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# After years in the wilderness: development and the discourse of land claims in the new South Africa

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# "After years in the wilderness": development and the discourse of land claims in the new South Africa

## Introduction

Anthropologists, it is currently claimed, can and should play a significant role in those processes of managed and haphazard social change subsumed under the heading of development (Pottier 1993). In South Africa, many anthropologists have acted - indirectly or directly - to defend the rights of communities subjected to the vagaries of the capitalist economy and to various forms of government planning. In relation to the former, they have documented the effects of labour migration and of the gradual decline in subsistence agriculture; while in relation to the latter they have looked at the social upheavals caused by population resettlement, whether these were the clear outcomes of state plans or rather more unforeseen. But a more novel and certainly more ambitious approach would be for the anthropologist's gaze to broaden, thus encompassing not only these local communities but also those who have represented, or worked to alleviate, their plight. My own analysis here is based on the discourse and rhetoric used not only by resettled people claiming restitution but also by parties - people in the "land" NGOs, in local and regional government, and in any of a number of newly-emerging consultant consortiums - who concern themselves with restoring territories to their claimants and with developing and improving these.

To broaden one's vision in this way may seem like stepping into a political minefield. Surely, one might argue, the motivations and modes of expression used by those who have worked unselfishly on behalf of the dispossessed need not be probed in this way. Surely these assumptions and rhetorical styles are, in any case, utterly dissimilar to the kind of development rhetoric, criticized by many writers, which represents the third world as backward: as a tabula rasa on which knowledge must be written by the West. But it is generally acknowledged that the job of the anthropologist is to deconstruct cultural realities by making clear how these relate in often contradictory ways to the specific social context within which they were produced. If anthropologists are currently encouraged to study the processes of development and change, and if it is thought appropriate for them to include within the ambit of their investigation the developers as well as those developed, then it is illuminating to examine and analyze the forms of behaviour and expression used in both

arenas, and the extent to which these do or do not intersect.

The broad context of my present study is that of the ongoing reconstruction of identities, within the family, civil society, and the South African state. In the process of remaking themselves, developers and those developed draw on multiple rhetorics. An inclusivist and communalist discourse which originally emerged in the struggle against a long history of coercive state planning, may mask the particularist and individual interests which are served when land restitution is pursued. A liberal/universalist discourse of human rights may overlap, but is often at variance, with the primordialist ideologies of ethnicity and tribe. The charter for change which results from these interlocking discourses can be unexpected. A rural community may desire rapid material advancement while its urban-based development partners envision it as committed to communalist ideals and simple and "appropriate" technology.

**Development planning in South Africa**

Among the major players in the drama of land restitution and development in South Africa are the Land NGOs. The existence of these organisations, like that of many cognate organisations in South Africa, must be understood in the broad context of apartheid and of the struggle waged against it on various fronts. They had their origins, specifically, in defending the rights of those who had owned freehold land in white or common South Africa and whose lives had been disrupted by the infamous forced removals of the apartheid era, which reached their height during the 1960s. But they drew part of their impetus, and some of their modes of expression, from popular struggles with a rather longer trajectory. It was the resistance to plans for agricultural "betterment", which the South African government attempted to impose as a result of the report of the Tomlinson Commission in 1955, which originally provided the discursive armoury for this particular set of battles.

The array of planning initiatives undertaken in the wake of the Tomlinson Commission's report was a complex one. It arose out of an observed need to improve and rationalise agriculture in the reserves; its proper fulfilment would entail the creation of a class of successful farmers, cultivating on a freehold basis both the land formerly held in "Trust" and

that currently used in communal tenure by numerous subsistence farmers. It would, of necessity, require the redeployment - or more bluntly the dispossession - of many of these smallscale communal-tenure farmers. But the implementation of these plans in the broader context of apartheid's mass relocations meant that they became little more than a way to subdivide the land so that successive waves of newcomers could be accommodated on it. What was originally, then, a modernising development plan conceived of in broadly similar terms to those being proposed and implemented elsewhere in the world, became recast as part of the apartheid state's strategy, articulated in racial terms, to control the lives of African country-dwellers.

