a farm labourer is synonymous with "Mapogger" as Ndzundza are known in Afrikaans. Whereas many Pedi despite their experience of farm life either cannot or - more often - refuse to speak Afrikaans, most Ndebele acquired a good knowledge of the language during the lengthy period of unmitigated tenancy. In addition, most are well acquainted with many other aspects of Afrikaner culture, albeit from the perspective of subordinates. Morotse's Ndebele inhabitants in the present day seem to have an ease in interacting with whites, especially Afrikaner whites, that contrasts markedly with the reserve and suspicion of Pedi villagers, and that explains and partly substantiates the Co-op officials' stereotype.

A further factor that must be remembered in understanding this stereotype, however, is the fact that the Ndebele with whom these officials have most contact, and whose sense of humour they are thus best placed to appreciate, are not in fact ordinary plotholders but rather members of the chiefly family who occupy senior positions in the Co-op's administrative hierarchy.[10] Ironically, these men do spend a lot of time "sitting around in offices" - in the Co-op office, to be precise - and it is here that lengthy bantering sessions between elite Ndzundza and Afrikaner officials

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[10] See James (1987:79-80) for details of how the Co-op administration is tied in with structures of chiefly authority.

are played out. The insistence by these officials that the Ndebele, as seasoned farmers, readily took to the Co-op's introduction must then be understood in a different light. It was these chiefly Ndebele, one of whose number in fact devised the Co-op, that were keen to push the scheme through. If ordinary, commoner Ndebele plotholders were supporters of this initiative, and if they continued in apparent support of it even when it was being roundly rejected by other villagers, this should be seen in terms of the operation of chiefly privilege and authority in the community, and of the quasi-clientelist relationships between Ndebele commoners and their chief, rather than in terms of a considered decision about good farming based on years of experience working with whites. It is these relationships that will form the subject of the following section of the paper.

Ethnicity and authority

During the incident in which villagers grouped together to protest about the interference of the Co-op in their farming, the ethnic stereotypes which emerged - of Pedi as fighters and resisters in contrast to the perceived obedience and quiescence of the Ndebele - were as inaccurate as many of the other stereotypes mentioned so far. Despite some informants' insistence that it was the Pedi villagers who initiated the protest, voluble dissatisfaction about the Co-op had come from both sides of the ethnic divide: a fact which reveals as false the officials' attitude that Ndebele were overwhelmingly positive in their approach to the Co-op. The stereotype seems more accurate however in reflecting each group's behaviour after the meeting called by the chief to try and restore calm to the village. Although the village had been more or less united in its opposition to the Co-op, it was in responding to the chief's emotive appeal for loyalty that its members appear to have divided along

ethnic lines, into compliant Ndebele and defiant Pedi.[11] It was this split, in its perceived as well as its actual dimensions, which defused the impact of the villagers' dissatisfaction, and which can throw some light on how the issue of chiefly authority influences ethnicity in the two groups.

Understanding Ndebele submission to the chief's appeal involves two major areas of consideration. The first relates to the recent history of chiefship and chiefly authority as experienced by the two sections of the community. In contrast to the Pedi experience, in which there was a long-standing tradition of chiefs being expected to voice their subjects' opinions even when these brought them into conflict with higher authorities, the continuity of Ndebele chiefly power was interrupted and eventually became re-established in a primarily ritual domain. The second related aspect concerns the role of marriage rules in constituting chiefly power and thereby ethnicity.

The defeat of the Ndzundza in 1883 left the members of this once powerful chiefdom scattered on white farms without any form of effective leader-

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[11] It might be argued here that Ndebele were compliant because it was their chief who happened to be reigning in the area and who made the appeal, and that Pedi villagers would have responded with equal docility to a speech by a Pedi chief. It is true that there is no effective representation of Pedi or Pedi traditional authority in the area. The Bantu Authority system makes no provision for a sharing of power between ethnic groups, and in this case it has designated one chiefly position, to be occupied by an Ndebele. Although there is a Pedi family of chiefly descent living in the village, the only voice granted this family in the officially-recognised political sphere is that of headman of the village's Pedi section. Almost the only effective role played by this man is that of acting as a mouthpiece to the community for decisions taken by the Co-op and by agricultural functionaries of the Lebowa Government. In other words, the village's Pedi headman like its Ndebele headman and like the Ndebele chief of the area functions primarily as a messenger for directives from a sphere of influence beyond his own. To the extent that these functions are effectively the same, one could measure and compare the responses to ensconced authority by the two ethnic groups. But there is a significant difference. The Pedi headman is subordinate to the Ndebele chief and does not not enjoy the power - however circumscribed this may be - which his superior can use to gain private rewards within the Bantu Authorities system or to play the role of patron towards his followers.

