'A sentimental attachment to the neighbourhood': African Christians and land claims in South Africa

'A Sentimental Attachment to the Neighbourhood'

African Christians and Land Claims in South Africa

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Introduction

As part of its attempt to understand 'an apartheid of souls', this volume is concerned to show how mission activity, particularly that of European-based churches with close links to the expansion of Dutch/Calvinist influence, may have nurtured the local construction of race or ethnic difference in Indonesian and South African society. One well-known account of Christianity in South Africa shows how the interaction between mission and missionised produced a sharply dichotomised sense – experienced by the Tshidi Tswana as the contrast between *setswana* and *segoa* – of difference between indigenous and imported culture.[2] While this shows how processes devoted to undermining it may paradoxically strengthen a sense of cultural identity, what it does not yield is a sense of how Christianity, appropriated within Tswana and other African societies, furnished a means of marking internal distinctions of social class, dovetailing in unexpected ways with ethnic difference. It is such divisions – potently fusing class with ethnicity and having crucial implications for the ownership, reclaiming, and use of land – with which the present paper is concerned.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the division between early converts to the mainstream mission churches and those who continued as adherents of the chiefship and of ancestral religion became a means to demarcate, even where it did not exactly coincide with, the division between an incipient, early-urbanising middle class and the poorly-paid migrants who were forming the ranks of the wage labour force. This division is perhaps best-known in the context of Zulu society in the former Natal, where mission converts were termed *kholwa*, but has been equally pervasive among other language groups of South Africa, including the speakers of northern Sotho or Pedi who form subjects of the present study. Mission converts called themselves *bakriste* (Christians) in contrast with *baheitene* (heathens) while non-converts spoke disparagingly of them as *majakane* in contrast to themselves, the *baditšhaba* (those of the nation).[3]

This class of mission converts has been an influential one, economically

and politically, within South African society. Among its members one might list the 'South African peasantry' – Africans who moved beyond the reserves to buy farm land, and who for a time thrived by responding to market opportunities:[4] converts' strategy of land purchase in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, although not necessarily ensuring long-term economic stability as landowners, nonetheless ensured a level of respectability and influence for at least some of those pursuing it and their descendents.[5] (Correspondingly, it is mostly by people in this category, forcibly removed from their farms, that claims for recompense have been made in 'black spot' restitution cases currently handled by the land reform program – such as that of Doornkop in the present case study.) Having more impact politically, and partly overlapping with this constituency, the African National Congress, earlier known as the South African Native Congress, drew much of its original membership from among the ranks of mission converts. Adherents of this organisation framed their petitions to, and protests against, the colonial government in terms which stressed the universalistic liberal values of the nineteenth century. Although using some Africanist rhetoric, members of this nascent middle class have seldom been portrayed as concerned to stress group-divisiveness. Indeed, the absence of cultural and ethnic consciousness within this movement has been explicitly contrasted with its prevalence amongst the Afrikaner nationalists who came to constitute its chief opposition from the 1930s onwards. As one account put it, the exclusivism of Afrikaner Christian nationalism, rooted in late nineteenth-century nationalism, confronted a black nationalism, which combined Africanist underpinnings with the nineteenth-century values of multiracialism.[6]

While such a description may be accurate for some African converts, it is less so for the adherents of a series of European-based mission societies, such as those based in the northern Transvaal (now Limpopo and Mpumalanga) with which this account is concerned. Towards the East, the Swiss-based missions to Tsonga-speakers brought ideas on cultural identity derived from the nascent nationalisms of Europe, which contributed to the burgeoning of Tsonga ethnicity amongst local elites.[7] In more centrally situated areas, such as those near the heartland of the nineteenth-century Pedi polity, missionaries of the Berlin Mission Society (BMS), holding to a vision of the *Volkskirche* which derived from traditions of German romanticism, explicitly aimed to further the culture of those they Christianised, endeavouring to convert whole cultural groups rather than single individuals.[8] The forms of Christian ideology and practice to which these missions gave shape were complex: although early converts formed part of the modernising and urbanising middle class, subscribing to the universalising rhetoric already mentioned, they equally became the carriers – indeed, the vanguard – of particularistic identities not dissimilar to those which came increasingly to be espoused by their Afrikaner neighbours, as the following study of the reclaimed farm of Doornkop will demonstrate.

Doornkop – A Farm Reclaimed

In December 1994, a group of people celebrated their return to the farm Doornkop, the 'land of their forefathers'. Of those who had been evicted from their lands in apartheid's infamous 'black spot' forced resettlements of the 1960s and 1970s[9] this group was one of the first to return. Reports in the NGO publication *Land Update* show how, in marking the occasion, they made equal and simultaneous use of biblical imagery and the symbols and practices of African Nationalism. Their exclusion from the farm was spoken of in terms evoking the Israelites' 'exile' from the land of Canaan, and they knelt on the soil to give thanks to God for bringing them back to the 'promised land'. But their singing of Nkosi Sikele iAfrika, chanting of 'Viva Mandela!' and hoisting of the new South African flag seemed to link the reclaiming of this farm as much to the broader reclaiming of the new South Africa as to the Israelites' return to their homeland.[10] It also seemed symbolically to link the interests served by restoring this farm to its former owners with those of the nation as a whole.