While the rhetoric of development plans often masks unequal power relations (Hobart 1993), South Africa's plans for agricultural betterment as finally implemented were less circumspect. The implementation of these plans exposed relations of control rather than hiding them. Their unwilling recipients - or victims - resisted with varying degrees of intensity and effectiveness. In some areas, especially heartland reserve areas which had previously housed independent chiefdoms, uncompromising defiance was mounted against all facets of the state's attempts to achieve total control. People who had submitted to the regulation of their lives in the cities as labour migrants were refusing to allow state interference at the place which was cherished as home, and their informal struggles, in some cases, became the basis for involvement in broader-scale resistance politics (Delius 1990; 1996). In other areas, such as those held by the South African Native Trust to which people moved from various forms of tenancy or freehold in areas officially designated white, opposition to the planners expressed itself in recalcitrance or was hidden behind an attitude of weary resignation to the actions of planners and extension officers lumped together as the "Trust" (James 1988; 1994:56-7). But, whether the land had been long possessed or more fleetingly occupied, it had in both cases represented a source of security and a refuge against outside interference.

Fierce and subdued alike, the struggles against state attempts to dictate land use provided the basis for a populist rhetoric rejecting top-down initiatives undertaken by agents from beyond the community, and depicted the land as something communally owned which would be communally defended. This sense of a uniformly-experienced injustice and a shared resistance against outside intervention, which pervades much of the writing in NGO

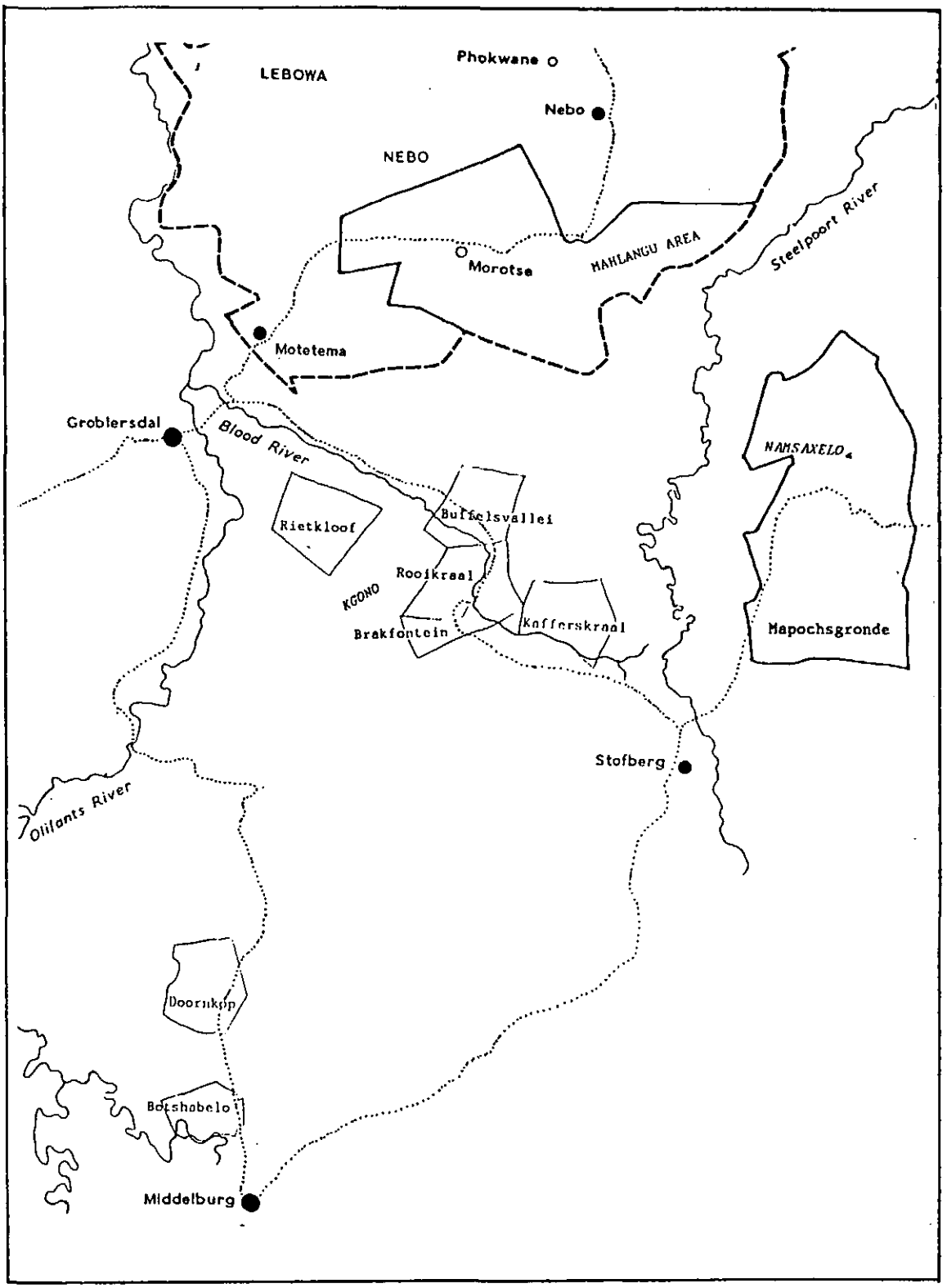
publications such as Land Update, veils the fact that claims on land derive from a series of sharply differentiated historical experiences and may articulate widely divergent interests, as I will show.

