

[Deborah Ann James](#)

## Kinship and land in an inter-ethnic rural community

### Thesis

**Original citation:**

James, Deborah Ann (1987) *Kinship and land in an inter-ethnic rural community*. Masters thesis, University of Witwatersrand

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/50301/>

Available in LSE Research Online: May 2013

© 1987 The Author

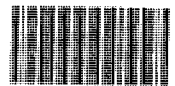
LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This thesis has been made available on LSE Research Online with the permission of the author.

KINSHIP AND LAND IN AN INTER-ETHNIC RURAL COMMUNITY

Deborah Ann James

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Arts,  
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg,  
in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



01441178

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a study of the way in which ethnicity shapes various aspects of the life of a Lebowa village. Differing histories as labour tenants on the white farms of the south-eastern Transvaal have determined differing access to agricultural resources for Pedi and Ndebele when they left the farms for their present home in the village of Morotse. In the contemporary setting, these rural assets are combined with the migrant remittances which have become indispensable to the survival of any household in the southern African reserve areas. Again, the resulting combined packages of resources are distributed unequally between the two ethnic groups. Corresponding to this relative poverty or prosperity, a range of household types has evolved, with a broad contrast between a Pedi and an Ndebele type. The practice of inheritance also manifests a contrast between the two ethnic groups.

At times, ethnicity is manifest not simply in different aspects of social structure, but in more overt conflict. I describe an occasion on which ethnic hostility was expressed - relating to the use of agricultural land - and in conclusion attempt to explain the existence of ethnicity in the village in the light of some recent literature on the topic. I argue that, in general, ethnicity must be understood in the light of competition over scarce resources in the contemporary "Homeland" context. In addition, the particularly strong ethnicity apparent in the Ndebele village section I explain by reference to the history of chiefly authority in the community, and to the observance of particular marriage rules. My final explanation thus invokes the events of recent history and the circumstances of the present.

## DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own, unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university.

*Abouh Isas*

*24<sup>th</sup>* day of *December*, 1987.

To Patrick, who tried his best to help me write this, and  
to Ben, who tried his best to prevent me.

## Preface

My first acquaintance with the Lebowa village I call Morotse was in 1981, when I visited the village as part of a research project into population relocation which was undertaken by the South African Institute for Race Relations. The section of the project with which I was concerned was a comparative study of three settlements in the area of southern and south-eastern Lebowa, each manifesting the effects of a different type of relocation. While a major concern of the pamphlet I subsequently wrote was the dramatic and emotive story of a "black spot" resettlement (James 1983), my interest was more strongly engaged by another issue - that of people who had been farm labour tenants in a white area and who were relocated to a reserve or "Homeland" area. It was this process which almost all the inhabitants of Morotse, at different times and for different reasons, had undergone.

As I got to know the village and its population better, there were other things which aroused my interest, some of them closely related to the inhabitants' labour tenant background. Firstly, the fact that tenancy on white farms was experienced in different ways by different categories of people meant that these tenants also left the farms for their new home in Lebowa at different times. Because of this, the village had a core of long-established landowning residents and a periphery of landless newcomers: and it struck me that this probably laid the basis for some kind of stratification. Another thing that interested me was that the use of this agricultural land owned by the village's longer-standing residents had been subject for several years to the dictates of an agricultural Co-operative. Overlaying older patterns of stratification, the effects of this institution were profound and villagers' responses

to it were so fierce that it was one of the major topics of conversation during the interviews conducted in this initial phase of fieldwork. Finally, I was intrigued by the coexistence in the village of two strongly demarcated "ethnic groups" - Pedi and Ndebele. Although the differences between the two were immediately apparent, I only learned later that the explanation of many other aspects of Morotse's life - such as those mentioned above - had something to do with ethnicity.

My interest led me to return to the area in 1983 and to undertake more detailed research - for a Master's dissertation - on the village of Morotse. My home during the four-month field research period was the Roman Catholic mission at Luckau, where I was given a room in the school buildings of Christ the Priest High School. The support and encouragement of the people I met at the mission were extremely valuable in helping to acquaint me with the area, its history and its problems. Father Michel Barrette, Sister Cathy, Solly Mokoena and Florence Sihlangu all contributed in various ways to making me feel at home.

I began by finding one or two people in the village who could speak English, and who were willing to be employed as interpreters. Through these people and their families, and later through others to whom they introduced me, I gradually started to understand the life of the village. My most detailed knowledge came through close acquaintance with a small number of families, and through an awareness of their everyday activities and concerns which anthropologists have labelled "participant observation". I also gained a broader, less specific knowledge through a survey of households conducted with the help of these interpreters. Out of a total of 487 households, a sample of 54 were surveyed, and detailed genealogies drawn of their members. I ensured that the sample included households from older and newer parts of the village, as well as from both Pedi and Ndebele sections. Here, then, my thanks go to my interpreters Theresa Makeke and Anna Madihlaba for their assistance, as well as to their families who made me feel so welcome. In addition, I thank

Salome Mtshali, Monica Makofane, Sara Mthsweni and David Mthombeni and their families, and all the other villagers who extended their hospitality and friendship to me. David Loboli Mahlangu gave me a fascinating account of the history of the Ndzundza Ndebele on which I have drawn in Chapter 1. Alpheus Mthethwa aided me in my investigations into agricultural matters in the community. I extend my gratitude to all these informants.

On my leaving the field to write up my research, I was faced with a dilemma. I was convinced that an understanding of history was essential to a proper analysis of the contemporary circumstances and social structures of a village such as Morotse, yet wary of engaging in extensive research into primary sources due to my lack of historical training. My compromise was to construct an historical account from a combination of secondary sources and selectively used archival documents. The Beaumont and Stubbs Commissions of 1913 and 1917-8 respectively, and the Report of the Native Economic Commission of 1930 provided essential evidence on the conditions under which African labour tenants lived on the white farms of the Middelburg district during the early part of this century. I thank Mrs Cunningham of the Church of the Province Library at Wits for her help in showing me the N E C report. The process of combining these historical sources and using them to foreground a contemporary study was immeasurably aided by comments and advice from Peter Delius, whose help in this regard and whose numerous discussions with me about the strong ethnicity manifested by the Ndzundza Ndebele have been central in enabling me to conceptualise this dissertation. Also extremely valuable were comments by Philip Bonner, and by the members of the Wits History Department Master's Seminar to whom he and Peter Delius kindly admitted me. I also derived useful information about Ndebele oral traditions from discussions and exchange of materials with Betty Schneider.



Although my dissertation was thus informed by historical perspectives, its major concerns were the typical social anthropological ones which arise in a contemporary, local-level study. These included the structure of households and their development through time; the way in which economic differentiation influences the structure of these households; landholding and inheritance of land; social relationships involved in the agricultural use of land; and the like. Here, I relied on the help of my supervisor, Professor W D Hammond-Tooke, both before my fieldwork began and during the period of writing when I was trying to make sense out of all these things. I gratefully acknowledge his interest and assistance, and especially his role in making the final version coherent and internally consistent.

Thanks are owed to other anthropological colleagues, as well. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 were presented at the Annual Conference of Anthropologists in 1984, 1985 and 1987; modified versions of Chapter 2 were presented to the African Studies Institute of Witwatersrand University and to the ASSA conference in 1985; and a version of Chapter 4 was presented to the History Workshop of Witwatersrand University in 1987. Conference participants who discussed these papers with me contributed greatly to refining and correcting some of the ideas contained within them. In addition, more detailed written comments on Chapter 4 were offered by David Webster and Michael Whisson.

Most sustained and valuable of all, however, was the help given me by my husband and colleague Patrick Pearson, who tirelessly read through endless drafts, made suggestions about ways of conceptualising different sections of the dissertation or expressing the finer points within these, and gave me much-needed moral support and encouragement.

Chapter 3 of this dissertation has been published as "Family and household in a Lebowa village" in *African Studies* 44 (2) (1985). Chapter 4 has been accepted for publication - as "Land shortage and inheritance" - in

a collection of papers edited by the History Workshop of Witwatersrand University, which will appear as *African Studies* of June 1988.

While conceptualising, writing and rethinking all this was occupying my mind and my time, somebody arrived to live with us and to ensure that I would have a lot less of both these scarce resources. For valuable help in tending to the needs of Ben, I am indebted to Margaret Tembo and to my mother, Jenepher James. And I would like to thank both my parents, Jenepher and David, for their general encouragement in this project and for their commitment - which must sometimes have seemed a vain one - to providing me with a sound education. I hope this dissertation may prove to be some kind of return on all the emotional and financial capital invested.

## CONTENTS

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Preface  | v   |
| Introduction   | 1   |
| Chapter 1: Historical background to contemporary ethnicity | 19  |
| Chapter 2: From co-operation to "Co-operative"             | 62  |
| Chapter 3: Household and family structure                  | 95  |
| Chapter 4: Land shortage and inheritance                   | 133 |
| Chapter 5: The problem of ethnicity                        | 164 |
| List of References   | 206 |

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

### Figures

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| 1: Map of northern Middelburg district;<br>southern Nebo district, Lebowa; and KwaNdebele | 18  |
| 2: Map of northern Middelburg district,<br>showing farms inhabited by Africans            | 30  |
| 3: Genealogy of the Mahlangu royals mentioned in the text                                 | 43  |
| 4: John Masilo's household  | 106 |
| 5: Elenah Masilo and her affines  | 110 |
| 6: Sara Matshika's household  | 111 |
| 7: Elenah Masilo's household  | 117 |
| 8: Anna Ralebetse's household   | 120 |
| 9: Eva Masilela's household   | 122 |
| 10: Hloi Kabeni's household   | 123 |
| 11: The Madihlaba family - kinship and locality   | 135 |
| 12: Cousin marriage in three old families   | 137 |

### Tables

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| 1: Use of paid and unpaid labour       | 75  |
| 2: Ethnicity and duration of residence | 99  |
| 3: Household types                     | 100 |
| 4: Collateral extension                | 115 |
| 5: Youngest sons and land allocation   | 146 |

## Introduction

Perhaps the most noticeable feature of the Lebowa village I call Morotse is the fact that it is divided into two sections, inhabited by Pedi- and Ndebele-speaking people respectively. During the period of fieldwork, the significance of this ethnic division was apparent in many aspects of village life: it came to the fore during an incident of protest which occurred early in my fieldwork and which is described in Chapter 2, but differences between the two groups were also manifest in things like household structure, the role of women, the rules of inheritance, structures of chiefly authority, and so on.

Ethnicity thus constitutes a lens through which all other aspects of village life must be viewed. In Chapter 1 I provide some historical background which demonstrates that Morotse's Pedi and Ndebele inhabitants, although both were labour tenants on white farms in the southeastern Transvaal before settling in Lebowa, lived under significantly different conditions on these farms. They also left the farms under different circumstances and at different times, and this affected their conditions of life, and specifically their access to resources, when they finally settled in their new home. Thus, the majority of Morotse's Ndebele families are recent arrivals with no cattle or land, and the majority of its Pedi families have lived in the village for a longer time, and have a better hold on both these kinds of resources.

Given this existence of ethnic difference, and the history which has partly formed it, the contemporary constraints under which Morotse's villagers live their lives are broadly similar to those described in other studies of rural Southern Africa in the present day. The majority of

men are absent as migrants for most of the year, leaving women to manage households on their own. Although the absence of men as migrant workers is probably the single most important fact determining other aspects of social life in Morotse, and although its significance is emphasised throughout the thesis, it is my primary concern to analyse the rural pole of these villagers' existence rather than looking in any detail at their lives in the working environment. Thus, of necessity, it is the women left behind who feature more prominently in the study than do their absent menfolk.

A crucial aspect of these women's activity is to tend the fields and manage the enterprise of farming. It is this area of activity that forms the subject of Chapter 2, where I describe how, with the acute shortage of land and intervention of external forces into agriculture via "Betterment planning"<sup>1</sup> and other subsequent government schemes, farming is no longer a matter of local autonomy but has come under the control of an agricultural Co-operative. Chapter 2 gives an account of the substantial changes wrought in production by the introduction of this Co-op, and concludes by showing how the villagers, initially united in their rejection of the scheme, were later divided into "defiant Pedi" who stuck by their original opposition and "submissive Ndebele" who obeyed their chief's injunction to abandon their protest.

Before going on to try and explain why this split occurred - the task of Chapter 5 - I look in the two intervening chapters at some other aspects of life, closely connected to this enterprise of farming, which are the concern of these rural, mostly female, householders. Again, the themes which emerge are well-known in broad outline if not in detail,

---

<sup>1</sup> The phrase is in quotes because it refers to the notorious South African Government scheme which, although ostensibly designed to improve agriculture in the South African reserve areas, in fact caused more hardship than it alleviated. See pp65-6 for details. Hereafter it will be referred to simply as Betterment, with use of the upper-case B distinguishing the word from common usage.

but are refracted through the prism of ethnicity. Chapter 3 is concerned with household types, and attempts to establish a correlation between the structure of households and the material situation - in respect of both wage-earnings and land - of their members. Amid the complexity of different kinds of households, a broad contrast is established between an Ndebele and a Pedi type.

In Chapter 4 I examine some changes that have come about in the practice of inheritance due to the situation of extreme land-shortage that exists in the village. The rule which all villagers claim to follow is that a household's field and property should devolve upon the last-born son, but in reality it is this son's wife, or even a daughter of the household, who effectively performs the role of heir: using the land, and undertaking the care of the aged. The part played by women, thus, is again a crucial one. Given this broadly observable trend, there are, as with other aspects of life, clearly-drawn ethnic differences between the way in which Pedi and Ndebele households apply this apparently rigid rule of ultimogeniture. These differences I explain by reference to the differing household types and to the differential access to resources referred to above.

In Chapter 5 I attempt to draw together the threads woven through the preceding chapters and to tackle the question of ethnicity directly. Some recent literature on ethnicity is reviewed, and in the light of this I look at the historical and contemporary data on interactions between Pedi and Ndebele in Morotse. The explanation is focused, towards the end of the chapter, on the differing responses of Ndebele and Pedi villagers to the chief's injunction to abandon their protest and return to their harvesting in peace, after the Co-op incident described in Chapter 2. I argue, ultimately, that ethnicity - and particularly the strong ethnicity apparent in the Ndebele village section - must be explained in the light of the history of chiefly authority in the community, of the observance of particular marriage rules, and of the extent of

competition over scarce resources in the contemporary "Homeland"<sup>2</sup> context, which is one in which ethnicity is officially endorsed.

*The Trust Village of Morotse*

Driving eastwards from Groblersdal on the road to Stofberg, a small turning to the left takes one past the township of Motetema, then up a steep ascent which leads to a high, gently sloping plain. Its well-watered fields and grazing lands extend eastwards to the edge of the escarpment which overlooks the Steelpoort River valley, while to the south this land gives way to more mountainous terrain before descending to the low-lying farms beside the Blood River. To the north-east lie the mountainous regions of Sekhukhuneland. Situated roughly centrally in this highveld plain, and about half an hour's drive on the road from Groblersdal, is the village of Morotse, whose population forms the subject of this thesis. Its 487 homes are built in rough lines which extend from close to the road up the hillside to the south where the tracks between blocks of houses become more rudimentary.

The sense gained by a visitor is that the road not only provides a crucial link to the outside world, but also signifies something about the relationship between the village and that world. Thus, the most permanent and largest built structures in the village, and those which have been erected by outside agencies, are clustered around the road: two shops, the primary school and the clinic. Here, too, men and some women congregate to wait for buses and taxis that will take them to Groblersdal and thence to their places of work in Middelburg, Witbank, Hendrina, or on the Witwatersrand. The bus stop also provides a meeting place for

---

<sup>2</sup> The word refers to the African reserve areas in South Africa which were conceptualised by the South African Government as providing a home to all those black South Africans who had not established their legal rights to live in the "white" areas. The word is in quotes to show that this view is not shared by many of the black South Africans concerned. Hereafter it will be referred to as Homeland, with the upper-case H distinguishing the word from common usage.



youths, many of them unemployed. And women and older children sit or stand by the roadside with their wares of fruit or cooked mealies, trying to catch the passing trade. Close to the road, too, are some small and roughly-built dwellings of people who have settled recently in the village. These shelters seem, themselves, to be in transit between their inhabitants' most recent and their next place of refuge.

If one climbs the hill away from the road towards the older parts of the village, one gains an impression of a more settled, rural lifestyle rooted in customary practice. The rutted tracks lead between fairly substantial residential stands, where homesteads are surrounded by planted mealies or fruit trees, or in a few cases fronted by flower gardens. Several of these establishments incorporate both thatched mud-brick dwellings and rectangular brick structures with tin roofs, showing evidence of a gradual growth over the years to accommodate additional family members. The diversity of styles is unified, in most cases, by the placing of the different buildings around a central courtyard which is fronted with a mud wall. Around the homesteads on the lower slopes of the hillside, these walls are painted with designs in muted earth colours which indicate that this is the core of the Pedi section of the village, while the homesteads situated higher on the hill have walls decorated with the brightly coloured paints typical of Ndebele decoration.

This older part of the village, high on the hillside where Pedi and Ndebele sections have become established over several decades, provides a contrast to - although it merges with - the area close to the road with its evidence of impermanence, transience and of the influences of the outside world. These two zones seem to signify different eras in the village's history: a fairly prosperous rural community whose dependence on migrancy was partial and to some extent discretionary has become completely dependent on its members' participation in the broader economy of South Africa. Even their use of the dryland plots to which a third of village inhabitants lay claim necessitates their prior and perpetual

access to cash wages. Morotse is thus, in a sense, a mere adjunct to the road which carries its members off to work and which brings back their monthly remittances.

As one continues one's journey past Morotse, along the road which now leads towards Nebo, a number of abandoned farm buildings suggest that this area has not always been one of African occupation, and the ordinance survey map bears out this impression, with farm names like "Gembokspruit", "Frischgewagd" and "Vlakfontein". This is a Trust area, whose farms, originally occupied by whites, were bought by the South African Native Trust for African occupation. The purchase was made in terms of the Native Trust and Land Act of 1936 which provided for additional land - "released areas" - to be added to the "scheduled areas" originally designated for African occupation by the 1913 Native Land Act. It was in these Trust areas on the peripheries of the reserves that most people evicted from white areas in South Africa came to settle, or be resettled. Situated in areas like these of recent African settlement, Morotse and other Trust villages like it have a very different appearance from the heartland Pedi village of Phokwane, some 50 kms further north, which was part of the original reserve. Presently, however, the distinction between these different villages and different areas has been overridden by their incorporation into a single magisterial district - Nebo - which in turn is part of the overarching administrative unit of Lebowa, the official rural home of the Pedi.

#### *Morotse and the Homeland political system*

Morotse, like most Lebowa villages, is subsumed into the official administrative structure of magisterial district and then Homeland as part of a tribal area presided over by a chief. Unusually in this Pedi ethnic unit, however, the chief of the area where Morotse is situated is an Ndebele - Mphezulu Jack Mahlangu - and the region in which he governs, taking its name from him, is called Mahlangu Tribal Area. Through a

process to be described in the next chapter, a group of Ndzundza Ndebele under their chief settled in the vicinity of these farms in the 1930s, and this chiefly family was later - in 1957 - invested as the official head of the Tribal Authority for the area (Coetzee 1980:268). The region's inhabitants, and the subjects of this authority, include however a Pedi-speaking minority as well.

The integration of this local authority into the government of Lebowa is effected via a three-tiered administrative structure. This structure is standard for all the Homelands, including the so-called "independent national states", and was established by the Bantu Authorities Act of 1951. At the lowest level of the structure, a local area and its "tribe" are under the jurisdiction of its traditional chief, whom the system officially designates as being at the head of the Tribal Authority. At the intermediary level, a magistrate's district such as Nebo is presided over by a Regional Authority, which attends to education, health and the like. At the pinnacle of the Homeland structure is a central governmental institution once known as the Territorial Authority, but more recently - under the Bantu Homelands Constitution Act of 1971 - redesignated the Legislative Assembly of the Self-Governing State of Lebowa (Hammond-Tooke 1975, Comaroff 1974).

A direct connection between this higher level of government and the local level is provided by the system of representation in the Legislative Assembly, which consists of 59 chiefs from local Tribal Authorities and 40 elected members. Thus, the Mahlangu area is represented in the Assembly by its chief Mphezulu Mahlangu, and also by its elected representative Johannes Mahlangu, who is a close relative of the chief's.

This system of representation is, however, of little direct concern to Morotse villagers. In contrast, there are several more immediate and tangible ways through which the forces of outside government impinge upon them. Firstly, there are a number of functionaries working in the vil-

lage, and living either on its peripheries or outside it altogether, who are employed by the Regional Authority. These are educated, middle-class people who come from elsewhere. They include the primary school principal and several schoolteachers, the clinic sisters, and - most importantly for this thesis - the agricultural extension officer Mr Sithole. His role in earlier years was the fairly ineffectual one of offering advice - often unheeded - on agricultural techniques. It has become a crucial role, however, since the founding of the Co-op described in Chapter 2. He now performs many of his duties under the rubric of this organisation, of which all villagers have compulsory membership, and is charged with carrying out the decisions made by its Management Committee. It will be described in Chapter 2 how, in most villagers' eyes, this well-meaning individual has become indistinguishable from a vaguely-defined and repressive entity called "the Trust" which has come to place ever-tightening restrictions on their farming activities and on their management of rural resources in general.

The first major intervention by this "Trust" - in 1964 - was its planning of the area in accordance with the aims of agricultural Betterment. The main manifestation of this, to the villagers of Morotse and neighbouring settlements in Mahlangu area, was that their fields were substantially reduced in size. The Co-op was founded some 15 years later, also ostensibly for the purpose of improving agriculture. It is seen by villagers, however, as merely extending this unwelcome control by forces beyond the borders of the local community, of whom Mr Sithole - along with two white Co-op officials - is one of the most visible representatives.

At the level of local government, there is the office of the Tribal Authority, situated in the village where the chief has his home. This is about half-an-hour's drive from Morotse by a circuitous route, or half-an-hour's walk over hilly terrain. People must travel this distance to the office if, for example, they want a workseeker's permit, or if they

are involved in litigation which has been referred to the Tribal Authority by the court of a village headman.<sup>3</sup>

Lesser disputes are, ideally at least, settled at the court of the village headman. The system does not always work as it is intended to, however. The present incumbent of this position is an old woman who succeeded her deceased husband, and who - because of her gender and her great age - is thought of by many as incapable of judging cases with discretion. In addition, this woman's late husband was a close agnate of the chief's and, like all the headmen in the area, she is an Ndebele. Many of the village's Pedi inhabitants prefer not to submit their disputes to her jurisdiction, although if these are serious enough to come to the chief's attention they will of course be judged by an Ndebele court in any case.

There is, in fact, a Pedi family of chiefly descent in the village - the Madihlaba family - whose senior male member holds a form of political office. Theoretically, he is empowered to adjudicate disputes between Pedi villagers, or to refer them to the Ndebele headman - his senior - if a settlement cannot be reached. Oral evidence suggests that the interplay between the authority of these two chiefly families from the different ethnic groups was in operation during the period when members of both were tenants on the white farms of the northern Middelburg district, and also when both left these farms to settle in Morotse. In both these periods, the senior male from the Madihlaba family enjoyed a relative degree of autonomy although he was ultimately subordinate to the Ndebele chief.<sup>4</sup> It seems to have been the process of formalising this relationship, and of officially instituting the Ndebele chief as the superior power in the region through the Bantu Authorities Act, that has

---

<sup>3</sup> Under the laws governing influx control, it was necessary to obtain a workseeker's permit before travelling to the District Labour Bureau in search of a job. These laws have been phased out since the time of fieldwork.

<sup>4</sup> See p39 for a fuller account of this relationship.

whittled away any authority previously exercised by the Madihlaba family. Thus, although informants agreed that the previous Pedi headman had heard and judged cases, his nephew, the present incumbent, is merely a "headman for the Co-op". In other words, his major role is to call meetings of villagers when he is instructed to do so by the agricultural extension officer or by the officials at the Co-op, and here to inform the people of decisions about when ploughing or harvesting is to begin.

Although the Ndebele headman of the village has somewhat more of a judicial role than this, due to her official position in the chain of command established by Bantu Authorities, she too serves primarily as a conduit through which instructions may be issued to villagers about agricultural matters. Her superior, the chief, although more powerful than she is, also plays a major part of his role within the context of the system of constraints and externally-made decisions that the Co-op consists of. And although he takes advantage of his role as chief to derive certain personal benefits from this organisation and from his position within it, it is described in Chapter 2 how his ability to exercise authority and influence wider policy in this sphere is strictly limited, and subordinate to that of the government funders. In summary, then, one of the most important roles played by the chief, his Ndebele headman and the Pedi headman is to convey commands and instructions to villagers from a sphere beyond that of village life, while being structurally incapable of implementing the needs or wishes of villagers themselves, or conveying these back to higher and more powerful authorities.

Since this thesis is limited in scope, it does not attempt to give a general account of the operation of chiefly authority in Morotse or of the effectiveness of the chief's or headman's courts in the sphere of village life. Likewise, although informal leaders or brokers may have emerged to fill the gap left by - and thus to replace the political

functions of - ineffective "traditional" authorities,<sup>5</sup> these processes have been defined as being beyond the scope of the present study. The topic of chiefly authority and power will be considered, in Chapter 2, only inasmuch as it is tied to and thus has a bearing on the operation of the Co-op, and therefore on the practice of subsistence cultivation in the village. As I have indicated, this is, in any case, perhaps the most significant role played by these "traditional" authorities. Later, in Chapter 5, there will be a discussion of a related issue: the extent to which the chief's role in the Co-op is linked to the fact of ethnicity in the village, and in particular to the strong ethnicity of the Ndebele village section. The analysis of this will entail a consideration of Ndebele chiefly authority in a historical context.

It is suggested above that neither the Pedi nor the Ndebele headman's court holds much sway in the village, and that on some occasions villagers prefer not to submit their disputes to the jurisdiction of these courts. Apart from these leaders' general loss of credibility alluded to above, another reason for the unpopularity of these courts is that members of the sizeable Christian community in the village disapprove of the headmen's courts - ostensibly because of the drinking associated with them - and so try to avoid dealings with these courts. Interestingly, although the distinction between Christians and traditionalists in the village - like that mentioned in Mayer's study of the Red and School Xhosa (1971) - is an important one, it does not appear to cross-cut or provide bridges between the even more fundamental division into the separate ethnic groups of Ndebele and Pedi. This may sound contradictory, but can be explained in the light of the overall theoretical approach to ethnicity which is followed in this study. As will be more fully explained in Chapter 5, the ethnic groups in Morotse have constituted themselves as distinct from each other in the context of the contemporary

---

<sup>5</sup> This occurred in the Pedi village studied by Sansom (1970), which shall be further discussed in subsequent chapters.

struggle for scarce resources in the Homeland where they are presently settled. Their ethnicity, then, is not coterminous with "traditionalism". Although some of the features stressed as distinguishing each group from the other may derive from "tradition" or from the primordial past, many others derive from the more recent experiences of these people - as labour tenants, or even in the Homeland itself. Far from minimising ethnicity, adherence to Christianity has on some occasions even come to be one of the "ethnic" features selected for emphasis: it is recounted in Chapter 5 how a Pedi may claim - quite inaccurately - that all Ndebele are heathens and that this distinguishes them from Pedi who are all Christians.

This leads me to a brief discussion of the terms used in the thesis for distinguishing these groups from each other. While the complex issues involved in explaining ethnicity will receive attention only later - in Chapter 5 - I wish for the moment to draw attention to the fact that, in referring to Morotse's villagers as Pedi and Ndebele, I am using a form of shorthand which they themselves employ in their dealings with each other. In doing this, as I explain later, I follow a trend in anthropology which regards folk definitions as of paramount importance in considering ethnicity, and which therefore deemphasises objective measures of tribal or ethnic affiliation. So, for instance, in using the term "Pedi" I might be thought to be ignoring the fact that the group bearing this name established hegemony over a widely-varied range of peoples during the 19th century, and that there continue to be local variations in culture and language within the broad area now defined as the Pedi Homeland. Similarly, there is a lack of concern in the thesis with the niceties of subdivisions within the Ndebele group: since most Ndebele in the village are Ndzundza Ndebele, the two terms are used interchangeably. My concern is not with fine distinctions in tribal membership, but with the way in which two broad groups have come to define themselves as distinct from one another in the contemporary context.



