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A Question of Ethnicity: Ndzundza Ndebele in a Lebowa Village

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Abstract *The insights of such authors such as Mitchell, Barth and Cohen can be usefully applied to understanding the occurrence of ethnicity in small-scale communities within the context of the South African system of ethnic homelands. In this paper, deep-seated divisions between Pedi and Ndebele in a village in the Pedi Homeland of Lebowa are examined. While it is undoubtedly true that these can be understood only in the light of the constraints in resources and political power imposed from above through state policy, account must also be taken of local-level processes. Recent historical events, and the contemporary setting, have led the people concerned – particularly the Ndebele – to constitute themselves as ethnic groups in order to try to secure their hold over crucial economic and political resources.*

Introduction

In the South African context, the question of ethnicity is a morally-charged and difficult one. This is mainly so because the enforcement of ethnic separation by the South African government has been seen to lie at the heart of some of apartheid's worst atrocities. The study of ethnic identities, by *volkkundiges*, for example, (1) has appeared as an unquestioning acceptance – or even an ideological justifying – by academics of this official policy. Because of this, scholars critical of the South African government have tended to under-emphasise these identities, and to stress instead uniting factors such as common working class identity. In recent years, however, a number of studies have singled out for analysis precisely this kind of strong group identification. (2) While these works do acknowledge that the outer parameters within which strong ethnicity emerges may have been set by state policy, they are equally concerned to examine the local-level processes through which it develops and is maintained. They also have in common an insistence that these group identities must be understood not in terms of primordial loyalties, but as affiliations established by specific, and recent, historical developments.

This latter idea is, indeed, not entirely new to the discipline of social anthropology. As long ago as 1956, Mitchell observed that workers on the Copperbelt were stressing tribal allegiance, not as an anachronistic hangover from their rural origins, but as a newly-discovered way of interacting with other people in the urban setting. Along similar lines, Cohen showed how Hausa traders on the alien context of Yorubaland acquired a cultural distinctiveness - mainly through the practise of intense Islamic mysticism – far stronger than that of Hausa still living in their heartland. In so doing, the group safeguarded its political and economic interests in a way which the newly-written constitution of independent Nigeria failed to do. And in a piece published, like Cohens, in 1969, Barth showed that tribes or ethnic groups should not be understood in terms of objective, and therefore unchanging, cultural features, but rather through a knowledge of why their members, in a dynamic and fluid contemporary setting, should want to maintain themselves as strongly distinct from other groups.(3)

It may seem puzzling that the challenge of applying these kinds of insights to South African anthropological studies was not taken up sooner. The reason, again,

probably lies in the reluctance of these scholars, by acknowledging the existence of ethnic consciousness, to be though of as endorsing the ideological underpinnings of apartheid. In addition, a number of anthropologists were using radical or materialist theory to help them understand the transformations wrought upon contemporary rural or urban communities in South Africa. While such an approach would definitely preclude the notion of ethnic affiliation as something primordial, it seemed equally incompatible with the writings of an author like Barth, whose 'methodological individualist' (4) perspective emphasised the power of common people to manipulate social situations to their own benefit, and seemed naïve in the light of the massive structural inequalities in South African society.