But the change in government has obviously set the scene for new kinds of rhetoric and negotiations. One of the distinctive features of the current situation is that many of those who previously worked in the NGO sector now work for the government. Where those previously dispossessed strive for restitution, they are now making claims not on a hostile but on an benevolent state - staffed by those who have long championed their cause - which has expended time and effort to ensure that land claims proceed as smoothly as possible. The continuity of personnel between the two sectors is thought to be likely to lessen the possibility of corruption and self-serving and to increase the prospects of accurate and detailed research (Birch 1996:14), but whether this is the case can only be revealed by further research.

**Restitution: specificity or common cause**

The land NGOs in the various provinces, and the umbrella NGO the National Land Committee, arose out of the struggle in which dispossessed communities tried to reclaim their land, in a process the outcome of which has now come to be known as restitution. Its claimants are specific communities, previous owners of freehold land, which were driven off it within the last 30 years and usually inadequately compensated. Their claims are contained in time and space, and fall well within the parameters for valid land claims set by the SA Government (Marcus et al 1996:4-5). Campaigns were given impetus by the sharp sense of loss engendered by the removal of such communities to the bantustans, though their rhetoric drew on the experience of the more longstanding and generalised experience of loss of control over land outlined above.

Restitution provides but one of the many - sometimes contradictory - imperatives emphasised in discussions of land reform in South Africa. While NGOs and Land Restitution Commissioners combine a commitment to social justice and the redistribution of wealth with a pledge to restore lost lands to their former owners, the World Bank and other developers have stressed the need to promote viable agriculture in a manner not dissimilar to that


LEBOWA
Phokwane
Nebo
NEBO
Morotse
MAHLANGU AREA
Steelpoort River
Motetema
Grobiersdal
Blood River
NAMSAXELO
Rietkloof
Buffelsvallei
Rooikraal
KGONO
Brakfontein
Kafferskraal
Mapochsgronde
Stofberg
Olifants River
Doornkop
Botshabelo
Middelburg

proposed by Tomlinson, and thus to foster capitalist-style production (Williams 1996). Someone commented at a recent workshop on Land Reform that the relatively greater strength of restitution than other motives driving land reform may indicate a preference to pursue short-term and realisable objectives rather than more radically redistributive and hence prolonged processes of agrarian reform which may ultimately prove unsuccessful. It may, then, reflect the doubts which have been expressed about the real potential for smallscale farming in South Africa (Birch 1996:10).

The desire for restitution, having originally catalyzed communities to press for land reform and nurtured the vigorous growth of the Land NGOs, however occupies a morally ambiguous status when seen against the broader backdrop of this reform process. Put in the starkest possible terms, restitution could be seen to restore property to those whose original ownership of it assured them a better life, even after its confiscation, and is thus driven less by the desire for social justice and equality than by the urge to re-establish what was once the status quo.

The potency of restitution as an incentive may, then, reflect the fact that the communities whose struggles are documented in NGO publications like Land Update have particular interests not necessarily shared by those demanding land on other grounds. Many of those claiming restitution of land owned their properties on a freehold basis. The land was not, it is true, always purchased in a manner which enshrined individual property rights - Brakfontein, for example, was "given to the Mampuru people by Stephanus Grove, a representative of President Paul Kruger, in 1881" (Land Update 29:14), while Doornkop was purchased by a group of 284 people in 1905 (Land Update 35:19-20; James 1983). The fact that both of these communities had chiefs indicates that they envisioned themselves in some senses as possessing the land collectively.

This sense of communalism and sharing is what those opposing the apartheid regime on behalf of the dispossessed emphasised most strongly in their campaigns. But the very fact of owning the land, even on a communal basis, indicated that its purchasers had occupied a higher socio-economic status than those in surrounding communities, and served further to entrench them in this higher status. This was not necessarily because land ownership "was

a condition of successful farming - it was not", as Murray has noted in respect of similar communities in the Free State, but rather because it "was the material springboard for a decent education and hence for a socio-economic mobility within the district and outside it" (1992).

