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Cloete, G. R.

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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

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by: G R Cloete

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THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT OF AFRICAN POLITICS IN NATAL, 1907-20 - A PRELIMINARY RESEARCH REPORT

In the aftermath of the Bambatha Rebellion Africans in Natal were faced with a still greater disaster, an epidemic of East Coast Fever which swept Natal between 1905 and 1910 killing virtually all their cattle, with profound effects on African society.(1) In view of the important place of cattle to Natal Africans the loss was a severe blow altering in a number of ways the economic opportunities open to them in the years after the Rebellion. In this paper I will use the East Coast Fever as a starting point from which to view a number of processes in which Africans were involved in this area.

The 1910 Native Affairs Department report (2) gives some idea of the situation in which Africans found themselves in that year when the disease had largely run its course and only a small fraction of African cattle were still surviving. In the lower Tugela District the magistrate reported that about 200 African cattle were left. This represented a proportion of about 1 per 144 head of population. The loss, he stated, was unlikely to be soon recovered as people had to devote all their money to paying off debts in which the loss had involved them.(3) From Mahlabatini the report was of more than 75% of cattle killed by East Coast Fever. The disease appears to have spread from north to south and in the lower Umzimkulu area it was still prevalent at this time. Africans were attempting to control it by spraying their cattle with hand pumps.(4) These examples give some idea of the devastating effects of the disease as well as its wide spread. Few areas in Natal escaped.

As might be expected African agricultural production suffered a severe setback as a result of the disease. Throughout Natal most Africans had to return to hand cultivation with the hoe in place of ploughing. The government did make donkeys available for purchase on easy terms to replace cattle lost so that Africans could plough but few could afford them. In addition as the donkeys were brought from the highveld the vast majority of them died of biliary. As a result grain output was greatly reduced and supplies had to be purchased to make good the shortfall as well as to replace milk, an important part of the diet which

was/...

was now lost. The health officer reported a large increase in disease particularly of the scrofulous form of tuberculosis, ascribed by him to bad nourishment as a result of cattle losses.

To buy more food Africans would have to tap new sources of cash or at least exploit existing ones to a greater degree. The position was that taxes and rents (the latter rising rapidly in the last years of the 19th century as we shall see) had to be paid while the increasing demand for European style clothing and household utensils had also to be met.

Articles which might once have been classed as luxuries were gradually becoming necessities as traditional manufactures gave way to store bought articles. So, Africans were in a situation of rising cash needs, applying not only to Christians but also to traditionals, though certainly in greater degree to the former.

Many Africans were soon deeply in debt to traders or farmers. Those who still had cattle found them attached to meet their debt but this seldom freed them from the debt. The court messenge for Ixopo noted in April 1909 the very low prices cattle seized for debt fetched as a result of restrictions placed on their movement by the East Coast Fever regulations.(6) These restrictions played into the hands of unscrupulous local white farmers who knew they would not have to contend with buyers from outside the district. An investigation was set in motion by the Native Affairs Department and brought to light such reports as the following one by the magistrate of the City Division. Here, at a sale, 12 head of cattle fetched £3.12.0. "The usual practice as was done in the above case" stated the magistrate "is for the half dozen people who attend these sales to form a ring, one man buying everything, and dividing the spoil equally with his associates after the sale.(7) As a result of the investigation such sales were stopped, but they must already have done much to compound the results of East Cost Fever.

The basic problem presented to the people was that cattle as a means of preserving traditional society and protecting it to some extent from the demands of white society were no longer effective.

Cattle/...

Cattle loss also meant a decline in agricultural production as noted above and Chief Stephen Mini of Edenvale considered cattle loss one of the chief reasons why the Edenvale community had not been able to supply the Pietermaritzburg market and set up a viable market oriented agricultural economy. Many men had lost interest in the project due to cattle losses and had left the district, some even selling their land. A serious step consideri the difficulties Africans faced in gaining access to land with freehold title in Natal.(8) East Coast Fever must he seen as one of the reasons why Africans did not exploit the market for agricultural produce. This would have given an independent source of cash income to those Africans who had land and access to a market. These assets were not available to a great number of Africans in Natal.