The themes of nationalist liberation and return from biblical exile, combined in Doornkop's dramatic celebration of reclaiming, point to some contradictory impulses underpinning South Africa's land reform programme. To stress the similarity to the promised land of the Bible is a reminder of the longstanding Lutheran faith of its original owners: a feature which marks them off as having a superior socio-economic status to, and interests distinct from those of, many other claimants of land. Farms like Doornkop were purchased at around the turn of the century by offshoots from mission communities wishing to establish themselves as titleholders outside the African reserve areas. The restitution of such lands, although it is a key focus of the government's land reform programme inasmuch as this aims to redress the injustices of apartheid, has also been recognised as incompatible with broader processes of redistribution designed to benefit the very poor who never owned land in the first place[11] and who, unlike Doornkop's owners, were not members of longstanding Christian communities. This divergence of interest was, however, masked by the deployment of national symbols at the Doornkop homecoming ceremony described above. Singing the national anthem, raising the flag and hailing the President served to highlight participants' endorsement of, and their reliance on, broader nation-wide projects of development, and symbolically to merge the interests served by restoring this farm to its former owners and their descendents, with those of the nation as a whole.

The prospects for such a dovetailing of specific interests with the broader national project were promising. The reclaiming of this farm, occurring in the same year that Mandela's inauguration as president heralded the dawn of the 'new' South Africa, seemed to augur well for both: it ushered in an era in which the returning of land to those rudely dispossessed of it was intended to be a priority. But some ten years later, much of this promise remains unfulfilled. The failure of the land reform program to meet its targets has been

a matter of puzzlement: ensuing analysis has, however, shed little light on the reasons for it. There is one aspect of the explanation, however, on which several commentators agree. They point out that there would have been more urgency to deliver land – and hence more strength to the arm of the relatively under-resourced land ministry vis-à-vis others in the government – had land claimants made their own voices heard by uniting to form a broad-based 'social movement'.[12] Such a failure of unity over the matter of lost land is not only mystifying to those in the world of policy. It will also puzzle anthropologists accustomed to reading and thinking about land in Africa as a symbolic site where the fusion of powerful images of ancestral identity and fertility make the social unity of its claimants almost a matter of inevitability.[13]

To point to the absence of solidarity over land is not to deny, however, that primordial motifs of land and its relationship to the broader African community have been invoked in the South African context. A statement made at the Doornkop homecoming ceremony by Joe Seremane, then Chief Land Claims Commissioner and himself a victim of removals from a Christian farming community, illustrates this well:

> People regard earth as some kind of womb. It is where life comes from, so land is synonymous with life. It has broader implications – that each and everyone has land as a birthright. If you tamper with that, you tamper with where you come from, the womb, someone is tampering with your own mother. [...] Earth remains the source of your life. Of life itself.[14]

Such remarks suggest that land might, indeed, be viewed in such a way as to form the basis of a society-wide movement to ensure restitution. But the impetus towards unity which it suggests are counterbalanced by a strong separatist urge: a suspicion of anything beyond the local and especially of that which provides connections to broader national-level structures. The vision of difference which underpins such separatism, although partly finding expression in primordial statements and using a language of tribe or ethnicity, is one formed along the axis of Christian belief and practice, drawing strongly upon the biblical narratives which accompany these.

The complex interweaving of Christian and ethnic identity, in land-claiming communities like those at Doornkop, thus made for a sense of distinctiveness not only from those in the traditionalist heartlands they originally moved out of but also from members of other ethnic/religious communities roundabout. This distinctiveness has been shaped, in part, by the particular relationship such communities have with their land. Our focus in this paper is on how land claimants have used and reinterpreted the Bible, specifically the Old Testament, to reiterate the exclusivity of their connection – their 'sentimental attachment' to this specific 'neighbourhood'. The Bible provides a template for understanding how Doornkop was originally settled and cultivated, how it became home, was lost, and reclaimed, and how community and land were

inseparably linked. The Bible endorses their claims of primordial connection to the land: claims which appear to underwrite the broader program of land reform, yet render it ultimately fragmented.

Narratives of Land: Tribulation, Testing and Community

Titleholder Separatism and Independence – the BMS and Rebone Ramaube

The political rhetoric of restitution described above sees the restoring of land rights to the African populace as a key aspect of freedom in the new South Africa. But this obscures a complex, and particular, relationship which ties people to land: it is this which has lent force to efforts, such as those of Doornkop's former owners, to regain their farm. It is also this which has mediated people's relationship to the state, causing them to experience this relationship as members of specific kinds of communities, rather than as individual citizens. To those born at Doornkop, and descended from one of the original purchasers (*bareki*) who bought the farm 'on the surface and below the ground' (*ka fase le ka godimo*) and who enjoined their children, in a manner evoking Biblical genealogies of begetting, to 'stay here, and your child, and your child's child', ownership of this farm symbolises not only the communality of living and working on the farm but, closely related, a sense of distinctness from those round about who had never been owners of land.