I will briefly explore some of these themes in relation to the reclaimed farm of Doornkop, which is near the town of Middelburg and has been under the jurisdiction of Mpumalanga province since 1994. Its occupants - descendants of its original purchasers, together with a number of tenants - were forcibly removed from the farm and resettled in Lebowa (in the case of the landowners) and KwaNdebele (the tenants) by army and police in 1974. The land was never reoccupied or sold, but was used by police as a range for target practice and an entertainment venue: symbolically, a "lapa" was built near the site of the original mošate (chief's kraal) in which police and their families had braaivleis on Sundays. Former landowners continued to bring home their dead to bury in the farm's graveyard, and tried various strategies to get the land back. The Progressive Party's Helen Suzman was petitioned, lawyers were engaged, and later TRAC (Transvaal Rural Action Committee) provided advice and support for many years. Eventually, twenty years after the removal date, the reclamation campaign was successful. Under terms initially established by the government's Advisory Committee on Land Allocations, but finally effected by Derek Hanekom only a few months after the Government of National Unity's first taking office and well before the establishment of the Commission for Restitution of Land Rights, the Doornkop Homecoming Committee finally won for its constituents the right to reside on the farm again.

Like many similar communities classified as "black spots" under apartheid which later attempted to reclaim their land, these people had initially come to be living where they did because of their Christian orientation, which expressed itself in aspirations to middle-class status among some of its founders' grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The community of Doornkop was thus one in which the privileges of education and ownership had been enjoyed, as Murray notes (ibid). But it would be too simplistic to say, as I first imagined might be the case, that every member of a previously landowning community like this one had the basis for a material security superior to that experienced by those who had been

subject to different forms of tenure (for example, the communal tenure of the reserves, or the insecure situation of labour tenants on white farmers' lands in the surrounding area). It is more accurate to say that some of the descendants of a Christian community such as Doornkop, with its easy access and ideological predisposition to providing its children with education, have risen rapidly in social standing and material well-being. Inevitably, these families or members of families had moved away from the farm to work or pursue careers in urban centres, even before the fateful date of forced removal. Equally inevitably, it is the members of such families, perceived as the most educated, able and successful sons and daughters of Doornkop, who became the prime movers in the efforts to reclaim the land and, when it was finally reoccupied in 1994, were elected to form the Management Committee which would continue to oversee matters of development and advancement which most of those resettled so keenly desired.

Both the geographical scatter which this entailed, and the accompanying scatter of status, wealth and influence between different sons and daughters of Doornkop, proved a matter of extreme cognitive dissonance for members of the Land NGOs who continued to play a role - a much-valued one - in helping to put bits of infrastructure into place. Their ideas of community had derived not only from the experience of struggle in South Africa as mentioned above, but also from an internationalist development discourse used in NGOs throughout southern countries. As part of its insistence on the existence of community, or as part perhaps of its attempt to encourage the growth of a community out of disparate pieces, this approach prescribed the necessity for such things as Participatory Research which would establish a communally- or jointly-held perception of the past as a basis for future planning imperatives, and the need for such things as "institution-building" and "capacity-building" which, again out of a uniformly-experienced deprivation, would construct an ability to run meetings, organise finance, and enter into tough negotiations with developers and government alike. Doornkop people's choice of an absentee educated elite to exemplify their interests via a model of representative democracy clashed fundamentally with the model of participatory and consensus-based democracy embodied in this development discourse.[1]

[1] Interview with Greg Jacobs and Melinda Swift of TRAC, 6th March 1997, Johannesburg.

Differentiations and hierarchies do not lessen the extent to which freeholders stand united on the question of their inalienable right to own and to occupy this land. But in the eyes of Doornkop people themselves, the basis for seeing themselves as a community is also - and equally - a basis for distinguishing themselves incontrovertibly from those living round about who might, in a broader and perhaps more radical programme of land reform, be seen to have the right to lay claim to pieces of land - perhaps even to the same ones. Sechaba (nation or tribe), translated by TRAC as "community" , is for them thus a concept which excludes as much as it incorporates.

The right to be a member of this freehold community, as in many others, is founded upon that old anthropological stalwart: descent. A person returning to Doornkop has to be able to trace his or her ancestry from a member of one of the group of core families who originally bought the farm in 1905, and to prove this ancestry to the satisfaction of the Land Allocation Committee. This, in tandem, entails a religious identity, as a member of one of three churches which thrived on the farm before its occupants were removed: the Evangelical Lutheran Church of South Africa (formerly Berlin Mission Society), its breakaway Bapedi Lutheran Church, and the Baptist-style Pentecostal Holiness Church. It also entails an ethnic identity, as a Pedi linked via the original Doornkop chief Seth Ramaube to the royal house of Sekhukhuneland.