ship. Despite this devastation of the polity, the imprisoned chief Nyabela made great efforts to perpetuate his influence. According to oral tradition, he sent messages to his subjects from prison and later dispatched an emissary to rule in his absence,[12] and documentary sources corroborate that chiefly functions - most notably that of supervising male initiation - were being re-established for Ndzundza on the farms around 1886 (Delius 1987:11-13). It seems however that leaders' power was to remain narrowly restricted within this ritual domain, for all attempts to regroup and to set up any more substantial material basis for independence and political unity were thwarted (*ibid.*:17). A small group, including a branch of the chiefly Mahlangu family, did live as rent tenants on a farm called Kafferskraal where they were not directly subject to the authority of any farmer. Nonetheless, the fact that most of the chief's headmen and almost all of his subjects were labour tenants would have placed severe restrictions on the operation of chiefly power in any other than the ritual domain.

It is interesting that the issue around which the chiefship re-emerged - male initiation - was also one of the few areas of influence in which this revived power could be exercised. Although concerned primarily with ceremony and ritual, it was not however an ephemeral aspect of Ndebele social life. On the contrary, being one of the few institutions ensuring unity in the otherwise disparate existence of these people, it seems to have been loaded with several significances beyond its apparently limited scope. Delius for instance proposes that by the 1920s initiation schools were teaching youths the virtues of submission to the authority of the male household head, and that this may have been indicative of the extreme dependence of elders on members of the younger generation in the circumstances of labour tenancy where farmers wanted the whole family to work on their lands. Values taught which would ensure the solidarity of fam-

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[12] See James (1987:44-7) for a fuller account.

ilies and thus the security of their tenancies on the farms were the same values which supported and emphasised the importance of royalty, and in Delius' view the teachings during initiation may have reflected "a tacit alliance between homestead heads battling to maintain their positions and royals seeking recognition" (*ibid.*:19).

It is interesting to note that one area at least in which Southern Ndebele culture does not display an apparent conservation of typically Nguni features is that of the organisation of male initiation: the Ndebele *wela*, like its Pedi equivalent, is centralised and involves the congregating of all youths of suitable age at the king's place, rather than being run by the head of a local descent-group as is the usual Nguni pattern (Kuper 1978:117-9; Sansom 1974b:269). Although I have no information about how long this has been the case, the use of the centralised Pedi style in the context of farm life would have had the effect of further stressing the centrality of royal and chiefly power.

It seems then that, during the farm era, the chiefship acquired a new and fundamentally changed significance in Ndebele social life. While the chief's authority declined in most areas, what remained of it became focused in the sphere of ritual, and especially in the ritual institution for the education of youths. This in turn became the occasion on which were stressed the virtues of loyalty and obedience to family elders and to the chief himself. Being spread via such means, this ethos of loyalty - albeit to a chief with narrowly circumscribed powers limited to the domain of ritual - may well have become widespread amongst farm-dwelling Ndebele.

This situation contrasts markedly with that obtaining among Pedi in the area, not only those living in the Pedi reserve but even those who, like the Ndebele, were tenants on farms in the Middelburg district. In fact this proximity of reserve-dwellers and farm-dwellers was partly why the

Pedi tenant community maintained an image of chiefship in which public accountability was so crucial. As already mentioned, the Pedi chiefship despite conquest by and subordination to the whites during the 19th century still had a geographical base in the heartland of the Pedi reserve. This base, and the social constituency of reserve-dwellers that went with it, was to provide the ingredients for a fierce resistance to the S A Government's subsequent interference with the operation of chiefly power.

