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"Making Short Work of Tradition": Popular Rural Protest and the State of Emergency in Bophutatswana, Marico and Rustenburg, as perceived by TRC Witnesses, 1977-1993

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Introduction

The testimony and proceedings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission are voluminous and instructive. They mark the first time in modern South Africa's history that an official body has encouraged people to speak freely about recent events and to speculate how the violent excesses of the past might instruct the creation of a better, more democratic society. It must be one of the first times that a modern state has frankly admitted that the prerequisites of a truly just society may not already exist.

These frank admissions have also encouraged discrete groups of people to assume a certain smugness about the authoritarian single-mindedness of the apartheid and segregation eras. Much like people of another time who admired Mussolini and the Italian fascists because they appeared to make Italy's trains run on time, some still believe that there was a measure of commonplace virtue in the certainties of the recent past.

Political virtue, however, is never commonplace. It requires more courage than force to maintain. It demands a degree of skepticism about motives, interests and outcomes that authoritarian governments find disturbing. Skepticism of this sort soon became the hallmark of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC aimed to establish a process for democratic procedure-- one in which its sustained inquiry about motives and intent would be focussed on the former South African state and its opponents. But could this high-minded charge hold up under wide ranging and numerous accounts of atrocities and state terror?

I propose to examine how the testimony of ordinary African witnesses from the former districts of Marico and Rustenburg, and also from the fictional political convention of Bophuthatswana enabled the TRC to pursue its expanded charge of "establishing as a complete a picture as possible of the causes, nature and extent of the gross violations of human rights which were committed during the period from 1 March 1960, including the

antecedents, circumstances, factors and context of such violations". In conformity with my peculiar way of making a living, I will place my greatest emphasis on the "antecedents".

The Unravelling: The State of Emergency

In 1984, after nearly eight years of popular protest, President P.W. Botha declared a countrywide state of emergency. Two years later Botha's regime declared its intention to incorporate Leeuwfontein and Braklaagte, two of Rustenburg and Marico's most notable "black spots", into the fictional state of Boputhatswana. Local and tribal councils of the Baphokeng and Bafarutshe Tswanas began to recast themselves as Defense Committees and actively sought to identify themselves with the banned African National Congress (ANC) , the United Democratic Front (UDF), and Peoples' Progressive Party (PPP).

On 10 February 1988, their actions and related popular protest briefly overthrew the administration of Lucas Mangope in Boputhatswana. Mangope was restored to office 18 hours later by battalions and paratroopers of the South African Defense Force (SADF) and the conspicuous appearance of P.W. Botha, General Adriaan Vlok, the South African Minister of Police, and General Magnus Malan, the Commander-in-Chief of the SADF. In March 1990 Walter Sisulu of the ANC described the subsequent armed confrontations and protests as a "popular revolt". On 29 December 1990 the murder of Glad Mokgatle, Lucas Mangope's subaltern in Phokeng, constituted a determining moment in the protracted conflict.

Four years later, on the eve of South Africa's April 1994 elections, local Africans in Mmabatho, the fictional capital of the equally fictional Bophuthatswana (Bop), seized local

radio and television stations. Civil servants, who had defended Bop's president, Lucas Mangope, and his Christian Democratic Party against the earlier accusations of local members of the African National Congress (ANC), stayed away from their offices for weeks at a time.

When panic stricken white farmers from Krugersdorp, Marico and Rustenburg showed up in AWB drag, ready to give their friend Mangope a hand, many of Bop's soldiers joined the popular opposition. Some turned their guns on Mangope's "guests". Others passively watched events from the sidelines. Mangope was on his last legs. The complicated process of constructing the new South Africa out of the political absurdities and violence of the past had begun in the western Transvaal.

In fact, the collapse of apartheid in the rural areas of the western Transvaal and in the counterfeit state of Bophuthatswana had begun much earlier. The extraordinary number of atrocities that took place between 1984 and 1990, during the state of emergency, accelerated its demise. The state and its opponents made "short work of traditions" during this brief but highly charged period, just as Alexis de Tocqueville claimed revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries did at the height of the French Revolution.