*Approaching the Study of a Contemporary Rural Settlement*

When I began the fieldwork for this thesis, the discipline of social anthropology in South Africa appeared to be in a state of crisis. Conscious of the many criticisms levelled against the discipline - at worst for its ideological underpinning of the doctrine of separate development; at best for its irrelevance - many scholars in South Africa were abandoning the undertaking of small-scale studies of local communities entirely. Instead, they favoured a broader perspective which emphasised the historical processes leading to rural impoverishment and migrancy in the country as a whole, and which showed how rural dwellers were intrinsically linked as labourers into the South African economy. The message coming from such studies was that only these macro-level issues were relevant, and also that the methodology of participant observation usually associated with social anthropology had nothing to contribute to such analyses.

In retrospect, the loss to scholarship - and to general awareness - engendered by this period of neglect was considerable. Its extent is highlighted by the few studies which *were* made at the time. Foremost among these, and so serving as my major inspiration and template, was Colin Murray's *Families Divided* (1981). This book, through a detailed examination of the stories of particular families and their economic circumstances, provided an account of the precise transformations wrought in a rural population by the processes of impoverishment and dependence on migrant labour. Thus, whereas scholars working at the macro level might have been tempted to presume a uniform breakdown in family life in the rural peripheries of southern Africa, Murray showed that although certain aspects of family life had disintegrated, others had intensified quite unexpectedly.

Murray's book, then, provided a touchstone for my own study. There is one important difference however between Ha Molapo, where he conducted

his fieldwork, and Morotse. Although the social transformations wrought in a Lesotho village by the gradual incorporation of its inhabitants as migrant labourers were fundamental, there was a continuity in the geographical location of at least their rural home. For Morotse's inhabitants, the process of social change was more dramatic since, occurring in parallel to their ever-increasing involvement in migrancy, they experienced two major upheavals affecting their rural domicile and lifestyle. The first of these transformed them from cultivators in tribal heartlands and surrounding areas into labour or cash tenants on white-owned farms. The second occurred with their departure from these farms under varying circumstances and their resettlement in a Trust area on the peripheries of the Homeland.

My study, then, was to be one which dealt with population relocation in South Africa. This subject has been a very emotive one in the development of critical thinking about government policy. While it and its immediate effects have been widely documented - by Platzky and Walker (1985), Mare (1980) and by the numerous reports made by organisations specifically formed to combat removals in all four provinces - it has been another area to be neglected by anthropologists, and so the longer-term effects of resettlement on local communities have been little studied. One exception is the work of Sharp and Spiegel (1985) on labour tenant removals in the Orange Free State.<sup>6</sup> This case differs from that of Morotse, however, since Free State tenants appear to have moved to Qwa Qwa fairly recently, during a relatively short period, and to a place where no farming land was available. Consequently, there has not been the same differentiation between early- and late-comers in terms of unequal access to resources and community support that occurred in Morotse.

---

<sup>6</sup> Another exception is the work of de Wet and McAllister (1983) on relocation due to government-planned agricultural Betterment. This will be referred to in Chapter 2, where I address the issue of Betterment in more detail.

Since I thus lacked any comparative data about the effects of resettlement over time, I have tried in Chapter 2 to give as accurate an account as possible of at least my own case study. This involved trying to reconstruct the history of the populating of the village, and attempting to understand how the time of arrival of Morotse's inhabitants from the white farms affected their subsequent lives in the village. To do this, I used informants' oral testimonies about when they left the farms, how they lived after arriving in the Trust, and how conditions changed over time. In addition, I assessed and compared the contemporary circumstances, and the material and social well-being, of families who arrived earlier and those who came later.

It might be presumed from the above suggestions that Morotse exhibits a kind of stratification based on access to such rural resources as land and networks of kinsmen. In reality, however, the picture is far more complex. Although it has been stressed that this study is concerned primarily with the rural dimension of villagers' existence, rather than with their urban working environment, it would be completely misleading to claim that these two aspects are independent of each other. On the contrary, in Morotse as in Murray's Lesotho village, the practice of subsistence farming is not viable without access to migrant remittances. Cash is the independent variable without which land or any other rural resource cannot be properly used (Murray 1981:87). Thus, whatever stratification exists in the village is not based on a single criterion such as landholding, but rather on a combination of resources of which cash is one of the most important. In Chapter 3, for example, it is suggested that, although a household's possession of a field can bolster and reinforce its economic security, the factor most directly influencing a household's prosperity - and thus its size and structure - is the amount and regularity of its cash income. Conversely, many of the most recently-arrived of Morotse's residents not only came too late to the area to acquire fields, but also entered the migrant market late and on unfavourable terms. The relative poverty of one of these households

derives from a lack of both kinds of resource, whereas the wealthiest are shown to be those who have access to both.

A related issue arises in Chapter 4. Here, I show that the inheritance of land has come to be one of the few ways in which a household, in the contemporary context of extreme land shortage, may acquire a field. Inheritance is seen as a kind of bargain, in which parents pass on to their son's household their piece of ground in return for his care and support in their old age. Once again, there is a complex relationship between cash and landholding. It is uncertain whether the most sought-after and crucial resource in the transaction is the land offered by the parents, or the access to a migrant remittance which is provided by their son's attaching himself to their household. What is clear, however, is that the most successful households combine both of these.

It should be clear from what I have said above that the village of Morotse bears little relationship to the self-sufficient, insular rural communities described in some of the classic southern African ethnographies. It follows, therefore, that although I refer to these from time to time they do not serve as a model for my dissertation. Instead, as I have already mentioned, I have been influenced by Murray's study, which shows the inescapable links between a village and the hostile and exploitative outside world. Apart from Murray's book, the works which describe a similar kind of relationship between a community of country-dwellers and the wider society are the monographs on Mediterranean peasant villages - by Pitt-Rivers (1971), Friedl (1962), White (1980), Davies (1973) and the like. These, too, have served as inspiration to me in a broad sense, although it is true that most of the villagers they depict differ from Morotse's inhabitants in being less dependent on migrant wage-labour, and thus in being able more accurately to be described as peasants. Nevertheless, I often perceived qualities in the villagers I encountered which reminded me of peasants described in these books and of European country people I have encountered myself: wry humour, tough independence

combined with a resounding scorn for the values of "the world out there", warmth and generosity as hosts, pride in the preservation of a household's well-used and well-looked-after stock of equipment, and so on. These qualities, and my wish that they would not be lost from view when I wrote about the people who possessed them, lead me to mention one other book which guided me: also about a Mediterranean community, but one which lived long ago. Reading Ladurie's *Montaillou* (1978) showed me that it is possible to write about a village in a way which keeps its inhabitants as live people rather than reducing them to stick figures. I hope I have managed to follow his example.

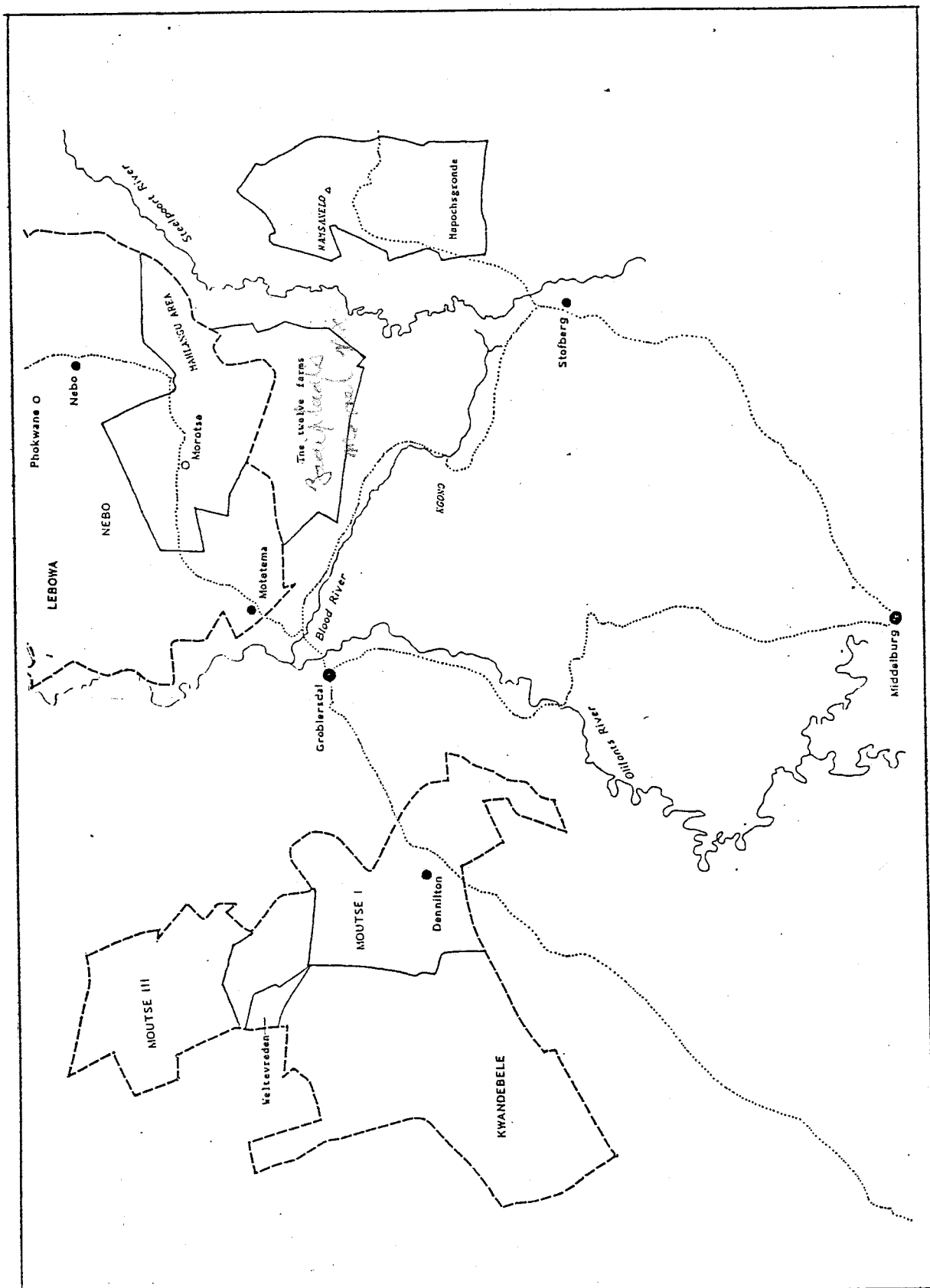


Figure 1: Map of northern Middelburg district; southern Nebo district, Lebowa; and KwaNdebele (including Moutse I and II)

## Chapter 1: Historical Background to Contemporary Ethnicity

The relationship between anthropology and history has long been of concern to anthropologists. It was explored by early writers like Evans-Pritchard (1962) and Schapera (1962), and more recently Comaroff (1982) and Sharp (1985) have argued that a knowledge of history is essential to a proper study of the social anthropology of any society. In my study of the contemporary interactions between Morotse's Pedi and Ndebele inhabitants, it is particularly important to know something of their experience of the past. This is because the village acquired its present situation, appearance, demographic composition, ethos - and, indeed, its very existence - as a result of major historical changes occurring in the Middelburg district and the Pedi heartland during the 19th and 20th centuries. There are, however, certain problems inherent in using history to anthropological ends. First and most obvious, an anthropologist who is not also an historian lacks the training to undertake a proper study of the past. Second, she is faced with the puzzle of how much history to include, and of what to select from the complex totality of a group or a region's experience.

A partial solution to the first problem is provided by Devons and Gluckman (1964) who argue that a scholar from one discipline may "abridge" the findings from another, taking these as given without necessarily having established their truth for herself. In this chapter, although I have made some use of primary sources, I have situated these within an overall framework "abridged" from the work of social historians - mainly Morrell (1983), Delius (1983, 1987) and Beinart & Delius (1986).

The problem of selection I have tried to solve by allowing the major theme of the thesis to act as a filter. A concern with ethnic differences and interactions in contemporary Morotse has necessitated research of the past - both recent and more distant - for explanations of why these exist. Despite my preoccupation with explaining ethnicity, however, the historical material presented here has not been infused with an interpretation of its significance, but has rather been laid out unmediated as a background to contemporary ethnicity which will be discussed in subsequent chapters. It is only in the last and fifth chapter that both types of data - historical and anthropological - will be drawn together in a final attempt to explain ethnicity in this village.

The historical data presented covers a number of distinct periods, correlating broadly with several different themes. In the first period to be considered, white settlers were struggling with members of the Pedi and Ndzundza Ndebele polities for hegemony in the region later to be designated the Middelburg district. The clashes between settlers and these chiefdoms, and between these chiefdoms themselves, only ended with the defeat of both Pedi - in 1879 - and Ndzundza - in 1883. Although I give a brief account of these conflicts to set the scene for later developments, it is my contention that present-day Pedi and Ndebele ethnicity is not founded in this early era of conflict, but that it dates rather from the subsequent period when white farms began to be established in the area and when Africans lived as tenants on these farms.

The era of farm life was heralded by a transitional phase - from 1883 until the 1920s - during which white settlers attempted to enforce their control in the region by ensuring access to land and labour. The labour of the Ndebele had already been secured by their becoming indentured as labour tenants to the farmers who had subjugated their chiefdom. It was more difficult, however, for settlers to establish control over the labour of Pedi cultivators in the area, many of whom managed to remain as relatively independent farmers by renting land belonging to land



companies. It was only as this transitional phase drew to a close, in the 1920s, that Pedi peasant cultivation was being severely undermined and conditions of tenancy became more restrictive.

Even in the era of farm life proper, when both Pedi and Ndebele were living as labour tenants on white farms from 1920 onwards, the conditions of tenancy were very different for members of the two groups. For reasons to be outlined below, Pedi tenants were better placed to exercise a degree of choice in the kinds of labour contracts they entered, whereas most Ndebele were more constrained. There were members of both groups living on adjacent farms in the northeastern Middelburg district, but Pedi tenancy was restricted to this area close to the Pedi heartland and generally lasted for less than a generation, whereas Ndebele tenancy occurred not only in this area but also in many other parts of the south-eastern Transvaal remote from their original heartland, and it kept some families as tenants from 1883 right through till the 1960s or 1970s. A central contention in the thesis is that many of the contemporary ethnic differences between Pedi and Ndebele can be attributed to the conditions under which they lived as tenants on white farms.

It was the ending of this period of farm labour that brought people to Morotse - and many Trust villages like it - in search of a new home. They chose to leave, or were evicted from the white farms where they had been labour tenants, and moved northwards to the Nebo district where Morotse is situated. The end of this era of farm labour, however, came at different times for different families. Broadly, those who left the white farms earlier - during the 1930s and through to the 1950s - did so through their own choice, came to Morotse from farms close by, were more prosperous when they left those farms, and secured title to land in Morotse when they arrived. In contrast, those who left the farms later - from the 1960s onwards - did so under duress, came to Morotse from distant farms in the Belfast, Carolina and Bethal districts, were less prosperous when they left the farms, and were unable to acquire land on

their arrival in the Trust. The first group, of what I call old families, included roughly equal numbers of Pedi and Ndebele tenants from nearby farms in the Middelburg district. The second group consisted almost exclusively of Ndebele families from much further afield.

It is based on considerations like these that I make my claim about the influence of the labour-tenancy experience on the present-day circumstances of Morotse's villagers. It is not so much the interactions between Pedi and Ndebele during this era of tenancy that I wish to emphasise, although these did occur especially where members of the two groups were tenants on adjoining or even the same farms. Rather, it is their differing experiences of tenancy, and the broad contrast in these experiences between relative independence and relative constraint, which have been crucial in establishing the contemporary differences between them. It is only in the present-day setting, in which both groups have come to compete for scarce resources, that these differences have become salient, and that they can therefore be properly described as "ethnic".

After completing the brief account of conditions on farms to which Pedi and Ndebele families were subject, I focus on another aspect of history essential to my overall argument in the thesis. Beginning in 1883, this is the story of successive Ndzundza Ndebele leaders and of their attempts to acquire land for Ndzundza settlement. A major split which developed between two groups of Ndzundza led by their respective branches of the chiefly family has been seen as having been caused by a dispute between leaders over which land to accept from the S A Government. One of the groups consists of those Ndebele who settled in Lebowa on the Nebo Trust farms - where Morotse village is situated. The other group - which includes some Manala Ndebele - is that whose leaders were instrumental in establishing the Homeland of KwaNdebele.

The reason why it is important to document this split, and the subsequent establishment of KwaNdebele as an ethnic territorial unit, is because

it forms an important background to the lives of Ndebele - leaders and commoners - living in Nebo. These people, especially commoners, have experienced a number of subtle pressures to leave Lebowa and to settle instead alongside other Ndebele in the Homeland designated for them. Although the Lebowa Government is officially non-ethnic in its policies and Nebo Ndebele leaders cite this, together with other reasons, as underlying their desire to remain in Lebowa, a more powerful authority - the S A Government - is dedicated to promoting ethnic consolidation. As will be demonstrated in detail in Chapter 5, this policy becomes manifest to the Nebo Ndebele community through rumours about enforced removal to KwaNdebele, about future denial of citizenship to non-residents of KwaNdebele, and the like. These rumours combine with more immediate ethnic tensions over resource-competition to give Nebo Ndebele a feeling of unease about their security in the area. The sense of anxiety is intensified by descriptions of the socioeconomic deprivation in KwaNdebele and about the political harassment that has occurred there in recent years. An awareness of the doings of the other section of the Ndebele, and about developments in the Homeland where they live, is thus constantly present as an influence which shapes the consciousness and everyday experience of Morotse's Ndebele inhabitants.

In presenting this section of the historical background, I have had more difficulty in finding reliable historical writings that can be "abridged", since the recent political history of the Ndzundza has not been documented in a scholarly or objective way. My solution to this problem has been to use two sources available to me. One, a thesis by Coetzee (1980), presents a view commensurate with the S A Government's policy of ethnic consolidation. The other, strongly contrasting, view is contained in a set of oral traditions recounted to me by an informant in the Nebo Ndzundza chiefly family. Each of the accounts presents a partial view of the truth in order to further particular political aims,

and a presentation of the contrast between them may give some indication of the strongly emotive and partisan nature of the dispute.<sup>1</sup>

## Part One: Pedi, Ndebele and Settlers in the Middelburg district

### *Early Interactions: c1830-1883*

By the beginning of the 19th century the Pedi had established dominance over various tribes which had long been living in the area between the Olifants and Steelpoort rivers. Pedi ascendancy over these groups, achieved by conquest, was subsequently reinforced by marriage practices, leading to a loose confederation of groups which, although perhaps more accurately described by their original names - Koni, Matlala, Tau, and so on - will in this thesis be referred to by the more general term of Pedi.

Living in contiguous areas were the Transvaal Ndebele. A pre-*difaqane* offshoot from the Natal Nguni, they had been in the Transvaal for at least two centuries before the branch known as the Ndzundza Ndebele moved with their chief Mabhogo Mahlangu away from their capital Mnyamana (in the vicinity of Pretoria North) towards the area of Pedi hegemony, and settled just below the Steelpoort at Namsaxelo (near present-day Roossenekal). Their movement to this area was prompted by fierce battles with Mzilikazi, in which they suffered severe losses (Kuper 1978:110).

Once in the area, there is some record of early conflict between Mabhogo's Ndebele and Pedi under Malekutu during the 1830s (Hunt 1931:284). From the early 1840s however the Ndebele did recognise general Pedi overrule in the area, and even sent a wife to Sekwati. By the time the Trekkers arrived in the area in 1847; the Ndebele were well-established in their

---

<sup>1</sup> In the second part of Part 2, information on KwaNdebele is drawn from newspapers, Hansard and from the South African Institute of Race Relations (hereafter SAIRR) Survey.

mountain fortress at Namsaxelo, having earned the respect and allegiance of several Sotho-speaking groups in the immediate neighbourhood (Coetzee 1980:244; Kuper 1978:110). Some of these were even absorbed into Ndebele society (Delius 1987:3). Delius shows how the Ndzundza and the Kopa, because they lived at the peripheries of the Pedi heartland, were subject to many demands for labour and tribute from the Trekkers, and came to constitute the focal point of resistance to these demands (1983:36).

Although the Pedi proper under their royal Maroteng leaders were generally seen in a similar light by the settlers - as troublesome, unwilling to meet demands for labour, and even positively threatening (*ibid.*:37-8) - there was a short-lived Boer/Pedi treaty, drawn up in 1857, which established the Steelpoort as the boundary separating the two groups and provided a temporary delay to the conflict between them. In fact, in 1863, a brief alliance between Sekhukhune I - then Pedi paramount - and the Boers culminated in an attack on the Ndzundza stronghold. Sekhukhune did have his own reasons for attacking the Ndebele: he wanted to retaliate for the growing number of raids made by them against his people, especially against returning migrants passing close to Ndebele territory. But Delius suggests that the paramount's involvement in this fleeting alliance with the Boers was ultimately catalysed by his fear that, if he refused to cooperate, the Boers would utilise Swazi military power to attack his own kingdom (1983:96-7). And Pedi experience of this alliance, in which the Boers held back and left them to do most of the fighting and sustain the most casualties, led them summarily to abandon their allies (*ibid.*). The failure of the Boer/Swazi attack when it eventually came in 1869 enabled some Pedi to move out of their heartland strongholds to settle in "the more fertile, but exposed, periphery" (*ibid.*:104). The Boers' authority, without the assurance of Swazi reinforcements, declined into the early 1870s (*ibid.*).

The uneasy co-existence of settlers, Pedi, and Ndebele continued, with occasional cooperation between two of the groups in attempts to subor-

dinate the third. The presence of the Ndzundza in the region, for example, continued to be irksome to the Pedi rulers, and to interfere with their attempted dominance in the region. The earlier pact between Pedi and Ndebele dissolved when the Ndebele withdrew the wife they had given to Sekwati, and refused to recognise the authority of his successor Sekhukhune. When the British finally moved in to smash Pedi military might in 1879, they were assisted by Ndebele. And the final defeat of the Ndzundza by the Boers in 1883 was accomplished with the help of Pedi auxiliaries.

The story of this campaign against the Ndebele still looms large today in the folk consciousness of Ndzundza villagers in Morotse. The popular version, echoed in some historical accounts (Hunt 1931:304-5), is that the conflict was engendered by a dispute over rival claims to the Pedi paramountcy. Mampuru, having murdered the paramount Sekhukhune, sought refuge at Namsaxelo with the Ndzundza chief Nyabela. In retribution, Sekhukhune's followers enlisted the military assistance of the ZAR burghers to lay siege to the Ndebele stronghold. It is probable however that this incident merely provided a flashpoint which ignited the already tense situation between Boers and Ndzundza. This tension existed due to persistent refusals by the latter to provide labour, their reluctance to be assigned a reserve by the *Lokasieskommissie*, and the general threat perceived by white settlers in the existence of this independent chiefdom so close to them (Delius 1987:2, 4). Following the defeat of the Ndzundza, Mampuru and his ally Nyabela were taken to prison in Pretoria where Mampuru was executed for the murder of Sekhukhune, while the Ndzundza were allocated as indentured labourers to the Boers who had taken part in the campaign. The territory which the Ndebele had occupied, known as Mapochsgronde, was surveyed, subdivided and incorporated into Middelburg district, and in a proclamation the ZAR government decreed that the tribe would under no circumstances be allowed to live there again (Coetzee 1980:248; Delius 1987:5).

The power and autonomy of both Pedi and Ndebele had now been broken, but the Ndebele defeat was by far the more effective and unequivocal of the two. The Pedi, though they had been subordinated to white authority in the battle of 1879, still enjoyed the freedom afforded by having a separate and partly independent domain - an area whose limits and the administration of which was to take many more years for successive white governments to define and establish. Even in the area closer to Middelburg, they could exercise a degree of choice about where and how to live, as will be documented below. This choice could be exercised in responding to the increasingly effective extension of white control, and especially to the demands for farm labour which were to become the main focus of conflicts between whites and blacks in the region during the first part of the 20th century. The Ndebele on the other hand were more restricted, even when the period of indenture ended, since most of them immediately became labour tenants, sometimes on the same farms. This constrained situation was to have far-reaching effects - on the development of local white agriculture and its labour-acquiring strategies, on the social structure and attitudes of Ndzundza people right up until the present day, and on the nature of their interaction with their Pedi neighbours.

*Land Settlement and the Decline of Pedi Farming: 1883-c1920*

With the conquest of both Pedi and Ndzundza polities, white settlers were now nominally in control in the region. The ensuing years however were to see a number of struggles between settler farmers attempting to make this control effective and the African cultivators whose labour they sought to attract or retain. At the same time, broader forces - partly informed by these local struggles - were at work to ensure the segregation of African from European-owned land, and finally to demarcate a reserve area for the Pedi. Accompanying these struggles and this restriction of African land ownership and use was a process of gradual decline in the independent agricultural activity of African cultivators, and a

proportionately increasing dependence on the proceeds of various kinds of labour.

While two historical researchers - Cooper (1974) and Morrell (1983) - give key information about these processes and tell of the "rise and fall" of African peasant and subsistence cultivation in the region, Beinart and Delius (1986) have warned against viewing this process as too monolithic and unidirectional. Put crudely, some radical or revisionist scholars have described a relentless movement from semi-feudal to capitalist agriculture in the South African countryside, in which white farmers, their interests strongly represented in state policy, were ranged against African peasants and tenants whose gradually progressing immiseration ensured their transformation into wage labourers. Although in broad outline this change did occur, its accuracy is called into question by Beinart and Delius when seen in the context of particular, local situations (*ibid.*:11-17). In the Middelburg district, for instance, the settler population was by no means undifferentiated or united, and as a result its members did not agree on strategies for attracting labour nor on the reserve policy that was adopted by successive governments and finally established by the 1913 Land Act (*ibid.*:37-8). The following account of farmers and tenants will thus be informed both by the data in Cooper's and Morrell's writings, and by the provisos of Beinart and Delius.

A complex picture emerges of patterns of land ownership and occupation in the Middelburg district during the first decade of the 20th century, if one qualifies the broad division between black and white by looking at some basic cleavages within the category of white land users. Although much of the land was in white hands, many of these owners were absentee landlords: either land companies which had bought the land for speculation, or rich businessmen/farmers who had bought land using capital from other enterprises and who kept it for winter grazing or merely to house tenants (Beinart & Delius 1986:23, 39; Morrell 1983:120). Within



this context, African peasants and poorer white farmers or *bywoners* were in competition to rent land from absentee owners. Although it was state policy to establish and aid the settlement of as many white settlers in the area as possible, this was thwarted by the fact that white farmers experienced problems in acquiring labour, and many were forced, as a result, to abandon the business of farming altogether (*ibid.*:32-5). Indeed, poorer white farmers, whom the government was aiding with loans of cattle and equipment, often absconded with these. Some moved north to enter African employment or hire themselves out to Africans as transport riders in Phokwane, one of the Pedi heartland locations (Morrell 1983:80). Some African peasants seem, then, to have been rather more successful than these poor white farmers with whom they were competing. This may have been because the former were better placed to mobilise the wider community to pay rent for land whereas the latter, as individual tenants, were more vulnerable (Beinart & Delius 1986:42).

The poorer white farmers who, despite such hardships, managed to stay on the land, experienced acute difficulties in recruiting labour. These difficulties were partly initiated, and compounded, by the fact that there were so many farms owned by land companies where blacks could live as "squatters" - that is, rent-paying tenants - without the obligation to provide labour which was inherent in the more constrained relationship of labour tenancy. Even where blacks did live on the farms of resident white owners, they often did so as "squatters" rather than as labour tenants, despite a series of anti-squatting laws culminating in the law of 1895 which had limited the number of "squatting" families to 5 per farm owner (Massie 1905:97). Conflicts between these smaller farmers and the large-scale landlords will be elaborated on in the next section, but for the moment one can see how, from the point of view of the African - mostly Pedi - peasantry, the availability of some forms of tenancy which were free from the requirement of labour service provided them with the possibility of a relatively independent existence during this period.