One manifestation of this resistance can be seen in Pedi responses to the Government's attempts, pre-1950, to establish a chain of command from Native Commissioner downwards through chiefs to local headmen. According to Sansom, the system foundered through lack of community recognition of these state-endorsed authorities. To fill the gap in the authority-structure left by people's reluctance to acknowledge these headmen, local groups of unofficial leaders called *bashalagae* had emerged by the time Sansom conducted fieldwork in the 1960s. These men had the advantage of being beyond the control of the Commissioner since their existence as leaders was unknown to him (Sansom 1970:38-43, 53-5).[13]

The most pronounced resistance of all, however, occurred at the time when the Government tried to impose Bantu Authorities. Despite much suspicion a system of Tribal Authorities was briefly set up, but it encountered such hostility - not least from its own office-bearers - that it was soon disbanded, its Paramount suspended and then exiled, and another member of the chiefly family appointed in his place. As in many other such cases, there was a split within the population of the Pedi reserve between those willing to implement the system - the supporters of this new chief - and those who followed the true Paramount (based at Mohlaletse) and who

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[13] These leaders were most often migrants who had earned enough money to buy a plough and so make a living by ploughing others' fields in the reserve area. In addition, they often managed resources for absent migrants, and it was on this service that many other aspects of their leadership were built up.

were fiercely opposed to the system. The strength of resistance throughout the whole series of episodes, which culminated in the riots of 1957, suggests however that a very large contingent of reserve-dwellers, including numerous migrants, were strongly opposed to the implementation of the Government's plans. What is interesting is that much of this resistance was voiced by, or even initiated by, members of the chiefly class in Pedi society, not the least of these being the Paramount himself (SAIRR survey 1957-8:72-6).[14]

From the evidence cited here, it can be seen that for inhabitants of the Pedi reserve chiefship remained an institution in which secular power and control were still very much at issue. And although it might be thought that farm labour tenants, living outside the reserve, would have been fairly remote from these kinds of struggles, I found evidence to suggest a high degree of contact between the farms and the reserve area. A number of Pedi informants, for instance, told me that when their families were living on farms in the 1920s and early 1930s a son would travel to the reserve to undergo initiation there, usually accompanied by one or more sisters whose duty it was to cook for him. Also making for easy communication - of culture, ideologies of resistance and the like - was the fact that Pedi farm tenants enjoyed a relatively high degree of mobility compared to their Ndebele counterparts. A family might move fairly freely between farms, but also to mission stations, to Pedi-owned freehold land, and to the reserve itself.

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[14] The later parts of this saga did of course spell a kind of defeat for resisters, since those chiefs who continued with the support of their subjects to oppose the new system were simply bypassed, and surrogate "chiefs" were installed in their place. To this day the incumbents and supporters of the Mohlaletse Paramountcy, eventually allocated the status of a mere Tribal Authority in the S A Government's schema in 1965, insist on the higher ranking of this chiefship, and are embittered by the refusal of surrounding Tribal Authorities to acknowledge its superiority (Delius 1980:356).

In these debates and conflicts about the role of royalty in the contemporary situation, it was not merely commoners who made their feelings known, but frequently chiefs who articulated these feelings. The idea that a chief traditionally is expected to act as a spokesman for community feeling is by now well accepted among anthropologists, thanks largely to Comaroff's seminal article (1974). That this idea was current too among Pedi villagers in Morotse was made clear to me by a number of informants' vehement statements. One man told me about his expectations of royal behaviour: a chief should not be a ruler who tells people what to do, but rather a follower and a listener. He must hear what his people want and act on their behalf, and if he fails to do this, the people will be entitled to fight with, or even kill him. This same man expressed his exasperation and puzzlement at the fact that Ndebele villagers lack this attitude towards chiefly power, and at the fact that "they just clap their hands and say 'Mahlangu' when (their chief) speaks".

I have sketched a contrast between chiefs whose authority came to exist primarily in a ritual domain, since they and their subjects lived in circumstances which denied the possibility of any more substantive power; and chiefs whose constituency demanded - and whose independent geographical base allowed - a retention of secular authority which led to political acts of resistance.