Earlier historical works tended to emphasise the fragility of the traditional African subsistence economy which collapsed as a result of new burdens placed on it by the cash nexus and rising consumption needs. Inherent weaknesses resulted in a failure to cope with the new demands of a more complex society.(9) Recent work has emphasised the early 1900s as a crucial period in the process through which Africans were excluded from these resources. An exclusion, it is argued which largely put an end to the prosperous African peasantry which had grown up during the mid 1800s.

Such analyses have emphasised the control which traditional society gave Africans over land, labour and cattle, and suggested as a consequence that they were well placed to cope with and exploit new economic openings. This they proceeded to do, and the result was the emergence of a relatively prosperous African peasantry in the mid 1800s in Southern Africa. This peasantry suffered a decline largely due to coercive measures taken by white farmers to place African peasants in an economically disadvantaged position. An important aspect of this argument is the use of political power by whites to secure economic predominance. This process is generally seen as hearing fruit, from the white point of view, in the early years of the twentieth

century/...

century.[10] The question arises of how far this general picture for Southern Africa fits Natal. A close correlation would mean that the results for Africans would coincide with, and compound those of East Coast fever.

Slater who did some preliminary work on the situation in Natal suggests that in the early period of white settlement in Natal the traditional socio-economic life of the Africans gave them the ability to take advantage of new economic opportunities. He defines a "core of key economic resources" on which this ability rested; access to land; labour power and cattle ownership. These three were interdependent and they also played an important part in the social setting. Polygyny and lobola especially had important relations with these resources. For the moment we need only bear in mind their importance while dealing with the question of access to land.[11]

Low cost land was initially obtainable and was responsible, according to the 1852/3 Natal Native Affairs Commission for Africans becoming "rich and independent". The commissioners felt that polygyny, which they saw as "female slavery" was responsible for maintaining the wealth of Africans as it gave them a supply of labour. That Africans were fairly well off is substantiated by the fact that in 1857 out of a total of £1,918.7.0. paid in taxes, all except £35 was paid in cash rather than cattle. Land was available in a number of categories. Of these location land was probably most attractive and cheapest and least likely to make the occupant subject to harassment by whites. Next came unoccupied Crown or privately owned land, and finally, the least attractive category was that which involved labour service to a white farmer. Slater argues that as the 19th century progressed land became more difficult and costly to obtain access to.[12] This is supported by the facts of agricultural development in Natal.

Up until 1860 most farming in Natal was on a subsistence basis. After 1860 this gradually began to change. Commercial farming was introduced in the form of sugar cane cultivation on the coast and sheep farming in the midlands. The first wattle plantations were established in 1864 but lack of a cheap transportation system and hence readily accessible markets hampered the

growth/...

growth of commercial farming. By 1879 the only railway line in Natal led to Verulam to serve the sugar industry on the North coast.(13)

Changes began with the opening of the diamond fields but it was the exploitation of the goldfields on the Rand and the coalfields in Northern Natal which led to the greatest developments. The railway line to the Rand was completed in 1891 and agriculture derived an indirect share of the new prosperity. The sugar industry was greatly stimulated by the opening of an inland market on the Rand. The wattle industry gained an export market and by 1910 wattle shipments had reached a value of £213,000. Major changes in land use along the rail route to the Rand, and in the midlands and northern districts were brought about by the establishment of the dairy industry at the end of the 19th century and its growth in the early years of the 20th century.(15)

All this meant that land became a far more valuable commodity. "Kaffir farming" ceased to be the most effective way of exploiting it. Access to land became increasingly difficult and costly in the latter half of the 19th century. As white commercial farmers increased in number they complained more bitterly of labour shortage and moved more determinedly to undermine African economic independence.(16) They opposed land ownership by Africans, the creating of mission reserves and locations as well as the recruiting of mine workers which gave Africans a source of income to pay rent and avoid committing themselves to labour service.

After the turn of the century, with agriculture receiving a great boost this came to a head and the balance began to turn definitely in the favour of the white farmers. They had long opposed "Kaffir farming" with little success because of the considerable financial interests tied up in the enterprise. Now much of the land in the hands of absentee land speculators began to pass into the hands of commercial farmers.(17) For instance in the Ixopo/Richmond area fears of eviction seemed to be behind a great deal of the unrest at the time of the Bambatha Rebellion. In this area the Natal Land and Colonisation Company was selling off land occupied by Africans to white farmers as a consequence of the rapid expansion of the wattle industry.(18)

Chief/...