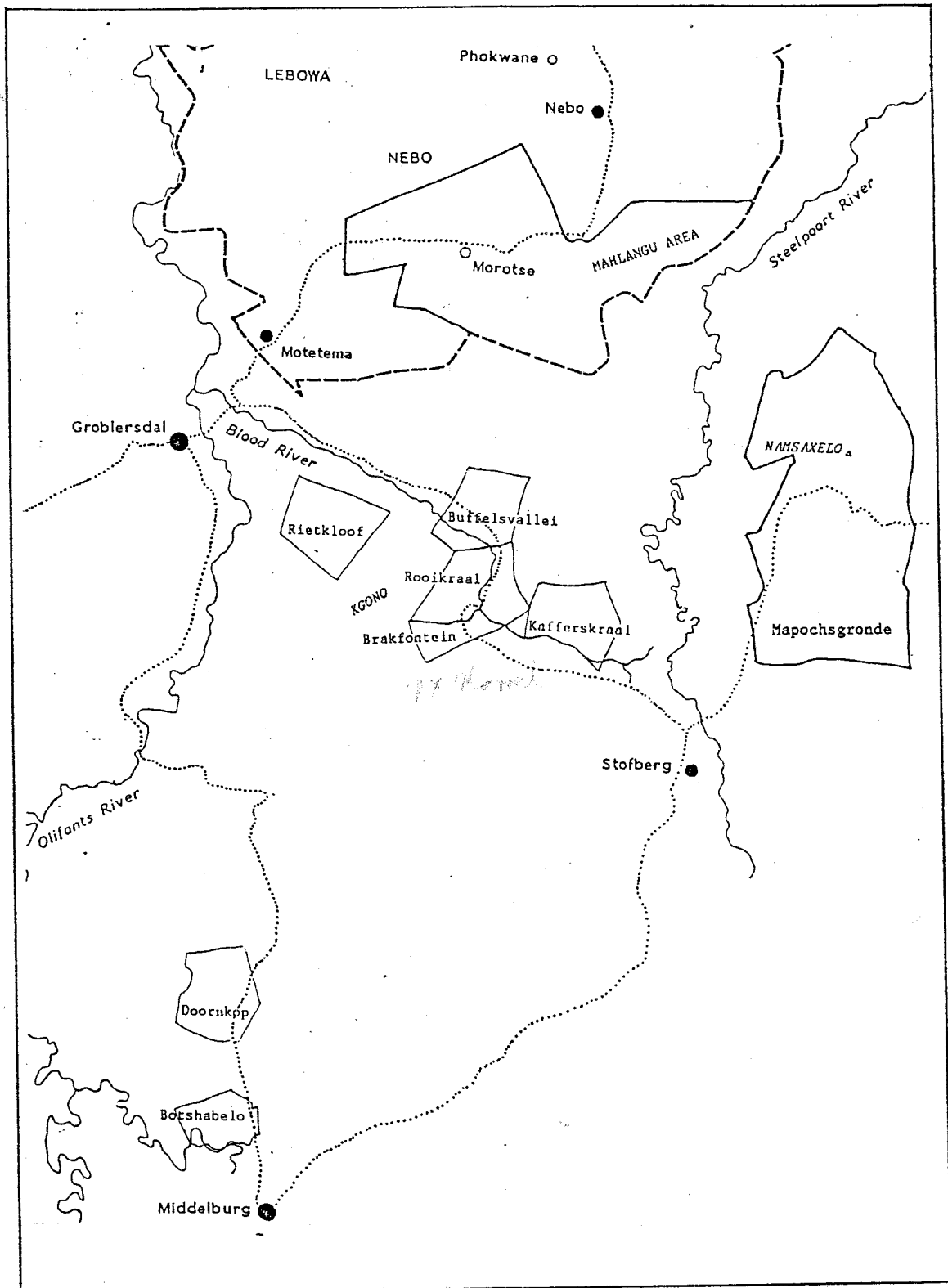


Figure 2: Map of northern Middelburg district, showing farms inhabited by Africans

Especially in the area between the Blood River and Middelburg, from which Morotse's earliest settlers were drawn, there were blacks living in relative freedom on a number of farms. Although this was a "white" area, the fact that there is a Pedi name for it - Kgono - and that there is evidence of its having been an area of dense Pedi settlement, with its own chief, from at least 1865<sup>2</sup> suggests that its inhabitants regarded themselves as its rightful owners, and that they rejected its demarcation into "farms" with Afrikaans names. Even when it became possible for Africans to buy freehold land outside of heartland areas, Pedi were slow to take advantage of this since their rulers had decreed that the land already belonged to the Pedi and therefore that purchase was redundant and unnecessary (Cooper 1974:49; Hunt 1931:317). There were, however, some farms bought for African occupation, especially by Christian groups not living under chiefs. On the farm of Botshabelo a Christian community lived under mission supervision, and at Doornkop an independent Christian group had purchased and settled on its own farm (Delius 1983:160-7; James 1983:5-7). Other farms in the area - such as Rietkloof (or Maleoskop) which was the home of Mabhogo's erstwhile allies the Kopa, and Brakfontein (or Hlakudi) - were officially declared as locations (Morrell 1983:118, 123). The adjoining farm Kafferskraal became home to a number of Ndebele families - notably that of the chief - who moved there after the end of the period of indenture in 1888.<sup>3</sup> Only later was it proposed as an official location by the Stubbs Commission, and it never, in fact, became authorised as one. Other farms, like the neighbouring Rooikraal, were owned by whites but settled by black "squatters". Some of these farms were kept by rich white owners to provide them with winter grazing and some were, indeed, simply "labour farms" the purpose of which was to house tenants from whom labour could be exacted at the landlord's convenience (Beinart & Delius 1986:37).

<sup>2</sup> Evidence of H G Mortimer to Stubbs Commission, UG 32-1918: p6.

<sup>3</sup> More information is given about the non-indentured status of these families on pages 36, 39, 41-2.

Although these people who dwelt between Middelburg and the Blood River were not entirely free of constraints - mission authorities or absentee landlords could exact labour, rent or services, and many were already involved in labour migrancy to supplement their rural living - they did enjoy a degree of independence. Partly, this independence consisted in the freedom to move from one kind of living situation to another, or even to move for a spell back to the heartland of what was later to become the Pedi Reserve. I shall argue that this relative autonomy, and especially this freedom of movement, was the most important factor distinguishing Pedi from Ndebele tenants.

But restrictions on the livelihood even of Pedi tenants began to be felt during the second decade of the 20th century. Morrell argues that these constraints were linked to, although not direct results of, the passing of the 1913 Land Act which laid out the parameters of the Pedi Reserve. Whereas the Beaumont Commission of 1913 had declared the farms adjoining the Blood River to be reserve land, the Stubbs Commission of 1917-18, under great pressure from white farmers, deprived the reserve of these farms, declaring this area instead to be "open" and so able to be inhabited by both whites and blacks. The Stubbs Commission did intend this area to become, eventually, a part of the Pedi Reserve proper, housing those blacks who were no longer to be allowed to live on white farms in more southern parts of the highveld. Its temporary designation as "open" seems to have been designed to ease its transition to exclusively black occupation, and to avoid alienating the few white farmers who were already residing in the vicinity.<sup>4</sup> When this area was declared to be "open", a flood of white settlers moved onto these farms, which were cheap and easily irrigated (Morrell 1983:129), and there were whites, too, who moved right into the Phokwane area in the Pedi heartland. In this climate of demand, the land companies who owned many of these farms raised their

---

<sup>4</sup> UG31-1918: p13

rents, and black tenants, like white ones, had to pay more for the agricultural and grazing land they were renting from these companies.

Morrell states that it was pressures such as these demands for exorbitant rents, in combination with factors like drought and cattle disease, which led to the undermining of the black peasant and subsistence economy in the region. Pedi were thus driven to rely more heavily on wage employment than they had been doing.<sup>5</sup> Morrell argues that this process was a result, not directly or automatically of Government policy, but of linked processes such as the desire of the land companies to maximise profit (1983:160-1).

*Farm Labour: from c1920*

As is shown above, the economic independence of Pedi was affected by these difficulties in renting land for cultivation and by the constraints of the Land Act. They were, nevertheless, still relatively well-placed in being able to exercise at least the choice of opting for wage employment in the urban centres rather than working for local farmers (Cooper 1974:22-6; Morrell 1983:192) or, if they did work on farms, of selecting those where favourable conditions of employment were offered. This possibility of choice accounts for the perpetual lament of white farmers in the Middelburg District - from those testifying to the Stubbs Commission in 1917 to those interviewed by the Native Economic Commission in 1930 - that their greatest difficulty was that of recruiting, and retaining, the services of black farm workers.

The detailed evidence on farm labour in Middelburg given to the Native Economic Commission in 1930 gives an indication of some of the different kinds of contract which had evolved during the first part of the century.

---

<sup>5</sup> Pedi had in fact been migrating for many years before this, but mostly on terms of their own choosing rather than out of dire necessity or inability to subsist on the land (Delius 1983:62-79)

In some parts of the area, farmers offered a three month contract, in return for rights of residence, cultivation, grazing, and - occasionally - food as well.<sup>6</sup> In others, a tenant family would have to provide six, or even nine months of service, for the same or less favourable returns.<sup>7</sup> The poorest farmers of all had tenants who worked, on the *somaar* contract, for an unspecified period - often the whole year round.<sup>8</sup>

This variation in kinds of contract appears to be attributable to three factors: the region in which the farm was situated; the size of the farm; and - closely related - the wealth of the farmer and whether or not he was able to offer wages in return for labour. Morrell suggests that proximity to the dense area of black settlement in Phokwane and surrounding locations in the Pedi Reserve made for easier recruitment of labour, but because the examples he cites are all of wealthy farmers, it may be that the ability to offer wages was the definitive factor (1983:175-7).

The advantages enjoyed by bigger, richer farmers with better ground over smaller, poorer ones are graphically described in the evidence of two farmers-association office bearers from the district: Bosman and Williams. Some rich farmers, they complained, rented entire company farms for black occupation, allowing rent-free accommodation to those who would provide labour service in return. In contrast, small farmers attempting to attract tenants had to give each resident family a larger than average plot for cultivation - in Williams' case, he claimed, "*die beste grond op my plaas*" (the best land on my farm) - since blacks, preferring always to live in large groups, would tend otherwise to choose tenancy on a large farm. Once having acquired a few tenant families,

---

<sup>6</sup> Evidence of J C Yates: pp824-5, and of Maseti Ramakgopa: p336, to Native Economic Commission; 1930 (hereafter N E C).

<sup>7</sup> Evidence of J C Yates: p825, and of P C Bosman and J J Williams: pp944 & 964, to N E C.

<sup>8</sup> Evidence of J C Yates: p824, to N E C.

the smaller farmer would be compelled to make up for their small number by imposing a longer contract on each one, which in turn would tend to drive these families off in search of better conditions unless they were compensated with extra food, fertiliser for their own crops, and the like.<sup>9</sup>

According to the Native Commissioner of Middelburg, other factors that might induce a tenant family to ask for a "trekpas" and leave were: the farmer's demand that the women of the family work on the farm or in the house; and the fact that "young natives" were required to work for long hours even though the choice to enter the tenancy had been made by their father or another senior male relative -

They do not like farm work. They get no money at all ... occasionally they get a shirt, or an old pair of trousers, or something like that, and for that they have to get up early in the morning. They always get mealie-pap and nothing else, and they prefer to go to the towns and work for wages.

The Commissioner also cites "the desire to be their own masters" as causing Africans to depart from the farms they had worked on, and to go and live in the adjoining locations.<sup>10</sup>

Combining this evidence with that collected by Morrell, then, it seems that poorer farmers, and/or those who lived in areas where there was a shortage of potential labourers living nearby, were in perpetual danger of losing the labour tenants they had, and had to compete with each other in enticing these to stay or in attracting new ones. Although there were attempts to eliminate this competition between farmers by establishing commonly-agreed-upon and uniform conditions of service, these proved unsuccessful.<sup>11</sup> It was this atmosphere of intense rivalry between white

---

<sup>9</sup> Evidence of P C Bosman and J J Williams to N E C: pp951, 945-6.

<sup>10</sup> Evidence of J C Yates to N E C: pp831, 835-6.

<sup>11</sup> Evidence of P C Bosman and J J Williams to N E C: p942; Morrell 1983:196.

farmers which allowed Africans - mainly Pedi - a fair degree of choice in the kind of farm work they did.

In contrast, the Ndebele living in the district - and further afield - appear to have been in a position to exercise far less choice. Although the period of indenture subsequent to the tribe's defeat in 1883 was officially specified as lasting only for five years (Kuper 1978:111), Ndebele people nevertheless, by 1914, still constituted a "trapped labour force" (Morrell 1983:137). They had made strenuous attempts in the intervening years to break free of their situation of virtual captivity; many fleeing from the remote farms where they had been placed, and others attempting to locate and reclaim their lost families and children (Delius 1987:8-10). This did result in a gradual concentration of Ndzundza on farms close to the old heartland of the chiefdom, especially on the farm Kafferskraal, but large numbers nonetheless remained on their original farms (*ibid.*:11). Another promise of freedom came when the Anglo-Boer war provided a temporary slackening of farmers' control over their captive labour force, allowing large numbers of Ndzundza to regroup around their chief at Kafferskraal. The end of the war in 1901 however saw most of these people again dispersed under direct white control, and stripped of the cattle and weapons they had managed to accumulate (*ibid.*:15-16).

Their apparently "trapped" situation by 1914 derived partly from their extreme poverty, which meant they had no opportunity singly or as a group to purchase or rent land which might have served as an independent residential or agricultural base. They were described in 1914 by SNC Edwards as being "as poor as mice ... they work for no wages and going out to the mines is, to say the least, openly discouraged" (Morrell 1983:137).

With minimal access to wages through farm work or through migrancy, I have attempted to demonstrate that these tenants were unfavourably placed - unlike many of their Pedi neighbours - to become rent-paying tenants on company land, or to buy land of their own; a step which might in turn



have allowed an escape route from the trap of unremitting labour tenancy.<sup>12</sup> The administration's reluctance formally to allocate a location to them ensured that they were kept in this virtually captive position. And they appear not to have been welcome in the lands occupied by other chiefdoms, as

most of these had been conquered, collaborators had been entrenched and networks of informers had been created. Beyond this the major chiefdom adjacent to the heartland of indenture was ruled over the Pedi paramount Kgoloko, who had actively assisted in the destruction of the Ndzundza, and who was closely linked to J Abel Erasmus the Lydenburg Native Commissioner. Chiefs locked in local conflicts were also prepared to denounce their rivals for harbouring refugees (Delius 1987:9).

Not being well placed to discriminate between employers, then, it was mostly Ndebele rather than Pedi who worked, for poor farmers, on the year-round "somaar" contract described earlier. One further factor in their virtually captive situation was the fact that the farmers to whom many of them had been originally indentured had removed them to farms in many remote districts of the south-eastern Transvaal such as Bethal, Carolina and Belfast. From these places they could only move - to industrial centres, or to "native locations" - with extreme difficulty. All these elements played their part in ensuring that, on the labour-hungry farms of the Middelburg and further-flung districts, at least one source of labour remained available and easily exploitable. An observation by Native Commissioner Yates, that "the Mandabella are the best (farm) workers", probably reflects nothing more than the fact that, unlike their Pedi counterparts, they had little opportunity to be anything else.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> One exception to this was a group of about nine families paying rent to reside on the farm Kafferskraal with the Ndzundza chief Matsitsi Jafta Mahlangu. See evidence of Jafta Mahlangu to N E C: p921.

<sup>13</sup> Evidence to N E C, p852

*Some Case Studies*

The documentary and archival sources referred to so far give an idea, from the white farmers' and administrators' point of view, of life on the farms in the Middelburg district. Against this scenario, we can look at the detailed history - based on oral evidence from interviews - of a few specific families presently living in Morotse. It is a story which corroborates most of the detail given above, while showing how tenants and "squatters" themselves experienced the situation.

The Madihlabas were living in the Kgono area, just south of the Blood River, by the turn of the century, having moved there by stages from an area further to the north and closer to Sekhukhuneland. This was a chiefly Pedi family, and although there were probably a number of factors causing or facilitating its migration to the peripheries of the Pedi area - such as the general broadening of Pedi authority in the region during the early 1870s, outlined above (p25) - the main cause singled out by my informants was a series of succession disputes and the subsequent departure of one of the claimants along with the branch of the family which supported him.

The first of these disputes, which involved a witchcraft accusation between two brothers, led to the younger brother fleeing southwards from the Pedi heartland towards the Tubatse River (present-day Steelpoort) and settling there with his supporting agnates. They changed their name from Masabela to Madihlaba, a name which denotes a particular type of cattle-colouring symbolically associated with chiefly status. A later dispute brought two of the family's sons from Tubatse to Kgono. They settled in the area, again accompanied by certain kinsmen, including the Lerobane and Chego families who were - and continue to be - related to the Madihlabas by cousin-marriage, and who came to act as councillors to the Madihlaba chief (see p133).

After the Madihlabas arrived at Kgono, certain adjustments in the extent of chiefly authority became necessary, as the Ndzundza Ndebele chief Matsitsi Mahlangu was already established in the area, living on the farm Kafferskraal with several families, and with the Ndebele labour tenants on surrounding farms under his jurisdiction. Dikwetsi Madihlaba, settling with his group on the farm Doornpoort, established a relationship of courteous co-existence - and a degree of subordination - with the Ndzundza chief. He heard most cases at his own court, for instance, but acknowledged Matsitsi's right to override his judgement on more far-reaching issues. He sent ceremonial gifts, such as the livers of slaughtered beasts, to the Ndzundza chief, but was in turn excused from certain payments and tributes which would have been the lot of an ordinary subject.

During the Madihlabas' period of residence on the white-owned farms of Kgono, they experienced a gradually increasing restriction on their type of livelihood. They moved from Doornpoort, their home during the Anglo-Boer War, to another farm nearby where they paid rent, and then to Buffelsvallei, where they worked for the white occupants of the farm - the brothers Jansen - for three months a year, being able to take up wage employment elsewhere for the remaining nine months. Each of the family's sons was supposed to take his turn at providing this stipulated period of service, and the eldest son - now in his late 70s - did so. By the time the second son, Jacobs, was considered eligible to work, however, the contract had been extended, and Jacobs left the farm, preferring to work for wages at Witbank and Hendrina. After three years he returned to Buffelsvallei, and on the neighbouring farm of Rooikraal he courted and married Tabitha Tlaka, whose family were rent-paying tenants on the farm and worked for wages on a nearby farm belonging to a Greek.<sup>14</sup> His wife came with him to live at Buffelsvallei, and it was

---

<sup>14</sup> Greek farmers were mentioned in the evidence of Yates to the N E C as being among the few who paid wages to African labourers: "good wages - up to £3" (p825).

a dispute between farmer Jansen and Jacobs over whether she should work in the farmhouse which - combined with their growing dissatisfaction over other conditions on the farm - caused the family to leave in 1939.

Looking back at their life there, one of the sisters complains that, although they had a piece of land for ploughing, this was inadequate to supply the family's needs in food, and they were sometimes forced to supplement their produce by trading a beast for bags of meal from farmers near Bethal. They were given some rations by farmer Jansen, but this was always of poor quality - buttermilk, for example; or the coarse residue from the sifting of mealie meal. A further grievance was that the farmer took the family's own kraal manure to fertilise his crops, while complaining that they kept too many cattle and insisting that they sell or otherwise dispose of some of their beasts.

These factors, together with the extension of the labour contract, and topped by the dispute over whether the family's daughters-in-law should give labour-service as well, influenced the family head, Sekgeti, in his decision to take his wives and children away from this farm and search for a place "with a better contract", or one where they could live in relative independence from whites. They trekked, with 50 head of cattle, northwards across the Blood River and settled on a farm where the farmer - Kleynhans - allotted each married household head a field for which he charged them rent but no labour service. The village of Morotse, on this farm, is the family's present home.

When the Madihlabas arrived at their new home there were already half a dozen tenant families living on the farm, and many more were to follow. Some of those already there, and many who came later, were also from Kgono, having been driven by a similar desire to find a living situation under fewer constraints from whites. Many trekked to the farm having heard about it from relatives who had already moved there. About two years after the Madihlabas' arrival, the Ndzundza chief Jonas Mahlangu

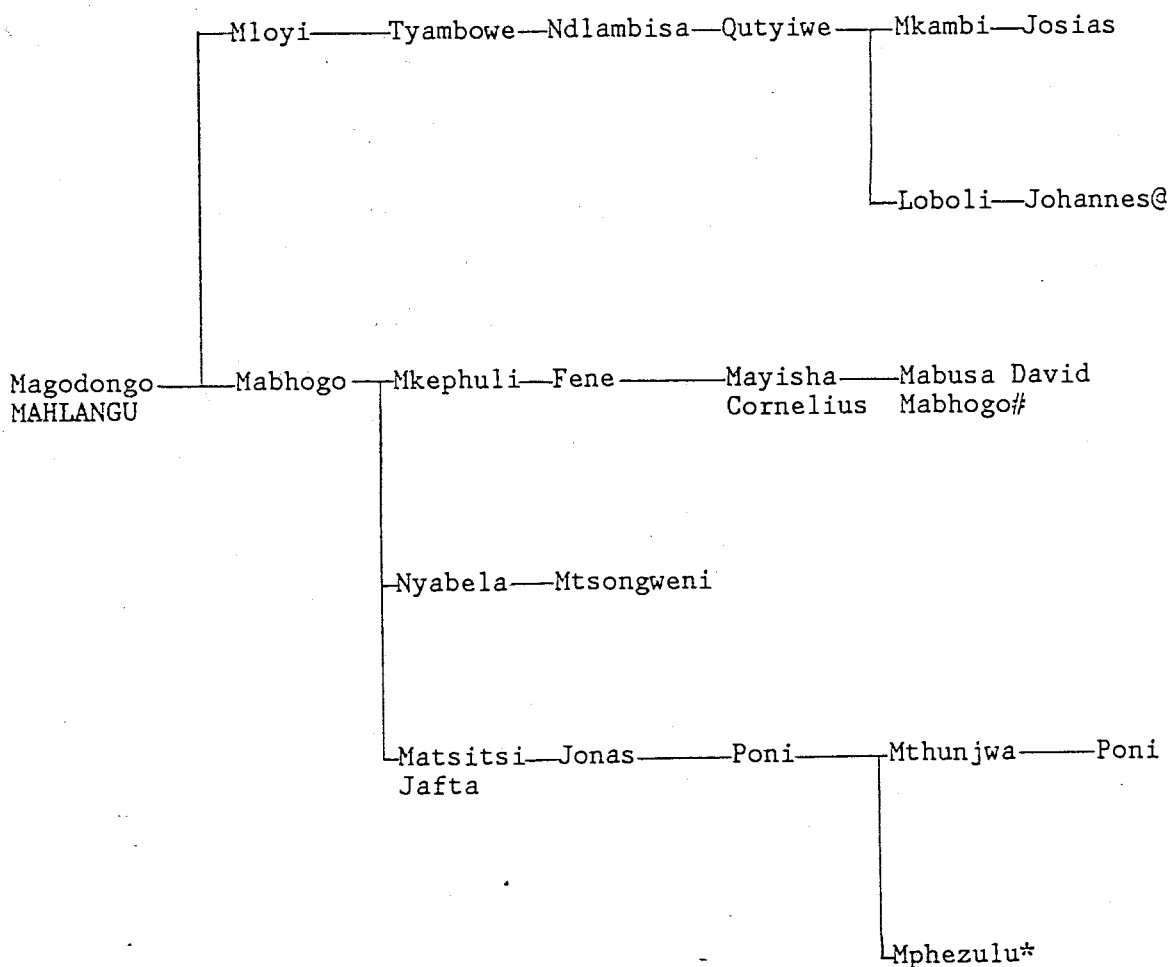
(Matsitsi Jafta's successor) arrived from Kafferskraal with numbers of his family and followers, and settled on an adjoining farm. At roughly the same time the whole group of farms was bought by the South African Native Trust, and "released" for black occupancy and for addition to the existing Pedi reserve under the 1936 Natives Trust and Land Act. After this change in status, the farms, which formed part of the magisterial district of Nebo, became a logical choice of home for the hundreds of labour tenants who were to leave white farms - or be forcibly evicted from them - at a rate that increased steadily over the next 40 years.

To illustrate the point made earlier about the differing situation of Pedi and Ndebele on the white farms, a comparison can be drawn between the experience of a family like the Madihlabas - in many ways representative of most of Morotse's Pedi inhabitants - and that of some of its Ndebele families. Such a comparison is, however, complicated by a consideration not mentioned up till now. The tenant families more remotely situated - that is, those Ndebele scattered in more distant parts of the white areas of the south-eastern Transvaal - were also those who stayed as tenants for longest. In many cases these people left the farms, not through choice or dissatisfaction at stringent conditions as the Madihlabas had done, but as a result of eviction, several decades later, by their employer/landlords. These evictions occurred because of major changes in the scale and capital-intensiveness of white agriculture, and because of related Government legislation enforcing the abolition of labour tenancy and "squatting": institutions thought to be incompatible not only with modern agricultural methods but also with the ideology of *Apartheid* (Mare 1980:8-15).

The Ndzundza Ndebele who came to Morotse after living on the white farms, then, can be roughly divided into two groups. Those who had lived at or on farms adjacent to Kafferskraal were close to the Pedi reserve and to the old Ndzundza heartland. By living on or moving to these farms, they had given themselves the possibility of "drawing on and reviving

wider social networks, and of partly overcoming the atomisation which they had suffered" (Delius 1987:11). Although they had constituted a constrained labour force with less access to the option of wage labour than their Pedi neighbours, they nevertheless did resemble these neighbours in that they, too, made the choice to leave their tenancies relatively early, before conditions had become particularly arduous or the limitations on stock too strict. Those in further-flung districts, in contrast, mostly experienced far more restrictive conditions of service, and yet did not exercise the choice of escaping even from these until a time when the choice was taken out of their hands. This difference in conditions of departure, and in time of arrival in the reserve, was especially important in determining families' access to resources once actually resident in the reserve area, as will be demonstrated in Chapter 2. It is the second category - of people who left the white farms since the 1960s - which represents the majority of Morotse's Ndebele-speakers and of its inhabitants as a whole. My case-study of an Ndebele family will be drawn from this group.

The widow Dina Skhosana was born on the farm Kaalplaas in the Carolina district. When she married Katu Skhosana she moved to the farm Wonderfontein, where he was living with his family. They had no land of their own to plough, nor were they allowed to keep cattle on the farm: their contract involved payment in food - and a little money - for the year-round services of Katu and two sons on the lands, and of Dina in the farmhouse. In 1974, the farmer informed them that they should leave, and they came to Morotse, having heard about the village from a relative. Due to the lateness of their arrival in the reserve they, like many families in a similar position, were unable to acquire land. This difference between landless and landed families has had implications for their mode of livelihood, types of social interaction and household structure which will be explored in subsequent chapters.



- \* Acting chief in Mahlangu Area, Nebo, Lebowa (regent for Poni)
- # Chief at Weltevreden, KwaNdebele
- @ M P for Mahlangu area in Lebowa Legislative Assembly

Figure 3: Genealogy of the Mahlangu royals mentioned in the text

Sources: Kuper (1978), Coetzee (1980),  
Interview with Loboli Mahlangu (1983)

Also to be explored later in more detail are issues such as the further populating of the area, its subsequent history and its agricultural use, and the effects on all these things of the system of Bantustan administration, known locally as the "Trust". Since my specific concern in this chapter is to show something of the background of Pedi and Ndebele interaction in the area, what is needed here is some account of the intervening political history of the Ndzundza Ndebele. This group had not been entirely destroyed as a political unit despite their defeat in 1883, and their reigning chief was eventually to be registered as the Tribal Authority for this whole group of Nebo Trust farms, which later became known as the Mahlangu Tribal Area. This formalised the coexistence between Pedi and Ndebele authority that had already been operative on the white-owned farms of Kgono.

## Part Two: Ndzundza Political History 1883-1986

The political history of the Ndzundza subsequent to their defeat in 1883 is difficult to reconstruct with accuracy. This is so because, although oral evidence on the day-to-day lives of Ndebele tenant families on white farms is easily and reliably acquired, accounts of the group's alignments and migrations in a broader sense, and of the doings of its chiefs, vary widely due to a bitter dispute which has split the tribe since the 1950s. Some writers date the beginnings of this split to a much earlier time, attributing it to tendencies of fission inherent in the tribe's social organisation and to related succession disputes which occurred during the 19th century, and maintaining that the tribe's geographical dispersal after its defeat in 1883 merely accelerated these tendencies (Coetzee 1980:259). My informants in the chiefly family contradict this view, and emphasise instead that the split was caused by government intervention during the 20th century: by the oppressive legislation, land deprivation and consequent competition for scarce resources which became most severe with the advent of *Apartheid*. It seems that proponents of



both these views have particular political axes to grind. The first, mostly Government apologists, emphasise that there is one "rightful" Ndzundza chief who can be identified through a careful application of tribal traditions, and that an Ndebele nationalism and pride in ethnic unity can thereby be fostered. The second strive to prove that the course of Ndebele political history has been unnaturally diverted by white Government interference. In the account that follows, then, I will attempt to indicate where the two versions differ, both in their "facts" and their interpretations.