Furthermore, being a member of the Doornkop community entails the exclusion of a group of people, who are likewise defined both in ethnic and in kinship terms. They are the Ndebele who previously lived and worked as labour tenants on surrounding farms, many of whom later came to live at Doornkop as rent tenants and worked the land in the absence of those who had left to pursue their education or their careers. But in the furious debates which have raged about rights to lay claim to a portion of the farm, they are spoken of as "sons-in-law", since the only ones among them who are entitled to land are those who courted and married daughters of Doornkop, either while living on the farm or during the period of exile. Current legislation has it that a son-in-law may live and have land on the farm, but only provided that his wife (the Doornkop daughter) is there with him. A son-in-law who tried to dodge this rule by arriving to settle with his second wife after the death of the first

one, had his truck piled with possessions turned back at the gate to the farm.[2]

If the residents of Doornkop saw themselves as occupying a superior status - in religious terms if not uniformly in material wealth - this was experienced in contrast to two sets of people. For some the most strident contrast was that between themselves and the ethnically similar but geographically distant baditshaba (non-Christian Pedi) from Sekhukhuneland. But those in closest proximity were the Ndebele. Their lowly status as farm labourers who had been trapped in slave-like tenancies on white farms was, in the view of some, further diminished by their heathen beliefs and their practice of sending their children to initiation school rather than having them baptised and confirmed.

It is difficult to get an accurate picture of the relationships which bound these tenants to their freeholder landlords, since the nature and quality of these connections has become morally charged in retrospect by the issue of forced removal. In the broader political world, and in newspaper reports of the time, to admit that the farm was overcrowded and plagued by landlord/tenant tensions was to concede that it was a "slum" and to accept the legitimacy of removing the inhabitants of this "black spot". Conversely, to deny these things was to show that one condemned the removal (James 1983).

It is unlikely that the tenuous rights which these tenants enjoyed while living on a freehold farm like Doornkop will provide the basis for them to lay claim to any portion of these farms, even under the inclusive terms laid down in recent legislation. Certainly no mention is made of such a possibility in Land Update, although the need to entrench the rights of labour tenants on white farms is stressed elsewhere in its pages. Members of the provincial government's restitution commission take the attitude that individual freehold communities cannot be expected to bear alone the effects of immense population pressure such as that which resulted from large-scale labour tenant evictions. Tenancy rights of this kind thus cannot be restored or enshrined on a piecemeal, "farm-by-farm" basis, but rather need to be solved through broader processes of land reform.[3]

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[2] Interview with William Kalushi, 12th May 1997, Johannesburg.

[3] Interview with Durkje Gilfillan, 13th June 1997, Pretoria.

But Ndebele - former tenants and others - have attempted to return in the post-1994 era. Debates currently rage in Doornkop, as among other freeholders who have claimed or are claiming land, about whether it is acceptable in the broader context of a post-apartheid South Africa to discriminate against would-be landholders on the basis of ethnic origin. There is also much argument over whether people in need who were accommodated in an earlier, pre-removal era, should be given land in the era of restitution. According to one view, it was a spirit of charity and kindness which led freeholders to accommodate tenants leaving white farms, since they had nowhere else to go and it would have been un-African to refuse them lodging. This view finds its current expression in the opinion that land should be available to all comers who want it.

But, in Doornkop from about 1970, it was not the community as a whole which opened its arms to bahiri (tenants, lit. "those who hire", from the Afrikaans huur). The few bahiriši (landlords, lit. "those who cause to be hired") who had let numerous pockets of land to Ndebele tenants were seen - by those opposing this practice - as having been motivated purely by greed; as having allowed pagan practices into the community; and ultimately as having given the apartheid government an excuse to remove all the farm's occupants on the grounds of overcrowding and slum-like conditions. The logical extension of this view is that all Ndebele should be excluded from settling on the farm - except sons-in-law, who may only be admitted on the basis of strict limiting criteria.

The debate over whether the Doornkop community should retain its religious, ethnic and kinship integrity as stated in the original constitution drawn up by its founders, or whether it should admit others into its midst, is linked in interesting and unexpected ways to a debate concerning the desirability of developing and modernising the farm. Contrasting views about what "development" is and whether or not it is desirable, form the basis, in turn, of a deep factional cleavage which has split the community into two parts: a split which eventually caused TRAC to terminate its decades-long involvement with the reclaiming and redevelopment of the community.[4]

[4] Many of the points in this and the following two paragraphs come from interviews with Kalushi William Kalushi, 3rd March, Johannesburg, 1997, and 12th May, Johannesburg, 1997.