Chief Munyu in the Ixopo Division complained to the local magistrate, F.E. Foxon, in June 1908 that the land on which he was living had been sold and that he had nowhere to go. Foxon pointed out that if Chief Munyu was moved onto Crown land the same thing would soon happen again. The Secretary Native Affairs files at this time contain many similar complaints but no record of any solution being offered by the authorities. It is likely that in many cases a chief such as Munyu would have no alternative but to allow his followers to disperse and seek land where they could find it as individuals. The fact that this was happening in many cases is supported by appeals to the authorities to define wards for chiefs on private lands as they were defined in locations. This would stop members of a whole number of different tribes living together on private farms in conditions making it virtually impossible for the chief to assert his authority. This was never done: farmers would probably not have tolerated a chief exercising authority over men resident on their land.(19) This highlights an important aspect of the land problem. The increasing lack of land able to be exploited in accordance with traditional patterns of land usage which provided the chief with a source of patrimony to enhance his political authority.

By about 1909 Evans noted that "all the best and most accessible Crown lands of the colony have been acquired by Europeans and the large native population they once carried has been moved elsewhere or become tenants to the owners. The unfertile and isolated tracts still remaining only carry now about 1,000 kraals...."

Africans only owned about 200,000 acres. After 1904 evicted peasants who wanted to buy land to obtain security of tenure were blocked by the fact that further sales to Africans were suspended in that year.(20) This suspension appears to have extended to syndicates and groups such as independent churches. This was the position until 1913 when the Land Act put a stop to any further hope of land sales to Africans in white areas.

After/...

After the 1913 Act Chief Mbhekwe informed the Natal Natives Land Commission "we see that the desirn is to deprive us of these lands which we have bought with our own exertions, which were not given to us, and to place us upon land upon which we cannot possibly subsist. Yet some years ago it was constantly dinned into our ears that we were a lazy people who did not appreciate the advantages of buying land... We were wholly satisfied under the conditions which made it possible for us to learn better methods of cultivation".(21)

Natal farmers before the Committee were pushing for Africans who had bought land to be moved to other areas not close to railways. Much of the area in the Midlands had become valuable dairy land since the eradication of East Coast fever. The extent and nature of the political pressure exercised by the farming lobby in Natal and its effects is a field in which further research is badly needed.

The picture of a fairly prosperous African peasantry in the 19th century facing a decline in their fortunes at the end of the century and in the early years of the 20th century which Bundy has postulated for South Africa as a whole appears to be followed fairly closely by events in Natal. Detailed study of Natal shows a decline in the face of white commercial farmers who possessed political resources which gave them a great advantage when it came to securing rights to land. Increasing taxation meant that Africans had a greater financial burden to bear. Rents were also going up at this time and Africans were having to pay cash for many articles which had once been supplied by home industry.(22) To this burden I would add the catastrophic effect of East Coast fever which meant that Africans had to buy food to supplement inadequate harvests resulting from their lack of draught animals. This replaced a condition in which a surplus had formerly been produced.(23) This interpretation conflicts with earlier ones which stress the inability of traditional patterns of agriculture to meet new demands. In fact it would appear that Africans were well placed to meet new market opportunities but white farmers had political resources which helped them to eliminate African competition and they were also helped by a serious blow to the African economy in the form of East Coast fever.

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In meeting their cash needs Africans were faced with a drastic reduction in the number of choices open to them. For the many who could only find a place on private land conditions were probably worst. Rents were often exorbitant, as high as £5 per annum per hut and out of all proportion to what Africans earned.(24) The average monthly rate for Africans on European farms in 1909 was 20s.(25) Thus if a man worked for the farmer for 6 months of the year he might only earn £1 more than his basic rent and he still had to pay his government taxes. (Hut tax 14s, poll tax £1). In these circumstances many Africans provided labour for 6 months of the year in lieu of rent. Here there were also difficulties for farmers often demanded that this labour be provided in bits and pieces throughout the year when he most needed it. This effectively prevented men from seeking labour elsewhere at a higher rate than they could get on the farm and bound them to their impoverished condition.(26) Africans in these conditions were often estranged from their traditional leaders. Their general lack of education meant they were not able to articulate their grievances in the forums being developed by the new men. It is likely that there was considerable dissatisfaction in this group which African political leaders did not tap.