Morotse Village

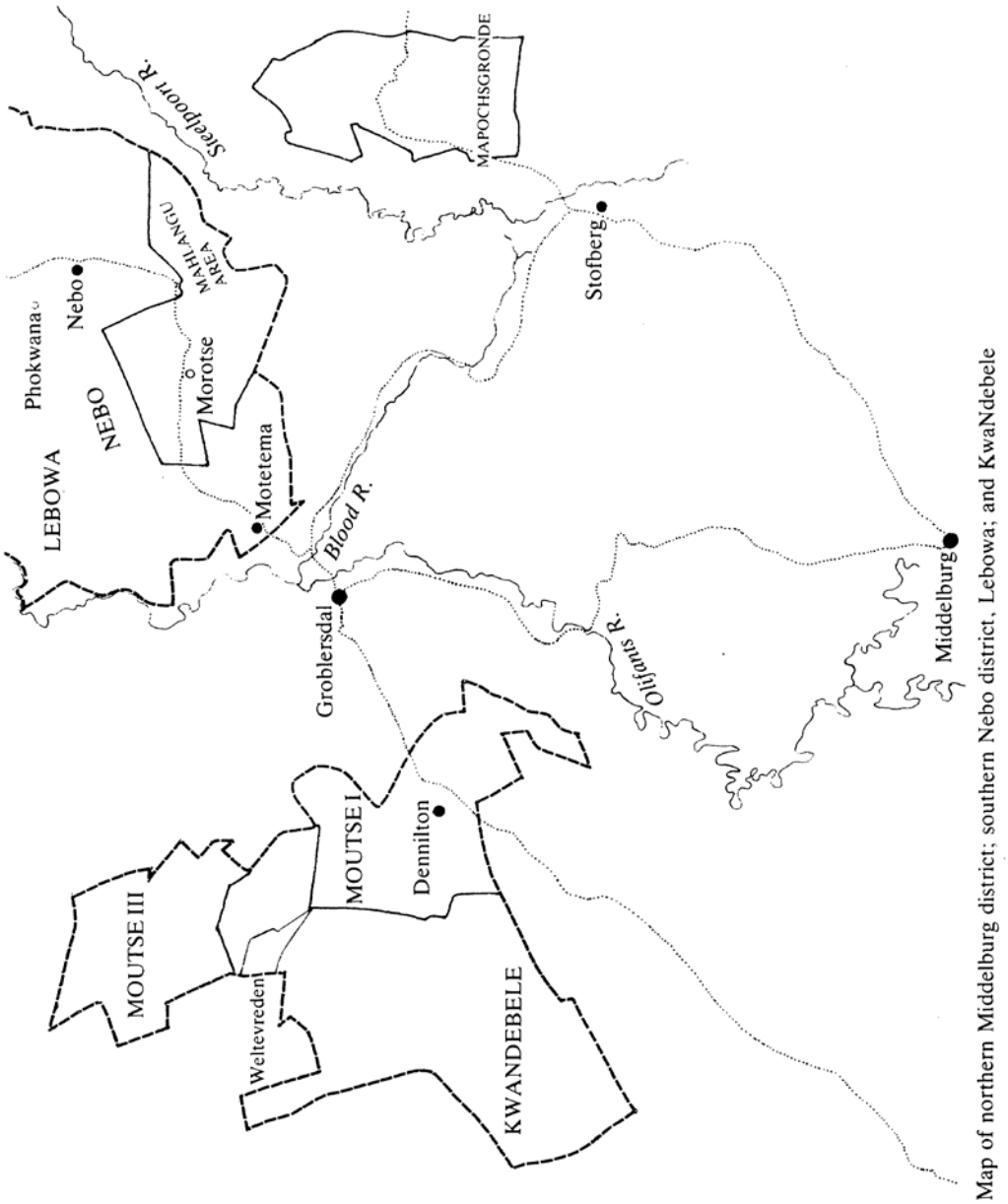
Morotse is a village situated on the peripheries of the Pedi Homeland of Lebowa, on one of a group of 'Trust farms' which were bought from white owners after 1936 to add to the existing Homeland area. Almost all the village's present inhabitants — Pedi and Ndebele — moved to their present home since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

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

In later years, as is now well known, a Homeland did come to be designated for the Ndebele. Its creation was prompted by the continued departure from white farms of labour tenants who were now too many to be accommodated alongside other groups of people in the various other homelands. A split developed alongside other sets of Ndebele leaders: those who eventually opted for Homeland status in this newly allotted territory of KwaNdebele, and those of the Nebo Ndebele with whom this paper deals. The latter preferred to remain in Lebowa since they were adamant that they would never accept any Ndebele Homeland other than the original heartland, now known as Mapochsgronde.(5) The tense and antagonistic relationship between these two branches of the chiefly Mahlangu family and their respective groups of followers forms an important background to the lives of the Nebo Ndebele living in Morotse, as will later be demonstrated.

Seen from the perspective of formally-defined power relations, then, the situation in Morotse is one in which a local authority of one officially-designated ethnic origin wields power within a broader context dominated by another ethnic group. Against this background, a look at local-level relationships between the two groups in Morotse reveals a strong degree of boundary maintenance. This was most obvious to me during fieldwork in the spatial separation of the village into Pedi and

Ndebele sections, but it extended into, and was maintained by, many other aspects of life beyond the purely geographical. Endogamy, for example, served to maintain group boundaries, and esoteric ritual, particularly that associated with initiation, also



Map of northern Middelburg district; southern Nebo district, Lebowa; and KwaNdebele

ensured that each group remained opaque to the other.(6) There were many differences evident between the two communities; some were commented-on by villagers and enshrined in ethnic stereotypes and categorisations, but other abstract, structural differences were more clearly visible to me, an outsider.

On the level of folk interpretation, Pedi people revealed in conversation that they thought the Ndebele to be old-fashioned, with excessive respect for the authority of the chief, and mostly pagan in their beliefs. Ndebele, on the other hand, thought that the Pedi were fierce and angry, and too prone to create trouble with the whites or with any other form of authority.