As the narrative is retold now, the very reasons underpinning, and processes involved in, the purchase of farmland were concerned with independence and autonomy. When the bareki seceded from Botšhabelo and involved themselves in the long and complex process of buying their own farm, they were attempting to remove themselves from the structures of governance imposed by both mission Christianity and the settler state.[15] They were also – in parallel with the converts' original motivation in moving away during the 1860s from the Pedi polity and the domain of Chief Sekhukhune – reasserting their independence from the political structures of African traditionalism. Buying Doornkop appears, in retrospect, to have provided a real basis both for some political autonomy and for a separate identity.

Present-day accounts of the Lutheran converts' flight from the menace of Sekhukhune's warriors resonate strongly with the official version which the Berlin Mission Society (BMS) mission at Botšhabelo published in 1965 to commemorate its centenary. And both are powerfully reminiscent of the Israelites' flight from Egypt in their stressing of divine deliverance. The mission account invokes this episode explicitly:

> In the Bible it is said that God did a miracle when he saved the Israelites from Egypt, led them through the wilderness and gave them food and water in a mysterious way.[16]

It stresses God's miraculous powers:

> The river was overflowing and the king's warriors were after them. With God's miracle, the waters receded to allow them to cross the river on the night of 23rd of November 1864. [...] After they crossed to the other side, more water flowed into the river and the king's soldiers could not cross.[17]

In contrast, Rebone Ramaube's reiteration of Doornkop folklore has the incident mediated through the agency of God's messenger, the German missionary:

> When they arrived at the Tubatse river, they crossed at a place where it was shallow. Sekhukhune's warriors were behind them carrying spears. When these warriors were supposed to follow them across the river, great waves emerged, a flood came from the east and it started to fill the river. The warriors couldn't cross the river to follow our parents and their saviour Merensky.[18]

The fleeing Christians, under Merensky's guidance, then established themselves at the evocatively named Botšhabelo (place of refuge), which the mission account describes as 'a beautiful garden of the true Jesus Christ' for the gift of which they 'thanked God'.[19] But it was over the question of whether this farm was 'given' by God or purchased through the converts' diligent labour that the accounts diverge utterly. The BMS archive in Berlin documents how a swathe of land – including both Botšhabelo and Doornkop – was initially bought by the Lutheran congregation with the legal and financial help of Merensky, who served as trustee for the converts.[20] Like many African land purchases at the time, aspirant owners, taking advantage of a political dispensation allowed during Paul Kruger's presidency of the ZAR, and seizing a brief moment of opportunity before the passing of the 1913 Act which was to legislate against Africans owning land outside the reserve areas, were here using a white 'front' to buy their farm. Such a strategy seemed bound to end in dispute. The local account as told by Rebone Ramaube contrasts with the BMS one in its insistence that Merensky deceived his followers by fraudulently putting his name, rather than theirs, on the title deed of the farm which had in reality been bought with the proceeds of their own labour. So deceitful is he seen to have been that he delighted in having the congregation sing a hymn which mocked them for their illiteracy and their incapacity to discern how they were being tricked:

> They managed to buy the land, using collection money from the church service, with Merensky. He put his signature on the deed, showing it did not belong to the people but to him. God said to Merensky, 'tell these people what you have done'. When we used to sing 'the darkness which is here in the earth is reigning everywhere', in hymn 121, we did not know what was meant by this. He meant by this that the people were illiterate and could not even see that he had written his name on the title deed. Some people did detect what

> Merensky was saying, we started to find out what was wrong with him. We went to a farmer nearby, over there, and explained that Merensky is no more as we used to know him. The farmer asked how we knew this. We said, 'we can hear it in the songs in the church and in his preaching, we aren't happy with it'. The man asked, 'is there anything you have agreed with him?' 'Yes, he has bought a land with us. We are not sure how he has bought it. We will be divided (through these bad words).' We went and discovered that Merensky had put his signature on the title deed.

In response, the story goes, some of Merensky's parishioners then raised the money to buy an alternative property nearby – the present-day Doornkop. Their dispute with the mission was one in which strivings for territorial and political independence were merged with aspirations to receive the truths of the gospel without missionary mediation; a number of those who were to be purchasers of Doornkop had followed an early convert, Martinus Sebushane, in breaking away from the Berlin Mission Society and establishing the independent Bapedi Lutheran Church (subsequently categorised by Sundkler, in retrospect, as the first of the Ethiopian Churches which emphasised 'Africa for the Africans').[21] Agents of what was now the Union Government were puzzled by the community's reluctance, while attempting to conclude the extremely lengthy process of independent purchase, to engage with the state structures set up for Native Administration. Officials of the Department of Native Affairs were perplexed by these people's 'attitude [which] has always been most independent [...] and insolent', and by their preference for dealing independently with maverick 'law agents and others'.[22] They explained the 'persistency' of these African purchasers by reference to their presumed 'sentimental attachment to the neighbourhood':[23] an interpretation which subsequent events have certainly shown to be prophetic.