For those not tied to a white farmer the need for cash had generally to be met through labour migration. This was to pose a number of problems of a socio-economic nature to African society. Recent work in Central Africa has stressed that labour migration in this area became a support of the traditional tribal social structure.(27) The main element here was that land in the rural areas could be held by the chiefs and elders against the money earned by migrants. This land was wanted by the younger men who went to the towns to work as a place to retire to and also to raise their families. In Natal land shortage and cattle loss made for a different picture. Together they deprived the older members of society of their economic power. The economic roles were reversed and in many cases it was the younger men who went out to work who were the main support of the families. Traditional society had little with which to attract this wealth back.

One/...

One of the complaints levelled against the Poll Tax was that by personally paying the tax and holding the receipts young men were given a sense of independence from parental control.(28) The recognition of an independent economic status, it was felt, weakened the control of the kraal head. This process was exacerbated by labour migration according to Vilakazi who states "when they went to these places (cities and mines) they were required by industry and commerce to enter legal contracts and to earn money as individuals rather than as members of families or tribes. This insidious individualism which was being insinuated into their lives far away from the tribal setting and from the close kinship and family group, began the destruction of the strong sense of social solidarity; for here in the mines and in the cities there were few things, if any, which reminded the men of their kinship or family ties and traditions.... There developed a new class of Africans called abaqhafi....characterised by his absolute lack of respect for old traditions".(29)

In evidence before the 1905-6 Natal Native Affairs Commission Africans complained that their children went off to work and sometimes never returned. In this way the fathers were deprived of the aid which they customarily expected from their sons.(30) Others complained that when the young men did return from the mines and cities they had spent all their money. Migrant labour thus involved a considerable degree of social and economic dislocation for Natal African society. As money lost in this way was also lost to the Natal economy the chiefs were able to secure the co-operation of the authorities on this issue and in 1908 the Natal Native Labour Agency was established in Johannesburg. It attempted to maintain contact between Africans there and their families in Natal and provided machinery for sending remittances home. This met with some success but the problem presented by the abaqhafi remained and is an area in which I hope to gain further information.

I will now turn to some of the political implications of social economic milieu. Giving evidence before the Natal Native Affairs Commission after the Bambatha Rebellion an African named Nduku said "if ... we natives could only have feathers we would put on our wings and fly to another country".(31) In

these/...

these words he gave expression to the feelings of many Africans in Natal faced with the increasing pressures of white domination. The Rebellion marked the last attempt to achieve a solution to these pressures through an attempted recovery of former military prowess. A strong vein of nostalgia continued to flow through the thought of many Natal Africans in ensuing years. There were persistent rumours that Bambatha had not died at the Mome Gorge. The uprising he had led had only been the precursor to a greater one in which the Zulu people would rise as one, without divisions and would once more sweep all before them.

Nostalgia was not the only response, along with it went practical adaptation to the problems presented by the whites. Shula Marks discusses this in the last chapter of her book on the Bambatha Rebellion.(32) The lesson of unity was stressed in the South African Native National Congress.

There was a shift of emphasis away from traditional ways of meeting white pressure through military confrontation and rejection. Many traditionalists began to see education as the new tool which would equip them to meet whites on equal terms. At the same time many of the educated were disillusioned with the result of exemption in Natal. It created no substantial difference in their lives, gave them no sense of being drawn more closely into a wider society.(33) They began to take a greater interest in the affairs of more traditionally oriented Africans,(34) and the many common concerns they shared. Both groups placed great stress on representation in Parliament in the evidence which they gave before the 1906-7 Natal Native Affairs Commission. In general there was a heightened consciousness of the need for Africans to create a platform from which they could speak and act to protect their own interests within the white political and economic framework. There was a general and growing feeling that whites saw Africans only as a source of tax and labour and were indifferent to their well being.(35) The conflicting interests of whites were felt to make them useless as political communicators for African interests and aspirations. While these grievances were not new around this time they became more pressing and were more often expressed as a result of conditions in Natal after the Bambatha Rebellion.