Since well before the return to Doornkop of the families who now live there, TRAC was engaged with the members of the Management Committee and other sub-structures of the Doornkop Homecoming Committee, attempting to secure not only the return of the land but also its provision with essential infrastructure such as water, sanitation, schools, and the like. At the many meetings which were held, both before and after the return, a small group of people made known its determination to settle on the precise plots they had previously occupied, and, by implication, to subsist as the small-scale cultivators they had been before they were moved. The Management Committee, although ideologically at variance with this idea, felt it would be unwise to alienate this group since its leader, Madileng Ramaube, claimed to be a descendent of the community's original chief and thus enjoyed credibility among older Doornkop people. The opposed group, whose rapid increase in size owed something to the influence of the Management Committee, desired to live in the manner to which they had become accustomed since being removed to the planned townships of the bantustans: with a grid plan, tarred roads, street numbers, and the like. The increasing preeminence of the latter group led to its adversaries being dubbed majela thoko (those who eat alone) or dingangele (those who contest or dispute) - terms often used to describe minority opponents of a mainstream political view whose proponents desire consensus.

When TRAC arranged a PRA workshop at which people were encouraged - in order better to understand their past so as better to plan their future - to draw maps showing how they had lived before the removal, this was interpreted by the modernising faction as an endorsement of the majela thoko position, and as an unnecessary impediment to the inevitable development of a township on the farm. (It was also thought that the NGO's African fieldworker had taken part in the exercise primarily as a CV-building exercise: a position which appeared to be substantiated when he gained an important position in the government soon afterwards.)

Antagonism between the positions and their proponents was very fierce. When officials of the Mpumalanga government arrived to survey and peg out the new "planned" plots, the pegs mysteriously disappeared every night. It was rumoured that Madileng Ramaube had hired someone to pull them out after each day's planning activity. Eventually giving up the battle to win other community members over to their side, Madileng and his wife ignored the planners' designs, built their shack on the exact site of their earlier house, and planted a patch

of mealies which encroached substantially upon the neat grid plan which the surveyors had laid out. The sudden and unexpected recent death of Madileng was said by some to have been caused by a heart attack resulting from the stresses of this dispute, but was attributed by others to witchcraft.[5]

For most of the majority who aligned themselves against the majela thoko, this man's demise was taken as a vindication of their own position. In contrast to the linked conservatism and exclusivism of majela thoko, members of this opposing faction believe that the community will not progress or enjoy the benefits of its situation within the prosperous province of Mpumalanga until it resolves to open its gates to all comers. Sounding echoes from the separatisms of the past, one resident recounted an incident in which, after several truckloads of Ndebele had been refused permission to resume their original tenancies on the farm soon after its reclaiming in 1994, these had accused the Doornkop community of "still practising apartheid". In similar vein, Mrs Maabe said she had heard that Padayachee, the province's housing director, had vowed not to offer any more help to Doornkop until it abandoned its stance as a "Volkstaat", independent of broader structures. Although aligning herself firmly in opposition to a backing-looking stance, she nevertheless had an ambivalent attitude about the desirability of admitting outsiders. She believed that the community's insistence on self-rule would guarantee Mpumalanga's refusal to engage in its development, but on the other hand claimed still to be "ruled by her elders" and hence to be opposed to the arrival of those not entitled by birth to live there.[6]

As a background to this fierce contestation, in which the importance of ethnic separateness is inextricably interwoven with notions of entitlement on the basis of descent from particular ancestors, regionally-patterned ethnic power bases are emerging. Some locals perceive the Mpumalanga provincial government to be dominated by ethnic interests opposed to those of the Pedi - whether these be the culturally and linguistically proximate "Mapulana" as one opinion has it, "the Swazi" as it is represented in another view, or more broadly "the Nguni"

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[5] Minutes of Doornkop Community Meeting, 13 April 1996, TRAC file on Doornkop; interview with Roswald Linnenkamp, Doornkop, 20th May 1997.

[6] Interview with Makhwele Jacobeth Maabe, 14th July, Doornkop.

whose emergence as a regional force not only incorporates the Swazis but also highlights Ndebele language, culture and economic power.

To move once again to a more general level of discussion: even if one excludes tenants, the constituency which can demand or which might enjoy the benefits of restitution becomes more and more circumscribed when one considers questions concerning the acquisition of land through inheritance. One question is whether all descendants of those dispossessed have the right to restitution. In Doornkop they do, but no-one knows exactly how many they are. Many important decisions concerning development have been delayed until everyone comes back: but the majority of those entitled do not want to come back until these basic developments have been done. Those attempting to reclaim the adjoining land which was previously occupied by Merensky's mission station Botshabelo have resolved to avoid the pitfalls of the Doornkop experience, by itemising each descendent of the original owners (they have collected 52 so far). A further question is whether, is all descendants do have rights, what those descendants not wanting restitution are to do with their share of the patrimony.