It is beyond argument that a defeat as resounding as that suffered by the Ndzundza in 1883 would have represented a major interruption in tribal leadership. Not only were they widely dispersed subsequent to this event, but their ruling chief, Nyabela, was imprisoned. This in itself was not necessarily an insuperable problem, however, since Nyabela was in any case acting as regent for Fene, who was said to be the youthful heir to the line established by Mabhogo.

But even Mabhogo's right to rule is far from having been unequivocally established.<sup>15</sup> And there is doubt and uncertainty, too, about the "rightfulness", strictly speaking, of Mabhogo's successors (Kuper 1978:110). It would, then, appear to be more useful to regard the succession of incumbents to Ndzundza chiefly office, during these very disturbed times, as having been governed by fairly flexible principles of suitability and popular choice, in much the way that Comaroff describes (1974), rather than by rigid and unchanging traditional rules. It may be that some of the problem in defining the tribe's "true leaders" after Nyabela's imprisonment arose from the lack of a cohesive and au-

---

<sup>15</sup> Fourie claims that it was the gap created in the Ndzundza chiefly family by the devastations of Mzilikazi's army - they destroyed the right-hand or great house - that allowed Mabhogo to step into the breach and assume leadership (Kuper 1978:110). Loboli Mahlangu says, rather, that there was a true heir - the blind Tyambowe - for whom Mabhogo was acting as regent: Coetzee claims that this regency culminated in Mabhogo's usurping the chiefship (1980:244).

tonomous constituency which would have been able to continue this practice of endorsing the leader most suited to the task. From this time until the issue of independence became salient, debates about who the real "opperhoof" of the Ndzundza was became something of concern mainly to state functionaries deciding how to answer the appeals of Ndebele royals to allot them a portion of land.<sup>16</sup>

With Nyabela and his councillors in prison, then, and Fene too young to assume any chiefly duties, the Ndzundza on the farms were left without any form of even nominal or ceremonial leadership. The story goes that the imprisoned chief then chose his youngest brother Matsitsi Jafta Mahlangu - who was also in prison - to act as his deputy in looking after the Ndzundza and their needs. According to the folk version, the plan of escape for Matsitsi was as follows:

every Wednesday they were given some snuff, of which they would only take a little and store the rest. One morning they went off to work, with all the snuff they had collected in Matsitsi's pocket. Matsitsi was the coffee boy: he made coffee and gave it to the warder, who then told Matsitsi to clean his shoes. Matsitsi threw the snuff in the warder's eyes, then ran away. ... He went to the white farmers at Kafferskraal where his family was living, and told them that he had been sent by Nyabela to rule his people in Nyabela's place. The whites agreed. Matsitsi called a big meeting of all the Ndzundza, who came from all the far away farms to hear what message Nyabela had sent them from prison. Matsitsi told them that Nyabela had sent him to be their ruler. They were all satisfied with this arrangement.<sup>17</sup>

Coetzee, although his information on this era is much briefer, agrees that a section of the Ndzundza was living in the Middelburg district under Matsitsi during and after Nyabela's imprisonment (1980:250). And Delius concurs that, although in detail this account may be inaccurate, reliable evidence suggests that there was a resurgence of chiefly power in the late 1880s and the 1890s (1987:12-13).

---

<sup>16</sup> See evidence of Jafta Mahlangu to Stubbs Commission, U G 31-1918: p15; and evidence of Jafta Mahlangu to N E C: pp920-30.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Loboli Mahlangu, May 1983.

My informant stressed that Matsitsi's first major task, after his designation as acting chief, was to hold an initiation school or *wela* for Ndzundza youths: an occasion which normally should have taken place every three or four years but was now overdue, and which was prompted, on this occasion, by the fact that Fene, the heir to Mabhogo's line, had reached an age when his initiation was a matter of urgent priority. At this stage he was living with his mother on the farm Welgelegen, near Delmas. Released from prison, two chiefly councillors - members, like Matsitsi, of the ruling Mahlangu family - joined the acting chief, and they held an initiation at Kafferskraal for local youths, and then again at the farm Welgelegen for Fene.

It is in accounting for relations over the next 30 years and thereafter between these two branches of the chiefly family situated in two distinct locations that the versions of the story begin to differ. According to one view, there was a harmonious relationship between Fene, who, as he matured, assumed chiefly powers over Ndebele living at Welgelegen and other farms near Pretoria/Delmas, and Matsitsi, who continued to hold sway in the northern Middelburg district. The accord between them was reinforced by Matsitsi's support for Fene in a minor dispute between the latter and his classificatory brother Mtsongweni, the son of Nyabela, who challenged Fene's right to reign. Matsitsi, called in to adjudicate, ruled in favour of Fene, who expressed his gratitude by agreeing to continue "sharing" the chiefship with Matsitsi, so that each should exercise his dominion on his own side of the Olifants River. A further demonstration of accord was the help given in 1923 by the Middelburg to the Delmas section of the tribe when the chief of the latter - now Mayisha Cornelius Mahlangu, Fene's son - was forced by the State to move from Welgelegen. In his purchase of the farm Weltevreden, to which he moved, he was assisted by Matsitsi's followers, each of whom is said to have contributed one ox from his herd towards the cost of the land.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Loboli Mahlangu, May 1983.

In strong contrast to this account, Coetzee's interpretation points to the existence of substantial tension, during the period 1900-1930, between the two branches of the chiefship. Although he cites evidence to the effect that Matsitsi viewed himself as a representative of Fene, and that he indicated that he would submit to Fene's authority if the latter were to return to the vicinity of Mapochsgronde and Kafferskraal, Coetzee nevertheless emphasises more strongly that there was antagonism between the two men, quoting an alleged remark of Fene's that Matsitsi - unwilling to accept the status of a mere headman - had been trying since the war of 1883 to escape from his authority (1980:267). It is this remark alone which Coetzee uses as evidence in support of his claim that the leadership dispute, arising from a natural tendency to fission and thus already present in embryo, was merely catalysed by the tribe's 1883 defeat.

To resume the alternative view given by Loboli Mahlangu: it was only well after 1939, when the first group of Ndzungza led by their chief Jonas - Matsitsi's son - moved from Kafferskraal northwards across the Blood River to the Trust farms of Nebo, that tension between the tribe's two branches first began to manifest itself. When the conflict did erupt it was directly caused by disagreements concerning which land the tribe should accept from the South African Government, and not by any pre-existing tendency towards fission. Throughout the first half of the 20th century the tribe's representatives had been pleading with the authorities to allow the Ndzungza to settle, once more, at Mapochsgronde - the place of Mabhogo's original capital Namsaxelo.<sup>19</sup> Their requests were consistently refused. Judging from earlier statements, this was because it was thought strategically unwise to allow the reuniting, at a place which had come to symbolise its former power, of a group which had proved so recalcitrant in recognising the sovereignty over them of successive white settler governments.<sup>20</sup> In later statements, officials merely

---

<sup>19</sup> Evidence of Fene Mahlangu to Stubbs Commission, U G 32-1918: p15.

<sup>20</sup> Report of the Stubbs Commission, U G 31-1918: p14.

emphasise the land's unsuitableness for agricultural development in explaining why it was not to be given to the Ndzundza. But whatever the government's reasons for refusing these requests for Mapochsgronde, the Ndzundzas' spokesmen rejected all alternative offers of land out of hand until 1959 when Poni Mahlangu, Jonas's son, finally accepted the group of Trust farms in the south of Nebo district - including the one where Morotse is situated - as the permanent home of at least the Middelburg Ndzundza over whom he held sway. By this time, the area had in any case become the *de facto* home of large numbers of relocated Ndebele who, evicted from white farms, had joined the original Pedi and Ndebele settlers of the 1930s.

The chief of the other branch of the Ndzundza Ndebele, Mabusa Mabhogo David Mahlangu (son of Mayisha Cornelius), having refused the government's offers of various Trust farms on the grounds that the Ndzundza would be satisfied only with their original territory, Mapochsgronde, was angry with Poni for accepting the Nebo Trust farms. During a bitter personal altercation, Mabusa accused Poni of having sold his people to the whites, and tried to fine him five head of cattle for his misdemeanour. Following this, Mabusa crossed to the east of the Olifants, visiting the farms where Poni had jurisdiction, and attempting to replace Poni's headmen with his own.

Mabusa's accusations appear ironic in the light of later developments: he, too, eventually accepted from the Government an offer of land which was remote from Mapochsgronde. The farms allocated to him and his subjects, surrounding Weltevreden where he was already living, were later to form the core of KwaNdebele. And - in the view of my informant - it was eventually around the issue of whether the Ndebele should accept independence in their new Homeland that the antagonism between the tribe's two branches, having originated in the land issue, was to assume its most violent and bitter dimensions.

Before going on to discuss the processes which finally resulted in the creation of a Homeland for the Southern Ndebele, it is necessary first to review the broadly contrasting versions of the story so far. Coetzee emphasises that the split in the Ndzundza tribe was generated internally by traditional processes of fission and rivalry in the chiefly family, and that this split was aggravated by the tribe's dispersal in 1883. My informants in the Nebo Ndebele chiefly family stressed instead that it was external pressures - of landlessness, and of resistance to, versus collaboration with, the S A Government's Homeland policy - which caused the split. The contrast seems fairly clear-cut, and the latter version appears perhaps to ring more true. There is, however, a complicating dimension which is not mentioned by either account. This is the fact of internal differentiation within both these Ndebele groups. A major distinction between royals and commoners which was salient during the earlier years on the farms appears since to have been made more complex by the emergence of a broader elite class of people like entrepreneurs and businessmen often closely linked to members of the chiefly family. Both versions of the story, while speaking of the Ndebele as a united group, tend to emphasise exclusively the motives and interests of royalty and/or of this elite class, and ignore the role which may have been played by growing stratification.

The following account tells of one group accepting and the other rejecting an independent Homeland. Each of the two competing versions continues to stress the purity of motives of its own side while scorning those of the opposing side. But one must bear in mind that the members of this elite class in both groups may have had reasons for accepting an independent Homeland or for electing rather to stay in Lebowa which served their own interests and which were not shared by the broader mass of Ndebele whom they claimed to represent.

*The creation of a Homeland*

The idea of a Homeland for the Southern Ndebele is a relatively recent one. Neither in the 1913 Land Act nor in the act of 1936 was any provision of land made for them: and even the more recent *Apartheid* schema of the 1950s, which provides for separate and quasi-independent ethnic units, made no mention of the Ndebele. This is because large numbers of them were still resident on white farms, while others lived, mingled with people of diverse ethnic backgrounds, in different freehold and reserve areas. Ndzundza royals had repeatedly made known their wish for land, but these needs had been met sporadically and piecemeal, through land purchase or the allocation of small areas of Trust land like those described above, rather than through inclusion into the State's grand design of ethnic units. Although the need for land was being expressed by Ndebele spokesmen, then, this was for a long time not elaborated at the level of the State's ideological schema.

It was only around 1970, when various irresistible pressures on population began to be felt, that there was State acknowledgement of these demands for land and that provision began to be made for a separate Ndebele Homeland (Coetzee 1980:428). These pressures were twofold. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, there were changes in the practice of white agriculture. It began to be unproductive to house large numbers of tenants on farms where a few full-time wage labourers would be better suited to the needs of large scale farmers using capital-intensive methods. This tendency towards rationalising farm labour, together with accompanying laws formally abolishing labour tenancy, led to the movement of thousands of ex-labour tenants away from white farms, and the question of where to house these people - many of them Ndebele - became a pressing problem which could not perhaps have been foreseen within earlier versions of the grand design of *Apartheid*.

A second factor - probably an equally unintentional by-product of the ideology of separate development - which made the provision of land for Ndebele settlement an urgent necessity was that of pressure which was placed, within other ethnically-defined territorial units, on people who were resident within the territories but who did not "belong" to these units. So, for instance, there were numbers of Ndebele living in the Tswana Homeland of Bophutatswana. By a gradual process, as access within the territory to resources such as land began to be determined by membership of the Tswana ethnic group, so Ndebele residents came to be identified as aliens or "squatters", and started to experience harassment at the hands of local police (Coetzee 1980:427; SAIRR Survey 1984:466). From as early as 1970, but continuing into the 80s, these Ndebele were fleeing from their former home amongst the Tswana and seeking for a place in which to settle. By a kind of domino effect, then, the working out of the logic of independence in one Homeland was instrumental in the creation of another such territory, in which the dispossessed Ndebele could seek refuge and security, and in which their authorities, in turn, would come to exercise tyranny over non-Ndebele.

If one looks again at the two factors mentioned above, it can be seen that they made the provision of land for Ndebele settlement an urgent priority, but there is no reason why they should, of themselves, have resulted necessarily in the creation of a Homeland or of an "independent national state". Chiefly informants from the Nebo Ndzundza, for example, claim that they were already satisfied with the Trust farm lands allotted to them in Lebowa. In addition, their earlier conflict with the other section of the Ndzundza made them reluctant to co-operate in the proposed venture of ethnic unity. Their requirement for a secure place to live had been fulfilled within the context of a reserve area which, even though it had been defined by the S A Government as an ethnic unit for the Pedi, has been consistently emphasised by its own authorities as a non-racial, non-ethnic entity. This has meant that, on an official level at least, there has been no ethnic harassment and subsequent dispossession in



Lebowa of the kind which occurred in Bophutatswana. Indeed, where there has been ethnic competition in the Mahlangu area of Lebowa, it has sometimes been seen to take the form of favouritism towards Ndebele and discrimination against Pedi, since the area, although a part of Lebowa, is itself under the jurisdiction of a formally-constituted Ndebele Tribal Authority. The full complexity of local-level ethnic relationships on the Nebo Trust farms will form a central theme of the next four chapters, and especially of Chapter 5. But at least the leaders of the Nebo Ndebele have experienced no ethnic discrimination from the Lebowa authorities and therefore have had no need to add their voices to the clamour of calls for an Ndebele Homeland.

From the perspective of those seeking to emphasise or foster the spirit of ethnic separation and of Ndebele national pride, the stance taken by the Nebo Ndebele is seen as mindlessly obstructive rather than as engendered by satisfaction with their present material situation. Perhaps the best example is Coetzee, whose thesis combines roughly equal measures of historical detail and State propaganda in its attempt to prove that what the Transvaal Ndebele want, after all these years of dispersal, is "*etniese konsolidasie en nasionale selfverwesening*" (ethnic consolidation and national self-determination). In his view, the behaviour of the Nebo Ndebele is best explained in terms of the personal political ambitions of their present acting chief, Mphezulu, whose refusal to acknowledge the seniority of Mabusa or to identify himself with the struggles of the Southern Ndebele are the major factors in impeding this striven-for political unity (1980:272). Material presented in Chapters 2 and 5 appears to substantiate the claim that this chief's personal ambition exceeds his concern for his subjects. But Coetzee's claim that these subjects' interests would be best served by uniting them in a central Homeland must be treated with scepticism in the light of conditions in KwaNdebele to be described below. As it happens, Nebo's Ndebele, although subject to the general disadvantages of life in South Africa's rural peripheries, at least enjoy the advantage of being able to practise

some agriculture - a privilege denied to their KwaNdebele counterparts. And they are spared KwaNdebele's levels of political repression and brutality.

Writers like Coetzee, in pursuit of the chimera of united Ndebele national pride, are concerned to identify unequivocally the "true" chiefly line as that which has associated itself with the Ndebele Homeland, and emphasise that the Nebo Ndzundza leader is merely a "headman who considers himself chief" (Bothma, cited by Schneider 1985:64).<sup>21</sup> Such writers must have been puzzled by more recent developments in KwaNdebele, in which even royals initially in favour of independence have changed sides to become fierce opponents of, and have even been jailed for their antagonism to, the scheme.

If one distinguishes the purely material issue of Ndebele access to land from the political one of an Ndebele Homeland, then, and if one attempts to understand why it is that the creation of the latter should have been thought necessary, one can look for answers on a number of levels. Apologists for State policy, as indicated above, try to show that it has been the reawakening of Ndebele nationalistic pride that has prompted the formation of a context for territorial and political separateness. A completely contradictory view, normally associated with the "political economy" line of thought, would emphasise rather some of the stark material and infrastructural realities of this Homeland in attempting to explain the reasons for its existence and especially for its proposed independence. As mentioned earlier, it provided accommodation for large numbers of people rendered homeless by various aspects of *Apartheid*. These people are housed in a series of vast rural townships which have no land for agriculture. Since they thus rely entirely on wage labour, the area could be seen as providing a dormitory for a workforce serving

---

<sup>21</sup> In fact, Mphuzulu Jack Mahlangu is acting as a regent for his young nephew, Poni.

the PWV area. While the Homeland already houses this large population, and accommodates those of its residents who are in industrial employment, the fact of its planned independence will ensure that responsibility for this population - its health-care, its welfare, social services; but also the control of it - will be removed from the S A Government. Reports in Hansard reveal, indeed, that this has already occurred. Answers to questions put by opposition spokesmen to S A Government ministers show, firstly, alarmingly inadequate provision of various kinds of infrastructure - the existence of only one hospital, for example, and of a ratio of one doctor to every 23,226 patients<sup>22</sup> - and, secondly, a lack of State concern, or even knowledge, about this inadequacy on the grounds that control over these things has already "been handed over to KwaNdebele" (*ibid.*).

KwaNdebele thus houses and controls a large - partly surplus, partly working - population, close to the Reef, at minimal cost to the central government. In view of its woefully meagre resources, its proposed "independence" is perhaps more ludicrous than that of any of the other "national states" in South Africa, and appears to be being foisted onto the territory through the expedient of buying off certain key ministers in its legislative assembly. For example, there have been allegations "that all the territory's liquor licences (are) held by government ministers and nearly all the new shops (belong) to government officials or members of their families" (SAIRR Survey 1982:396).<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Hansard 12 July 1984

<sup>23</sup> Far less likely to be true, and yet very telling nevertheless, is the hilarious story I was told by a member of the Nebo Ndebele about Simon Skhosana, the chief minister and proposed president of KwaNdebele. When he was inaugurated by Dr Koornhof, then Minister of Co-operation and Development, he clapped his hands in obeisance and said "*Driemaal dankie, my baas! Dankie vir die huis, dankie vir die motor, en dankie vir die geld*" (Thank you, my master. Thank you for the house, thank you for the car, and thank you for the money.)

Achieved thus, any independence would be illusory, since it would be backed up not by substantive material resources but by pay-offs to selected people in authority. But even these members of the elite with definite interest in the granting of independence have balked at the inadequate provision of land. As an indication, the ratio of persons to land in the territory almost doubled from 1,5 per hectare in 1980 to 2,9 per hectare in 1984.<sup>24</sup> In 1982 the KwaNdebele authorities, though agreeing in principle to the idea of independence, made it conditional on the fulfilment of their land claims (SAIRR Survey 1983:344).

There were two areas of land, in particular, which they wanted. The first was a group of twelve farms to the immediate south-east of Nebo, adjoining those where Mphezulu and the Nebo Ndzundza reside, which have provided a major focus in the continuing conflict between the two groups of Ndzundza Ndebele. The second was the Moutse district of Lebowa, over which terrible strife developed during the 1980s. While the Moutse episode attracted most attention from the media since it occurred at roughly the same time that KwaNdebele independence was due finally to be granted, it is the case of the twelve farms that will be recounted here, since it had a more direct bearing on the Nebo Ndzundza - including those in Morotse village - who live immediately adjacent to these farms.

#### *The twelve farms*

The uncertainty surrounding the destiny of the farms adjoining Nebo - nine originally, to which three were added - began when they were bought from their white owners by the S A Government after 1936, and there was speculation by both groups of Ndebele and their leaders about who was to be allowed to settle there. Since, by the early 1970s, it was thought that these farms might be the location of the future KwaNdebele - although no firm decision had yet been reached about this (Coetzee 1980:431; SAIRR

---

<sup>24</sup> Hansard 12 July 1984.

Survey 1972:174) - Mabusa's followers from Weltevreden and from surrounding white farms began to move into this area.<sup>25</sup> The government plan at this stage appears still to have been one of establishing an Ndebele Homeland next to the Nebo Ndebele, so that the territory could eventually expand outwards to include these Ndebele and the existing Nebo trust farms on which they lived, thus creating one unified Ndebele unit. The conflict between the two Ndebele groups was already far too advanced to allow for easy acceptance of this plan, however. The proximity between the Nebo Ndebele and those of Mabusa's people who did move to the twelve farms has led, not to a harmonious mixing, but to suspicion, antagonism and even violence. A widespread Nebo Ndebele fear is that, if these twelve farms were to be given to Mabusa and his followers as a Homeland, it would mean, eventually, the loss of the adjacent Mahlangu area to Mabusa's people as well, and the dispossession of Mphezulu's subjects. Such a view reveals that the Nebo Ndebele, or at least their leaders, identify their interests as firmly situated with those of Lebowa, and that the alternative of ultimate unity with KwaNdebele and with the opposing faction is not even a remote possibility for them. Andries Mahlangu, an influential headman in the Nebo group, who was also an MP in the Lebowa Legislative Assembly,<sup>26</sup> made clear the strength of this Ndebele/Lebowa alliance when he called for the return of the twelve farms from the custodianship of the S A Government to that of Lebowa which he claimed was their rightful owner (SAIRR Survey 1979:321).

If the Nebo Ndebele saw the occupation by Mabusa's people of the twelve farms as a threat to their own continued security of tenure within Lebowa, an equal amount of distrust and suspicion was present in the view taken by Mabusa and his supporters of the Nebo Ndebele stance. Their position, as represented by Coetzee, was to mistrust Lebowa's claims of ethnic

---

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Loboli Mahlangu, May 1983.

<sup>26</sup> He was also the founder of the controversial agricultural co-op to be described in Chapter 2.

non-discrimination, and to assume instead that the territory's authorities were merely making use of Mphezulu's allegiance to them as a pretext in appropriating the twelve farms for Pedi use (Coetzee 1980:497). A claim by Simon Skhosana, the chief minister, that Lebowa is "a lion that wants to swallow all the Ndebele" (*ibid.*:498), reflects the same kind of attitude.

In the dispute over these twelve farms, the more abstract debate between those Ndebele who were pro- and those who were anti-independence became merged with, and even enveloped by, a far more immediate contest for a real, material resource. The bitterness of the dispute acquired its most tragic expression when Andries Mahlangu, the Lebowa MP mentioned above, was shot dead by four hired gunmen at his home on Goedgedacht, near Morotse, on January 25, 1981. An extremely forceful local leader, and seen by some as far more influential than the chief Mphezulu, Andries had been among other things a very outspoken opponent of the incorporation into KwaNdebele of the Mahlangu area, of the giving of the twelve farms to KwaNdebele, and, indeed, of the whole idea of Kwandebele independence. Only three years later were legal proceedings instigated against Piet Ntuli, the KwaNdebele minister of the Interior, for the murder of Andries.<sup>27</sup> The trial ended in the acquittal of the accused.

Since Andries' death, the question of the twelve farms, although still a cause of concern to both sides in the clash, has died down somewhat, having been eclipsed in importance by another land dispute - that over Moutse.

#### *Developments since 1986*

Early in 1986 conflict erupted after the Moutse area of Lebowa, inhabited by both Ndebele and Pedi people, was incorporated as part of KwaNdebele

---

<sup>27</sup> Rand Daily Mail Extra, 2/8/84.

on 31 December 1985. This was the second area of land which had been promised to the Homeland by the S A Government as what most observers interpreted as a bribe to take independence. Since 1980, when the area was first excised from Lebowa and placed temporarily under the administration of the Department of Co-operation and Development, Moutse residents had experienced uncertainty about the area's future. The final outbreak of violence - mostly between Pedi residents of Moutse and members of KwaNdebele's notorious *Mbokotho* vigilante groups - left a number of dead and saw the detention of a Moutse M P in the Lebowa Legislative Assembly. Among other protests, a legal action was instituted and Lebowa broke off diplomatic relations with South Africa. A number of Pedi residents moved away, reluctant to submit themselves to the notoriously oppressive regime of KwaNdebele's leaders. And Ndebele residents who had previously lived peacefully with their Pedi neighbours moved away too, fearing reprisals from the Pedi population for the violent acts perpetrated by *Mbokotho*<sup>28</sup>

In Moutse district, as in Morotse village, Pedi and Ndebele people had been living together peacefully. Although tensions in Morotse never developed to anything like the same extent that they did in Moutse, they were similar in having been engendered by an allocation of scarce resources along strictly ethnic lines which was imposed from outside the community by the policies of *Apartheid*.

As the date scheduled for KwaNdebele's independence - December 1986 - drew nearer, opposition to this scheme from within the ranks of the area's residents grew increasingly emphatic. Members of the royal family, who initially had accepted the idea of an Ndebele ethnic unit, by now had joined the popular call to scrap independence. The *Mbokotho* groups, under the patronage of Skhosana the Chief Minister and Ntuli the Minister of the Interior, intensified their violent campaign to silence, intimidate

---

<sup>28</sup> Rand Daily Mail 18/7/83; Financial Mail 24/1/86 and 28/2/86.

or eradicate dissenters. What followed was virtually a civil war in which roughly 160 people were killed. Finally however, in the face of this massive popular revolt, the KwaNdebele Legislative Assembly rejected independence for the Homeland at a meeting on 12 August 1986. At the same meeting, *Mbokotho* was outlawed. The open expression of this widespread opposition in the Legislative Assembly was interpreted by some as being due to the death, two weeks before, of Ntuli in a car bomb explosion. Although the explosion's perpetrators were never discovered or brought to trial, it has been suggested that agents of the S A Government may have been responsible, as Ntuli's excesses were an embarrassment to it and were hindering progress towards KwaNdebele independence.<sup>29</sup>

These events demonstrated that, whatever the initial motivation for accepting Pretoria-style independence by the Ndebele royals and elites, opposition from common people, largely prompted by the excesses of Ntuli and the *Mbokotho*, became a significant force which swept even royals along in its wake. But this victory of popular opinion was not to last for long. After Skhosana died unexpectedly of diabetes, the succession of George Majozi Mahlangu to the position of Chief Minister saw a renewal of plans to accept independence, and a resumption of the campaign to root out opposition to these plans. *Mbokotho* gangs began their reign of terror again, attacking even the royal kraal of Mabusa Mahlangu, and causing him and his son and heir Cornelius Mahlangu to flee. Other sons of the chief, along with scores of other opponents to independence, were detained. Presently, violent strife in the area continues, and it seems probable that its rulers will continue their ruthless campaign to procure independence at any price.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> The Sunday Star 3/8/86; The Star 13/8/86; The Financial Mail 15/8/86; The Weekly Mail 15/8/86.

<sup>30</sup> City Press 17/5/87



It is against the background of these events in KwaNdebele that the situation of the Nebo Ndebele of Lebowa, and specifically those of Morotse, must be understood. Although much of the conflict recounted here had not occurred by the time of my fieldwork in 1983, KwaNdebele was already experiencing massive overcrowding and inadequacy of resources. Being aware of these things, most of the Ndebele of Morotse village and environs were firmly committed to remaining in Lebowa, where some of them at least had land and established social networks. On the other hand, via a complex set of processes to be described in Chapter 5, some of them had begun to feel threatened within the multi-ethnic context of Lebowa, and had actually moved to KwaNdebele from the Pedi reserve. It is to the Pedi and Ndebele residents of Morotse village, and to an incident in which ethnic divisions became manifest, that we now turn.

## Chapter 2: From co-operation to "Co-operative"

In early autumn after harvest the plotholders of Morotse thresh the maize from their fields. Gathering early every morning to await the arrival of the tractor and threshing machine from the Co-op, they then work till sunset: the women pouring the ripe cobs into the machine, and the few men weighing the sacks of threshed grain and loading them onto the truck. The Co-op officials, after taking a roll-call at the end of the day, drive the tractor back to the Co-op. Here the sacks of maize are stored, awaiting their eventual delivery to the plotholders, whose debts to the Co-op must first be calculated, and then subtracted from the total yield of each one.