Assessing the various contradictory narratives for their historical accuracy is of less interest, here, than seeing how the local, African account illuminates the view Doornkop's claimants have of themselves and of their relationship to their land. An extreme view, like that expounded by Rebone Ramaube, would have it that not only Doornkop but also Botšhabelo – indeed, all the land in the Middelburg district – rightly belongs to those who were Merensky's converts and whose labours enabled him to make the initial land purchase. Such a view, clung to by Rebone and other members of a present-day Doornkop faction of diehards – dubbed *dingangele* (those who contest or dispute) in contrast to their modernising opponents – nourishes the belief of this faction's members that farmlands, once reclaimed, should retain their independent status, and should remain separate from any broader political or national structures. Rebone's account depicts the community's hard-won acquisition, after undergoing tribulations and owing much to divine deliverance, of a place where some autonomy could be found. It seems to invoke the authority of God and the power produced through biblical analogy, not

as a motif to illustrate obedient membership of a missionary's flock in his heavenly garden, but in support of sovereignty over their own swathe of the Transvaal, and of their right to run it as they please.

In this and other similar cases, missions, by originally facilitating the independent settlement of African cultivators beyond the bounds of chiefly power and somewhat remote from settler control and the state, had laid the basis for the creation of particular kinds of communities. Former mission inhabitants, positioned somewhere between citizen and subject,[24] had an indirect relationship to the broader political world which was mediated through membership of such communities.

We Are Scattered All Over

A powerful adjunct to the story of the farm's original purchase – aided by God but ultimately obstructed by his agent Merensky – lies in the story of its people's dispossession when they were forcibly relocated in the 'black spot' removal of 1974. As Godfrey Mathobela recounted:

> In the morning we woke up to find soldiers and police, they were knocking on doors and saying we must go and board the bus. [...] It was known, on that morning, that if enemies came people would *hlaba mokgoši* (call to alert people to a danger). *'Sebatakgomo'* was being heard from GaMotau to Soplai section where we were staying. The old men and women were gathering at the church to pray. The village is known for its devotion to Christianity: whenever people had a problem, they would pray [...][25]

His description places evidence of the community's devout and supplicant Christianity side-by-side with its deploying of the traditionalist chiefly invocations which had been used during the reserve-based Pedi revolt of the 1950s: a reminder that there was an interweaving of mission and traditionalist ideologies and practices – despite claims of distinctness – throughout the period under review.[26] Echoing his words, but linking dispossession to its eventual outcome of divine redemption, is Rebone's account:

> [...] even when we were removed, we prayed, but they said, 'even if you pray, we will take you'. God has now brought us back again, we are at our place. [...] I used to tell people that one day we will come back here, but most of them said I was mad. However, I knew that through the power of prayer, God would one day bring us here.[27]

The reclaiming of Doornkop appears, retrospectively, to have vindicated the faith of those dispossessed: Rebone states, 'My trust in God was ultimately confirmed by our coming back'.

Conversely, the difficulties people faced while in exile are interpreted as an index of their loss of faith that the farm's reclaiming would eventually be accomplished:

> Even the Bible confirms these things. I kept on referring them to the Bible, Isaiah 1: those who abandon their God will be punished. Yes, at Monsterlus [the resettlement village] we were suffering and that was God's punishment for the fact that most people were beginning to lose hope in Him. Even in the book of Jeremiah, Chapter 5, it is said that the present laws are no longer being made by old people, but by children, and that we get food through difficulties. This was true because at Monsterlus we were not ploughing or growing our own food. We depended on buying everything. We were like the Israelites when they were in Egypt.[28]

The forced removal was, however, not the only experience, or cause, of dispersal by Doornkop's sons and daughters. It and other factors which left its children, like those of Israel, 'scattered in the wilderness', have lent themselves to a vivid remembering of the farm's original community, and a poignant mourning of that community's loss. In the process, the sense of what distinguishes members from outsiders has become sharpened. The narrative about life 'in the wilderness' stresses not only the community's loss of faith but also its sense of threat experienced at the hands of those – labelled baditšhaba or 'those of the nation', usually translated as 'traditionalists' – who were not mission people. As someone put it 'some people treated us like slaves, we were strangers (foreigners), even their language was different, and we were lost'. The stories, like that of the original departure from Sekhukhuneland, stress themes of tribulation and testing while in exile that are strongly reminiscent of those in the Bible.

Many of Doornkop's sons and daughters had been working in the towns of the Transvaal and the cities of the Reef for years by the time the removal occurred, often taking up residence in urban or peri-urban settings like Soweto whilst leaving their children to be brought up on the farm by grandparents, in what became a typical trajectory followed by rurally-based members of the emerging African middle class. But what distinguished the removal from these more gradual and less irrevocable forms of dispersal was how it forcibly displaced the location in which family's rural domestic circumstances had been situated, leaving no choice about the religious character of their vicinity – about whether their neighbours were bakriste (Christians) or baheitene (heathens) – and hence subjecting them to the antagonism of the latter. The removal, as refracted through some accounts, took the children of God, so sorely tested in fleeing from the domain of Pedi chiefly authority and yet so miraculously reprieved, and dumped them once again in the midst of those who practised pagan rituals, key among which was *koma* (initiation), with, for boys, its accompanying circumcision. In accounts of the decision to return to the farm after its reclaiming, like that told by Bapedi Lutheran Church member Godfrey Mathobela, practical considerations like Doornkop's favourable situation for the possibility of employment were outweighed by a much more important factor. This was the need to escape, once again, from the

heathen practices of the reserve areas whence their forefathers had originally fled:

> We wanted to come back to Doornkop because life in Mamone [in the reserve] was not good for us. We were disturbed by *koma* (initiation), by being forced to attend this. People in Mamone would come and force one to become initiated, house-to-house. It was not easy to resist. But I was safe – when they came and sang the songs to fetch *mašoboro* (uninitiated boys), I would lock myself in the house and pray and pray, and then the threat would miraculously pass.
>
> But then they came again. On that day, when the mob came, a young girl of fourteen rushed to tell me, and was crying, pleading that I should take cover. I couldn't now run away, I just prayed and prayed, and then felt brave. [...] I left Mamone at 4am and went to my wife's place, arrived at 5am and explained everything to my wife, whom I sent to check whether they had broken into my house. They had not done so. I had been alone there, my parents had left for Witbank to take some other children away for fear that they would be abducted by the same mob. After my wife returned from Mamone, she was scared to have me stay at her place, having heard that the mob was looking for me high and low.
>
> I went off, planning to go to Witbank, but on the way, *lengwalo* (scriptures, lit. 'the word') came to my mind: *thapelo yeo e se nago moleki ga se yona* (a prayer which is not tested is not a real one). The meaning of this verse is, if you're a real Christian, you must stand test and not run away, through prayer you can defeat your foes. Running away would have meant that I didn't trust God or believe that my prayers would be answered. So instead of fleeing to Witbank I went to nearby Glen Cowie [a Catholic mission] where I stayed at the place of my brother-in-law, my younger sister's husband. I spent a few days there. The next Sunday I went to church, to report the problems to the priest and to ask for absolution and salvation. The priest prayed with me to save me, this strengthened me, and the next day, I had sent word to my wife, who then sent word to tell me that the situation had improved, and that I could return.

Although this story emphasises the importance of individual strength abetted by the power of prayer, and hence carries the message that it is better to stay and face one's adversaries, in its final outcome it mirrors the tale of the original escape from the Pedi reserve. It is echoed by other accounts which tell of life in the 'dumping grounds' and reserve areas. The evils these enumerate include traditional marriage, witchcraft, *sangomas* (traditionalist healers) and other ungodly and even unhealthy practices in the places to which Doornkop sons and daughters had been relocated; they celebrate how the power of prayer and spiritual healing have been facilitated by retreat from these areas and by the farm's reclaiming.[29] The sense of relief expressed about having escaped

and returned to a godly place parallels a more secular emotion: of delight that the measure of political autonomy originally established through the purchase of this farm, and the promise of freedom from the diverse tyrannies of chiefs, mission and officials and mission alike, might now have its realisation. But such a promise has been undermined by the dawning realisation that the community at its heart has long disappeared.

The Community and the Church Bell

In oral accounts given by Doornkop residents, the farm symbolises the continuity; stability and fellowship which is said to have united its former inhabitants. Its loss signified the loss of a social bond and the scattering of its people. Its reclaiming, as described earlier, seemed to promise a reinstatement of this bond – but one that ultimately proved to be illusory.

A key idiom of the former community's togetherness is the church bell. When Elizabeth Maroga described her memory of her early childhood spent on the farm, she told of how everyone knew each other, how almost all were related, and how at the heart of this close-knit existence was the church, the bell's tones of which were so well-known that when it rang to call residents together they would know in advance the nature of the news they were to be given.

The bell, tangentially, was invoked in another motif of community solidarity: its name distinguished one among a sequence of youth groupings (*dithaka* – s. *sethaka*) which, although closely paralleling the initiation regiments (*mephato* – s. *mphato*) of communities in the heartland of the Pedi homeland,[30] were in fact established by the event of confirmation in the Lutheran church. They were named in accordance with memorable events happening at around the time of members' confirmation. One year, when the church bell was cracked, the sethaka was accordingly named sethaka of the broken church bell (*sa mauša tshipi*). Others were named for more secular events: sethaka of chicken-stealing (*sa mautswa dikgokgo*) commemorated one member's youthful mischief while sethaka *sa matata a ma tala* bore witness to a girl's having fallen pregnant while 'not yet ripened'.[31] While confirmation meant that a young person was a 'proper Christian', it simultaneously – like its pagan equivalent koma – confirmed an adolescent's readiness for marriage.[32] Membership of the confirmation groupings also integrated youths into a long-term set of community relationships, by giving them an identity as a member of a specific peer group. These were particularly significant and enduring for women who, years after their confirmation, would help other members when one of their children, in turn, was confirmed or married. They made clothing, contributed money and food, and dressed in special and distinctive uniforms to commemorate these events as members of a solidary grouping. Corroborating the importance of these dithaka, Doornkop women expressed regret that the forced removal had dispersed their members and made it impossible for them to continue functioning.