Having made the point that restitution, despite its communal rhetoric, is a process likely to exclude more people than it incorporates, it is necessary also to investigate the extent to which its claimants may have participated in experiences common throughout the areas where they have lived.

One of these is the intensity of social interaction deriving from population movement. The continuous flux of people around the South African countryside has been caused not only by the obligatory removals of apartheid but also by economic imperatives, or by the wish to move closer to schools, shops, churches and other amenities of a modern life (Schirmer 1994; James 1994:200-4). Freehold farms such as Doornkop, as well as providing a long-term refuge for families evicted from or voluntarily leaving the white farms, in some cases acted as staging-posts in families' treks from these farms to the reserve areas. Even if freehold owners occupied a relatively fixed position in this situation of movement, there was considerable interaction between them and their immediate or more distant neighbours: an interaction which resulted in the formation of marriage ties in some cases. And even in

freehold communities, intergenerational continuity was not sufficiently strong to ensure that all male and female children of original owners stayed on the farm, even before removal. Upwardly mobile people and daughters, in particular, experienced high rates of mobility: for the daughters of freeholders this may be in part because they stood to gain less by remaining on freehold farms than do their brothers.

Another aspect of experience which freeholders had in common with surrounding tenants was that of involvement in waged or salaried work. Freehold farms were not in general the basis for an lifestyle as independent producers. Rather, the sale of particular crops such as peaches in Doornkop are remembered as having provided sums of money targeted for specific purposes like the schooling of children. People's present-day claims that they led a stable and fixed land-based life rather than one subjected to the fluxes and flows of the migratory labour experience are based on moral rather than objective considerations.

Assuming then that the experience of dispossessed freehold communities on the one hand distinguishes them from their neighbours while on the other hand merging them with these, let us look briefly at some of the meanings which their ownership of land - previously cherished, later denied, and once again anticipated - may have for them.

**Reclaiming land, developing land**

Why do people want to go back - especially in cases where they have established a security elsewhere? Do their interests in reclaiming their home turf coalesce with the reasons underlying the NGO's and governments' programmes of land reform and development? Government and NGO emphasis has been on the need to set right past injustices and at the same time - somewhat under the influence of the World Bank - to create viable small-farmer programmes, and the efforts of the land NGOs have also highlighted the need for small-scale, sustainable and community-based development initiatives, with an emphasis, for example, on toilets that people themselves will build and maintain, and the like. But what most people living in Doornkop draw attention to, at the same time as celebrating their return from exile in quasi-biblical terms, is their wish to live in conditions of tlhabologo (civilization), similar to those pertaining in any urban setting.

Neither in the pages of Land Update nor in other sources on restitution (Murray 1996:217) is there a suggestion that freeholders returning to their original farms are doing so in order to pursue careers as full- or even part-time farmers. The emphasis in a variety of articles is rather on the bitterness of having been cast out of one's birthplace and on the joy of return. The experience of living away from home is repeatedly described as "exile" in terms which evoke the Israelites' exclusion from their homeland (Land Update 35:19-20), with the places in which they were forced to live described in similarly evocative and biblical terms as "barren", "the wilderness" or "foreign lands" (ibid.; Land Update 32:11-2). The representation of the return home, in places where it has occurred, combines biblical images with more overtly nationalist ones, as in the return to Doornkop in December 1994 of some of its previous residents. While speaking of the newly reclaimed farm as a "promised land" and kneeling on the soil to give thanks to God for its return, their singing of Nkosi Sikele iAfrika, chanting of "Viva Mandela!" and hoisting of the new South African flag linked this reclamation more to that of the recently constituted "new South Africa" as a whole than to that of some abstract biblical paradise.

The prevalence of old testament imagery in these evocations, incidentally, is a reminder that the original move of some communities away from the communal land tenure system of the reserves had been prompted by their twinned rejection of ancestral religion and the authority of local chiefs, and that they were strongly Christian in their orientation.

Seemingly more pagan and less Christian in its emphasis, however, is the repeated use of the ancestor motif. Echoing many similar articles, the account of the Doornkop returnees described them as going "back to their ancestral land" and spoke of the intention to "visit graves and reconnect with our ancestors" (Land Update 35:15, 19-20; 34:10). Likewise, but in wonderfully contradictory vein, there is the story of Mr Moloko who celebrated his return to Bakubung the "land of his forefathers" while describing in the same breath his original migration as a child with his parents from the far distant Orange Free State where he had been born (Land Update 32:11-2). It emerges from his account that his chief happiness came from the fact that he could be buried alongside his wife who had died and been interred prior to the community's forced removal. He was committed more, then, to secure his future place as a forefather buried there than to the security of living close to a long lineage of buried

ancestors.