On the morning of June 20th, 1983, after threshing had already been in progress for about two weeks, the tractor arrived as usual. But on this day the driver found the group of plotholders waiting for him at the gate. They blocked his way and told him to take the machine back to the Co-op, for they intended to do no more work until those whose fields were already completed had had their sacks of mealies delivered to them. After driving to the village to consult a respected member of the community who advised him, regretfully, to comply with the farmers' wishes if he wished to avoid serious trouble, he returned to the Co-op.

This had grown out of the events of the previous day, when plotholders had complained with mounting vehemence about not having yet received their mealies. In response to these complaints, the Co-op officials had invited these people to the office to collect their accounts, after which - they promised - the sacks would be delivered. But this attempt at negotiation had increased the farmers' anger rather than defusing it.

Incensed by the hopeless extent of the debt of which each one's account showed proof, and by the apparent impossibility of ever repaying this debt, they had moved towards the office, shouting threats and demanding their sacks of maize. Members of the Lebowa police force were standing by to disperse the crowd. The farmers' unwillingness to compromise, however, was clear from the incident of the following day in which the tractor was turned back from the fields.

Only on Monday the 22nd, two days after the tractor incident, were the plottolders finally persuaded to accept a kind of compromise. The chief arrived with several Co-op officials. He chastised the farmers, invoking their loyalty to him, and to the village headman against whom much of their anger had been directed during the incident. He also, however, apologised for not having been present to ensure that people received their mealies immediately after threshing, and promised them that he would arrange this in future. They, in turn, agreed to return to the fields. The following day threshing proceeded as normal. The burning question of debt remained unanswered. It, and many other questions and complaints about the Co-op, once again became topics to be discussed and grumbled about only between friends and relatives, and possibly to re-emerge in future near-violent incidents.

All the people in the village with ploughing land have, since 1980, been automatic members of the Co-op. As can be seen from the account above, this body functions in an extremely autocratic way, with decisions about farming made from above and issued to plottolders in the form of instructions. The officials who issue these instructions include the agricultural extension officer who has been drawn very closely into the operation of the Co-op, some local Lebowa government employees, and a number of white representatives of the South African Government-linked funding body. The Co-op's "members", as will be shown more fully in a description of its functioning later in the chapter, thus have little or no influence on its operation.

To understand these people's strong feelings about the way in which their agricultural activities are presently organised, and their powerlessness to act on these feelings in any other way than through sporadic outbursts like the one described above, it is necessary to look at the functioning of this Co-op which now so strictly controls the use of their rural resources. The effects of this institution can only be understood, in turn, against the background of a knowledge of their past experience of farming.

*The subsistence farmers of Morotse*

As has been recounted in chapter 1, most of Morotse's residents moved to the area from the white farms where they had been tenants. It was those who came during the period 1930-1960 that arrived early enough to establish their rights to land for ploughing, while those who came since the late 1960s were able to acquire only residential stands. The landholding group comprises about 30% of the population. The people in this group all have compulsory Co-op membership, and almost all were involved in the tractor-stopping incident. The present chapter is concerned primarily with this landholding minority, but it will also examine, as a subsidiary theme, some of the relationships that exist between these farmers and the continually growing majority of landless people.

For those who do have farming land there have been many changes in the practice of agriculture since they first came to the area. The most recent and most substantial of these was the formation in 1979 of the Co-op, its introduction having, in part, been prompted by the recent implementation of Betterment planning, with its recurrent partitioning and reallocation of land.

Of Morotse's present inhabitants, the very earliest were, themselves, tenants on the land of the whites who owned the group of farms until these were bought by the Trust. They were soon joined by people who had been working on white farms further south under gradually more restrictive

conditions, and who had moved to the area seeking a living situation with fewer constraints. In return for the rent they paid, these people were allotted sizeable portions of land on which to do their own ploughing: one family claims to have used 16 morgen on different parts of the farm, while another informant, making a sweeping gesture, said "Before, the place was open. We could plough wherever we liked". The amount of land to which each household had access was certainly big enough to sustain the production of a subsistence livelihood - maize, sorghum, beans and other vegetables - plus a surplus of wheat which was sold at white markets in nearby towns like Stofberg and Middelburg. At the same time as engaging in peasant cultivation, most families had members who were working as migrant labourers. This was generally "target" migrancy, aimed at earning money for taxes or for the ceremonial gifts associated with weddings, and was usually abandoned after marriage. The fact that many Morotse residents were involved in migrant labour from even before they came to these Trust farms means that the stereotyped view of transition from successful peasantry to proletariat is too crude. Nevertheless, the amount of land available did, at first, allow for a reasonably successful agricultural enterprise, which was to be undermined as the Betterment planners made successive moves to limit plot sizes.

These government planners - known locally as the "Trust" - began their work in the mid-1950s. First they surveyed the land and decided which was suitable for ploughing, grazing and residence respectively. This official specification of residential areas involved some relocation of people from homesteads scattered on different parts of the farm, but a large number of families remained where they were, being required to do no more than formalise the boundaries of their residential sites in accordance with the grid plan imposed on the village by the planners. The effects of Betterment relocation in this case, then, were not nearly as far-reaching as those documented by de Wet and McAllister (1983) in the Eastern Cape, where communities of long-established and previously

widely-scattered homesteads were forced to resettle in centralised villages.

What did have fundamental effects, however, was the reduction of each household's ploughing plot to four morgen.<sup>1</sup> This made some land available for new settlers: ex-labour tenants who were continuing to arrive at a rate that increased steadily over the next ten years. At the end of this period, in the mid-1960s, there was a replanning of the area to provide land for the latest arrivals, leaving each household with a ploughing plot of three morgen in size. For those who arrived after the beginning of the 1970s, there was no more ploughing land to be had.

As has been noted by Yawitch (1981), Betterment planning as a Government policy arose out of the Tomlinson Commission's proposal to create a class of viable farmers in the African reserves. It never achieved this aim, however, for in the areas where it was not abandoned due to fierce popular resistance, it became a compromise between attempting to facilitate a rational, planned agriculture and - more urgently - having to house the Homeland population whose continual increase was being ensured by various types of population resettlement. The case of the Trust farms in question demonstrates this process very neatly. The official planning report for the area specifies that the economic unit for one household using a mixed farming economy should be eight morgen of dryland for ploughing.<sup>2</sup> It is the same report which details the division of the ploughing land into plots of only half this recommended size, and the further curtailment of these plots by one morgen each followed a few years later.<sup>3</sup> These

---

<sup>1</sup> The earlier planning reports measure field sizes in morgen, whereas recent agricultural and Co-op documents use the more modern hectares. One morgen is the equivalent of .83 hectares.

<sup>2</sup> According to this report, such a household should also have 11 large stock units, each requiring four and a half morgen of grazing land. A household subsisting from dryland farming alone, claims the local agricultural extension officer, would need 25-30 morgen of land.

<sup>3</sup> Grazing resources at this stage were still adequate, being well within the planning report's specifications, but by 1982 a new report

planning decisions were clearly made as a response to the population increase rather than to promote better farming.

The effects on farming of this subdivision of land were, predictably, that yields dropped and fewer kinds of crops could be grown. One informant claimed that it was straight after the "Trust" arrived to demarcate her fields that her husband first went to work in town, and although it would be facile to claim that planning heralded the collapse of subsistence farming for all households in the area, it certainly seems that, for most, it changed the role of farming from a primary to a supplementary one.

It was in response to this crisis in food production that the influential headman and MP Andries Mahlangu<sup>4</sup> and the local agricultural extension officer started in 1974 a ploughing project, which was the predecessor to the Co-op. With very limited resources at first, but aided by funds from the Lebowa Government, the project's 56 initial members clubbed together to buy fertiliser and to buy or hire other equipment. The worth of this enterprise, according to its agricultural officer co-founder Mr Sithole, was proved by the yield of the first harvest: an average of nine and a half bags of maize per morgen, as against the planning report's estimated average yield for the area of three and a half bags. The project, claims Mr Sithole, was so successful at rehabilitating people's exhausted and overworked plots that by 1978 there was a flood of applications from other plottolders wishing to become members. The project's MP co-founder applied to the Lebowa Development Corporation for finance to enable the scheme's expansion. The money was lent, and the Ndebele Co-operative, formed in 1979 to replace the project, took over its running in 1980. With the money, expensive tractors were bought, the services

---

indicated that there were only about three morgen of grazing land per large stock unit.

<sup>4</sup> See also pp57-8 for accounts of Andries Mahlangu's activities.

of full-time tractor-drivers were engaged, and in 1981 a combine harvester was hired to speed up the process of harvesting the crops. The style of farming, then, was becoming gradually more capital-intensive.

There is no doubt that this Co-op has caused a dramatic improvement in the productivity of Morotse farmers' fields. In the years between 1981 and 1983, for example, the harvests were well in excess of those produced in neighbouring areas. The attitude of most plottolders towards the organisation, however, is one of suspicion and antagonism, sometimes erupting into outright aggression, as happened in the incident described earlier. Co-op officials have a number of explanations for this. For the first few years of its existence proper accounts were not kept at the Co-op and plottolders' debts were not deducted from their total yields. This, say the officials, gave plottolders unrealistic expectations for subsequent years, and has made them resentful about the debts incurred. Another explanation proffered by these officials is that plottolders' antagonism to the Co-op is proof of their backwardness. Their stubborn refusal to appreciate the efforts being made in their own interests is attributed to "their culture" and "their beliefs". This assessment of the situation shares much with the view of writers in the tradition of Redfield and Foster who see peasants as having a conservatism and obstructiveness to change that is inherent in their culture (Hutton and Cohen 1975). It is also reminiscent of the outlook of many rural development agencies which see themselves as having to motivate rural people who are

accused of being the obstacle to their own development, or unable to grasp the benefits of development until exposed to persuasion that it is, indeed, in their interests (Heyer *et al* 1981:4)

A detailed look at the many changes wrought by the Co-op's introduction - changes more far-reaching and fundamental than the obvious one of an increase in the yield of maize from the land - reveals that the reasons for the apparent conservatism of Morotse's landholders are complex, and



cannot be sought on the level of economic rationality alone, even though economic considerations do, themselves, play an important part in shaping this antagonism towards the Co-op.

Among these changes, the most apparent are those concerned with agriculture itself, and the social relationships it involves.

### *Ploughing*

Previously, some plowholders had ploughed using their own oxen or tractors. Others, having no implements or draught animals of their own, had relied on fellow-villagers to do the work for them. Immediately prior to the introduction of the Co-op, this was a service done in return for cash, but in an earlier period of Morotse's history it had been a form of assistance performed without reward, at least in material terms. A similar practice had been current in the Pedi heartland (Monnig 1967:160) and, as in Morotse, this type of co-operation was transformed into a cash service. It became common for families with absent migrants to hire the services of a ploughman with his team of oxen and plough: equipment which was usually purchased with the proceeds of migrancy, and which enabled its owner - known locally as *mosalagae* (stay-at-home) to retire to the countryside and earn an adequate living there (Sansom 1970:192-3; 1974:169).

Setting aside for the moment the phenomenon of these rural entrepreneurs, and looking at why it is that some households could do their own ploughing while others could not, one must appreciate two factors. One is the presence - or absence due to migrancy - of able-bodied men, and the other is whether or not the household owned agricultural equipment. The latter of these factors, in Morotse, is linked to the conditions under which its villagers used to live as labour tenants, and to their different reasons for leaving the white farms. It is a case which differs sig-

nificantly, therefore, from that of the heartland communities described by Monnig and Sansom.

In Chapter 1 it is recounted how some of the village's present inhabitants arrived early, having decided independently of external constraints to leave their labour tenancies in order to seek for a more autonomous living situation. They left their farms at a time before the restrictions on labour tenants were particularly arduous, and this meant, among other things, that few if any limitations had been placed on the number of stock they were allowed to keep. When they moved to Morotse, then, many brought considerable numbers of cattle with them, and this was facilitated by the fact that most had already been living fairly close by. The chiefly Madihlaba family had 50 head of cattle when they came to the area in 1939 from Buffelsvallei about 15 kilometers away; and the five sons of the household used these to plough their father's, and later their own, fields. The Masilos, who had arrived from the same area some years beforehand, had ten cattle to start with, and these bred until the family owned 30. Although Swartbooi Masilo at first migrated seasonally to work on the roads, his family later earned enough money through the sale of their produce to buy their own plough, and he became a permanent country-dweller.

In contrast, the people who arrived between about 1950 and 1965 had, in most cases, remained as labour tenants until their eviction by the farm owner. Often, this eviction was due to their children's refusal to fulfil the labour requirements of the tenancy. By the time they left the farms, limitations on stock had become stringent. Many informants from this category had not been allowed to own any cattle at all, and even for those who did possess a few animals, the farms from which they trekked were often so far-flung (in districts such as Lydenburg, Belfast, and Carolina) that instead of bringing these cattle with them, they sold them before leaving. For these people, mostly Ndebele-speakers, there were

still dryland plots to be had if they arrived before the late 1960s, but they had no draught animals with which to plough.

Voli Mtshweni belongs to one such family. With her husband, children, and stepchildren, she came to the area in 1960, having been evicted from the farm Renosterhoek because the children refused to work there. Since they had brought no stock, and owned no farming equipment, they worked their new fields for the first year with a plough and span of oxen hired from Mazimgele Kabini, who had been living in the area for many years. In subsequent years they paid Kleinbooi Skhosana to do their ploughing with his tractor. By the time the Co-op was introduced, many of the plotholders who had no oxen or implements of their own were hiring Skhosana.

Skhosana is a unique figure in the area. Unlike the other latecomers described above, who were evicted from their farms and arrived with next to nothing, he brought several tractors and an array of ploughing and weeding machinery with him when he came in 1967. For years he had been running the farm Mooifontein for its white owner on a crop-sharing basis, and from the proceeds of this enterprise he had gradually built up a stock of his own farming equipment. He had a reputation for being the best ploughman in the village, but a number of other people (at least one through his encouragement) were also working other plotholders' fields in return for payments in cash, having bought themselves tractors and ploughs with the proceeds of migrant labour.

It seems that these tractor-owners soon took over as professional ploughmen from their humbler counterparts who worked with teams of oxen. This left the latter to use their equipment only for the ploughing of their own fields. Local links between a stock owner and a few neighbours needing someone to plough for them were transformed into cross-village links between the mass of plotholders, and the very few owners of tractors.

When the Co-op took over all ploughing with its sophisticated equipment, the effects varied for these different sets of people. For the tractor-owners, it meant the effective end of their country-based cash earnings: this was true for all except Skhosana, whom the Co-op contracted to plough certain blocks of fields for them. For those owning oxen and their own ploughs, who been trying to use these resources in maintaining a close approximation to the self-sufficiency of earlier years, it meant that the ploughing equipment which they owned became redundant. For the poorer plowholders, on the other hand, it signified a kind of levelling of opportunity, even if only in the sense that it reduced to the same level as themselves the farmers who had previously enjoyed the advantage of owning their own equipment.

#### *Recruitment of Labour*

Now, this year, they say we owe money; but why did they not tell us before? Why do they only tell us now? We also have to pay the children that we hire, because you can't work alone, you won't finish in time.

This statement by a Morotse woman neatly summarises some present realities about the relationships involved in agriculture. Relationships of reciprocity between villagers which were actualised, at times of intensive work, in *matsema* or work parties have largely been replaced by contractual relationships. It may not be only the Co-op that has effected this change, but the mention of time constraints in the quotation above indicates that the new organisation has had an important role in this regard. Before examining this aspect in detail, it is necessary first to look at how work parties once functioned in this village, and to draw on some comparative material in examining their role.

As Kuckertz (1984) notes, much of the ethnographic literature on traditional South African societies gives a picture of work parties as occasions of "mutual helpfulness", serving to unite separate households or

kin-clusters into a broader community of common purpose. Inherent in this general view is that the work party system ensured an equality of access to labour amongst a community's members, with the exception, perhaps, of the chief. Sansom (1974a:154-7) elaborates on the inherent egalitarianism of grain production using work parties.<sup>5</sup> He postulates that a man wanting to grow more grain than his fellows would be prevented from doing so by being unable to recruit them as labourers for extra periods of ploughing or planting. Even if, as an incentive, he provided more beer and meat than others were able to, this would be inadequate to tempt people from their own fields at the peak work period. When this period ended, freeing landholders for possible extra work, a chiefly prohibition on the tilling of any more, fresh land served to further prevent the emergence of differentiation based on grain-growing.

This view is disputed by Webster (1987) who argues on the basis of his observations of subsistence producers among the Thembe Tonga of Northern Natal. Here, a social differentiation between grain cultivators does occur, and becomes progressively greater season after season. Those whose food stocks are exhausted before the onset of ploughing will - purely in search of nourishment - attend work parties called by those who have a large remaining store of grain and meat. As a result, the former have to delay their ploughing until other work parties are over, by which time they may have missed the early rains. In addition, lacking grain to make beer, and therefore in no position to call work parties, they must plough their fields with household labour alone. In this way, poorer cultivators may become locked into a cycle of decreasing yields, while richer ones can consolidate their wealth year after year. That there was a similar situation in Morotse prior to, or during, the introduction of hired labour, was suggested by the agricultural extension officer:

---

<sup>5</sup> He contrasts this egalitarianism with the possibilities provided by cattle-keeping for storing wealth and lending capital with interest.

In the past they used to think, 'Have we got enough meat, have we got enough beer, to pay those who will come to work?' Usually people used to find out whether this man has reserved a lot of liquor, and if not they'll say, 'Oh, there is nothing there'. Only those few who were interested would come and help.

This evidence suggests that the work party system - even in heartland communities - contained possibilities for reinforcing social differentiation. In a Trust farm community such as that of Morotse, there were other factors, as well, which made for an unevenness in the practice of labour recruitment.

Firstly, a number of the Pedi-speakers who arrived in this area early on were strong adherents of Christianity. This was a commitment that manifested itself not only in belief and ritual, but in every aspect of a person's social relationships as well. It meant, in the sphere of agricultural work, a disdain for the use of the work party, which was the means currently being employed to procure labour by other, traditionalist, families who had arrived in the area. In the case of Jacobs Ralebetse, for example, this disapproval was especially strong since he was the only man in his family to have espoused the Christian faith. At ploughing time, when his father, uncles, brothers and cousins and their families got together with neighbours to drink beer and then work on each others' fields, Jacobs would inspan his own team of oxen and set off for the fields accompanied by only his wife and children, who still recall with a half-amused incredulity how hard and strictly he used to work them there. He resembles the community's other converts to Christianity in that it is through a disapproval of intoxicating drink that he expresses his repugnance for work parties and other traditionalist institutions like the headman's court. It is possible that men like Jacobs were striving for the kind of economic individualism and independence from the claims of extended family mentioned by writers on religious change in Zambia (Long 1968). Given, however, the lack of documentary evidence, and the vagueness of people's memories about exact yields, it cannot here be clearly established whether the differences

between the traditionalist and Christian styles in agricultural labour laid the basis for some kind of economic differentiation.

Secondly, it has already been mentioned that the establishment of relationships - co-operative or contractual - between people for the purposes of ploughing was influenced by their different times of arrival in the area. This factor must be considered, too, when looking at work parties in Morotse. A statement from Sara Kabeni who came in 1960 indicates that, although her family had relied on the labour of work parties when cultivating their fields on the white farm where they lived before, they could no longer do so after coming to Morotse and getting a plot in the area. According to a woman in a similar position, "If you made a party, you would get many to drink, but only two to work. People only helped you if they liked you". The people who "liked" each other were the early arrivals from the nearby farms, already bound together by a common history on these farms. They were linked by kinship and marriage ties, allegiance to the same holders of traditional authority, and a tradition of reciprocal co-operation in agricultural work. Later arrivals from far away, not integrated into this community, had to fall back on immediate family, or hired labourers, to work on their new fields.

This pattern of paying helpers, or of being forced to rely on the labour of close family alone, has since become the predominant one for "old" and "new" families alike. Table 1 gives a breakdown of the percentage

Table 1: Use of paid and unpaid labour

| Type of labour               | Households |
|------------------------------|------------|
| Family only                  | 30%        |
| Paid only                    | 20%        |
| Combination of family & paid | 50%        |
| Total                        | 100%       |

of households sampled using these two different types of labour, and those using a combination of both.

The Co-op officials, who take a roll-call to check up on the number of helpers accompanying each plotholder to the fields at peak periods, claim that these helpers are all family members as "tradition" dictates, but such a claim is misleading. Traditional labour requirements, as shown above, were not satisfied by immediate family members alone, but necessitated the concentrated input of the bigger group which could be called together in a work party. To recruit a reasonable number of workers under the present system, a plotholder needs either a cash income or a surplus of maize with which to hire at least a few helpers. Ideally, the amount of cash or produce expended in this way can be reduced by making use of whatever family members are present - as in the "combination" category - but it is unlikely that there will be enough of these members to cope with all the work. This is because a relative, nowadays, will work without remuneration on one's fields only if he or she "eats out of the same pot".

A typical working group in the "family only" category, then, would consist of only two to three people: most typically, a woman and two children; or a woman, her co-resident daughter-in-law, and one child. All the people interviewed in this "family only" category consider themselves to be short of labourers, but are unable to pay for more as they have neither a regular cash income nor the assurance of a grain yield large enough to facilitate payment in kind.<sup>6</sup> The lack of access to cash through migrant remittances thus creates an intensification of intra-family dependence in such households. This extreme dependence can be most clearly

---

<sup>6</sup> Although there are many other variables accounting for differential yields among plotholders, such as soil acidity, proximity to the watercourse, etc., there does appear to be a correlation between the size of a household's yield and the number of labourers working on its fields. Households in the "family only" category thus tend to reap smaller yields.



seen in situations where, for some reason, the system so heavily relied upon ceases to function. Such a case is that of Anna Kabeni, one of whose two daughters-in-law, despite the payment of bridewealth, lived with Anna for only a few months before returning to her own home. For the purposes of harvesting and threshing, this means that Anna has only one helper, her pension being too meagre to allow for the hiring of extra, non-familial help.

The observation that cultivators in Morotse need cash inputs to achieve even the humblest success in farming has a parallel in other studies of Southern African peasant/proletarian populations. Cooper (1981) notes a rural differentiation in Botswana based on the varied extent of investment made by people into farming using town-based cash earnings. Writing of migrants in Lesotho, Murray (1981:87-99) attacks the widely-held belief that migrancy and subsistence farming provide alternative means of making a living in that country, showing instead that "...farm income is partly derived from the investments of migrants' earnings, and households with an income from wage labour are better able to invest than households without such an income" (*ibid.*:87).

Before suggesting in what way the Co-op could be seen as responsible for this change in the system of labour recruitment, one or two details must be noted about the kinds of people who become linked by these new contractual arrangements, and about an interesting morality concerning the type of currency in which it is considered appropriate to pay employees.

Of the plottolders surveyed who pay for all, or some of, the labour on their fields, 22% employ non-co-resident members of their extended families. This practice is seen as a kind of favour to kinsmen, the reasons given being something along the lines of "I asked my daughter to come and help me. She has no fields of her own, so she can grow nothing. She needed the payment". The remaining 68% employ non-relatives; either neighbours and close friends, in which case the contract is seen, again,

as a favour to the employee; or otherwise unknown people - sometimes children - from other parts of the village, who in most cases approach the plottolders and ask to be employed. Whether between kinsmen, friends, or total strangers, these contractual relationships, in almost all cases,<sup>7</sup> have in common the fact that they link together members of the landholding minority and members of the landless majority.<sup>8</sup>

There is an interesting distinction drawn, however, between friends or relatives on the one hand and strangers on the other. This is done not only, as mentioned above, by the perception of the former relationship as a personal one of magnanimity or paternalism, involving favours to people close to one but less fortunate than oneself. The difference is made clear, as well, in terms of the currency in which payment is made. Kinsmen or neighbours who work on one's fields are most often paid in kind, whereas strangers receive their wages in cash. Reckoned in purely economic terms, there appears to be no difference between the two, as the cash wage of R22 for eleven days' work is equivalent to the payment in kind of one bag of mealies given for the same period. Using mealies to pay a friend or family member thus functions to reassert the personal component of a relationship that is otherwise becoming rapidly depersonalised. It is an extension of the ideal of commensality, and an attempt to counteract a tendency, observed in several cases, for co-operating family groups to become smaller and to exclude more and more people.

The functioning of work parties in traditional Pedi - as in other - communities was closely tied into the system of authority, in that

---

<sup>7</sup> In a very few cases, two relatives, both owning land, work for pay on each other's fields. This depends on the Co-op's decision about when different fields are to be harvested, threshed, etc.

<sup>8</sup> The position of these landless people is similar to, but more extreme than, that of the late-arriving plottolders mentioned earlier. As will be shown in Chapter 3, many of them lack not only land but also social support-groups to be relied on in times of emergencies.

commoners could invite parties to begin ploughing and planting only once the chief had performed rituals for the protection of the land and seeds (Monnig 1967:159). The recruitment of labour for agriculture in present-day Morotse, though vastly changed, is even more rigidly bound up with the system of authority. Through a spokesman appointed by the Co-op, this organisation's officials issue instructions to ploholders about when harvesting or threshing is to begin. Farmers must then arrive at the fields on the designated day, accompanied by the requisite number of helpers, whose presence is recorded during a roll-call. By the end of a specified period, work on their camp of fields must be completed, so that the next camp can be begun; and for one household to finish the harvest in a week without extra help would be impossible. Previously, two ploholders could help on each other's adjoining fields, but now both must be present at the same time, each with a set number of helpers. The Co-op's efficient and rationally-made plans are too large-scale and inflexible to be changed in view of longstanding reciprocal arrangements, or of such eventualities as the absence of a crucial household member - for work reasons, perhaps, or because of a funeral in another area - at the time designated by the Co-op for work to begin. Thus, the hiring of labour has now become standard for "old" and "new" families alike.

From this account of directives to ploholders, it can be deduced that few if any decisions about agriculture are in fact made "co-operatively". Although theoretically the ploholders' interests are represented in the organisation's structure, its actual functioning mostly involves central decision-making by a small group of people in authority, and an issuing of instructions by them to the Co-op's "members".

### *Structures of Control*

Diagrams pinned up on the walls in the offices of the Co-op illustrate the interlocking of the various bodies responsible for its running. Mr

Sithole, the extension officer, summarised these rather complex-looking diagrams as follows;

the Tribal Authority is there to give the land, to help their people, the Lebowa Department of Agriculture is there to see that everything is done properly, and the LLM is there to finance the Co-op.<sup>9</sup>

The interaction between these three is structured via various committees. Decisions are made by the Management Committee: a body whose members include representatives from the Lebowa Department of Agriculture and Forestry, and from the South African Government's Department of Co-operation and Development; and which is run by a white employee of the LLM, Mr Fritz. The chief and his chief councillor are *ex officio* members of this committee, along with some local notables chosen by them, such as successful shopkeepers and businessmen in the area. The Functioning Committee then carries out these decisions: it comprises such people as the agricultural extension officer Mr Sithole, and Mr de Jager, an employee of the LLM whose job is to administer and manage the loan given by this company to the Co-op. The role of Mr de Jager and of Mr Fritz the Co-op manager are supposed to be embedded into a complex decision-making process, with checks and counter-checks, in which "the tribe's" interests are allegedly represented by the chief and his councillor. They have, however, more power than is designated them in the official version of the Co-op's structure described above. This power may derive partly from their being the only whites amongst several blacks in a Government-linked organisation. It stems even more, however, from the fact that they represent the company which provides the money for this enterprise.

It is the commanding presence of these men at the Co-op that accounts for some plottolders' perception of their present situation as one of "working for whites", or as being similar to their previous lives "on

---

<sup>9</sup> The LLM (Lebowa Landbou Maatskappy) is a division of the LDC (Lebowa Development Corporation), which was previously controlled by the South African Government but has since been transferred to the Lebowa Government under the Co-op Act of 1980.

the farms" whose system of coercive authority many came to Morotse to escape. Here, they complain, they are even worse off than they were as labour tenants, as they get none of the few perks - food while working, tea, packets of sugar - associated with that rather paternalistic relationship, and they bear the added burden of being forced to pay helpers out of their own pockets.