Particularly memorable to Elizabeth Maroga were occasions like Christmas,

when children would assemble around the tree standing in the church to recite verses each had been given by the church minister (*moruti*); and Easter, when people prayed all night long and in the early hours of the morning proceeded to the graveyard to place candles on the graves. She recalls a sense of plenty, which for her and others who lived there is captured in the memory of the peaches (*diperekisi*) they used to cultivate and sell at nearby towns. But it is not the thought of going back to the cultivation of peaches which inspired her to want to return after the farm had been reclaimed. 'When I think of Doornkop, I feel I could fly and go there', she said. 'We want to go back because we long for the relationship that we used to have. Now we are split up and spread all over.'[33]

Community was defined, then, by worshipping together, being confirmed together, and farming together on the farm; memories about these experiences, sharpened by loss, set the parameters for a remembered community. But it was in some senses a divided community: these memories contain complex references to emergent socio-economic differentiations – within the farm's constituency – which sharpened over time. Put simply, it is a differentiation between people who still had their primary domicile on the farm at the time of the 1974 removal and those who, years before, had procured houses in urban settings in which the economically active part of the family was living when the removal happened.[34] Almost all Doornkop families had by this time come to rely on money earned in paid employment, but wage-earners in the former group were mostly blue-collar labour migrants residing in temporary compounded accommodation while in town: the latter, in contrast, had become permanently town-dwelling, house-owning (or leasing) and well-educated members of an African middle class. For members of this group, the experience of childhood on the farm – like that of Elizabeth Maroga, now a nurse at Baragwanath Hospital in Soweto – was part of a life course whose later phases led inexorably to a relatively comfortable existence in town.

The distinction between the two groupings was further entrenched with the moment of the forced removal, when poorer people had little choice but to accept their transportation to the remote and inhospitable Bantustan 'dumping grounds' – Bothashoek, Praktiseer, Monsterlus – and to set up house in the tin shelters which were then provided,[35] while better-off ones, in contrast, had heard about the move in advance and made alternative plans about resituating their elderly relatives and the family's rural assets in areas closer by. Correspondingly, after the farm's reclaiming in 1994, many of those who returned immediately had done so more out of necessity than choice, while several of those who were inclined rather to see the farm as a place for eventual retirement were town-based people who had the material resources necessary to underpin the luxury of such a choice.[36]

Local accounts of the community's earlier life acknowledge these differences of wealth but, as Elizabeth stressed, 'no-one ever had to go without'.[37] Her statement reveals the existence on the farm of patterns of paternalism, binding richer to less well-off people. These appear to have resembled similar patterns

among mission-based proto-middle class communities elsewhere, such as those of the kholwa in Natal.[38] The contemporary expression of this clientelism has been the increasing reliance of poorer, less literate people upon members of the urban-based elite to represent them in the series of committees charged with leading the land-back struggle. In recent times, however, people have begun to express some resentment about this dependent status, asserting that richer people do not, any longer, really care for poorer ones as they used, and ideally still ought, to do. As Eva Mankge said: 'People don't help each other much now. There are many funerals, but little helping.'[39]

Did reclaiming the land then promise a salvaged sense of community? Godfrey's account, above, suggests that through combining a tested and strengthened Christian faith with prudent flight he has been set free to live again amongst his own kind. Giving a similar impression was Eva Mokaungoe, who said 'the law of Doornkop says that we should all be together, we cannot be scattered around'.[40] This seems to suggest that returning to the farm would fulfil the promise of freedom sought by the original buyers. But there is a sense in which the paganism and errant ways of the world beyond the farm, once encountered, were impossible to leave behind. Those returning are thought, by some, to have been unable to shake off these bad practices.[41] In this sense, the loss of a truly moral community united by its common faith and practice, blamed upon the 'scattering' of Doornkop's children, is irredeemable. In Magdalena Seholola's statement – 'When we die we are brought back so we can be together' – is an implication that there is community only in death.

African Christianity as 'Civil Religion'

It is not only in South Africa that the Bible has proved to be a rich source of imagery for those who have undergone unsettling experiences. We do not need to look far to find evocations of the Old Testament in defence of beleaguered and oppressed people far from home[42] or in support of identities newly created in the course of post-war reconstruction.[43] For such people, as for the convert/titleholders who bought Doornkop and enjoined their descendents to stay there for generations, it may be precisely the distance from, and lack of access to, traditional discourses on stability and belonging, which make scripture such an important idiom. This is not, however, to deny continuities with pre-existing forms of experience, as some recent writings on South African land ownership indicate. In a study of preacher/prophet Solomon Lion in the former Transvaal, Murray sees the preacher's elaborate theology merely as the means whereby this forceful man, achieving extraordinary levels of patriarchal control over his followers and their wage-earning capacity, was able to achieve both the purchase of the farm on which they lived and the continued communal existence of its inhabitants.[44] Murray's focus on Solomon Lion's efforts to establish and sustain an independent community, and his scepticism about the leader's motives, inclines him not to consider the significance of

the Bible or of Christian belief in the perceptions of his followers (such levels of control might in any case, under an earlier socio-political dispensation, have been achieved through more recognisably customary means). But it seems likely that the prophet's authority, and hence the viability of the community, was sustained by the scriptural status he assumed.