Many chiefs during this time would appear to have been largely pre-occupied with the problem of bolstering their traditional authority. The problem they were faced with was expressed by Chief Gcokota. "I want location lands for my tribe. They have been turned off the farms. Even today members of my tribe are constantly leaving me and the result will be I will be left alone."(36) The main problem was that of securing land and this led to a period of intense rivalry over the control of location lands, virtually the only category which could still be exploited in the traditional manner.(37) The divisional magistrates were sometimes used in the ensuing struggles. In the Umsinga Division the magistrate Colonel Lugg was won over to support the Acting Chief Kwengce against the supporters of the ex-chief Jula who desired the latter's reinstatement. On Lugg's leaving the Umsinga Division his successor was advised to abide by the settlement he had made in this case and avoid re-opening the matter.(38) There were also continual disputes over land between various chiefs often leading to faction fights.(39) Convicted rebels most of whom were released after two years imprisonment, often found that in their absence their land had been taken over by others and this led to further hostilities.(40)

Thus land disputes and faction fighting over land became a major category of political expression in the period. A great deal of the time and energy of traditional leaders was taken up in these forms of political expression, this being one of the reasons why they did not become involved in other forms of political activity to any great extent. The conflicts over land were embittered by long standing hostilities left over from the Zulu Civil War and others created during the Bambatha Rebellion.

Only one attempt appears to have been made by chiefs to organise on a western model in order to secure a better deal from the authorities. This was the establishment of "Iliso Lesizwe Esimnyama" in March 1907. The organisation was active during 1907 and 1908 holding a number of meetings to discuss land and the Native Administration Bill introduced by the Natal government after the Bambatha Rebellion. The establishment of a newspaper was also planned suggesting that the line taken by John Dube's Ilanga lase Natal was not regarded as satisfying the needs of the new

organisation/...

organisation. "Iliso's" activities encouraged the Natal government to include a clause in the Bill regulating Native Assemblies. Amongst other things it forbade chiefs to convene or attend political assemblies without the written permission of the Secretary for Native Affairs. This called forth a protest from a number of chiefs but the Iliso appears to have lapsed after this. Many chiefs were fearful of taking any action which would offend the government, or even which was not specifically supported by the government.(41)

I have been told that Solomon who succeeded Dinizulu on his death in 1913 set out to overcome the internecine hostilities dividing the Zulu people and was able to resolve many of them. This created a basis for more united action by the chiefs, but as yet I do not have much evidence for or against this.(42) As far as people depended on chiefs for political leadership then, they were not likely to get it. In fact it can be argued that at this time many Africans were faced with a leadership hiatus. The "new men" were largely concerned with pressure group politics aimed at securing acceptance by white society. To this end they often exhorted Africans to adopt European agricultural methods and go to work on the mines and in general accept the work ethic to prove their worth. The former course was extremely difficult, the latter unattractive. Discontent mounted and was expressed during the period of the 1914-15 war by the great reluctance Natal Africans showed to enlisting. The exhortations of the Natal officials and the new men failed to overcome this expression of discontent.(44) Instead it was simply allowed tp fester on until given some political expression through the activities of the Natal branch of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union in the 1920's.(45)

To/...

To sum up I would say that once commercial farming on a large scale became viable in Natal land became a far more valuable commodity. Greater productivity was yielded through direct exploitation by white farmers than could be gained through "kaffir farming" by absentee landlords. As a result many Africans found themselves evicted while white farmers used their political influence to exclude Africans from obtaining land through purchase or in the form of further locations. The effects of this, coinciding with those of cattle disease greatly weakened the financial basis of the traditional social system. New sources of income had to be tapped. By their nature they tended to further undermine the old economic order by placing economic power in the hands of younger men. The older men had few resources with which to attract cash wages so that they could be converted into more traditional forms of wealth. In this situation, with the futility of rebellion fresh in the minds of Natal Africans, much political activity became focussed on obtaining a share of the small amount of land which could still be held in accordance with traditional patterns of land tenure. The fear of the white government in which many traditional leaders stood and their sense of the futility of opposition may have had much to do with this internalising of political activity. Those chiefs and headmen who did try to involve themselves in wider political currents were rapidly confronted by opposition from the white government which had the power to depose them.