In effect, the state of emergency destroyed the legal certainties of the apartheid era , making it impossible for the judicial process to reaffirm publicly the existence of the state by punishing the "guilty". Arrests and punishment were

carried out behind closed doors. The use of the "wet bag", defenestrations and mutilations of genitals and limbs became as commonplace as filling out the blank spaces on a charge sheet. By the end of the 1980s South African Defense Force (SADF) directly administered most of the country's cities and towns. Civilian officials served at the pleasure of the SADF's General Staff. General Magnus Malan succinctly stated the position in his initial statement before the TRC,"...the territory of the Republic of South Africa was declared an operational area for the South African Defense Force."

But even though judging and punishing took place behind closed doors, state sponsored violence had to be public. Otherwise half the point of the violence carried out by the state's security forces would have been lost. Civic associations and neighborhood defense groups would have found it easier to move into the space abdicated by civilian administrators. How did all this work in the countryside and the fictional homelands?

The Present Meets the Past

On 6 May 1997 an African peasant farmer named L.S. or Lizo Makganye came to testify before commissioners and translators of the TRC at a public hearing in the town of Zeerust. He had come to town from his nearby village to talk about how he and his fellow Bafarutshe had resisted incorporation into Bophuthatswana, even though the ostensible reason for his presence was to talk about how his son and other young people in his village had been unjustly arrested and tortured in 1993. At one point, the conversation between the elder Makganye and the commissioners took a turn that was reminiscent of William Faulkner's injunction that "the past is never really the past":

> Chairperson: You said earlier on..., that there was a struggle of the people of Braaklagte against incorporation but that was around 1989...- but this happened in 1993. What was happening in 1993 that made the police come back in such large numbers back into the community and take such action against the people?
>
> Makganye: They did so because we did not want to be incorporated in Boputhatswana.
>
> Chairperson: But incorporation had taken place already. We're talking about 1993, we're not talking about 1989. Incorporation had taken place already.
>
> Makganye: Do you say we were incorporated in Boputhatswana?
>
> Chairperson: Yes.
>
> Makganye: Do you say we were incorporated in Boputhatswana in 1993? We didn't agree. When they, immediately they said
> we were incorporated, we did not agree. We continued with our struggle, because we knew that there was nothing called Boputhatswana, it's part of South Africa.

Anomalies and contradictory conversations of this nature had happened before in South Africa, but without the potential political explosiveness of the 1990s.

On the afternoon of 20 April 1914, less than hundred miles from where L.S. Makganye had his 1997 exchange and less than a year after the Land Act had been introduced on the floor of the Union Parliament, C.J. du Plessis, a prominent Afrikaner farmer from the Hex River Ward of Rustenburg, stood up in a district courtroom and declared that, "The natives in the Hex River Ward I think should be treated just the same as other natives, but they have got ground, in that Ward, and it is very difficult for me to state what should be done with them... In the long run they will have to be shifted. They must realize that they cannot go on as they are at present. If Hex River were left as it is, where a white man or Kaffir could buy where he liked, it would result in war".

War did come, but not as du Plessis had imagined it.

> In August 1914 the First World War broke out. Six months later men like du Plessis and their families participated in or gave passive support to a rebellion against South Africa's entry into the war and the apparent failure of the Land Act to give them complete control over the lives and expectations of their African tenants and laborers. The rebellion unleashed a pogrom against the persons and property of many Africans in the Hex River, Zwartsruggens, and Linskana wards of Rustenburg and Marico. Despite the bluster and violent

acts of participants in the failed rebellion, the machinery of African dispossession continued to move too slowly for most white farmers. The Land Act had been a great political victory for one segment of white landowners, but its weak executive powers made it a creature of the government of the day. The executive impasse spiked corporal punishment and violence on the farms of the Transvaal and former Orange Free State, which, combined with Afrikaner bitterness about the outcome of the Anglo-Boer and First World War, made for a faint but continuous current of violence in the countryside.

Proclamation after proclamation pointed this out--from the 1916 Beaumont Commission Report to the 1939 Proclamation 31. In the 1920s, as Prime Minister of the Pact Government, J.B.M. Hertzog sought to address the problem by ratcheting up the number of days that an African labor tenant was obliged to work on his landlord's farm to 120 and by appointing one of the principle leaders of the 1914 Rebellion, General J.C.G. Kemp, as Minister of Agriculture. However, such measures failed to accelerate the pace of dispossession of Africans landowners outside the designated reserves.