Marriage rules

While the differing histories of the two groups might account for their having evolved different kinds of relationships between leaders and their subjects, it is questionable whether these structures and attitudes would persist in the present day merely because of some anachronistic carry-over of ideology from the past, even if this was the recent past. What makes these historical influences effective in the contemporary setting, and thus bolsters the loyalty of Ndebele subjects to their chief, is a strong

and far-reaching network of kinship ties. This in turn owes its existence to the specific marriage-practices in this community, or at least in the group of plotholders which forms its core.

Rules governing marriage appear to be one area among many in which Pedi custom has influenced that of the Ndebele. In place of the strict exogamy typical of Nguni peoples, Ndebele custom as documented by Fourie favoured cousin marriage, especially with the daughter of the mother's brother (Kuper 1978:114). Remnants of an emphasis on exogamy can be traced however in the following aspects noted by Fourie: marriage is prohibited with any woman who has the same *isibongo* as a man, that is, with a patrilateral parallel cousin. Splits in families are explained as originating in the wish for their members to intermarry while maintaining the observance of exogamy. The expansion of the Ndebele tribe historically to include other families besides the original five was seen by Fourie's informants as having been a welcome development since it facilitated exogamy. And the strict observance of *hlonipha* and dramatising of social distance between in-laws during the marriage ceremonies are more reminiscent of Nguni groups practising clan exogamy than of the customary ease and familiarity of Pedi affines who are often already blood relatives (Kuper 1978:114-6; Preston-Whyte 1974:205).

The recent and contemporary practice of these marriage rules in the village of Morotse places more emphasis on exogamy than on the repeating of marriage alliances over several generations which recurring cross-cousin marriage would facilitate. Informants stressed this too: "You may marry a father's sister's child, but it is better to marry an unknown person". It is this practice of setting up new marriage links in each generation rather than cementing already-existing ones which could account for an impression I gained early on in fieldwork: in the core group of plotholding Ndebele who arrived early in the village, virtually every family has some kinship tie to all the others. More important for my

present argument, almost everyone is related, at least by marriage, to Chief Mahlangu.

The effects of this tendency towards exogamy are made still more pronounced by the practice of polygyny, much more widespread in the Ndebele than the Pedi village section, and especially prevalent in royal circles. The current chief's grandfather had five wives, and his father had three; and the fact that each of these was chosen from a group different from the chief's own implies still further-flung ties of affinal connection.

My suggestion is that the ties of kinship are here acting to reinforce the ethos of loyalty to royal authority described earlier in this paper. It is a suggestion based primarily on a folk interpretation, for at least a few informants offered the existence of affinal links to the chief as explanation for this reluctance to go further with their protests against the Co-op. Although it is true that some of the connections to this chief established by marriage are fairly remote and might therefore be thought not to carry much weight, some case studies seem to demonstrate the contrary. Lena Msiza, wife of a man whose mother is the sister of the chief's mother's mother, was one of the informants citing her relationship to the chief as a reason for her loyalty to him. Another case study demonstrating the strength of these marriage ties to royalty is that of David Mthimunye, a dedicated Christian. Despite his fervent commitment to being a Jehovah's Witness and his professed antipathy to aspects of customary behaviour such as traditional dress, male initiation, and the chief's court and its pronouncements, he nonetheless insisted that his marriage to a half-sister of the chief's makes it imperative for him and his family to behave with dutifulness and respect towards the chief at all times. This man played no part in the plotholders' revolt, despite his expressed dissatisfaction about the Co-op.

My observation about this tendency to exogamy and the effects of this on relationships of authority of course begs the question of what lies behind this tendency. My insistence throughout this paper has been that social rules and structures arise or change in relation to concrete historical circumstances. There could be several possible reasons behind such a change, and these can only be speculated about here. It has been noted, for instance, that the practice of "marrying out" can create widespread alliances (Webster 1977:197; Preston-Whyte 1974:192). These, besides their economic and more general social functions, may have a specifically political significance. Gluckman shows how, in the case of decentralised Nuer society, the presence of affines - and therefore of blood relatives in succeeding generations - in groups other than one's own creates a check to possible conflict and feuding between the groups concerned (1970:12-13). But in the case of societies with definite political leaders, affinal links between groups could become even more salient politically. Much has been written on the significance of cross-cousin marriage in perpetuating links between rulers and ruled (Leach 1971; Bonner 1980; Delius 1983), but the important point is that such links, to be perpetuated, must first be initiated, and this must happen via the practice of exogamy at least in the initial stages of overrule (see Bonner 1980:91; Delius 1983:55). In the accounts referred to here, the giving of wives to previously unrelated groups in exogamous marriage is initiated by the dominant or conquering group. Similarly, it could be the case that, among the Ndebele, the impetus came from royals to extend marriage-links to diverse groups of subjects. If this were the case, the trend might well have started while Ndebele were still living on the farms, and its effect would have been to counteract the dispersal and disruption of the era of farm life, and at the same time to ensure a degree of attachment to royal authority.