These reciprocal ethnic stereotypes acquired their most stark form during an incident of protest in which the chief's authority was, momentarily, fundamentally challenged. Villagers had united to speak out against a so-called Co-op, which had for several years controlled their farming and allowed them no say in the use of their fields. Their main grievance was that the costs of the highly capital-intensive techniques used in ploughing and preparing their fields were deducted from each plotholder's total yield after the harvest, leaving many severely in debt to the Co-op. The people ultimately responsible for having decided upon, and implemented, this system were a number of white representatives of the Co-op's funding body, the South African government-linked Lebowa Landbou Maatskappy. Although the presence and influence of these men led many Morotse villager to see themselves as 'working for whites', the chief and a number of his relatives and councillors played an important role in it as well, deriving personal benefits from its existence while acting as mouthpieces for its directives to the community. Thus it was that, when the villagers' protest against the Co-op became voluble and threatened to assume violent dimensions, the chief was called in to try to quell the disturbance. When the chief addressed them in highly emotive language, invoking their loyalty and imploring them to abandon the protest, some villagers agreed to do so while others wished to carry on their action still further. The division between 'capitulators' and 'resisters' was thought by many – on both sides of the ethnic divide – to be synonymous with that between Ndebele and Pedi.

The more etic differences, observable on the level of social structure, in many instances bore out the emic image of Pedi Christian modernity contrasted with Ndebele traditionalism. The typical Ndebele household, for example, was extended along agnatic lines, with a man and several sons – or, more accurately, a woman and several daughters-in-law – living together and sharing resources. In contrast, Pedi households in the village were generally smaller or, where a household was extended, it was more often through its unmarried daughters and their children. (7) The logic of their differing household structures was evident, too, in the way in which the rule of the last-born inheritance – equally tenacious clung-to in theory by both Pedi and Ndebele – was carried out by members of the two groups. In Pedi families it was more common for the older sons to move away from the parental home, leaving the younger son to take care of his parents, set up home on their plot, and use their fields. Ndebele families, so strongly united by agnatic ties failed to undergo the fission which normally occurs with impartial inheritance. Instead, the family would stick together and continue to use the field jointly. (8) In line with these structural differences, the role play played by women in domestic and village life differed strikingly between the two communities, with Ndebele women more apparently 'traditionalist', subject to stricter rules of *hlonipha*, and more often dwelling in orthodox households with their in-laws where such rules would have to be observed.

Within the broad context of the division between the two groups, it can be seen from this brief description that the Ndebele group is more 'ethnic' than the Pedi: that is, it is seen and sees itself as more culturally distinctive, and its members are subjected to cultural stereotyping by other groups more frequently than they, in turn, construct stereotypes about the members of these other groups. Although the Pedi view of the Ndebele as primitive, backward and opposed to civilising influences has a parallel – though with less derogatory connotations – in the observations of a number of anthropologists, this is in strong contrast to the views of the white Co-op officials, in whose opinion the Ndebele are industrious peasant farmers, who are down-to-earth and easy to communicate with.

The fact that each group in the broader social field emphasises a different 'typically Ndebele' trait shows, as Barth has suggested, that ethnicity is a situational phenomenon involving not absolute or objective cultural differences 'but only those which the actors themselves regard as significant'. (9) In the case of the Ndebele, different features are seen as significant by a range of actors, each addressing its own agenda when interacting with the members of this group. It is only through an examination of these various kinds of contact in a historical perspective that we may understand why such identifying characteristics – sometimes so unlike each other as to be positively contradictory – have been selected. By this means, I will attempt to arrive at an understanding of the strong cultural distinctiveness of the Ndebele in this Lebowa village.

I start by examining the claims of anthropologists. It has been noted that the Southern Ndebele, despite their close contact with Pedi people over the last century and a half, have a social structure and culture remarkably distinct from that of the Pedi. (10) their language, form of initiation, descent groups and marriage rules appear to be typically Nguni, and since the group is known to have moved away fro the Natal Nguni territory during the 16th century, it is thought that these features are Nguni traits which have been tenaciously clung to.

What is problematic in this interpretation is its assumption that all apparently traditionalist traits are necessarily Nguni survivals of the group's Nguni origins. And even if one were to accept that these characteristics do derive from the distant past, this interpretation begs the question of what historical or contemporary circumstances have led to the retention of these customs. This questions demands an answer especially urgently in the light of the fact that another group- the Northern Ndeble – who shared the same Nguni origins have lived close to Pedi influence for an equivalent amount of time, did *not* retain Nguni language or tradition in any measure. A more detailed look at the attitudes expressed by Pedi villagers provides some clues about the circumstances that gave rise to apparent Ndebele conservatism. It is said that whereas Pedi are modern, civilised, educated and Christian, Ndebele prefer their customs, and this makes them backward. Pedi are townspeople who understand town ways, but Ndebele are country bumpkins. Proof of their primitiveness is their dislike of education, and even when an Ndebele child does attend school, he or she will leave as soon as possible: if a girl, she will never regard herself as truly grown up unless she has worked as a domestic servant in Pretoria for a few years before returning to build a house: if a boy, he will get work so that he can buy an old car which will be parked in his parents; plot and then left to rust. When going to town to look for work, the Ndebele find jobs easily, because they will work for much less money than a Pedi would. Also, they often do not have passes, which puts them in a weak position and means that the employer can pay even less. A finial indication of their backwardness is Ndebele dislike of church, and their favouring of traditional ancestor worship.