Linked to the importance of being close to ancestral graves were issues of health and healing. I have been hearing from Doornkop people about their need to be able to communicate with and give libations to their ancestors in order to secure health and freedom from ancestrally-derived misfortune. This aspect of the "ancestor" theme was one which the NGOs had not picked up on, perhaps because its suggestion of pagan practices did not integrate easily with the rationalist discourse of development or with the universalist human-rights-based discourse of the struggle agenda.

Another perceived source of health in this newly-reclaimed land of canaan is its future inhabitedness - contradictorily, its civilization. Eva Mokaungwe indicated to me that the farm had become a wilderness while it had been without inhabitants, and that only when a proper grid-plan had been imposed, houses built with street numbers, roads tarred, and water laid on in pipes, would the place become really healthy. This vision of development had little to do with the "small is beautiful" model espoused by the NGOs. It may derive in part from the promises of development made by the present government during its election campaign - the acronym RDP is on everyone's lips - but also comes from people's experience of the apartheid-planned urban landscapes where they lived while in exile. Ironically, the top-down imposed, ordered designs of the Tomlinson Commission which were so much hated and so fiercely resisted in the 60s and 70s, have set a standard in quality of life which people living in the 90s are reluctant to do without.

What, then, <u>is</u> the significance of this ancestrally-based communalism: this curious mixture of old-testament imagery with a commitment to the burial place of forefathers who might turn out to have been itinerants in any case? <u>Land Update</u> portrays freeholders reoccupying their land as undifferentiated groups rather than as individual owners. One is invited to conclude that the subjects of chief Ramaube in Doornkop established their connections to him through the same means as those used by communities in South Africa for at least a century and a half: by acknowledging him as patron and lord and cleaving to him as subjects (Beinart 1994:19). The ancestors whose graves prove such a compelling motif in the discourse of reclamation thus have something of the feeling of chiefs extending the possibilities of a

primordial relationship of fealty to their followers. But we must remember that the people who became these chiefs were not warrior leaders of the dim and distant past, but specific individuals who had themselves, together with specific groups of subjects, taken the innovative step of buying farms, often somewhat remote from the power of traditional paramountcies and driven by views of modernity and of a departure from communally-oriented values. Often their position as chief is claimed to have been an elected one, although perhaps based upon the possession of royal blood. So, if ancestral right is insisted on by freeholders, it is one in which the language of traditional communalism is grafted onto that of individualism.

Of course, one effect of insisting on the imagery of ancestors and graveyards is to establish the fixity of one's claims - to prove or legimitise ownership, citizenship, ethnic or clan identity (Shipton 1994:361) - things which might prove especially necessary in situations of extreme flux such as that of the earlier era of rapid population movement, and that of the present-day uncertainty in which new land claims are made daily. Shipton points out that the ancestors' having pioneered a place may on the one hand prove the prior or even exclusive right of those specifically descended from the ancestors in question: but, contradicting this, ancestral presence may suggest collectiveness and inclusivity and the sense that no one, among those considered to be the same people, should have to go without land (ibid:350).

What we have here, then, is a seat of identity linked to longstanding family ties which also stretch forward into the future, in which the image of being one of God's chosen people brought back from exile into the promised land combines with ideas of traditionalist communalism. Tied to this, there is the strong motif of a place freed-from-outside-interference, as I suggested at the outset.

## Conclusion

It can be seen then that the restitution of land to specific communities has become part of a broader discourse, in terms of which land reform provides the key to solving "poverty, inequality, injustice and misery" and is "the starting point in any real debate about redistributing wealth and providing opportunities" (Land Update 31:2). It is as yet unclear,

and would require further investigation to establish, exactly how the voices of former freeholders have interwoven with those of NGO activists to produce this emphasis on the collective defense of rights. But the resulting synthesis bears a striking resemblance to the "rhetorical glaze" through which Chinese peasants visualised and conceptualised the post-revolutionary future (Croll 1994:1-10). These peasants' "collective dreams", although based inversely on lack of security on the land and thus not strictly comparable to the dreams of those claiming land restitution in South Africa, did share with these the use of a rhetoric which denied "individual interests separate from those of the collective" and emphasised the homogeneity of the latter (ibid.:8).

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