Consider the closing remarks of a letter written to Hertzog's Secretary For Native Affairs by Ernest Stubbs, the Native Commissioner for the Rustenburg district at the time. Stubbs was protesting the removal of the Sub-Native

Commissioner's office from the town of Rustenburg to a more removed area of the district:

> A large proportion of the Native population is spread among the farmers of the District. The proposed Native Areas, it is true, are more or less situate (sic) in the North,... but sight should not be lost of the fact that a considerable portion of the S.N.C.'s time is necessarily taken up in adjusting disputes and settling questions which constantly arise between European employers and Native employees... I do not agree that the tendency would be for Natives to have recourse to his office without going to lawyers, were his station at Pilansberg. The contrary would be the case. Natives would more than ever in the absence of an officer carrying the status and prestige of a Sub-Native Commissioner fall in the hands of lawyers and the litigation would be multiplied two and three fold.

White farmers in these areas felt particularly aggrieved about the African landowners in their midst. However marginal some African holdings might have been, neighboring white farmers claimed, right up to President J.B. Vorster's creation of the fraudulent state of Bophuthatswana in December 1977, that African landowners had "picked the eyes out of the country".

The Changing Modalities of Rural Contestation

Trading on the received wisdom about South Africa's countryside, as well as a healthy suspicion of it, historians of rural South Africa have depicted it variously. In one instance it is a place of "cows and peace". In another, we are told that occasionally it has become a stage for inter and intra- ethnic violence. Finally, it has also been a place where African peasant farmers and their families have struggled quietly and ingeniously to hold on to what little they have given the overbearing demands and constraints of white domination.

Much of the testimony given to the TRC suggests that all these capacities and conditions were present in places like the western Transvaal at one time or another. But their relationship to each other departed radically from what had obtained previously during the course of the popular protest of the 1980s. Such protest occasioned the growth of agrarian versions of the urban civic associations and village level defense committees. In Rustenburg and Marico the leadership of the new organizations encouraged migrant workers to join as well, so that they might stay informed about the scope and nature of repression in the cities. Some of the rural organizations also doubled as incipient agricultural cooperatives and interlocutors for African farm workers on white owned farms.

None of these developments were especially novel. Similar happenings had taken place in Zeerust in the late 1950s, when President Hendrik Verhoerd's government organized a special rural division of the South African Police (SAP) called the "Mobile Column" and attempted to foist passbooks on rural African women. But that rural Africans were now forming such organizations under the nose Mangope's regime and in defiance of a sustained military state of siege made local white farmers in Rustenburg and Marico fearful and intransigent. They also became increasingly skeptical of the ability of the state in all its various forms-- from Mangope's Boputhatswana to the partially the militarized South African state under P.W. Botha and F.W. DeKlerk-- to keep rural Africans in line. After DeKlerk lifted the state of emergency and local Africans openly expressed their support for previously banned organizations, white landlords evicted thousands of African families from their farms.

Between July and November 1991 evictions of African farm workers and their families increased sharply in Marico and Rustenburg. By March 1991, they were accompanied by intensified police crackdowns and a new recruitment drive by the AWB and other right wing parties among local white farmers and white mineworkers at the platinum mines near Phokeng. From Rustenburg to Zeerust, missions and church yards of every Christian denomination were crammed with hundreds of homeless families.

During his 6 May 1997 testimony before the TRC, Reverend

Kevin Dowling, the Roman Catholic bishop for Rustenburg during the 1980s and 1990s, claimed that the 600 homeless people at St. Joseph's Mission in Rustenburg in 1991 were composed entirely of families that had been turned off local farms. Many local whites were violently opposed to their presence at the mission. Intimidated by the violent threats of local farmers and Mangope's security forces, Bishop Dowling appealed to the SAP branch at nearby Boschhoek to help him move the 600 people in the mission in late November. Dowling thought that they would be safer at a place called Boitekong. On Saturday, 23 November 1991, several days after Dowling had appealed to the police to assist him in moving the families, St. Joseph's was rocked by a violent explosion. Of that experience, Dowling said:

> ...We heard this terrific explosion and we checked the buildings...We did not think to check our church, because the year before, in 1990, our church and our commercial school had been fire-bombed, causing a lot of damage, but we did not think to check the church, only in the morning, we found this devastation in the church. A powerful bomb, which the police explained to me was specifically designed to cause maximum damage through suction...The ANC martials came in that evening and one of the things I noticed, was that a bakkie, no not a bakkie, a mini-bus from one of the mines, came in with a whole group of White miners and they said they were coming to see the damage to the church. The ANC martials turned them out.