While some of these stereotypes – like the early age at which youths leave school and look for work – are borne out by observation, others have no referent whatsoever in present reality. Most notable among these are the assumptions that the Pedi/Ndebele divide coincides on the one hand with that between town and country people, and on the other with that between Christians and traditionalists. This stereotype in fact harks back to contrasts between Pedi and Ndebele when both were tenants on white farms, and it is to this historical experience that we must now turn. (11)

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

In contrast, the Ndebele were in a position to exercise far less choice. After their defeat by the Boers in 1883, they had been given out to there farmers as indentured labourers. Although the official periods of indenture only lasted for five years, and despite attempts made to break free of the original farms to which they had been allotted, (12) these people still appeared, by 1914, to constitute a 'trapped labour force'. (13) Partly, this situation of virtual slavery derived from their extreme poverty – they were described by SNC Edwards as being 'as poor as church mice…they worked for no wages and going out to the mines is, to say the least, openly discouraged. (14) With minimal access to wages for farm or migrant work, these tenants had no opportunity singly or as a group to purchase or rent land which might have served as an independent residential or agricultural base, and they thus lacked the options which allowed their Pedi counterparts some choice about the conditions under which they lived in white areas.

It is argued by Delius that only during the period of indenture did the Ndzundza – whose chiefdom in the 19th century had included a wide range of heterogeneous groups besides Nguni – forge a homogenous culture. One response to the life of the farms, he suggests, was to attempt 'to regroup and to revive key social institutions like the homestead and male initiation', (15) and that these socio-cultural reconstructions provided the tenants with a template of a lifestyle beyond the one dictated by the restrictive environment of the farms.

Thus, the alleged adherence to tribal ways of the Ndebele – and their apparently traditional agnatic family structure – has its origins in the farm era. This family type, as well as owing much to the socio-cultural reconstruction suggested by

Delius, also derived directly from the specific conditions of labour tenancy. A large family size was favoured by landlords, and the stipulation that every member render service to the farmer, and that failure to do so would result in eviction for the whole family, prompted an intensified interdependence within the family. In addition, the authority of male household heads, through whom the landlord issued all instructions and demands for labour, was thereby artificially bolstered. (16) After resettlement in the trust farms of Nebo, continuing poverty and lack of access to wider social groupings ensured a continuing interdependence of family members, resulting in the survival of such extended families into the present day. (17) A further dimension to this creation of ethnicity was the fact that aspects of traditionalist behaviour – such as the wearing of skins rather than western clothes – were positively insisted on by farmers, who appear to have found the possibility of Ndzundza westernisation threatening to their security in retaining this all-but-captive labour force. Along the same lines, Delius demonstrates the farmers' reluctance to allow schools on their farms, or even to envisage the possibility of their tenants' children attending school elsewhere. (18)

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

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

One can explain in a similar light the Pedi stereotype of Ndebele as country bumpkins rather than townspeople. When, during the first two or three decades of the 20th century, Ndzundza were prevented from becoming migrants by the constraints of their constraints of their labour contracts and the lack of resources or alternative accommodation which might have provided a basis for relative independence, farm-dwelling Pedi were managing to combine their tenancies with periods of migration to town, and were establishing networks, finding places to live, and gaining a foothold in certain defined areas of the urban/industrial economy. (19) And although Ndzundza were later to become as fully proletarianised as – albeit on less favourable terms than – their Pedi neighbours, the Pedi stereotype seems to hark back to the farm era in its insistence that Ndebele are primitive country folk.

At the same time, the aspect of the stereotype which emphasises the poorly paid jobs that Ndebele are prepared to settle for once in town is an accurate reflection of the fact that these people, when they did join the ranks of the industrial working class, stepped into it at a lower and relatively less privileged level than did the Pedi. Writings from other parts of postcolonial Africa suggest that ethnicity frequently reflects class position, and this appears to be true in the case of Morotse's Ndebele. (20) The Ndzundza were uneducated, lacked resources and so were 'relatively disadvantaged within rural society' as Delius suggests. (21) Their change of domicile

from white farm to Trust area had entailed a series of drawbacks: since many came from further-flung areas they were unable to bring cattle with them, and since most arrived after the Fifties they were unable to acquire land in their new abode. (22) When they did begin to migrate to town for the first time, they lacked ready-made urban networks and know-how, and therefore were denied the possibility of getting jobs through friendships within the urban context: all these things had to be built up from scratch. Their class position was thus a lowly one in both rural and urban aspects.