On the other hand, it is equally possible that marriage-links to the chief and his family began to be established by Ndebele commoners, and that this

trend started after the arrival of these people on the Trust farms. In the Homeland context, such links of affinity could be visualised almost as links of clientage, the existence of which might have been thought by commoners to facilitate favourable treatment during land allocation and distribution of other resources.

The question of which of these considerations or influences affected Ndebele marriage patterns must remain unanswered in this paper. But the idea that these affinal relationships are parallelled by, or express, relationships of a patron-client kind between Ndebele subjects and their chief is at least suggested by some evidence I found. And this leads me to look at a final, and perhaps the most important, question about the causes behind ethnicity: what resources might the group gain access to by organising itself along ethnic lines, and by clustering itself around a leader who enjoys privileged access to resources? In other words, what political functions, in Cohen's terms, ultimately underlie ethnicity in the case being discussed here?

Political underpinnings of ethnicity

It is my contention, then, that ethnic solidarity in Morotse is grounded in recent historical experiences of chiefly authority, and reinforced by marriage-ties. The explanation must be further qualified, however, to establish its truth in relation to this specific historical and geographical setting, since it is clear from a look at Ndzundza Ndebele in their official Homeland that very different relationships have developed between royals and their subjects.[15]

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[15] Here, chiefs have been profoundly influenced by, and even brought into line with, majority popular opinion. The royal family was at first party to the "independence" proposed by the S A Government, even though no member was actually to be designated as Chief Minister. But in the light of fierce and uncompromising popular resistance to the proposals, the family has swung about to identify itself with those opposed to independence, and some of its members have even been

There must therefore be something very specific about the contemporary context of the Nebo Ndebele which, added to the factors of history and kinship, has made them so apparently acquiescent to chiefly directives. Briefly, I would argue that the explanation lies in their occupation of a Homeland inhabited and broadly controlled by another ethnic group, where resources are scarce, and where competition for these resources has been predetermined as occurring along ethnic lines by state policies far beyond the ambit of villagers' control. In examining this complex situation, it is as important to understand villagers' perceptions as it is to know the facts, since it is a group's idea of itself as competing, or as being threatened, which in Barth's terms creates the conditions for its self-definition - and definition by the other group - as ethnic.

Morotse's Ndzundza villagers, according to evidence provided by my fieldwork, felt threatened in the context of Lebowa. Although the immediate area is defined as an Ndebele Tribal Authority, its situation within the Pedi Homeland was cited by a number of informants as cause for their feeling insecure here. This feeling of insecurity has been engendered mainly by the recent debates and conflicts over whether or not the Ndebele as a whole were to have a Homeland of their own. If, as some rumours had it, the Homeland were to be situated remote from Nebo and adjoining the home of the chiefly family's other faction (as, indeed, it finally has been), then Morotse's Ndebele feared they might be evicted from Nebo altogether, or discriminated against if they decided to remain there. Other accounts seeming to substantiate these misgivings rumoured that Ndebele would be denied citizenship unless they went to KwaNdebele. At the time of fieldwork in 1983, some Nebo Ndebele had been driven by these fears to pack their bags and leave. On the other hand, if KwaNdebele were to be situated on twelve farms along Nebo's southern border, as other rumours

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detained in official attempts to silence them as voicers of protest. See James (1987) for a fuller account.

predicted,[16] then the possibility existed that the Nebo Trust farms themselves, including Morotse and other villages, could be designated as part of KwaNdebele. This might be thought to be reassuring to Ndebele villagers, but their fear was that Pedi villagers would feel threatened by and resentful of the change, since it would leave them entirely under Ndebele control. And even though this was merely a vaguely projected future possibility in 1982, the sense of threat, resentment and general ethnic conflict engendered by it had already found its way into present relationships between the village's two groups.