In addition, their accounts show that most of them are deeply in debt to the Co-op for its capital-intensive inputs to their lands of ploughing and fertiliser (and, in 1981, the use of a very expensive combine harvester). The Co-op's offers to these people to lend them bags of maize in order to tide them over until a better year, is of no comfort to them. As one woman put it, their reply to this offer was

You must give us the sacks, not lend them to us. How will we ever pay back that debt? You will have to come and sell our houses and furniture so that we can pay the debt; otherwise we will owe money till we die.

As an indication, the Co-op's financial report of 1983 shows that the average debt for the 155 members was R238, with some plotholders owing amounts around R300 and one even in debt to the tune of R827.<sup>10</sup>

In summary, there are several sources of grievance underlying the Morotse villagers' antagonism to the Co-op, and giving rise to incidents such as the tractor protest. These include plotholders' enforced dependence on cash to accomplish the harvesting and threshing stages of the agricultural cycle, and the considerable debts they are compelled to incur during the ploughing and field-preparation stages. Both of these problems can, however, be seen to be subsumed within a broader and more fundamental grievance, concerning plotholders' loss of control and autonomy in the running of this important aspect of their lives. More will be said later in the chapter about the way in which Morotse villagers'

---

<sup>10</sup> Document entitled Ndebele Landbou Kooperasie Beperk, Aged Debtor Analysis as at 04/05/83.

subordination to the demands imposed by this Co-op dovetails with their subjection to the chief via the Bantu Authorities system of government. But before addressing this specific issue, some light can be thrown on the more general antagonism to the Co-op by comparing it with other such projects for agricultural development, both in South Africa and elsewhere.

Looking firstly at the narrower South African context, it has been argued that such projects must be viewed as part of an overall and gradual extending of external control over the lives of rural dwellers. In the early phases of this process, the Tomlinson Commission proposed fundamental changes in Homeland agriculture, hoping to promote the emergence of a small class of full-time farmers and to provide alternative livings, not based on the land, for the remainder of the rural black population. It has been documented above how the subsequent implementation of Betterment planning, ostensibly designed to rationalise agriculture in the way Tomlinson had recommended, became in most cases a means for cramming relocated people on to the land. But later developments in Homeland agriculture do appear to have succeeded where Betterment failed, and in some areas the creation of a small group of "progressive farmers" seems to be well under way (James 1983:26-7; Roodt 1984:331; Keenan 1984:324). This has involved extensive dispossession or exclusion from the land of large parts of the rural population, in favour of those few farmers selected to be participants in the schemes concerned. On the Bothashoek irrigation scheme in Lebowa, for example, each farmer had an allotment of about nine hectares and the remainder of the village's inhabitants were left with small dryland plots or no land at all (James 1983:26). The Ditsobola projects of Bophutatswana involved plots of 15 hectares, which it was proposed to increase to 71 hectares (Roodt 1984:331). An example of even more extensive consolidation comes from the villages of Bethanie, Mangwe and Berseba in Bophutatswana, where extensive tribal land, previously cultivated in small plots by the community at large, was developed by the Agricultural Development Corpo-

ration of Bophutatswana (AGRICOR) as a wheat and sunflower project on which 100 hectare farms have been let to a limited number of participants (Keenan 1984:324-5).

It can be seen that the Ndebele Co-operative of Morotse area differs in scale from the kinds of projects described above. Although there was Betterment planning of villagers' land which limited subdivision beyond two and a half hectares and thus excluded latecomers from acquiring plots, the implementation of the project did not involve reconsolidation of these plots or dispossess any of their original holders. And the fact that these plottolders are ideally supposed to be involved, on an everyday basis and with simple tools, in weeding, harvesting and pest control also appears to distinguish them from the farmers on these large schemes. The Morotse project does however resemble its grander-scale counterparts in the use of highly capital-intensive machinery and thus in the fact that substantial debts are incurred (*vide* Roodt 1984:333). And via the process of becoming tied, as users of this expensive equipment and more importantly as debtors, to organisations like the government Development Corporations, Morotse's plottolders have become subject to the same kinds of gradually penetrating external controls on the use of their land. Villagers themselves certainly perceive the Co-op as yet another phase in the intrusion of the government into their lives, as is shown by their use of the same word to refer to the Co-op - "Trust" - as they used to describe the government planners who earlier subdivided their fields.

Although this Co-op has not involved direct expropriation or dispossession of subsistence agriculturalists from their lands as the grander-scale schemes described above have done, it is possible that its continuation over a number of years could result in such extensive indebtedness by villagers that they may be forced to abandon their plots and the enterprise of farming altogether. The long-term effects of this kind of project, then, could be an indirect expropriation by debt and

eventually an adoption of the same style as is used in the larger projects, with the attempted encouragement of full-time, "progressive" farmers.

Such agricultural projects and schemes are widespread in contemporary South Africa, but their effects have not been thoroughly documented. Analyses more often examine their implications for the overall development of monopoly capitalism than for the lives of the cultivators involved (*vide* Keenan 1984). To find comparative material of this kind, it is necessary to look further afield to other parts of Africa, where the work of such writers as Williams on Nigeria and Tanzania (1976) and Barnett on the Sudan (1977) provides useful detail.

Barnett analyses the Gezira scheme, a massive irrigation development situated between the two branches of the Nile and designed to produce cotton for export. Tenants' participation in the scheme linked them to the world capitalist economy, and although their involvement was conceptualised as a contractual, commercial partnership between equals, it contained in reality a number of imbalances. In effect, Barnett claims, the scheme provided a way of spreading the risks to its grassroots participants while denying them a say in decision making or in the formulation of policy (1977:94).

Thus, for example, decisions taken at a higher level specified that the labour for each plot will be provided by its tenant, from the ranks of his family members. Management decisions of this kind became, at a lower level, constraints upon the tenant, whose production was then organised according to these considerations rather than being directed either by primarily profit-maximising motives or in terms of his other social obligations and needs (*ibid.*:32-3). In the example cited here, management's expectation of family labour was unrealistic, since the very structure of the family had changed - in accordance with the system of individual tenure - from an extended agnatic type with access to the



labour of communal work groups to a small, nuclear type isolated from others like it in the enterprise of production (*ibid.*:96-7). And even within these individual families, tenants' access to their sons' labour was free only until these sons turned 18, after which they were paid in cash for this work - another factor not acknowledged by scheme management (*ibid.*:36-8). Under constraints imposed by scheme management, people with access to resources outside their tenancies were best placed to enjoy a purely contractual relationship with those they employed, whereas those dependent on their tenancies alone had to operationalise other relationships and obligations in order to provide the necessary labour (*ibid.*:58).

From this example, one can see some of the profound effects that a scheme initiated to promote agricultural development has had on all aspects of its participants' lives. Barnett summarises these changes thus:

Their role as producer, previously embedded in a multiplex network of social relations, now became separated. Teased out from a dense set of role relations, it now stood alone, defined and controlled by a contract written in a language they did not know and could not read (*ibid.*:94).

That changes of a comparable kind and similar magnitude have been wrought in the lives of Morotse's ploholders by the Co-op is evident from the description given earlier.

Williams documents the failure of development schemes in Africa - both those designed along capitalist lines in Nigeria and the socialist-based *ujamaa* villages in Tanzania. In both cases, he argues, the implementation of development involved an extension of outside control into every aspect of peasant existence, and its vehement rejection by the intended recipients was engendered by "a preference for a way of life which allows them the freedom to manage their own resources" (1976:147). Peasants' decisions about the allocation of land, labour and time, Williams argues, are made in terms of a fundamentally different set of criteria to those - mostly capitalist in quality and scale - used by developers. So, for

instance, peasants tend to finance whatever expenditure is needed from earnings, whereas the developers spend money, for officials' salaries and the general running of the scheme as well as just for things like ploughing, in advance of the sale of the product. Often, the cost of the mechanised equipment imposed by developers is thought by peasants to be too great to justify the returns, especially after the deduction of debts incurred in the process of production (*ibid.*:146-7). These points provide clarity on the resentment of Morotse's farmers about the massive charges levied by the Co-op for ploughing and fertilising.

A further dimension to the loss of control experienced by participants in these schemes is that, whereas peasants organising their own farming have a commitment to their work because they own the product, those involved in development projects often regard these as "government farms", and interpret the subsistence allowances paid to them as low wages (*ibid.*:147). In Morotse a similar attitude prevails, with many plowholders claiming that they once owned fields but that these now belong to the Trust and that the few bags of mealies given them after the deduction of costs, or lent to those whose debt is greater than their total yield, is payment for their labour.<sup>11</sup> To conceive of the land and the product as no longer their own seems not unreasonable in view of the controls extended over production on schemes of this kind. The timing of operations is dictated (Heyer *et al* 1981:7), and in Morotse this means for instance that villagers are forbidden to go to their fields early in the summer and pick green mealies as they used to. It also means that people may not fulfil ritual and other social obligations during periods of the Co-op's peak activity. The type of crop is dictated (Barnett 1977:113), and Morotse's villagers frequently complain that they may no

---

<sup>11</sup> In fact, the land officially belongs to the Government's S A Bantu Trust, and each plowholder pays an annual rent for his fields. Plots very rarely fall vacant, but the theory is that these should be re-allocated to "good, progressive farmers" agreeable to the Co-op's improvements.

longer plant the other foods - pumpkins, beans, *morogo* - which they once cultivated between their rows of mealies to supplement their diet.

It could be argued that, since Barnett and Williams are writing of people who make the major part of their living from cultivation and the sale of produce and who could thus be properly described as peasants, their studies do not bear comparison with my study of Morotse's cultivators who are primarily wage labourers and whose agricultural production provides only a supplement to this source of livelihood. But it appears that the subsidiary status of such people's agricultural endeavour actually makes it even more crucial that they be able to juggle resources carefully and achieve a delicate balance of inputs and outputs in their management of farming. Before the Co-op was introduced, most people were already dependent on cash to pay for ploughing, and in some cases for harvesting and threshing as well, but each plotholding family was in a position to decide how to allocate resources such as cash and family labour in the light of the family's financial standing during that specific agricultural season. Cloete (1985) makes this point about cultivators in the Herschel district of Transkei, some of whom attempt to minimise their cash inputs into farming since it is a supplementary economic activity. In the light of this, the capital-intensive approach of development schemes such as those imposed by the Transkei Development Corporation (TRAKOR) in this district is highly inappropriate. Also resulting from the fact of farming's supplementary status are the elaborate cropping strategies used by these villagers, whose aim is not so much to provide a substantial yield at harvest time as to allow for a year-round supply of green mealies and other vegetables. Such attempts to strategise and to balance resources are overlooked and thus defeated by the grand-scale plans of development schemes.

The overall thrust of Williams' argument about schemes of this kind is that they allow external agencies - the state, aid organisations, or particular interests within the world capitalist economy - to intrude

into peasant activity at the most fundamental level: that of everyday production (1976:149). For the cultivators on the Nigerian, Tanzanian or Sudanese schemes, this control is exercised in order to dictate types and amounts of crops produced for the broader economy. In the case of Morotse, it is a control whose ultimate effects resemble the pattern of government plans to expropriate land from the mass of land users and replace them with a small group of full-time farmers. Seen from the point of view of the Co-op's "members", the project represents the latest and most intrusive step in a long and gradual extension of external control over one aspect after another of their lives. The squeeze on land and rural resources which made entry into wage labour a long-term necessity rather than a discretionary and temporary occurrence were early manifestations of this, and involvement in the life of industry with the constraints of compound life and the urban environment represented further controls. But even these restrictions allowed rural dwellers to retain a degree of independence, at least at the rural pole of their existence.

Sansom demonstrates that, before the introduction of the Bantu Authorities system of government in the Pedi village he studied, the previous style of administration under a Native Commissioner left a kind of space in the political structure. In theory, it was officially designated headmen who filled this lowest level of rural control, but in fact the gap was occupied by informal leaders - the *basalagae* referred to earlier - who derived much of their power from their role of managing the resources and fields of absent migrants. Thus, a degree of political autonomy or selfgovernment at the local level went hand-in-hand with autonomy in agricultural production, since this was controlled by villagers or their deputies (1970:38-43, 53-5).

In Morotse, too, agriculture was a matter of local initiative, with entrepreneurial ploughmen as important figures in the enterprise. And although I have no information on whether these men assumed a leadership role like those described by Sansom, it is certainly true that the in-

trusion of external agencies into agriculture via the Co-op was accompanied by a parallel tightening of political control. In the following section, I will demonstrate how the local chief has been allowed a greater degree of power as incumbent of the officially designated Tribal Authority through the role he plays in the Co-op.

### *The Chief and the Plotolders*

The role of this thesis is not a prescriptive one, and it would be inappropriate here to suggest alternative routes for the Co-op which might have led to a more truly "co-operative" spirit on the part of its participants. The question is of analytic interest, however, as its answer is bound up with a more general consideration of authority structures in the community, most notably with an examination of the chief's power. The extension officer suggested that, had the Co-op continued to operate on a small scale as it had before, with a large degree of responsibility for control and decision-making by the plotolders themselves, it might have been more successful. As it is, the official version of the Co-op's present structure is that the interests of "the tribe" are represented by the chief, Jack Mahlangu, and his councillor: that "the Tribal Authority is there ... to help their people".

The chief's role in various aspects of the Co-op's running has been mentioned above. He and his councillor sit on the decision-making Management Committee; he chooses other committee-members; he reallocates plots of land which fall vacant to people who are thought likely to be "good farmers". Theoretically, his power is so extensive that he has final veto on all decisions taken at the Co-op. It has already been noted, however, that there is some discrepancy between the official structure of the Co-op and the way it actually operates, and that the white representatives of the LLM exercise power greater than the authority of their official position. From conversations with one of these

men, Mr de Jager, and observations of the Co-op's daily running, it is clear that the chief is usually dissuaded by Mr de Jager from taking decisions which the latter regards as irrational or agriculturally unsound. De Jager leaves unquestioned, however, certain chiefly decisions, especially those pertaining not to the project in general but to matters which have a bearing on the chief's own, or his family's or certain friends', private gain. This fine personal balance between the two men is worked out through their jocular and boisterously humorous relationship. It is weighted, however, by the fact that the Mr de Jager is a shrewd and businesslike person with considerable agricultural expertise, whose authority is reinforced, as already mentioned, by his being white in a Government-linked organisation, and by the fact that he represents and protects the interests of the organisation's financial backers. The chief, on the other hand, is thought of in some quarters as a man who drinks too much and who uses the little power allotted him by the Bantu Authorities Act for corrupt ends. It might not be extreme, then, to describe this as a situation in which the chief is being indulged by being allowed to pursue his own private gain inside the structures provided by the Co-op. In return for this limited realm within which he can play the despot, he speaks on behalf of the Co-op to the residents of Morotse and neighbouring villages. His instructions are listened to by some villagers more readily than others, for reasons to be explored below. Overall, it seems that rather than being a representative of villagers' interests in the Co-op the chief could be more accurately described as a spokesman for Co-op interests in the sphere of village life.

In substantiating the claim made above about the chief's tendency to pursue his private gain, it is impossible to avoid drawing on reports made by villagers, some of which may be exaggerated or even unsubstantiated. What is important about these reports, however, is that they demonstrate the antipathy of at least a part of the community to this chief, and their willingness to believe him capable of corruption and selfish actions.

According to de Jager, the chief, who has extensive fields of his own, has in the past appropriated the entire crop grown on them for himself, refusing to pay his debts to the Co-op. In addition, he sends his wives before harvest to pick green mealies from his fields. Neither of these irregularities would be permitted an ordinary plotholder, and although de Jager claims he is trying to persuade the chief to abide by the rules, and thereby set a good example to his people, it is probable that these misdemeanours of Mahlangu's will continue to be condoned. Similar is the chief's behaviour in respect of grazing land for his cattle. Part of the grand plan for the area was to create a nature reserve, to which end one of the Trust farms was fenced with game fencing and several families were moved from their homes on the farm. The chief, observing the good quality of the grazing land on the farm in question, insisted on being allowed to graze his own cattle there along with the antelope that had been imported. Again, de Jager's reaction is one of amused resignation: he proposes to circumvent the problem by fencing off an area on the edge of the reserve especially for Mahlangu's cattle.

Allegations made by villagers about the chief in his role as Co-op authority include the following: he has appropriated Co-op funds for his own use; he has favoured kinsmen by reserving for them important paid positions within the Co-op; he and his family members in the Co-op have given plotholders' sacks of grain to shopkeeper-friends to sell; he favours friends, relatives and fellow-Ndebele by allocating fields to them when they fall vacant, or by giving them larger fields and residential stands than are given to other residents.<sup>12</sup> Such allegations exist against a wider backdrop of complaints about the chief's more

---

<sup>12</sup> Subsequent to my fieldwork in this area, an enquiry into the Co-op was initiated by the Transvaal Rural Action Committee of the Black Sash when they were approached for help by some of Morotse's plotholders. Although no findings have been officially made known, some of the hearings at this enquiry suggest that the chief was, indeed, using his position in the Co-op in order to benefit financially and in order to dispense patronage to his henchmen and certain subjects. See Appendix I.

general abuse of his authority, such as his misappropriation of school funds, his favouring of Ndebele-speakers when planning the siting of facilities such as schools and reservoirs, and so on.

The suggestion that this chief's role is more like that of Co-op spokesman than that of community representative is borne out if one examines certain disciplinary measures employed by the Co-op in whose execution the chief is, to a greater or lesser extent, involved. Firstly, he is alleged to have withheld work-seekers' stamps from villagers who have failed to pay the annual Co-op subscription of R10: a payment compulsory for landless people and plottolders alike since, it is claimed, the Co-op provides benefits to the community as a whole. Another sphere of punitive action in which the chief might come to play a part concerns his role in allocating land. It was mentioned in the section on recruitment of labour that Co-op officials keep careful records of the number of helpers accompanying each plotholder to the fields. A note is made, as well, of whether each plotholder has bought and used pesticides, and of the amount of time he or she has spent on weeding. Until now, this information has been used only in enabling Co-op officials to decide whether or not to grant loans of maize to tide particular "good" farmers over years in which they are deeply in debt. It is proposed, however, to make future decisions about possible confiscation and reallocation of plots on the basis of these records of each individual plotholder's performance. Were this proposal ever to be carried out, it would be the chief who, nominally at least, would have to sanction such decisions, since he is responsible for the allocation of land. For the moment, however, the plan remains unrealised, since officials fear the plotholders' reactions.

Another thing which concerns the chief, this time as one of several members on the Management Committee, is the meting out of a disciplinary measure to plotholders who have used an unusual form of informal resistance. During harvest time in 1983 Bafedi Ralebetse and her daughter Paina, who were particularly upset about the rumour that the Co-op would



be taking all the maize from the harvest in payment for debts incurred, were careful while harvesting their crop to leave behind a substantial number of cobs on the maize-plant stalks. This meant that at the end of the week's harvesting period they not only had a pile of mealies to be threshed by and taken off to the Co-op, but also some mealies left behind in their field. When they returned secretly in the evening to collect these remaining cobs, they were spotted by someone who informed on them. The two women were then summonsed to the Co-op, where they were severely reprimanded and fined twelve of their total yield of 89 bags of maize.

At times, it is said, the chief uses the Co-op as a forum within which to exercise his authority governing other matters. One Morotse resident complained that Mahlangu had administered a punishment at the Co-op in a case that should clearly have been brought to trial before the chief's court, with evidence heard before the whole council in the time-honoured way. Instead the man, whose pig had trespassed onto the field of a neighbouring village's headman, and who had then become involved in a fight with the headman, was taken to the Co-op where he was bound hand and foot and whipped by the chief without any intervention on the part of the council.

#### *The Ethnic Dimension*

Accounts such as these explain a local observer's description of this chief as "despotic". His assessment is shared by at least some of the plottolders in Morotse, as is demonstrated by the abovementioned allegations secretly made against Mahlangu. But this opposition to the chief is not universal in the village, and tends rather to correlate with ethnic group membership. Broadly, it was Ndebele plottolders who seem to have responded to the chief's appeal after the tractor incident, thus creating a split in the potentially united ranks of plottolders and so ultimately defusing their protest.

In the days subsequent to the meeting with the chief described in the first few pages of this chapter, informants strongly emphasised the role played by ethnicity throughout the whole episode. Most Ndebele said that it was Pedi who were at the forefront of the action: "*die Makatese is woes*" (the Pedi are furious). The Ndebele village headman, on the other hand, stated that it was both Pedi and Ndebele who were shouting and swearing at the extension officer on the day before the tractor incident when plottolders went to the Co-op to collect their accounts: "I was so ashamed when even the people with fields in the big camp went along with the ones in the small camp and swore at Sithole".<sup>13</sup> And Pedi informants agreed with this view that there was equal antagonism being shown by members of both ethnic groups. According to these informants, it was only after the chief's intervention that the united opposition to the Co-op was defused by Ndebele capitulation to their leader's demands. One Pedi expressed his frustration at Ndebele deference to royal authority thus - "they just clap their hands and say 'Mahlangu' when he speaks".

Various manifestations of ethnicity will be explored in the two following chapters, and in the last chapter, in the context of a review of the literature on ethnicity, I will attempt to answer the question of why Ndebele plottolders in Morotse were so ready to listen to their chief's appeal.

---

<sup>13</sup> The fields in the "big camp", above the road, are mostly held by Ndebele, and those in the "small camp", below the road, by Pedi. The headman is here expressing her sense of betrayal that even the Ndebele joined in the demonstration.

### Chapter 3: Household and Family Structure

"I cannot get a pension, so my sons have to pay me money from their work. But they should be working to feed their own families."

It is usual, in the anthropological analysis of any small community, to give close consideration to structures of kinship. In Morotse, such structures are no less crucial than they are in communities organised along more traditional lines. Writers analysing traditional communities, however, tended to choose as their focus the large agnatic groupings whose functions in structuring political, economic and religious life appeared to be crucial. While such writers saw the individual household as a mere subdivision of the basic building block of social life, it is this smaller grouping, the household, which will be the primary unit of analysis in the present study.

As has already been mentioned, the village's inhabitants are mainly reliant on migrant labour for a living, but this reliance is tempered by access to land and networks of support: resources whose availability depends on the length of a family's stay in the area. It is these circumstances, among others to be discussed, which shape the various sizes and kinds of households in the village. In cases such as that of the widow cited at the beginning of the chapter, for instance, large numbers of relatives live and eat together, while at the other end of the spectrum are households with a strictly nuclear form. In all cases, however, the individual household emerges as the significant structure of kinship. In this respect, the present-day inhabitants of Morotse differ fundamentally from their forebears whose thoroughly agnatic social organisation was recorded by ethnographers.

Fourie's description of the Ndebele "grote familie" (1921:103), for instance, is typical of many accounts of the lineage or lineage segment. Its head, the *umnumzana*, is the arbitrator of law, ritual and custom within the group; its organisation of succession is parallel to that in the tribe as a whole; and "the whole structure of the great family is also that of the tribe" (*ibid*:103, translated by Kuper 1978:114). In Monnig's account of the Pedi, the equivalent group - "the most important corporate unit within the tribal community" (1967:218) - is the *kgoro*. Although this unit is not a unilineal kinship group, and is distinct from the "lineage" (Monnig's translation of *leloko*), it usually originates as an agnatic group, and often remains essentially agnatic in character.

Without looking in detail at the body of recent work which has questioned whether the idea of the "lineage" or "unilineal descent group" is of any use at all in understanding Southern African traditional societies (Kuper 1982, Hammond-Tooke 1984), we may accept that in both Pedi and Ndebele historical communities a major role was played by groups of substantial size whose members were linked together largely through male kinsmen. Writers attempting to analyse the processes of social change in such communities have noted a general tendency for these agnatically-structured groups to shrink in size. The co-residential, co-operating and commensal group which has resulted from these changes is, in most cases, not an agnatic cluster or a lineage segment, but a small household.

In pre-colonial Pondoland, for example, an *umzi* or homestead might contain up to 20 related men and their families (Hunter 1961:15) but, during the era in which migrancy became a way of life, young men began moving away - more frequently, and at a earlier stage - to establish their own homesteads independent of the parent unit. According to Beinart and Delius, this happened due to tensions concerning ownership and control of property which derived in turn from people's gradually deepening involvement in wage labour (1979:7). By 1936, then, the average homestead had between eight and nine inhabitants, of whom about four were adults

(Hunter *op. cit.*). In the case of the Pedi, a comparable tendency for the *kgoro* to split into independent family units is noted by Sansom, who was told by an informant "there is no *kgoro*. In the old days everyone lived together and we had cattle. But now we are like Christians, each man's home is a *kgoro* (1970, quoted by Beinart & Delius 1979:7). In similar vein, Reader observes that there has been a "drastic diminution" in the size of the Makhanyaland residential unit, as indicated by the wide disparity between the average kraal membership of seven persons, in his survey of 1950, and "the large traditional kraal grouping of the Zulu" (1966:76-7).

Still smaller household sizes are recorded for Lesotho, where Murray notes, in one village, an average *de jure* household membership of 4.95 persons (1980:109). Although he points out that this mean figure obscures the existence of two distinct sizes of household, containing two and six persons respectively, it is clear that both these types represent a contraction of the traditional extended family household: both are strongly bounded and isolated in economic terms from relatives whom the larger, traditional unit might have included. For the slightly larger household, with absent migrants, this means the concentration of these migrants' incomes exclusively within their households; for the smaller household, often female-headed and lacking a migrant's wage, it means the concentration within the unit of unremitting poverty (*ibid*). Here, then, the isolation and shrinking of the household is associated with an economic differentiation between households.

This general tendency for the extended agnatic unit to split into its component households, and for the domestic unit to become considerably smaller in size, is qualified by Murray on two counts. Firstly, he points out that it would be meaningless to characterise this change - as many have done - in terms of a movement from the extended to the nuclear family, since the circumstances of migrancy force thousands of husbands and wives to live apart, and since the wide range of household types,

small as each household may be, includes only a few that could accurately be described as "nuclear". In the pages that follow, the range of households in Morotse will be described and analysed, illustrating in similar vein the scarceness of the strictly nuclear family. Some of the households to be discussed, indeed, manifest a distinctly extended form. The chapter therefore amounts to a qualification of the idea, outlined above, that households in contemporary rural Southern Africa have become uniformly smaller.

The second point Murray makes about household size is that, while "a certain pattern of reciprocal obligations has broken down" (1981:108), the onus placed on certain other relationships has become greater.<sup>1</sup> My study of household composition in Morotse likewise indicates that certain bonds of kinship have lapsed while others have intensified. Rather than seeing the resulting family and household types of this village as fragmented or altered survivals of original, functional wholes, it seems more useful to look at these structures as having evolved via a series of complex historical processes, and as having some underlying logic of their own. I thus follow Schapera in preferring to use the word "reconstruction" when describing changes in family life, rather than "disintegration" (1940:356). While not denying the extremely negative effects of resettlement and labour migration, such a word emphasises the positive efforts made by these rural people to cope with their situation.

In embarking on an analysis of household types in Morotse, two factors are especially important in understanding their diversity. The first

---

<sup>1</sup> This simultaneous conserving and dissolving of traditional relationships, he says, has been referred to by writers - such as Wolpe (1972) - concerned to analyse the labour requirements of South African capitalism. Such writers, by describing as "contradictory" these simultaneous processes of preservation and disintegration, have mystified unnecessarily a set of tendencies which are both, Murray claims, equally firmly "rooted in the political economy of the labour reserve" (1981:108).

is the developmental cycle of the domestic group. By examining to what extent the difference between one household and another is attributable to its stage in a cycle of development, the danger may be avoided of seeing a confusing proliferation of different forms, apparently lacking "a fixed norm of domestic grouping" (Fortes 1949:61), where these varying types in fact represent consecutive moments in the evolution of a single form.

The second important factor is that of ethnicity. It has seemed natural, in looking at household types, to retain the basic division between Pedi and Ndebele that, as an emic or folk categorisation, is at the forefront of most people's minds. It is a useful division not only because there do seem to be certain "ethnic-linked" features of households, but also because the division tends to correspond, roughly, with a division between people who arrived in the area early and those who came later. As can be seen from Table 2, of those households surveyed whose inhabitants have lived here for more than 40 years, 73% are Pedi, whereas of those arriving less than 20 years ago, 91% are Ndebele.

Table 2: Ethnicity and Duration of Residence

| Years of Residence | Pedi | Ndebele |
|--------------------|------|---------|
| 20 or less         | 9%   | 91%     |
| 21-30              | 29%  | 71%     |
| 31-40              | 43%  | 57%     |
| 41 or more         | 73%  | 27%     |

In Table 3, a breakdown is shown of the sample of 54 households which represents 11% of the 487 households in the village. Equal numbers of Pedi and Ndebele households were surveyed.