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

Interestingly, this view if the only one of the ethnic stereotypes mentioned so far which points directly to the experience of farm life as being formative of Ndebele identity – but it does so in an upside-down sort of way. There is little evidence, for example, that the experience of labour tenancy made 'better farmers' out of the Ndebele: plotholders' yields for the period 1979-82 indicate no significant difference between ethnic groups, and members of both groups have lived as labour tenants in the Middelburg district. Pedi ability to cultivate the soil while they were on the farms would not have been affected by the fact that they were freer to choose between farms and freer to migrate for part of the year from an earlier period.

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

A further factor that must be remembered in understanding this stereotype, however, is the fact that the Ndebele with whom these officials have most contact, and whose sense of humour they are thus bests places to appreciate, are not in fact ordinary plotholders but rather members of the chiefly family who occupy senior positions in the Co-op's administrative hierarchy. (23) Ironically, these men do spend a lot of time 'sitting around in offices' – in the Co-op office, to be precise – and it is here that lengthy bantering sessions between the elite Nzundza and Afrikaner officials are played out. The insistence by there officials that the Ndebele, as seasoned farmers, readily took to the Co-op's introduction must then be understood in a different light. It was these chiefly Ndebele, one of whose number in fact devised the Co-op, that were keen to push the scheme through. If ordinary, commoner Ndebele plotholders were supporters of this initiative, and if they continued in apparent support of it even when

it was being roundly rejected by other villagers, this should be seen in terms of the operation of chiefly privilege and authority in the community, and of the quasi-clientelist relationships between Ndebele commoners and their Chief, rather than in terms of a considered decisions about good farming based on years of experience working with whites. It is these relationships that will form the subject of the following section of the paper.

Ethnicity and Authority

During the incident in which villagers grouped together to protest about the interference of the Co-op in their farming, the ethnic stereotypes which emerged- of Pedi as fighters and resisters in contrast to the perceived obedience and quiescence of the Ndebele – were as inaccurate as many of the other stereotypes mentioned so far. Despite some informants' insistence that it was the Pedi villagers who initiated the protest, voluble dissatisfaction about the Co-op had come from both sides of the ethnic divide: a fact which reveals as false the officials' attitude that the Ndebele were overwhelmingly positive in their approach to the Co-op. The stereotype seems more accurate however in reflecting each group's behaviour after the meeting called by the chief to try and restore calm to the village. Although the village has been more or less united in its opposition to the Co-op, it was in responding to the chief's emotive appeal for loyalty that its members appear to have divided along ethnic lines, into compliant Ndebele and defiant Pedi. (24) It was this split, in its perceived as well as its actually dimensions, which defused the impact of the villagers' dissatisfaction, and which can throw some light on how the issue of chiefly authority influences ethnicity in the two groups.

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

The defeat of the Ndzundza in 1883 left the members of this once powerful chiefdom scattered on white farms without any form of effective leadership. Despite this devastation of the polity, the imprisoned chief Nyabela made great efforts to perpetuate his influence. According to oral tradition, he sent messages to his subjects from prison and later dispatched an emissary to rule in his absence, (25) and documentary sources corroborate that chiefly functions – most notably that of supervision male initiation – were being re-established for Ndzundza on the farms around 1886. (26) It seems however that leaders' power was to remain narrowly restricted within this ritual domain, for all attempts to regroup and to set up any more substantial material basis for independence and political unity were thwarted. (27) A small group, including a branch of the chiefly Mahlangu family, did live as rent tenants on a farm called Kafferskraal where they were not directly subject to the authority of any farmer. Nonetheless, the fact that most of the chief's headmen and almost all of his subjects were labour tenants would have placed severe restrictions on the operation of chiefly power in any other than the ritual domain.