In addition to these Ndzundza perceptions of possible Pedi resentment fuelled by developments yet to happen, there were very real and immediate complaints from Pedi villagers about unfair allocation of resources along ethnic lines. The chief and his henchmen are said to have favoured Ndebele in giving them fields before Pedi who were ahead in the queue, in allocating them larger residential stands, in deciding where to site water taps, in building the high school in a place close to the chief's own village where only Ndebele people live. There are also accusations that the chief's relatives, who hold important positions in the Co-op, have distributed plotholders' bags of mealies, and even food and fodder sent by aid organisations as famine relief, to other elite Ndebele in the area, some of whom are said to have profited from the exchange by selling these supplies from their shops. For these kinds of reasons, resentment about the fact of Ndebele control in the local context is widespread in the Pedi section of the village.[17]

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[16] See James (1987:56-7) for an account of the controversy over the Homeland's situation.

[17] The sense of outrage at the unfair partitioning of land, funds and aid is engendered by a situation of scarce resources and strong ethnicity, but it is also, of course, a product of the conduct of this particular chief. Although the kind of weakness and propensity to corruption he demonstrates are not unknown in other areas, they were not for instance shared by his predecessor.

The fact that this sense of ethnic tension has developed recently, and specifically in response to an almost unbearable pressure on resources, is indicated by opinions from both sections of the village. Pedi and Ndebele informants concurred that they had coexisted harmoniously when living side-by-side during the era when both were labour tenants. The early years in Morotse, too, had seen the two groups living together peacefully. One informant said that "it was only when so many people began to arrive here that things became 'hot', and Pedi and Ndebele started to fight one another".

The newcomers are almost all Ndebele, who have been moving off farms from more and more far-flung parts of the eastern Transvaal. These people do not share the links of kinship or loyalty which I have described as knitting the core group of Ndebele - those who arrived earlier in the village - into a solidary "ethnic" unit. They are, nevertheless, undeniably "Ndebele" - an identification given much greater weight by the way ethnicity is underwritten in the officially-recognised administration of the area. By Pedi villagers they are perceived, not only as increasing the pressure of population and the growing sense of being surrounded by strangers, but also as augmenting the Ndebele segment of the village, and thus the extent of Ndebele control. To Ndebele in the village core, this sense of growing Pedi resentment increases their own sense of being under threat.

It can be seen how this very stressful situation provides a fertile breeding-ground for inter-ethnic conflict. Members of each group are driven closer together, and further away from members of the other group, by the sense that their hold over the most basic factors of their livelihood are under threat. And paradoxically it is the Ndebele, who appear from the emic interpretations outlined above to be deriving most benefit from the ethnically-defined situation, who feel most under threat within the broader context of the Pedi Homeland.

To understand this paradox, it is necessary to look at a new factor not mentioned thus far. In looking for the material basis for a contemporary stressing of ethnicity, it is misleading to see the ethnic groups concerned as internally homogenous and undifferentiated wholes which act in terms of single uniting interests. There is, in fact, a fundamental distinction in each group between a small elite and a large mass of ordinary working people. In the case of the Ndebele group, the fact that it has been designated as being in control of the area and its resources means, in effect, that members of the elite - the chief, members of his close family who hold key positions in the tribal office and Co-op, influential shopkeepers, coal-merchants, and the like - exercise a hold over some of these things. Although this hold over resources is a tenuous and strictly circumscribed one, it is nevertheless significant in the context of local-level relationships in the village. Ndebele ascendance in the area thus amounts to little more than the provision of privileges for a few of the group's leaders. It may be, as I have already suggested, that the mass of ordinary Ndebele villagers attempt to establish their allegiance to these leaders, and to the chief in particular, in order to try and ensure that they will be favoured in turn. Their identity as Ndebele on its own by no means guarantees priority in the allocation of resources, but their links to the chief - of marriage or merely of loyalty - might be thought to do so.