Table 3: Household Types

| Type                            | Households | Percentage |
|---------------------------------|------------|------------|
| Nuclear                         | 7          | 13%        |
| Simple Three-generational       | 5          | 9%         |
| Extended (Male & Female headed) | 29         | 54%        |
| Small Female headed             | 7          | 13%        |
| Other                           | 6          | 9%         |
| Total                           | 54         | 100%       |

*Nuclear Households*

A number of the households surveyed are at an early stage of the domestic cycle: in what Fortes has called "the phase of expansion", during which new families are formed and the offspring of these are dependent on their parents. The households to be discussed here are nuclear in form, containing two generations only and having from four to six inhabitants. They are headed by men between 25 and 45 years of age, who are also the sole wage-earners.

Of the five Pedi households fitting this description, one receives a monthly migrant remittance of R100, and a further two receive R240 each a month. These latter are the highest cash incomes recorded for any household of the entire sample. The remaining two Pedi households of this type, like their two Ndebele counterparts, have monthly cash incomes of between R40 and R80. In addition to the total wage earned in town, most of the Pedi households in this category have fields whose produce provides a supplementary source of food. This is related to the fact that their household heads and their spouses, though young, belong to the long-established families in the village, and have acquired fields either through inheritance from parents too old to continue tending them,



or through the fact that their families are well known to the authorities who have thus been predisposed in their favour when fields become vacant and liable for reallocation.

A slight deviation from this Pedi nuclear household type is to be found in the case of Johannes Moloko. While also a member of a family of long standing in the community, and thus possessing his own fields, his household of four receives no cash income to augment the produce of this land, since Johannes stopped working at Highveld Steel in Witbank when he became ill some years ago. In contrast to the rather comfortable lifestyle of the people described above, he and his wife are perennially short of money.

None of the Ndebele nuclear households own fields as a means of supplementing income. This is, in one case, due to the very late arrival of the family in the area. Part of the reason why there are so few Ndebele households in this nuclear category is because, even in situations where the domestic unit does appear to take this form, its boundaries are ambiguous, and two supposedly discrete entities will merge under certain conditions or given certain pressures. So, for instance, the two separate households headed by the brothers Johannes and Moses Skhosana consider themselves for the purposes of labour in, and consumption of the produce of, their fields, to be one co-extensive unit: at least this food, their families "eat together".

#### *Simple three-generational households*

The next household type to be discussed is that in which the nuclear family is extended to incorporate members of the ascending generation, thus forming a three-generational domestic unit. This kind of household is generated by the Pedi/Ndebele inheritance system in its current form. Although still resembling the traditional system in its use of the patrilineal principle, the rule of inheritance now specifies the youngest

rather than the oldest son as the heir.<sup>2</sup> The norm dictates that this son should remain based in their household, and when he marries he should bring his wife there to live with him. Although the newly married couple usually builds a new house on the same stand, they "eat together" with the husband's parents and so form part of a single domestic unit. This means, for instance, that the man's wages serve to support his parents as well as his wife and children, and that the fields, now worked by the daughter-in-law, will produce food to be shared by her parents-in-law.

In Morotse, only 9% of households surveyed fit this description exactly. This is not because the principles underlying the formation of such a household are necessarily on the decline, nor because inheriting children are failing to fulfil their moral duty of supporting their parents in old age (although this latter is true in a few cases). Rather, it is because most units that include a man's parents have also absorbed other, non-nuclear family kinsmen; most frequently grandchildren. The scarcity of the "pure", or what I have called "simple", three-generational type of household, then, is accounted for by the fact that some years after its inception, it usually acquires still further generational or collateral extensions. In Morotse, the small percentage of simple three-generational households, to which extra members have not attached themselves, are mostly Pedi; they are all from "old families", and like the nuclear households described earlier all have access to a combined fund of wages and the produce of farming, plus pensions where the man's parents qualify for these.

#### *Extended households*

The biggest single category of households in the sample have further additions than the simple three-generational type: 54% of the total

---

<sup>2</sup> An explanation of this change in the system of inheritance is given in Chapter 4.

sample are extended either collaterally, or by the addition of grandchildren, or both. The households are substantially larger in size than the nuclear type, containing between nine and twenty members. In some cases, this greater size is matched by a larger number of wage-earners - ranging from two to five - and these earners belong to the generation below that of the household head. The age of household heads in this category - between 45 and 75 - is substantially greater than that of nuclear household heads, and this suggests that these households represent a later phase - one of several possibilities - in the development of the nuclear household type described earlier.<sup>3</sup>

Seen in terms of the classic developmental cycle, the household described here arises in the "phase of dispersion or fission" (Fortes 1949:4-5). Traditionally, this meant that members of the younger generation formed new conjugal units, and even if these units instead of dispersing remained as part of the larger agnatic grouping, they were separate in certain important respects. In the case under discussion, by contrast, the various components agglomerate to form an expanded domestic unit which "eats together" and shares resources. Although this kind of household, which I have chosen to call "extended", may appear to resemble the "extended family" of traditional times, the two in fact differ fundamentally.

A traditional *kgoro*, *umzi* or homestead, though formed as a grouping on the basis of agnatic kinship and intergenerational ties, was made up of a number of households possessing separate assets. Each house-property complex was distinct from the others like it in the joint or polygynous

---

<sup>3</sup> Pauw makes a similar suggestion about the differing ages of household heads in his discussion of the developmental cycle in the families of urban Xhosa. From an analysis of the ages of the male heads of the households in his sample, he ascertains that "father-mother-children families predominate at younger levels and the multi-generation families at older levels, suggesting that generally speaking the latter are at a later stage of development" (1963:148).

family, and its continuation as a discrete unit was ensured by the eventual transfer of its stock, buildings and other assets to the appropriate heir. (Gluckman 1950:195-8; Sansom 1974a:162). Although each separate unit was integrated economically into the larger group via various forms of co-operation - such as the pooling of labour and the loan or even transfer of cattle between houses - it owned, prepared and consumed its own quota of grain and produce.<sup>4</sup> The type of household being discussed here, in contrast, manifests a general pooling of resources: indeed, such a household arises, perhaps, out of a necessity for just this kind of sharing, in a situation in which such resources are scarce and unequally available. It might be hypothesised that the nuclear and simple three-generational households described earlier exist as they do because their resources - in both cash and produce - permit them to survive in that form. Unequal access to scarce resources, on the other hand, appears to give rise to a domestic unit large enough to ensure the fairly wide distribution of those funds that are available.

It must be noted that I do not intend to propose a simple causal relationship between a household's income and the structural form it assumes. There are cases, for instance, in which the household of a wage-earning man and his wife and children, despite the proximity of a needy parent, or a widowed sister-in-law, does not expand to include these people, but leaves them to cope on their own.

---

<sup>4</sup> Preston-Whyte 1974:179; Monnig 1967:189. Also see Sansom (1974a:162) - "...in equalising the amount of grain available per family member, the emphasis was on shared labour rather than on shared produce. ...to satisfy their requirements, large households cultivated bigger fields with the help of kinsmen". Even in situations like that described by Hunter, in which all members of the Pondo *umzi* not only worked but also ate together, "the house [was] ... a distinct economic unit", owning its own produce (1961:118), and each woman was expected to contribute equally to the shared meal from her house's private store of food.

An extended household acquires its extra members in two ways:  
collaterally, that is, through the cohabitation in one domestic unit  
of several adult siblings with their spouses and/or families; and ver-  
tically, that is, through the addition of the founding couple's grand-  
children, who may be the children either of sons or of unmarried  
daughters, or both. Here I am referring to situations other than, or  
in addition to, the "normal" or simple three-generational pattern in  
which grandparents have their grandchildren living with them because the  
father of the children is the youngest son and therefore the heir to the  
property.

In most cases, vertical extension follows on naturally from collateral  
extension. So, for example, the household headed by Sara Mthsweni in-  
cludes two of her sons (usually away at work) and their wives. When  
children were born to these couples, the household expanded to include  
them as well (see figure 6). In contrast, a household such as Karel  
Masangu's manifests vertical but not collateral extension. His sons have  
left to marry and found new households elsewhere in the village, but he  
and his wife are still responsible for the care of their unmarried  
daughter Flora and her child, as well as for their four other minor  
children.

John Masilo's household demonstrates a combination of several different  
principles of extension. On his retirement from a factory in Kempton  
Park, John and his wife Sophie returned to Morotse, a few years ago, from  
their house in Tembisa. Since John is an only son, he had built a house  
on his mother's stand in Morotse, and it was here that he and Sophie came  
to live on their retirement. They left their son Rudolph in charge of  
providing the family with its cash needs, and since he and his wife both  
work and live on the Reef, their children are cared for by John and  
Sophie. Although Rudolph is not the Masilo's youngest son, he has assumed  
the role of responsibility for his parents - and their dependants - that  
such a son normally plays, as his younger brother Daniel has proved un-

willing to do so. It is likely, then, that Rudolph will inherit the family fields and plot, and for this reason the presence of his children in the senior Masilos' rural household should be understood as part of the normal process of younger-son inheritance. In addition, however, the Masilos have permanently living with them their daughter Lizzy's children, whom Lizzy left in her parents' charge when, newly married, she was still working in town. She later became available to take care of them herself when she settled with her husband in a village nearby. But when the children were sent to live with her, they cried and asked to be returned to the home of their grandparents, where they now continue to reside. The other three members of the Masilos' household are Theresa - their youngest daughter and the only one of their children who currently lives at home - and her two children, who were born out of wedlock.

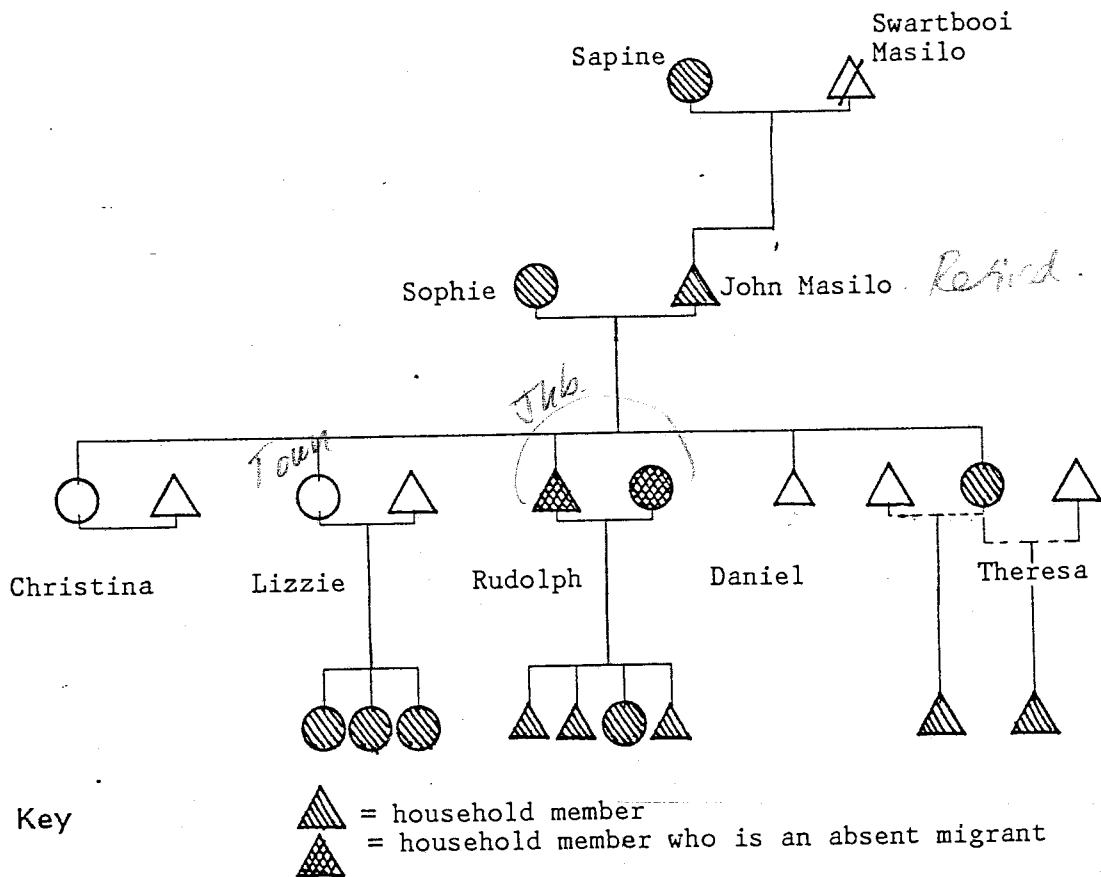


Figure 4: John Masilo's Household

Although the father of the youngest one is negotiating with Theresa's father to pay *bohadi* for her and for both the children, the Masilos have

grown very attached to these, the youngest of their grandchildren, and would prefer Theresa to take only one of them with her when she leaves Morotse to live with her new husband in Dennilton, about 100kms away.

The case of the Masilos illustrates the variety of ways in which a conjugal domestic unit can acquire additional members. More specifically, it is typical of most extended households in the sample in that it includes a significant number of grandchildren, some of whom live there in the temporary or permanent absence of their parents from the household. The existence of similar households, in urban and rural areas of contemporary Southern Africa, is reported by anthropologists such as Pauw (1963:153) and Murray (1980:108; 1981:112). These authors show that, as in Morotse, the presence of large numbers of grandchildren, with or without their parents, is accounted for in most cases by the system of migrant labour: since adults of a working age are absent for long periods or permanently, their children must be brought up within the extended household.

While it has been suggested earlier that larger households exist because of the need to spread resources more widely, it can be seen here, in addition, that the larger size of these households is partly due to the high proportion in them of grandchildren, who are present because their parents are away at work and are therefore unable to bring them up in the nuclear unit that is seen by many people in Morotse as "normal".

#### *Male and Female Headship*

Up until this point, the extended household has been described in fairly general terms. There is, however, an important group of characteristics the consideration of which allows finer distinctions to be discerned within the category. These are female headship, matrilocality, and a predominance of uterine or female links between household members.

These features need not necessarily always coexist: as a cluster, however, they indicate a recent trend noted as significant by several anthropologists. Pauw speaks of a tendency among the households he studied in an East London location to "become extended in the matriline, rather than the traditional patriline" (1963:142). He mentions, too, that the term "matrifocal", used by Raymond T. Smith "to indicate a system of domestic relations in which the father has a 'marginal' position" (*ibid.*:155-6) is applicable to the substantial number of female-headed, fatherless families in his sample. Similar tendencies were observed in families in Durban and surrounding areas by Preston-Whyte: she focuses on a family type which she calls "female-linked", in which co-operation between uterine kin is necessitated by "the absence of husbands to support them" (1978:59). Mayer also acknowledges the existence of matrifocal households among migrants in East London, although he claims that these are "more possible in the urban than in the migrant setting" (1971:282), and that they are often subsumed into broader, "patriarchally defined" groups (*ibid.*)

In Morotse, 56% of households surveyed contain members whose link to each other is traced through females, and 33% are female-headed. It is not intended, at this stage, to address the question of whether or not families or households should be termed "matrifocal". Since it is the extended household whose various manifestations form the focus of this section of the chapter, I will examine at this stage the question of male or female headship only insofar as it has significance for the structure of the extended household.

Both Pauw and Preston-Whyte draw a basic distinction between households in terms of whether they are male- or female-headed. Having formulated these categories, Pauw proceeds to draw a finer distinction, within the female-headed type, between those heads whose husbands had died, deserted or been divorced from them, and those who had never been married. Commenting on this, Preston-Whyte claims that "although it is useful for



structural and typological studies to distinguish between those households in which the female heads have formerly been married and those in which they have not, ...in functional terms the distinction is less meaningful" (1978:58). In the context of her study of female migrants living in and around Durban, there was no effective difference between women who had once had husbands and those who had always been single, since both types were eventually left to cope without support from men. It was this lack of support, indeed, which had led such women to leave their rural homes and enter the migrant labour market.

The case of Morotse is slightly different: here, I would argue, the distinction between male- and female-headed households is less significant than that between a household structured along broadly agnatic, virilocal - or what Murray calls "orthodox" - lines (1981:155), and a small female-headed household. Within the 56% of households headed by females, there is a notable difference between those units extended along agnatic lines, and those which are small and isolated from any effective wider grouping. The female heads of extended agnatic households are usually older widows, or women abandoned only very recently, whereas the female heads of the small isolated households are younger women who, if they have ever been married, were deserted or widowed very soon after marriage.

The possibility must not, of course, be ignored that these two types might represent alternative phases in the developmental cycle, with either one of them developing from the building-block of the nuclear family. Pauw, in his study, notes that this is the case: that all female-headed families, apart from those that have never had a father, grow out of the nuclear or "father-mother-children" family, which he isolates as the basic type, but which he says "shows a strong tendency on the one hand to lose the father at a relatively early stage and on the other to develop a multi-generational span" (1963:149).

The small, female-headed household identified above will be discussed in a later section of this chapter. My foregoing discussion of male and female headship has, for the moment, provided the analytical tools for a more precise definition of the extended household in Morotse. It is, as mentioned already, a large unit, often with more than one wage-earner providing its cash income, and with a membership that may include several siblings with their spouses and children, or that includes these children but not their parents. The head of such a household is an elderly person: it may be a man, like the retired John Masilo, but it is almost as likely to be a woman who has survived the previous male head, like John's neighbouring relative Elenah Masilo, the widow of his father's brother (see figure 5). Of Morotse's extended households, 59% are male-headed, and 41% are female-headed.

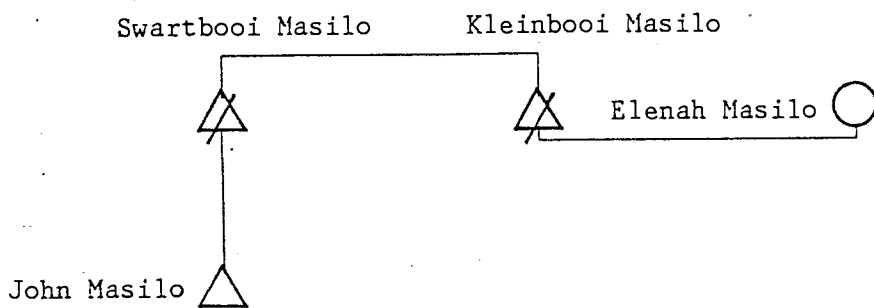


Figure 5: Elenah Masilo and her Affines

The point made above - that a household may be strongly agnatic in character despite the fact that it is headed and managed by a female - is demonstrated by the case of Sara Matshika. She is an Ndebele woman who came to the area about 20 years ago with her husband and his family, including his second wife Sannah whom he had married upon the death of her husband, his classificatory brother, some years before. When I met Sara she was mourning the loss of her second-youngest son Moos, whose death by shooting was the latest in a series of tragedies that had befallen her. Almost "every year" since she had come to "this world" of the Trust, she had buried someone. First a brother of her husband's

had died. Some years later, one of this man's sons, whom Sara had raised and who was her son Moos' closest friend, was stabbed to death. The death of her husband Jan followed shortly afterwards, and then that of her mother-in-law.

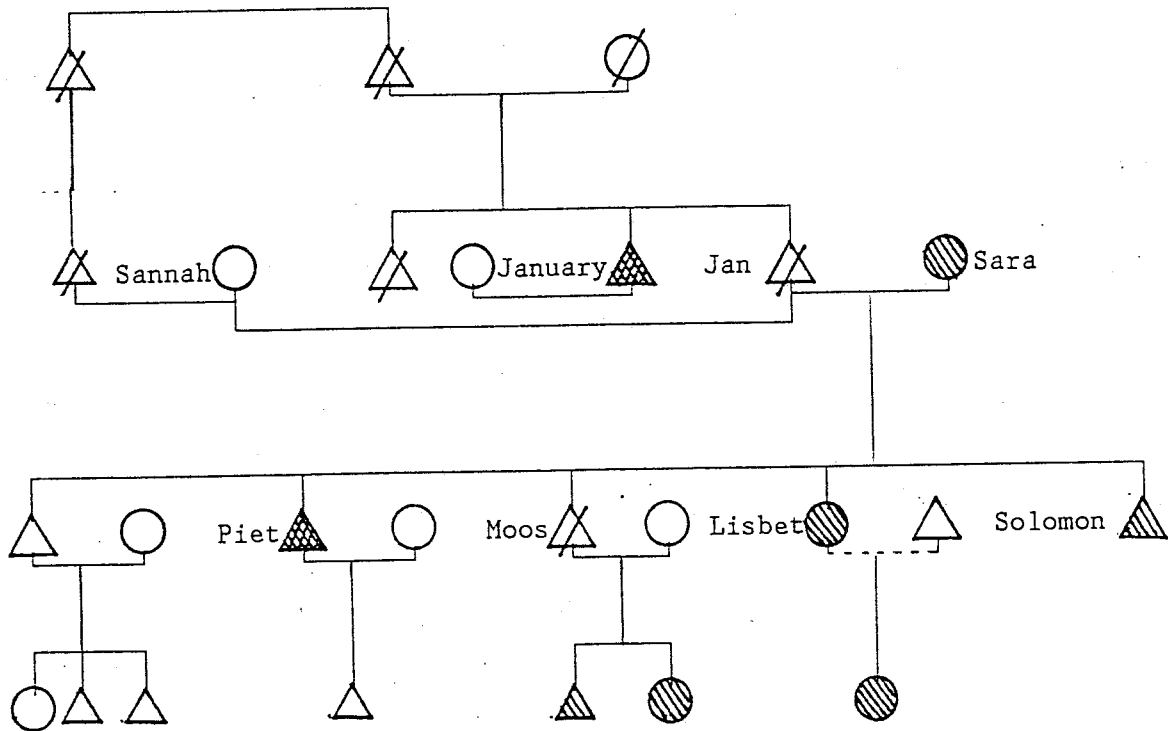


Figure 6: Sara Matshika's Household

This catalogue of the human losses sustained by Sara shows how intrinsically her life and central concerns are bound up with those of her husband's family, even though she and his other wife, Sannah, are now the only representatives of that family permanently resident at the place chosen by their in-laws as a home after they had moved from the farms. Although she has one consanguineal relative - a sister - living in the area, Sara's closest companion, apart from the members of her own household, is this second wife whom her husband married as a levir. Living with Sara at her home in Morotse are her youngest son Solomon who is unmarried and works in Germiston; another son Piet whose wife and child are resident in another village; the children of two other sons - one of them the recently deceased Moos - whose households are close by; and her unmarried daughter Lisbet and Lisbet's child. In addition to these

direct descendants of Sara's sharing her living space, her husband's brother January is also a member of the household. January, a migrant in Pretoria, has a wife who lives in Morotse at her family's home, but although he usually sleeps with this wife at her place when he returns from town, it is, interestingly, Sara's house which he regards as his home and where he keeps all his possessions.

One can see the centrality of the agnatic links in the family which Sara struggles to sustain and hold together. At an earlier stage of the family's development, she would have been one of several daughters-in-law subject to the authority of her husband's mother, and with a "marginal" status in the group (Murray 1981:149-153; Ngubane 1977:77-87). Now, as a widow, she heads the household: it includes not only a number of descendants in the male line, but also her husband's brother. Murray, writing of family structure in Lesotho, points out that "under circumstances of oscillating migration...the elementary structure of the *lelapa* may be daily rehearsed by its daughters-in-law, since many of the linking males in the senior or middle generations are either absent or dead" (1981:151). He is speaking specifically, here, of the practice whereby a male child is named after his paternal grandfather, thus preventing his mother from speaking his name and compelling her, instead, to call him *ntate*; such a practice ensures that, despite the absence of the key males, their importance is reiterated through this naming practice. Although this system of naming is not used in Morotse, it is clear that Murray's observation is true, in a more general sense, for a case like that of Sara Matshika.

#### *Pedi and Ndebele households*

The foregoing few pages have been devoted to describing the extended household, of which Sara Matshika's is a specific example. This household type, I argue, is typical of Ndebele domestic organisation in Morotse. While an outside observer cannot help but form this impression after a

short time in the village, it can be substantiated by a look at the figures: of all the extended households in the sample, 68% are Ndebele and 32% are Pedi.

The reasons why such a household is found more frequently amongst Ndebele-speaking people than amongst their Pedi neighbours are complex. I have suggested that extended households arise in situations where resources are scarce and unequally available. Mention has already been made of the fact that the greatest proportion of Ndebele families moved to the area from farms in recent years, and that few, therefore, have had access to fields, to the kind of education that might secure one a better job in town, or to the extended networks of support such as those surrounding the older families which could help a household to fend off adversity in times of unemployment. In addition to these material considerations, one could look to the traditional constitution of the Ndebele family, and to the way in which it was shaped during the period of labour tenancy, for explanations of this phenomenon: these aspects will receive more attention later.

Leaving aside for the moment the historical, material, or tradition-based origins of the Ndebele extended household, it is interesting to note the way in which aspects of customary practice keep it intact and perpetuate it. A girl who is to marry must spend a preliminary period at the home of her affines, learning from her future mother-in-law how to keep house and behave as a good *makoti* and a good wife to this woman's son. While there, and during her entire married life, she must observe *hlonipha*, which prevents her from addressing or speaking the names of her husband's senior relatives, and which specifies that she must cover her arms and shoulders with a heavy blanket whenever she is in the presence of her affines - that is, in all her actions, since these are performed in the presence, at least, of her mother-in-law.

These observations prove a point about the agnatic character of the Ndebele household. Since most males, as Murray points out (*ibid*), are absent, it is the daughters-in-law who are responsible for preserving the character of such a household. And while such customs as *hlonipha* do not, in themselves, necessarily ensure that these young brides will remain as virilocal residents rather than returning to their natal families under the stressful conditions imposed on marriage by labour migration, they do seem to play some part in perpetuating the predominantly agnatic character of Ndebele social organisation in Morotse.

A further specification about the precise nature of the agnatic household described above entails, as well, the drawing of a contrast with the extended household type more typical of Pedi-speakers in the village. The living arrangements of someone like Sara Matshika involve her in close contact not only with her affines, both male and female, but also with her sons and/or their children. In her case, and even more markedly in other cases, there is a strong tendency for sons to set up house at the place of their parents or, if they have absconded or are seldom present, for their children to reside there. Mention has already been made, earlier in this chapter, of the principle of collateral extension whereby grown-up children of a household's founding couple reside with them. In Ndebele extended households - in Sara's case, for example - this collateral extension is of an agnatic type: that is, several brothers who are children of the male head form part of the household's composition and contribute to its finances. But this is not the only way in which Sara's household is extended. In addition to sons, it includes a daughter, Lisbet, and this daughter's child. Here the collateral principle is uterine or female-linked. My claim that Ndebele households are typically agnatic must, then, be qualified. They manifest both uterine and agnatic extension. But it is when this household type is compared with its Pedi counterpart that its basically agnatic tendency becomes clearer.

Table 4: Collateral Extension

| Type of col. extension | Pedi      | Ndebele   | Total |
|------------------------|-----------|-----------|-------|
| Agnatic                | 3 (30%)   | 13 (43%)  | 16    |
| Uterine                | 7 (70%)   | 17 (57%)  | 24    |
| Total cases            | 10 (100%) | 30 (100%) | 40    |

It can be seen from the diagram that there are fewer collaterally extended households in the Pedi community. Indeed, there are relatively few Pedi extended households of any kind, and this, as has already been demonstrated, is due to the fact that a number of Pedi households have sufficient resources to survive in the nuclear or simple three-generational form. Of those Pedi households that are collaterally extended, however, the vast majority exhibit uterine rather than agnatic extension. In Ndebele extended households, by contrast, agnatic and uterine extension are fairly evenly distributed (although uterine links still predominate). What is indicated, then, is not so much a prevalence of uterine- or female-linked households in the village's Pedi community, but a relative lack, in such households, of agnatic linkages: a lack which tends to throw this female linkage into relief.

If one looks, then, at the type of extended household that is more typically Pedi - though it is found in both groups - one notices a predominance of female-linkage, especially at the generational level below that of the household head. These uterine structures are, however, "absorbed into patriarchally defined groups" as Mayer observes of "matrifocal" units in a passage quoted earlier (1971:282). In other words, the head of such a household, like that of its Ndebele equivalent, is a man or his virilocally resident widow, and in this sense the unit is still orthodox or agnatic in character.