It is interesting that the issue around which the chiefship re-emerged – male initiation – was also one of the few areas of influence in which this revived power could be exercised. Although concerned primarily with ceremony and ritual, it was not however an ephemeral aspect of Ndebele social life. On the contrary, being one of the few institutions ensuring unity in the otherwise disparate existence of these people, it seems to have been loaded with several significances beyond its apparently limited scope. Delius for instance proposes that by the 1920s initiation schools were teaching youths the virtues of submissions to the authority of the male household head, and that this may have been indicative of the extreme dependence of elders on members of the younger generations in the circumstances of labour tenancy where farmers wanted the whole family to work on this lands. Values taught which would ensure the solidarity of families and thus the security of their tenancies on the farms were the same values which supported and emphasised the importance of royalty, and in Delius' view the teachings during initiation may have reflected 'a tacit alliance between homestead heads battling to maintain their positions and royals seeking recognition. (28)

It is interesting to note that one area at least in which Southern Ndebele culture does not display an apparent conservation of the typically Nguni features is that of the organisation of male initiation: the Ndebele *wela*, like its Pedi equivalent, is centralised and involves the congregating of all youths of suitable age at the king's place, rather than being run by the head of a local descent-group as is the usual Nguni pattern. (29) Although I have no information about how long this has been the case, the use of the centralised Pedi style in the context of farm life would have had the effect of further stressing the centrality of royal and chiefly power.

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

This situation contrasts markedly with that obtaining among Pedi in the area, not only those living in the Pedi reserve but even those who, like the Ndebele, were tenants on farms in the Middelburg district. In fact this proximity of reserve-dwellers and farm-dwellers was partly why the Pedi tenant community maintained an image of chiefship in which public accountability was so crucial. As already mentioned, the Pedi chiefship despite conquest by and subordination to the whites during the 19th century still had a geographical base in the heartland of the Pedi reserve. This base, and the social constituency of reserve-dwellers that went with it, was to provide the ingredients for a fierce resistance to the South African Governments subsequent interference with the operation of chiefly power.

One manifestation of this resistance can be seen in Pedi responses to the Government's attempts, pre-1950, to establish a chain of command from Native Commissioner downwards through chiefs to local headmen. According to Sansom, the system foundered through lack of community recognition of these state endorsed authorities. To fill the gap left by people's reluctance to acknowledge these headmen, local groups of unofficial leaders called the *bashalagae* had emerged by the time Sansom conducted fieldwork in the Sixties. These men had the advantage of being

beyond the control of the Commissioner since their existence as leaders was unknown to him. (30)

The most pronounced resistance of all, however, occurred at the time when the government tried to impose Bantu Authorities. Despite much suspicion a system of Tribal Authorities was briefly set up, but it encountered such hostility – not least from its own office-bearers – that it was soon disbanded, its Paramount suspended and then exiled, and another member of the chiefly family appointed in his place. As in many other such cases, there was a split within the population of the Pedi reserve between those willing to implement the system – the supporters of this new chief – and those who followed the true Paramount (based at Mohlaletse) and who were fiercely opposed to the system. The strength of resistance throughout the whole series of episodes, which culminated in the riots of 1957, suggests however that a very large contingent of reserve-dwellers, including numerous migrants, were strongly opposed to the implementation of the Government's plans. What is interesting is that much of this resistance was voiced by, or even initiated by, members of the chiefly class in Pedi society, not the least of these being the Paramount himself. (31)

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

In these debates and conflicts about the role of royalty in the contemporary situation, it was not merely commoners who made their feelings known, but frequently chiefs who articulated these feelings. The idea that a chief traditionally is expected to act as a spokesman for community feeling is by now well accepted among anthropologists, thanks largely to Comaroff's seminal article. (32) That this idea was current too among Pedi villagers in Morotse was made clear to me by a number of informants' vehement statements. One man told me about his expectations of royal behaviour: a chief should not be a ruler who tells people what to do, but rather a follower and a listener. He must hear what his people want and act on their behalf, and if he fails to do this, the people will be entitled to fight with, or even kill him. This same man expressed his exasperation and puzzlement at the fact that Ndebele villagers lack this attitude towards chiefly power, and at the fact that 'they just clap their hands and say 'Mahlangu' when (their chief) speaks'.

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

Marriage Rules

While the differing histories of the two groups might account for their having evolved different kinds of relationships between leaders and their subjects, it is questionable whether these structures and attitudes would persist in the present day merely because of some anachronistic carry-over of ideology from the past, even if this was the recent past. What makes these historical influences effective in the contemporary setting, and thus bolsters the loyalty of Ndebele subjects to their chief, is a strong and far-reaching network of kinship ties. This in turn owes its existence to the specific marriage-practices in this community, or at least in the group of plotholders which forms its core. Rules governing marriage appear to be one area among many in which Pedi custom has influenced that of the Ndebele. In place of the strict exogamy typical of Nguni peoples, Ndebele custom as documented by Fourie favoured cousin marriage, especially with the daughter of the mother's brother. (33) Remnants of an emphasis on exogamy can be traced however in the following aspects noted by Fourie: marriage is prohibited with any woman who has the same *isibongo* as a man, that is, with a patrilateral parallel cousin. Splits in families are explained as originating in the wish for their members to intermarry while maintaining the observance of exogamy. The expansion of the Ndebele tribe historically to include other families besides the original five was seen by Fourie's informants as having been a welcome development since it facilitated exogamy. And the strict observance of *hlonipha* and dramatising of social distance between in-laws during the marriage ceremonies are more reminiscent of Nguni groups practising clan exogamy than of the customary ease and familiarity of Pedi affines who are often already blood relatives. (34)