My argument, restated, runs like this. A limited package of material resources - land, funds, aid, buildings - exists, for the use of this ethnically divided village. Although broader decisions about the disposition of these are taken in a sphere dominated by Pedi politicians, more immediate control is in the hands of local Ndebele authorities. Ndebele villagers, living side-by-side with their Pedi counterparts, sense a resentment from them at the power exercised by these authorities. Given the gradually tightening restrictions on resources, the effect of this perceived resentment - and of the ensuing sense of being under threat -

is to strengthen group solidarity, but particularly to deepen affiliation to its ruling clique, in an attempt to reinforce and retain its members' access to these key resources.

In this description of the village's Ndebele population as split by differences of wealth, power and influence, we can find suggestions of the existence of clientelist relationships. Although this aspect is merely touched on here, and in my earlier point that ties of marriage to the chief might well also be those of allegiance to a patron, it reiterates Leys' observation that an emphasis on tribal or ethnic identity and unity may serve to link members of different social strata in relationships of interdependence, while disguising the fact that their interests are fundamentally opposed (1975:203). Here, Ndebele villagers form a solidary group together with their leaders rather than grouping together with their Pedi counterparts whose material situation resembles theirs so closely.

My suggestion, along similar lines to those argued by La Fontaine (1969) and Cohen (1969), is that this group's definitive, apparently old-fashioned traits are serving important political functions. In his case study of Hausa traders in Ibadan, Cohen shows that not only is custom a cloak for relationships of power and control over resources, but also that it actually provides an idiom in which these relationships can be expressed. Things like an ideology of togetherness, opportunities to meet, hierarchies of authority and structures of decision-making do fulfil their ostensible purposes - which in Cohen's examples are kinship and religious ones respectively - but they also act as an infrastructure allowing for decision-making about and organisation relating to political issues: in this case, control over long-distance trade in Nigeria.

There are important differences however between Cohen's Hausa traders and the strongly ethnic Ndebele of my case study. It is true that apparently customary features, such as links of kinship to the chief, and male ini-

tiation schools, are here providing a blueprint for group solidarity and for relationships which appear to facilitate access to land, funds and general patronage. However the group is not organising itself spontaneously along ethnic lines in order to seize control over an available area of influence in a fairly fluid field, as the Hausa traders were doing. Rather, the outer limits of the field are very clearly set by the S A Government, and the fact that the competition for resources in the contemporary era is an ethnic one is also preordained from above. In addition, the group's leader has had his power augmented and artificially buttressed by the state's system of recognising a particular chiefly line as "rightful" in any given area. In such a situation, the opportunity does not arise for a group to organise itself in as flexible a manner as Cohen's traders did, with all participants as fairly equal partners in the enterprise. Rather, their political organisation in a bid to secure resources takes the form of establishing and perpetuating their allegiance and subordination to a ruler who, since his power is guaranteed him by the system, is one of the only actors in the entire drama with a reasonably secure hold on the goods that everyone desires. Another important thing to remember is that in this case the possible rewards are extremely meagre and may not be forthcoming at all. But I do not think that this inadequacy of return would lessen the tenacity with which people cling to such relationships of dependency.

There is one last point I wish to make about different degrees of formality in ethnic organisation. Writings on the colonial period saw ethnicity as having been encouraged or even newly created by the imposed capitalist economy (Leys 1975:199) and/or by the colonial authorities in their attempts to construct a system of administration for the colonies (Gulliver 1969:13; Iliffe 1979:326-8). It was only after independence, once these divisions were no longer officially enforced or recognised, that they began to acquire their own volition. Groups now began of their own accord to organise themselves along ethnic lines in a bid to gain or

retain control over key resources (Cohen 1969:13-4, 184; La Fontaine 1969:182).

The trajectory followed by the Ndzundza Ndebele has been almost exactly the opposite. Up until very recently the group has had no official recognition at all, and even when state policy about African administration had begun to adopt the idea of ethnic separation as its keystone the Ndebele were still being accommodated alongside members of other groups in different Homelands. The era of Ndebele indenture, labour tenancy and its immediate aftermath thus produced its own spontaneous and internally-generated group identity and solidarity, along some of the lines suggested earlier. It is only more recently that this organic growth of ethnic awareness has begun to be moulded by state policy, and has assumed the rigid dimensions I have outlined here. One can only speculate about whether this strong ethnicity would fade away if the official policy of ethnic separation to be abandoned.

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