During the state of emergency the BOP security forces gave right wing organizations and white farmers in Marico and Rustenburg an African countenance under which to hide. Once the state of emergency was lifted, such groups were obliged to construct their own machinery of terror and retribution--particularly since their own relationship to the state had

become so skewed after 1977.

The "special support" for white farmers, which had been so frequently referred to in government force reports on agriculture during the more halcyon days of the apartheid era, had all but disappeared after Vorster's pronouncement of the "independent homelands". State support for white farmers had always had ulterior political motives. Afrikaner Nationalist Party governments had distributed state subsidies to white farmers more with an eye toward insuring a solid block of rural white support (by the 1970s the majority of Afrikaans speaking whites also lived in cities) than improving the productivity of agriculture or expanding the infrastructure. It was only in the 1980s, for example, under the shadow of the state of emergency, that ESKOM, the state electrical company, finally completed the installation of power lines that served those rural areas where one had the greatest concentration of white-owned farms.

The increasing use of the tractor combine may have reduced the dependence of white landlords on the wagons and plows of their African farm hands and tenants between the end of the Second World War and the 1970s. But it was the unrelenting legal, military and political hammer blows of the Afrikaner Nationalist governments, combined with the forced removal of hundreds of thousands of Africans to the arid, unforgiving parcels of land in the so-called "Bantu Homelands", that eventually humbled African peasant landowners and sharecroppers. Numerous testimonies and depositions

submitted to the TRC suggest t[illegible] late as 1993 the South African government was forcing relatively self-sufficient African farmers in Marico and Rustenburg's "black spots" off their land with the armed might of the SADF.

Courage and perseverance have never been in short supply among Africans in the western Transvaal, but the terror that accompanied the state of emergency challenged even the most courageous and resilient. The experience pushed many such people to the breaking point. On 7 May 1997, Louisa M. Malebo, the former recording secretary for the Peoples' Progressive Party (PPP) in Rustenburg, recalled her arrest and imprisonment in April 1988, three months after Mangope's brief overthrow and subsequent restoration:

> I stayed fourteen days in the cell, that is in Phokeng. They released me and we never went to court. I then came home. From that time, I lived under severe conditions. They became the norm. A week would go by and the following [week?] I would be arrested. I did not have, I did not live a normal life.

The PPP came into being in 1985, just after the South African President, P.W. Botha, declared a state of emergency. Meanwhile Mangope's government was bent on removing Lebone Moloklegle from the chieftaincy of the Bophokeng Tswana . Lebone's chieftaincy had also inadvertently become associated with those Bophokeng who disputed Phokeng's connection to Boputhatswana. The PPP's leadership, particularly Mrs. Molebo and Rocky Malabane Metsing, made up an important segment of those who insisted that the connection had no legitimacy. Despite the claims and assertions of Mangope's security forces as they tortured her in the Phokeng Civic Center, Mrs. Malebo

insisted that the connection between the PPP and the deposed chief was, at best, symbolic.

The increasing cooperation among young, militant members of various African liberation organizations and their middle aged counterparts in the Transvaal's countryside was quite real, however. Testimonies taken between 1996 and 1997 from a number of rural Africans in the vicinity of Marico and Rustenburg suggest that a coalescence among the rank and file of various liberation groups, which had been forged in the local defense committees and civic associations, assumed a mature form after the lifting of the state of emergency in 1991. Was this coalescence a generational phenomenon? Many aspects of it certainly were. The experiences of activists during the late 1970s and 1980s, particularly those associated with the protests that accompanied the funerals of activists who had been targeted during the military crackdown, had wiped the slate clean.