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

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

My suggestion if that the ties of kinship are here acting to reinforce the ethos of loyalty to royal authority described earlier in this paper. It is a suggestion based primarily on a folk interpretation, for at least a few informants offered the existence of affinal links to the chief as explanation for this reluctance to go further with their protests against the Co-op. although it is true that some of the connections to this chief established by marriage are fairly remote and might therefore be thought not to carry much weight, some case studies seem to demonstrate the contrary. Lena Msiza, wife of a man whose mother is the sister of the chief's mother's mother, was one of the informants citing her relationship to the chief as a reason for her loyalty to him. Another case study demonstrating the strength of these marriage ties to royalty is that of David Mthimunye, a dedicated Christian. Despite his fervent commitment to being

a Jehovah's Witness and his professed antipathy to aspects of the customary behaviour such as traditional dress, male initiation, and the chief's court and its pronouncements, he nonetheless insisted that his marriage to a half-sister of the chief's makes it imperative for him and his family to behave with dutifulness and respect towards the chief at all times. This man played no part in the plotholders' revolt, despite his expressed dissatisfaction about the Co-op.

My observation about this tendency to exogamy and the effects of this on relationships of authority of course begs the question of what lies behind this tendency. My insistence throughout this paper has been that social rules and structures arise or change in relation to concrete historical circumstances. There could be several possible reasons behind such a change, and these can only be speculated about here. It has been noted, for instance, that the practise of 'marrying out' can create widespread alliances. (35) These, besides their economic and more general social functions, may have a specifically political significance. Gluckman shows how, in the case of decentralised Nuer society, the presence of affines – and therefore of blood relatives in succeeding generations – in groups other than one's own creates a check to possible conflict and feuding between the groups concerned. (36) But in the case of societies with definite political leaders, affinal links between groups could become even more salient politically. Much has been written on the significance of cross-cousin marriage in perpetuating links between rulers and ruled, (37) but the important point in such links, to be perpetuated, must first be initiated, and this must happen via the practise of exogamy at least in the initial stages of overrule. (38) In the accounts referred to here, the giving of wives to previously unrelated groups in exogamous marriage is initiated by the dominant or conquering group. Similarly, it could be the case that, among the Ndebele, the impetus came from royals to extend marriage-links to diverse groups of subjects. If this were the case, the trend might well have started while Ndeble were still living on the farms, and its effect would have been to counteract the dispersal and disruption of the era of farm life, and at the same time to ensure a degree of attachment to royal authority.

On the other hand, it is equally possible that marriage-links to the chief and his family began to be established by Ndebele commoners, and that this trend started after the arrival of these people on the Trust farms. In the Homeland context, such links of affinity could be visualised almost as links of clientage, the existence of which might have been thought by commoners to facilitate favourable treatment during land allocation and distribution of other resources.

The question of which of these considerations or influences affected Ndebele marriage patterns must remain unanswered in this paper. But the idea that these affinal relationships are paralleled by, or express, relationships of patron-client kind between Ndebele subjects and their chief is at least suggested by some evidence I found. And this leads me to look at a final, and perhaps the most important, questions about the causes behind ethnicity: what resources might the group gain access to by organising itself along ethnic lines, and by clustering itself around a leader who enjoys privileged access to resources? In other words, what political subtext, like that prompting the Hausa traders of Cohen's account to group together and protect their trade interests, ultimately underlies ethnicity in the case being discussed here? (39)

Political Underpinnings of Ethnicity

It is my contention, then, that ethnic solidarity in Morotse is grounded in recent historical experiences of chiefly authority, and reinforced by marriage-ties. The

explanation must be further qualified, however, to establish its truth in relation to this specific historical and geographical setting, since it is clear from a look at Ndzundza Ndebele in their official Homeland that very different relationships have developed between royals and their subjects. (40)

There must therefore be something very specific about the contemporary context of the Nebo Ndebele which, added to the factors of history and kinship, has made them so apparently acquiescent to chiefly directives. Briefly, I would argue that the explanation lies in their occupation of a Homeland inhabited and broadly controlled by another ethnic group, where resources are scarce, and where competition for these resources has been predetermined as occurring along ethnic lines by state policies far beyond the ambit of villagers' control. In examining this complex situation, it is as important to understand villagers' perceptions as it is to know the facts, since it is a group's idea of itself as competing, or as being threatened, which in Barth's terms creates the conditions for its self-definition – and definition by the other group – as ethnic. (41)