In another recent study of an independent Christian prophet in South Africa – Isaiah Shembe – the author interprets religious motivation more sympathetically.[45] Here, the prophet's purchase of land played its part in enabling the establishment, under conditions of increasing state control and social dislocation, of spaces of sanctuary for the refugee women and children who were Shembe's chief followers. It also provided an arena in which Shembe's 'rituals of resistance' could be enacted. Again there were continuities with past practice: the rituals were concerned as much with precolonial African issues – such as fertility – as with more orthodox Christian concerns. But again it was Old Testament language and imagery which became the means of expression and the focus of devotion.

The significance of the Bible, and particularly the Old Testament, in these cases has been in its capacity to help people come to terms with their 'tribulations, victories, captivities, peregrinations and prophecies' and hence to enable them 'to answer [...] troubling questions about their own identity'.[46] But how exactly does biblical discourse underwrite a sense of entitlement to, and social distinctiveness derived from, land ownership? While the lands procured by Doornkop's buyers, as for those bought by Solomon Lion and Isaiah Shembe, were undoubtedly important in their provision of some economic self-sufficiency, equally significant seems to have been their furnishing of a sense of uniqueness which their occupants, using the Bible as metaphor, could both sanction and circumscribe.

That the latter aspect might predominate is suggested by an example which might cause surprise by its inclusion, but which is nonetheless apposite. Indeed, it is perhaps more surprising that the obvious parallel between African landowners' separatism and that of their Afrikaner neighbours has not been drawn before. During the period when Afrikaner nationalism was on the rise, the nascent Afrikaner nation was spoken of as God's chosen people who had undergone, but – through a Covenant struck with God – managed to survive, terrible tribulations. These tribulations were in the way of a test: God had willed them to be threatened by other peoples, but not, ultimately, to be swamped by them.[47] (Such accounts, it has been argued, were constructed retrospectively with the aid of a neo-Calvinist intelligentsia, and hence owed their existence to the contemporary political setting in which nationalism was becoming salient, rather than to some abiding memory cherished by the descendents of the original Voortrekkers.)[48] Calvinist doctrine was here deployed to serve the ends of an anti-British republicanism and, in the process, to bind 'poor white' Afrikaners to their elite brethren by uniting all within the embrace of a single 'civil religion'. Afrikaners were justifying theologically an insistence which was becoming of ever-greater significance on the level of

secular power: that the state should not intrude between the individual and God. While bemoaning the loss of their independence in the formerly autonomous Boer Republics which Britain had annexed, they were asserting their right to a future autonomy – and, as it later emerged, to sovereignty – that was as much political as it was spiritual.

The repugnance inspired by this, which was to become one of the founding myths of apartheid, obscures resonances it had in the region. Some of the Doornkop narratives of land ownership and reclaim discussed above contain strong echoes of this account of divine selection through a process of testing-by-tribulation, of community bonds which transcend the divisions of class, and of an independence with spiritual underpinnings which nonetheless has secular outcomes. These echoes cannot be attributed to direct theological influence, since the mission station from which Doornkop's owners seceded, Botšhabelo, was run by the BMS, having been established under the direction of Merensky during the period of rule by the independent Boer ZAR (*Zuid Afrikaanse Republiek*). But, by default if not by design, there were links between these Lutheran missionaries and the state, during both the ZAR period and, later, the apartheid era itself. While this mission's German founders might have had little explicit contact with Boer society in the region, the regional political exigencies under which they operated made them wary of coming into conflict with the Boers: they thus effectively colluded with Boer demands – for labour and for taxation from their convert/subjects[49] and in other ways.[50] On the level of theology, the romantically derived German idea of the *Volkskirche*, by which people are thought to be best converted as members of extant cultures rather than as deracinated individuals, was later to become an important ingredient of apartheid-linked Calvinist ideology. It is certainly no accident that a missionary's son who was born and raised at Botšhabelo, Werner Eiselen, became one of the architects of apartheid, and one of the originators of *volkekunde*, the version of anthropology which lent itself to the aspirations of Afrikaner cultural nationalism.

Whether deriving from theological and ideological links, or from everyday interactions between Pedi titleholders and their Afrikaner farmer neighbours, there were distinct echoes of Afrikaner cultural exclusivism discernible on the level of Doornkop's aspired-to ideals of governance. Despite a factional divide which emerged between self-reliant diehards and modernisers amongst the farm's reclaimers, a sense of community distinctiveness transcended these differences, and resonated with the values of many of their Afrikaner farmer neighbours. Even anti-exclusivist modernisers were inclined to endorse the idea of restricted access as the farm's purchasers had advocated: 'it is not the wish of the buyers to allow anybody who is not a legal purchaser of the farm to dwell or settle on the farm' states its constitution. Conversely, even diehards unwilling to admit anyone to the reclaimed farm but a descendent of the original Pedi Lutheran titleholders were aware of the uncomfortable parallels between this exclusivity and the separatisms of South Africa's recent past. In an incident recounted to me with some embarrassment, several

truckloads of Ndebele, former tenants on the farm, having been turned back at the gate and refused permission to resume their earlier tenancies on the grounds that they were not descended from bareki (buyers), accused the Doornkop community of 'practising apartheid'. Schoolteacher Mrs Maabe, while admitting that she was still 'ruled by her elders' and thus opposed to the arrival of those not entitled by birth to live there, was nonetheless anxious about a rumour that the Mpumalanga provincial government's housing director had vowed not to offer any more help to Doornkop until it abandoned its stance as a *Volkstaat* (lit. 'people's state', a separate homeland for Afrikaners proposed by the far-right Conservative Party), independent of broader structures. As a committee member within the modernising faction, she recognised that the community's insistence on apartheid-style self-rule might disadvantage the farm by guaranteeing the provincial government's refusal to assist in its development.[51]