1) C. van Onselen, Reactions to Rindepest in South Africa 1896-97. J.A.H. Vol.XIII No. 3 (1972) pp. 473-488

2) Union of South Africa. Department of Native Affairs Blue Book of Native Affairs 1910 (U17-1911)

3) Many Africans became indebted to storekeepers. In areas where a surplus had once been produced there was now a shortage which meant buying food at inflated prices from traders.

4) U17-1911 pp.167-186

5) U17-1911 pp.310-34

6) S.N.A. 1/1/430 13440/09

7) S.N.A. 1/1/433 1631/09

8) Natal Native Affairs Commission (N.N.A.C.) p.910

9) C.W. de Kiewiet, A History of South Africa, London, 1941 p.197

10) C. Bundy, The Emergence and Decline of a South African Peasantry, African Affairs, Vol.71, October 1972 pp. 369-388; G. Arrighi, Labour Supplies in Historical Perspective: A Study of the Proletarianisation of the African Peasantry in Rhodesia, The Journal of Development Studies, Vol.6, No. 3 April 197 , pp.137-234

11) H. Slater, The Changing Patterns of Economic Relations in Rural Natal 1838-1914 unpublished seminar paper, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London University, January 1972.

12) H. Slater op.cit pp. 7-10

13) N. Hurwitz, Agriculture in Natal 1860-1950. Natal Regional Survey Vol.12 Cape Town 1957.

14) N. Hurwitz, op.cit. pp. 11, 12.

15) N. Hurwitz op.cit. pp. 13, 36, 105.

16) P. Bundy, op.cit. p.385

17) H. Slater, op.cit, pp. 8, 9; S. Nicolaysen, African squatting on European farms in South Africa B.A. Honours Thesis (Wits) contains considerable evidence of evictions around this time.

18) S. Marks Reluctant Rebellion: The 1906-8 Disturbances in Natal O.U.P. 1970

19) S.N.A. 1/1/400; 1582/08; S.N.A. 1/1/401 1767/08

20) P. Bundy op.cit., p.385

21) Report of the Local Native's Land Committee, Natal Province, p.38 UG 34-18

22) SNA 1/1/443 2963/09; Report by D.N.C., No. 1 District, on the subject of landlord and tenant.

23) Union of South Africa, Report of the Native Affairs Department for 1910. U17-1911. pp. 31 and 38.

24) Natal Native Affairs Department Report 1908, p.16.

25) N. Hurwitz, op.cit. p.31.

26) U.G. 17-1911.

27) W. Watson, Tribal Cohesion in a Money Economy: A Study of the Mambwe People of Zambia, Manchester 1971; J. van Velsen 'Labou Migration as a positive factor in the continuity of Tonga tribal society',in A. Southall ed., Social Change in Modern Africa, Oxford 1963. Other works have shown the destructive impact which labour migration can have; G. Wilson, The Economics of Detribalisation in Northern Rhodesia; A.F. Richards, Economic Development and Tribal Change: a study of immigrant labour in Buganda, Cambridge, 1953.

28) N.N.A.C. pp. 708, 714, 718.

29) A. Uilakazi, Zulu Transformations: A Study of the dynamics of Social Change, Pietermaritzburg 1965.

30) N.N.A.C., pp. 734, 870, 873.

31) N.N.A.C., 1906-7. p.736

32) S. Marks, op.cit. ch.13 "Aftermath"

33) N.N.A.C. pp. 909, 911.

34) Ilanga lase Natal May 28, 1909

35) N.N.A.C. pp. 762, 771, 722.

36) Natal Local Lands Committee U.G. 34-18.

37) S.N.A. 1/1/412, 2975/08; 1/1/412 3030/08.

38) S.N.A. 1/1/424 696/09; 1/1/424 617/09.

39) S.N.A. 1/1/445 3251/09.

40) S.N.A. 1/1/456 354/10.

41) S.N.A. 1/4/20 92/08; 1/1/443 2949/09.

42) Interviews. Mr. Selby Msimang 16th Feb. 1973; Mr. A.W.G. Champion 15th Feb. 1973.

43) Ilanga May 28th.

44) S.N.A. 1/4/25.

45) Sheridan W. Johns, "Trade Union, Political Party, or Mass Movement: The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of South Africa", in Protest and Power in Black Africa, eds. R. Rotberg and A. Mazrui, New York, 1970.