Morotse's Ndzundza villagers, according to evidence provided by my fieldwork, felt threatened in the context of Lebowa. Although the immediate area is defined as an Ndebele tribal Authority, its situation within the Pedi Homeland was cited by a number of informants as cause for their feeling insecure there. This feeling of insecurity has been engendered mainly by recent debates and conflicts over whether or not the Ndebele as a whole were to have a Homeland of their own. If, as some rumours had it, the Homeland were to be situated remote from Nebo and adjoining the home of the chiefly family's other faction (as, indeed, it finally has been), then Morotse's Ndebele feared they might be evicted from Nebo altogether or discriminated against if they decided to remain there. Other accounts seeming to substantiate these misgivings rumoured that Ndebele would be denied citizenship unless they went to KwaNdebele. At the time of fieldwork in 1983, some Nebo Ndebele had been driven by these fears to pack their bags and leave. On the other hand, if KwaNdebele were to be situated on twelve farms along Nebo's southern border, as other rumoured predicted, (42) then the possibility existed that the Nebo trust farms themselves, including Morotse and other villages, could be designated as part of KwaNdebele. This might be thought to be reassuring to Ndebele villagers, but their fear was that Pedi villagers would feel threatened by and resentful of the change, since it would leave them entirely under Ndebele control. And even though this was merely a vaguely projected future possibility in 1982, the sense of threat, resentment and general ethnic conflict engendered by it had already found its way into present relationships between the village's two groups.

In addition to these Ndzunza perceptions of possible Pedi resentment fuelled by developments yet to happen, there were very real and immediate complaints from Pedi villagers about unfair allocation of resources along ethnic lines. The chief and his henchmen were said to have favoured Ndebele in giving them fields before Pedi who were ahead in the queue, in allocating them larger residential stands, in deciding where to site water taps, in building the high school in a place close to the chief's own village where only Ndebele people live. There are also accusations that the chief's relatives, who hold important positions in the Co-op, have distributed plotholder's bags of mealies, and even food and fodder sent by aid organisations as famine relief, to other elite Ndebele in the area, some of whom are said to have profited from the exchange by selling these supplies to their shops. For these kinds of reasons, resentment about the fact of Ndebele control in the local context is widespread in the Pedi section of the village. (43)

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

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

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

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

My argument, restated, runs like this. A limited package of material resources – land, funds, aid, buildings – exists, for the use of this ethnically divided village. Although broader decisions about the disposition of these are taken in a sphere dominated by Pedi politicians, more immediate control is in the hands of local Ndebele authorities. Ndebele villagers, living side-by-side with their Pedi

counterparts, sense a resentment from them at the power exercised by these authorities. Given the gradually tightening restrictions on resources, the effect of this perceived resentment – and of the ensuing sense of being under threat – is to strengthen group solidarity, but particularly to deepen affiliation to its ruling clique, in an attempt to reinforce and retain its members access to these key resources.

In this description of the village's Ndebele population as split by differences of wealth, power and influence, we can find suggestions of the existence of clientelist relationships. Although this aspect is merely touched on here, and in my earlier point that ties of marriage to the chief might well also be those of allegiance to a patron, it reiterates an observation made by Leys that an emphasis on tribal or ethnic identity and unity may serve to link members of different social strata in relationships of interdependence, while disguising the fact that their interests are fundamentally opposed. (44) Here, Ndebele villagers form a solidary group together with their leaders rather than grouping together with their Pedi counterparts whose material situation resembles theirs so closely.

My suggestion, along similar lines to those argued by Cohen, is that this group's definitive, apparently old-fashioned traits are serving important political functions. In this case study of Hausa traders in Ibadan, Cohen shows that not only is custom a cloak for relationships of power and control over resources, but also that it actually provides an idiom in which these relationships can be expressed. Things like an ideology of togetherness, opportunities to meet, hierarchies of authority and structures of decision-making do fulfil their ostensible purposes – which in Cohen's examples are kinship and religious ones respectively – but they also act as an infrastructure allowing for decision-making about ad organisation relating to political issues: in this case, control over long-distance trade in Nigeria. (45)

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

There is one last point I wish to make about different degrees of formality in ethnic organisation. Writings on the colonial period saw ethnicity as having been encouraged or even newly created by the imposed capitalist economy,(46) and/or by

the colonial authorities in their attempts to construct a system of administration for the colonies.(47) It was only after independence, that they began to acquire their own volition. Groups now began of their own accord to organise themselves along ethnic lines in a bid to gain or retain control over key resources. (48)

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