For African titleholders such as those who owned Doornkop, the idea of being a chosen people, tested and then elected by God, thus had deep resonance with a similar sense prevalent amongst their Afrikaner neighbours.

Conclusion

What is the significance of the complex interplay between titleholder independence and citizens' legitimate reliance on the state? How does Christian practice inform it, and how does biblical authority legitimate either or both of its interwoven facets?

To say that biblical metaphor has been used to sanction a connection between land and people is not to make a primordial claim about land's providing a source of 'identity', as the earlier quote from the land commissioner Seremane suggested. Claims on land, whether primordialist or deriving their authority from the Bible, must always be understood in political terms. And we are warned against making simplistic assumptions about the automatic and unproblematic relationship between land and identity[52] without attending to the relationships of power and influence which underpin these.

The original acquisition of land by titleholders such as those who bought Doornkop must be understood in the context of an array of segregationist laws which the colonial government was elaborating in the first few decades of the century and which were later to merge with, and feed into, the harsher laws of the apartheid regime. Within this context, the state was assembling systems of African landholding which laid the basis for a technique of governance. This linked Africans' occupation of reserve areas, held strictly under terms of 'customary' tenure, to their status as subjects of chiefs under indirect rule.[53] Even missions such as those run by the BMS, although providing their converts with the basis of an existence separate from chiefly rule, were inclined to endorse the power of patriarchal leaders within these communities, and also to underwrite converts' obligations – in labour and taxation – to the holders of political power within the settler state.[54] Although mission accounts stressed

these converts' indebtedness to God for delivering them from pagan persecution and bringing them together in God's 'garden', thus emphasising the necessity of humble Christian obedience, mission practice emphasised the necessity of bowing to the power of the government. Titleholder narratives, in contrast, accentuate the overriding importance of God's law, denying by implication its subordination to state law. These narratives thus retrospectively sanction the emancipatory experience of unfettered land access and speak of the promise of political sovereignty.

This sovereignty, however briefly achieved and chimerical, did not however represent a thoroughgoing opposition to the customary tenure of the reserves and its accompanying systems of governance. Most important, it did not embody principles of private and individual ownership. Archival evidence does show that among the possibilities considered by Doornkop's buyers was the option of dividing the farm into a small number of individual titles, which would then encompass the rights of other, unnamed owners. These debates over forms of ownership were dictated by the need to negotiate the complex terrain of segregationist legislation. But the option for which the buyers eventually settled was a form of communal ownership: an alternative which neither led its members irrevocably into the separate and second-class citizenship of the reserve/Bantustans, with its accompanying status as subjects of reinvented tribal chiefs, nor left them as disconnected individuals whose emerging socio-economic differences might fragment them, within a political dispensation resolutely weighted against them because of their race and ethnic background. The image of 'community' which resulted, was one in which images of guidance and custodianship underpinned the dependent relationships between the poor and those who were becoming middle class. It symbolically merged all these and negated the differences between them by glossing them as 'children of Israel': despite being 'scattered in the wilderness', all were united by virtue of being sons of the soil.

If 'the realm of the word' was the territory in which mission converts encountered the interchange between the expanding imperial powers and African kingdoms attempting to consolidate themselves,[55] then their independent use of 'the word' represented a way to make Christianity their own, and to negotiate separate spaces for themselves within the context of this interchange. The Church provided a means through which independence could be sought through land purchase: and the Bible offered a repertoire of images for describing and legitimating this autonomy, while nonetheless endorsing the fundamentally communal and interdependent nature of its protagonists. Christianity was, in this sense, a fundamentally political phenomenon, contrary to weaker claims that its significance in relation to resistance has been merely that of 'counter hegemony'[56] or that its converts – through a long 'conversation' – were more persuaded by its secular facets than by its religious dimension. Religion and its secular dimensions were fused, making Lutheranism, for Doornkop's Pedi owners, a truly 'civil religion' as it had been for white farmers living in the neighbourhood and beyond.[57]

At the same time, however, Christianity did not lay the basis, amongst all those seeking land, for a broader political unity: the absence of such a unifying discourse has been much lamented by activists working in land reform.[58] Although the scripture of land ownership – and its corollary, the scripture of land loss – endorsed strongly-felt emotions which tied communal groups of people to specific farms and gave them a 'sentimental attachment to [particular] neighbourhoods', it has not, by definition, lent itself to a more generalised politicisation of the link between land and people.

Notes

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34 These were in Witwatersrand townships like Soweto or Daveyton and nearby towns like Witbank or Middelburg.
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