As numerous depositions made before the TRC demonstrated, the apparent differences among groups like the ANC and Pan African Congress (PAC) had become irrelevant in the face of the state's massive show of force in Rustenburg and Marico. The energy and ingenuity of youthful rank and file members of these organizations fed the growth of village defense committees and phiris or "action committees". This was particularly so in the so-called "black spots", where large numbers of people resisted incorporation into Bophuthatswana in spite of the occupation of their communities by SADF troops

and Mangope's security forces. In 1989 and 1990, on the eve of the unbanning of the ANC and the other liberation groups, clashes between the SADF and Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), as well as less formally designated armed groups, at Lamutso, Singh and Ramaquane heartened and inspired local people. Soon a loose network of village defense committees extended from Welgedacht to Saulspoort.

But many rural communities in Marico and Rustenburg paid dearly for the lack of coordination among the village defense communities. L.S. Makganye, who testified before TRC commissioners at Zeerust on 6 May 1997, knew full well how high that price could be. On 14 April 1993, Mr. Makganye's son "Snowball" was arrested, imprisoned and tortured to the point of permanent mutilation by Bop policemen, after he had convened a meeting in the rectory of the Anglican church near his village. Snowball Makganye and several other young men of his village, which was situated between Mabutastad and the border with Botswana, had formed an agricultural cooperative called the Boskop Project. But they had organized the cooperative, which sought to breed cattle, sell eggs, and share plows, at the very moment that Lucas Mangope was bent on demonstrating to anxious white farmers that the upcoming elections would not make him redundant.

Torture and peremptory detention were Mangope's last trump cards. True to form, he played them in hamfisted fashion. According to L.S. Makganye, Mangope's policemen, and perhaps some SADF reserve units, attacked his village on the

night before his son's arraignment:

> During that same night they came with teargas. All these soldiers encompassed our village and shot us with teargas and others were crippled... It's not only my son that are crippled. When we asked they just said, they just told us that whoever is adamant and doesn't want to take the authority of Boputhatswana must leave but we denied to leave and we are still in our own land. White people took our land whilst they found us being there. They would come and camp near our village where we were staying before... When you tried to go to the government in Zeerust's offices, ...when you arrived they would just say, our government has spoken in Pretoria that you should leave because your areas are black spots.

When the senior Makganye had completed this portion of his statement, the commissioner and translator mildly admonished him by saying" We just wanted to hear about what you have written in your statement, but now you are telling us about the land." He was at pains to see how one could separate the two "events", for why else and at whose behest had the soldiers come? The war that C. J. du Plessis had speculated on in 1914 had finally arrived.

Conclusion

In 1977, in the midst of urban uprisings in Soweto and other African townships, President J.B. Vorster's burlesque declaration of "statehood" for entities like Bophuthatswana bought time for apartheid. But with the onset of the state of emergency Mangope's influence declined steadily in the rural areas. This decline culminated with the short lived military coup of 12-13 February 1988.

After he had been restored to power by the SADF and had his restoration affirmed by the brief visit of P.W. Botha, Mangope's power was confined to Mmabatho, the prison and police barracks at Montswedi outside Zeerust, and the secret prison and torture chamber inside the Phokeng Civic Center. Armed violence and sustained contentious collective action by the village defense committees had discounted the merits of collaboration. The mutinies in Bop's army and the general meltdown of its civilian administration by the late 1980s was proof of this. The defense committees had also exposed the cracks and tensions in relations between the state and white farmers. The violence in the countryside during the state of emergency made manifest the fiction of "independent homelands", even to those officials who strove mightily to maintain it. Violence in the countryside had become something just short of a political solvent on the eve of the 1994 elections.

Violence and aggression in any society automatically embrace related problems of social and political costs, morality, social cohesion and authority-- in short, who, through the agency of the state, can do violence to others? Secondly, because there is no known human society where violence and aggression do not occur and because the range of expression of aggression can vary-- from a hostile glance to the extermination of entire segments of a population-- it is more useful to think of violence in terms of capacities rather instincts.

Actual acts of terror and their perpetrators only amount to the most obvious aspects of the problem. The tragic dimensions of this kind of human experience have often been submerged beneath the jargon of the social sciences. Terror and violence do not constitute political programs in themselves, but they do give poignancy to political choices made by the discrete groups of people in question.

The new South Africa is still in the making, and it will be some time before that process is completed. The TRC determined to examine this process with a measure of hope but without illusions. By helping to "make short work of traditions", it has made impossible to understand South Africa's past as a series of shibboleths or coincidental misfortunes. For that, we have both the living and the dead to thank-- especially the dead.

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