Commenting on the formation of similar households in urban areas of South Africa, Preston-Whyte notes that

the most frequent extension of the nuclear unit includes the children of unmarried daughters of the head so that there is a definite tendency for the household to contain more than two generations (Pauw 1963:144-54; Hellmann 1971a:169, 1974:16). In all these cases, the household is formed around a middle-aged or elderly conjugal pair whose marriage is stable and endures over time. Authority rests with the father and what Mayer (1973:viii) calls the patriarchal and patrifocal ethic dominates familial interaction". (1978:57)

In the same vein, Murray (1980:107-8) writes of "the three-generation household which includes a daughter or daughters with children", in rural areas of Southern Africa.

The difference between the two kinds of extended households described above is a subtle one, but it is important, especially in economic terms. A household including both sons and daughters of the head will contain at least a few male wage-earners, whereas an extended household containing only daughters and their children will have to rely on these female members for its cash needs. (It will be remembered that the heads of extended households are usually elderly: frequently they are too old to be effective as wage-earners.) It is well documented that Southern African rural women - as compared with men - enter the wage-labour market under conditions of extreme disadvantage, especially in recent times (Murray 1981:154; Yawitch 1982:208-16). It is illegal for them to travel to the urban areas to look for work, and labour contracts for urban employment offered via the rural District Labour Bureaux are for men only. Rural women, then, earn money mostly through local employment as domestic servants or part-time agricultural labourers, or through "informal sector" activities, all of which options offer very little remuneration.

If the head of one of these "daughters only" households dies and is replaced by his widow, the household begins to look rather like the female-linked families described by Preston-Whyte (1978). In Morotse



such families differ from their Durban counterparts, however, in that some of them are surrounded by long-standing networks of extra-household ties.

An example of such a female-headed, female-linked, extended Pedi household is the one headed by Elenah Masilo. She lives in a house built by her late husband Kleinbooi, on a plot next door to the homestead whose founder was her husband's elder brother Swartbooi. She has frequent contact with her neighbours, Swartbooi's descendents; in terms both of locality and of social interaction, then, her household demonstrates an agnatic structure, but this changes at the generational level below that of the household head. All the members of her household, apart from the grandchildren, are females, and the five grandchildren are related to her via female or uterine links. Of her five daughters, four are resident with her, and three are unmarried mothers. These three all work in or near Groblersdal, which is a three-quarters of an hour bus-ride away.

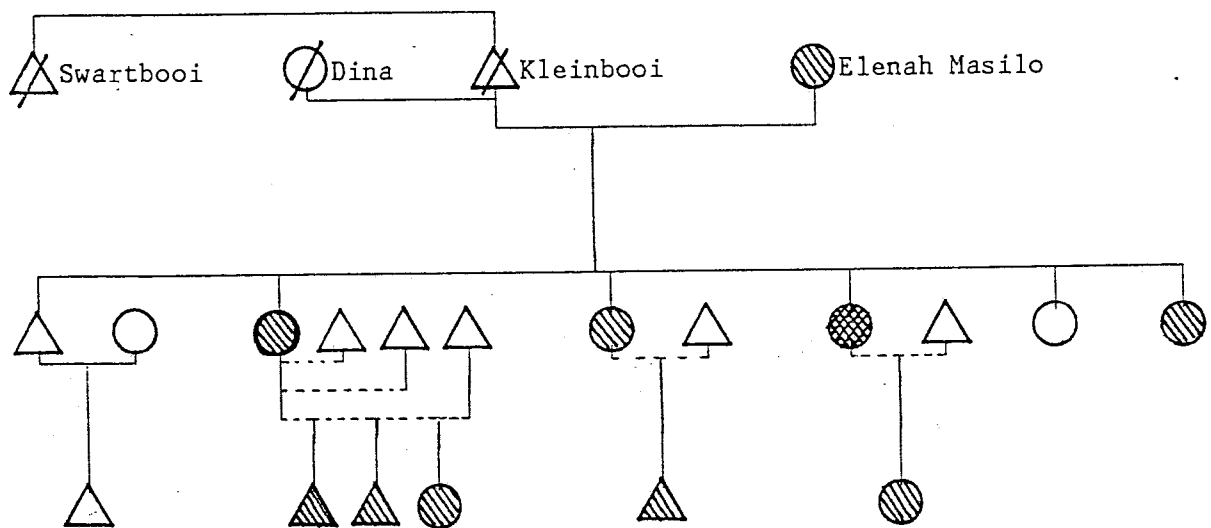


Figure 7: Elenah Masilo's Household

One is a domestic servant, "living in" and returning to Morotse only on weekends, and the other two are farm workers, coming home to sleep every night and travelling to work on a farm truck every morning. The domestic earns R20 a month, in addition to her weektime board and lodging, whereas the farm wage earned by the other two is R40 a month, for a type of work

that is considerably more arduous. In a normal month, then, Elenah receives between R70 and R90 with which to supply and feed the 11 members of her extended household. She has a son, but he lives near Germiston with his wife and child, and sends no money home to his mother. Another daughter, who works in Middelburg, is not a regular contributor to the household's finances.

Elenah's time is divided between domestic chores in her home, caring for her five grandchildren and her youngest daughter, and tending the fields that were allocated to her when she became Kleinbooi Masilo's second wife. Although these fields - a portion of whose area is waterlogged because of a nearby dam - cannot be relied upon to provide a regular supplement to the household's income, they did yield a harvest of 22 bags the year before fieldwork was conducted. Likewise, a number of similar Pedi extended households, whose especial vulnerability derives from their lack of male earning power, are cushioned from the effects of poverty by their ability to produce some food, which derives in turn from the fact that their members, as early comers to the district, acquired fields.

#### *Small female-headed households*

Earlier, it was proposed to examine the possibility that any household type might be a development of some other type. It has been shown that the nuclear type develops, in time, and given different circumstances, into either the simple three-generational or the extended household, in either its male- or its female-headed form. The small female-headed household, whose contrast to the extended, agnatic female-headed type has been mentioned above, arises in various circumstances. What all the recorded examples of this type have in common, however, is that they have split off from larger, extended units. Within this category - which constitutes 13% of the total sample - a broad contrast is discernible between households founded by women who, with their children, had previously lived uxorilocally, or with their natal families (as in the more

typically "Pedi" extended household) and those whose female heads had, immediately prior to the household's formation, been married and had lived virilocally (as in the more typically "Ndebele" type).

Like the larger female-headed household of Elenah Masilo, the small female-headed household tends to suffer the disadvantages of a lack of male earning power, although this is not necessarily the case, as males of a wage-earning age may be present. The heads, in all cases observed, are relatively young - between 30 and 50 years old - which suggests that this household type, though it arises from a larger household, may in turn be an intermediary phase in some further, later development. It is unlikely, though, that such a unit would develop into one of the larger female-headed types mentioned above, since it lacks the initial agnatic or patriarchal component that is an intrinsic feature of these larger types. Possibly, the small female-headed household is a relatively new phenomenon, having yet to develop into some further phase. On the other hand, since it is a unit with so little foundation in customary practice and so lacking in resources or in any basis for stability and continuity, it may be a last stage before some kind of disintegration; that is, before its members move off to establish alternative living arrangements.

Anna Ralebese set up her household three years ago, when she returned to the area after an extended period of living and working on the Reef. During her absence, her three sons had been cared for and raised by her parents, Jacobs and Tabitha; and she, as a temporarily absent member of Jacob's household, had sent home each month a portion of the small income she was earning from piecework jobs in town. She returned, she says, to look after her parents who were getting old. The plot she acquired, however, is some distance from the establishment which they share - in accordance with the inheritance system - with their only son Moses and his family. Anna began to build a house on her plot, but to date this consists only of one small mudbrick room in which she lives with her younger sons Lucky and Elvis. The household's economic situation is a

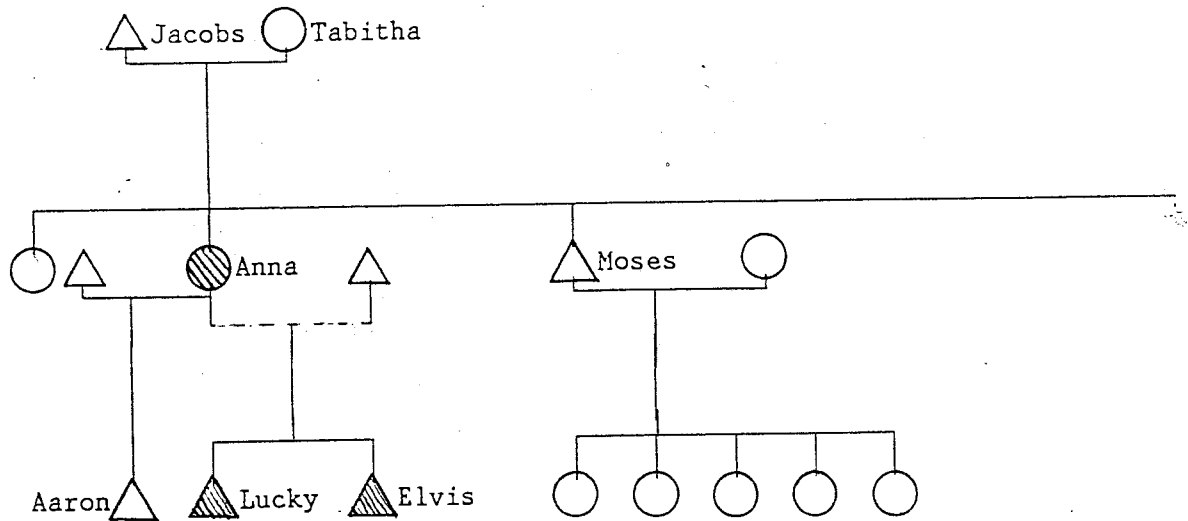


Figure 8: Anna Ralebetse's Household

fairly dismal one, since Anna has been unable to find a job which she considers suitable: as a Christian of long standing and the daughter of the local primary school's original founder, she would not consider working as an agricultural labourer, which is one of the few local options open to women. Her sons are in their late teens, and as recent arrivals on the labour market they experience several disadvantages. Although they would work on the Reef if they could, the tightening of restrictions on illegal movement to the cities, together with the current shortage of jobs offered through the District Labour Bureaux, means that both of them have had to rely on the extremely restricted opportunities for local employment.<sup>5</sup> Lucky, the elder, works in a cafe in Groblersdal, while his younger brother Elvis is employed by wealthy African coal merchant who operates within Morotse. Their combined incomes are not sufficient to supply the household. Far from being able to fulfil her stated aim of helping to look after her parents in their old age, then, Anna is sometimes driven to asking her parents for assistance, at least of a financial

---

<sup>5</sup> Since the period when fieldwork was conducted, the influx control laws have been done away with, although shortages of housing and employment still make it difficult for a reserve-dweller to live and work in town.

kind. This they provide, when they can afford to do so, from their monthly pension of R80.

Anna's establishment has, in fact, an air of ephemerality. The house is small and insubstantial, and there is no indication that it will be added to in the near future. There has been no attempt to tend the yard or grow vegetables there. She states that her sons do not feel at ease with her, nor she with them: this, she says, is because they grew up with her parents, and so regard her more as an aunt than as a mother. When they visit her parents' home, there is an air of boisterousness and joviality, but at Anna's house they behave with restraint and distance. Indeed, both she and her sons spend more time at the well-established and well-populated homestead of her parents, or that of her mother's sisters, than they do at her own house.

In Anna's case, then, the small female-headed household is almost like an adjunct to the larger household headed by her father with which it was, at one stage, merged. Not only is it attached to this larger parent unit through emotional ties, frequent financial dependence, and in other ways, but it is, in addition, connected to a number of other households in the village by ties of affinity, religious association, and so on. This network of ties exists by virtue of the fact that Anna, though a fairly young woman, belongs to one of the village's founding families. Other female-headed households, whose members arrived more recently, are far more isolated and vulnerable.

One such household is that of Eva Masilela. Unlike Anna, who formed a new domestic unit from the basis of her father's family, Eva had lived - until her recent divorce - with the family of her husband, having accompanied them when they moved to Morotse from the farm Uitkyk 13 years ago. On separating from her husband, Eva had to set up house on her own, with her two small children. She was faced with the prospect of having to earn a living for herself and the children but, since she knew no

people in the village besides her husband's family, which had severed all relations with her, she could find no-one to care for the children while she worked. For a while she earned a meagre living from "informal sector" activities, but she was eventually driven - through economic necessity - to find work as a domestic servant in Groblersdal, for which she earns R40 a month. The need for child-care was now imperative, so Eva's mother came to stay with her, temporarily moving to Morotse from the home near Middelburg to which she and her husband had come on leaving the farm.

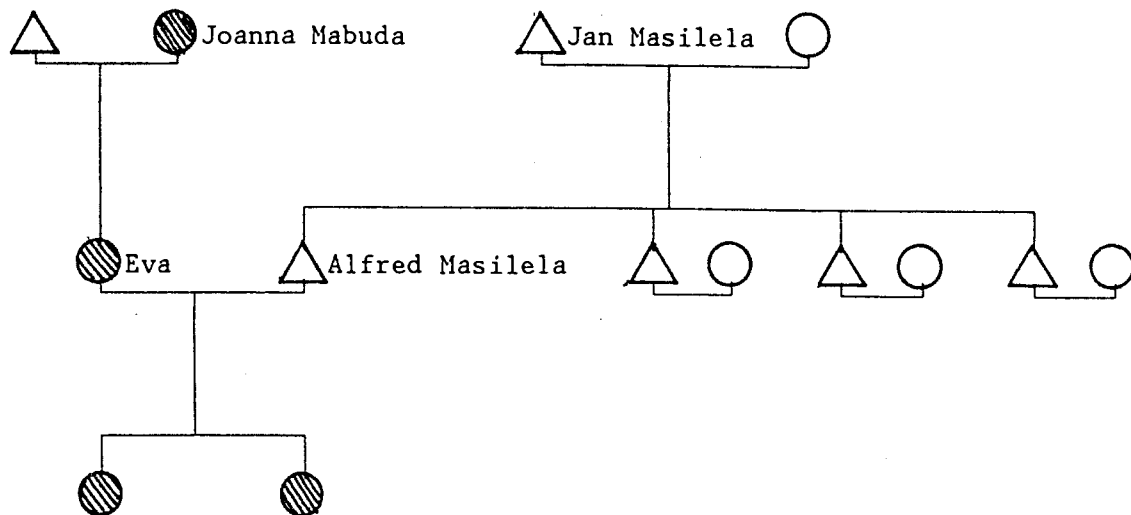


Figure 9: Eva Masilela's Household

The two households described above fit fairly neatly into the ethnic household types established thus far. Anna, a Pedi-speaker and a member of an "old family", was uxorilocally resident until forming her own household (she was, in fact, married when in her late teens, but since this marriage was short-lived and did not result in the formation of a new household before its dissolution, Anna's position in her father's household was much the same as it would have been had she never married at all). Eva, an Ndebele-speaker and a late arrival, was virilocally resident in the agnatic extended household run by her husband's parents, until her divorce led to the forming of her own household.

Eva is by far the worse off of the two women, both financially and in terms of general social comforts. Her exclusion from the extended household of which she was once a member demonstrates - by default - just how heavily such a household is relied upon. Her situation, an exceptional one, seems to prove the "rule" which has been tentatively suggested above: that the agnatic extended household, typical of Morotse's Ndebele inhabitants, is formed or maintained on the basis of a need to share resources between people who, without such a mechanism, would have close to nothing.

A few households in the sample occupy a kind of intermediary position: they are not as extreme in their isolation as Eva's, but neither are they built on a sufficiently solid agnatic base to be classified along with what Murray calls the "orthodox" households. Rather, they could be seen as occupying a position somewhere on a continuum between these two clearly distinguished types. They have been classified along with the small female-headed type for the purposes of this survey.

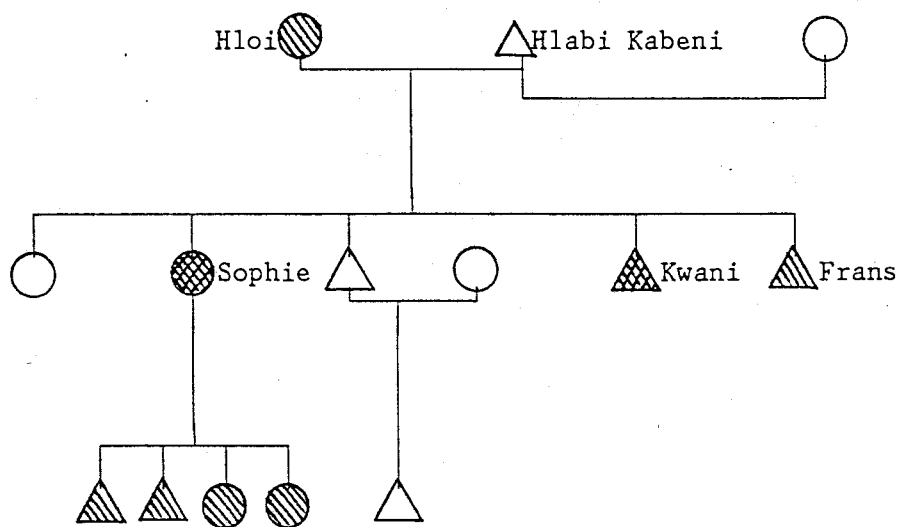


Figure 10: Hloi Kabeni's Household

Hloi Kabeni, for instance, as an elderly woman who cares for several grandchildren in the temporary absence of their working parents, heads

a household which bears a closer resemblance to the extended than to the small female-headed type. She has, however, had no contact with her affines since she was deserted by her husband, who visits and sends money only to his other wife. The two wives share a field and their homesteads occupy the same residential stand, but they have as little to do with each other as possible. The outward appearance of a "normal" agnatic family structure is, in Hloi's case, a bizarre parody of her actual situation, since she has no support from her husband at all, nor any contact with him or his family. Despite her antagonism for the co-wife however, Hloi cannot afford to move away, as it would be difficult to come by a new residential stand, and impossible to acquire another field.

#### *Discussion*

Up until now this chapter has been devoted to the construction of a typology. There has been an attempt to understand the somewhat confusing diversity of different households, by classifying together those which appear to be structured along the same lines. This kind of exercise might be seen as a dry exercise in labelling or "butterfly collecting" (Leach 1961:2); it might, as well, be considered a static approach, with each "type" being like a snapshot taken in a timeless dimension.

It is true that I have been trying to identify significant tendencies, and therefore that the examples I have given of each household type are typical rather than unrepresentative ones. There are, for instance, cases in which a youngest son, though morally obliged and expected to look after his parents and maintain their dwellings and fields, fails to do so, opting instead to abandon his family's rural existence for an urban one. In such a case, and if none of the other children step into the breach, the parents are left to fend for themselves. Instead of the norm of a simple three-generational household, then, these people constitute a very sparse nuclear household, with a head far older than usual,



and without the reasonably comfortable income that normally supports such a unit.<sup>6</sup>

Instead of seeing the above typology of households as a rigid system of classification, then, its particular examples should be viewed as points on a continuum. Another way of demonstrating the potential dynamics of the model is to point out that each type of household - shaped in varying measure by circumstance, customary practice and individual motivation - implies another type, depending on which family members it includes and which it leaves out. If a particular domestic arrangement departs from the stated norm, or from the most frequently adopted practice, it has repercussions for those who might otherwise be amongst its members. This is true in the case cited in the preceding paragraph, in which a youngest son defaults in his duty towards his parents. It could be said to be true, too, in the case of Eva Masilela's small female-headed household (p 123). Because she was no longer afforded refuge in the orthodox agnatic structure which once housed her, she had to create a new living arrangement; this, in turn, had repercussions for the structure of her parents' household in Middelburg, which her mother was compelled temporarily to abandon in order to come to Morotse and care for Eva's children.

A statement made by Murray provides an additional defence against the accusation that the construction of a typology is merely a static exercise. He claims that the different groups of households which he identifies, although they are "empirically discrete" at a given moment in time, should not be seen as "analytically discrete" since any one individual's life may involve a number of different kinds of domestic arrangements. Writing of women in particular, he says

---

<sup>6</sup> All but one of the households classified as "other" in Table 3 fall into this category - nuclear households comprising elderly people who lack support from their children.

The orthodox pattern is virilocal residence as a wife in the absence of the husband, followed by widowhood and, probably, the rearing of grandchildren. But there are many variations, involving perhaps a number of different conjugal associations, a period of absence as a migrant, a return to the natal home, and the rearing of children within a matrifocal household (1981:155).

I cite this statement in order to show that the household types I have identified are not merely static categories, but that they change as their members grow older and have to confront changing material and social conditions. The wide variation between households is, then, as I suggested at the beginning of the chapter, partly attributable to a cycle of development: a nuclear household may become a simple three-generational one, later acquiring more members to make it an agnatic extended one, and so on.

Amounting to a qualification of the above observation by Murray on the importance of the household's development is the fact that, in Morotse, there are certain types of living arrangements to which certain kinds of people will be predisposed, even as their households do evolve from one phase into another. The variable that may account for this has been identified, in this chapter, as that of the ethnic group to which the household members belong. While it is true that ethnic group is an important emic category in the village itself, and one that is constantly visible and demonstrable during the everyday business of living, there is another important variable with which it has been shown to correlate: that of length of stay in the area, and all the economic and social consequences which that implies. The people who, having arrived most recently, have had least time to establish themselves in Morotse, are Ndebele. They have spent much longer than any of Morotse's other residents as indentured labour tenants, and as has been suggested above this period on the white farms may have been a further factor in the shaping of the Ndebele family and household.

*The Ndebele and labour tenancy*

According to van Warmelo, the Southern Transvaal Ndebele "have retained Ndebele custom and language with astonishing tenacity" (1974:67), thus differing markedly from the Northern Transvaal Ndebele whose language and customs "have been largely superseded by (those of the) Sotho" (*ibid.*). Apart from language, examples of strongly and typically Nguni features retained by the Southern Transvaal Ndebele include the existence of clans, a tendency to practise clan exogamy<sup>7</sup> and the very strict form of *hlonipha* which often accompanies this (Preston-Whyte 1974:204-5). It is suggested here that this cultural tenacity does not merely reflect a strong conservatism, but that it is related to the fact that the junior Southern Ndebele tribe, the Ndzundza, was broken up in battle with the Boers in 1883, and that its members were subsequently scattered and lived for many years as indentured labourers and then as labour tenants throughout the south and east-central Transvaal (van Warmelo 1952:11).<sup>8</sup>

The effects of indenture and labour tenancy in constructing Ndebele ethnicity will be more fully dealt with in Chapter 5, but here I am concerned specifically with its influence on social groupings. In many ways, the conditions under which tenants lived imposed a great dependency between family members: brothers relied on brothers, and fathers on their children, to fulfil the terms of the labour contract. Thus, for instance, a man and his wife who grew too old to work had to be able to count on their sons and daughters to take over this duty from them, and young men who wanted to earn money in town relied on one or more of their brothers to meet the farmer's demands for labour. Failure to abide by the terms of the contract would result in eviction, not just for the errant individual, but for the whole family. This fact is powerfully demonstrated

---

<sup>7</sup> See pp194-5 for a fuller discussion of Ndebele marriage practices.

<sup>8</sup> This interpretation was suggested to me by Peter Delius, and is convincingly argued in his subsequent chapter on Ndzundza history (1987).

by the statements of many Ndebele Morotse residents who were asked why they had left the farms - "my brothers didn't want to look after the sheep, so the farmer chased us away" - "when they changed the contract, my sons were forced to work without rest; they refused this, so we had to leave the farm".

Although in this later period of arduous labour conditions the dependence by older family members on younger ones left them vulnerable to eviction, there is evidence that in an earlier period this interdependence between family members found expression in the exercise of considerable power by family heads over their juniors. This power, claims Morrell who writes about the same area, was fostered or reinforced by the white farmers:

the farmer used the head of house to mediate over the whole family work force. Farmers lured labour to their farms by offering advances to the heads of houses (*The Star* 19 October 1921) and then bolstered their prestige by placing them in authority over the other family members (1983:181)

From a different area of the Transvaal comes a report about the head of a Sotho labour tenant family whose authority over his sons lay largely in the fact that he claimed to be the exclusive bearer of knowledge about genuine Sotho customs. When important rituals like weddings or funerals were to be performed, his presence as officiant would therefore be indispensable. Since the family lived in an area, and in a situation, which isolated them from other Sotho-speakers, there were no rival claimants to this status of ritual expert (van Onselen, personal communication). The suggestion is, then, that the conditions of labour tenancy might have effected a greater dependence between family members, and respect for family elders, than would be normal even amongst people whose commitment to the traditional agnatic structure was strong to begin with.

As well as enhancing family cohesion and subordination to the family head, labour tenancy seems, during an earlier period, to have favoured a large family size.

When a squatter comes to a farmer to look for ground, the first question that is put to him is how many children have you and how many stock? (J D Heyns, SC12-1925 p50, quoted by Morrell 1983:181).

Children provided labour, and tenants' herds of stock were used, especially by the poorer farmers, for their own ploughing.<sup>9</sup> These accounts suggest, then, that the household of a family accommodated by and working for a white farmer would be fairly large, cohesive and patriarchally dominated.

Looking for anthropological material to flesh out these brief suggestions about the structure of the labour tenant family, it becomes clear that there has been very little detailed anthropological research into the phenomenon of South African labour tenancy and the social forms generated by it. Although many informants in Morotse volunteered anecdotes and reports about their lives on the farms, it was not possible from these sketchy impressions to build up a detailed picture of the social realities of a tenant family's existence. It might be instructive, then, to look at the one really thorough account of farm life that does exist, by Hunter (1936 and 1961, 1937), even though this study was undertaken in an area very distant from the Middelburg district of the Transvaal.

Among Africans living on Eastern Cape farms in the late 1930s, the basic module of social life was the *umzi* - "the patrilineal kinship group living together in a circle of huts" (1961:522) consisting of "a man, his wife or wives, unmarried children and sons with their wives and children" (1937:391). Although the solidarity of the family had, according to Hunter, been undermined on farms as in reserves by forces operative since

---

<sup>9</sup> Morrell 1983:177, and interviews with David Skhosana and Johanna Mathibela. It was only when agriculture began to mechanise and labour requirements changed that a large family became a liability rather than an asset in farmers' eyes. At this later stage, it is suggested, white farmers could manipulate the laws excluding blacks from land in order to try and regulate and limit the size of tenant families - and herds - which were admitted to their farms (van Onselen, personal communication).

the coming of the Europeans (1961:522), the size of the farm *umzi* was at least as big as that of its contemporary counterpart in the reserve - it contained an average of just over eight people (1961:15,522). Since only about two such groups would be accommodated on a farm, the chances of an agnatic cluster or large kinship network developing would be slight.<sup>10</sup> Relatives, unable easily to find accommodation on neighbouring farms, often had to live in districts which were widely separated, thus making it difficult for them to visit each other. Contact with far-flung or even nearby kinsmen was also limited by the restrictions farmers placed on social visits from other Africans, and especially on ritual occasions involving beerbrewing and ritual slaughter (*ibid*:528). This lack of access to the pool of relatives which in the life of reserve-dwellers featured as so important<sup>11</sup> had the effect of strengthening "the ties binding neighbours who live on one farm" (Hunter 1961:523). Similarly, I argue, this isolation would result in a greater reliance on members of one's own immediate household or *umzi*.

Such a household, then, was a fairly large unit, whose separation from a broader network of agnates or relatives would augment solidarity amongst and the interdependence of its own members. With a recent experience similar to that described above, the Ndebele family, newly arrived in Morotse, would, perhaps, be accustomed to accommodating a number of immediate relatives - such as the head's sons and their families - while sustaining a separation from more distant relatives. And since these more distant relatives would in any case be unlikely to have moved to Morotse after their sojourn on other, different farms, it would be difficult to extend extra-household ties to include related families even

---

<sup>10</sup> "...the average number of Bantu on each farms in the districts visited was only 16.7..." (Hunter 1961:505)

<sup>11</sup> Wilson et al 1952:31-2, 63-4; Hunter 1961:58-9

after the period of labour tenancy had ended. Dependence between members of the immediate household would thus be perpetuated for a period well beyond the date of their arrival in the Trust.

### *Conclusion*

It has been argued in this chapter that although the various types of household may represent stages in the developmental cycle, some households will develop along different lines to others. Among the Ndebele, for reasons deriving in various measure from tradition, recent history and present circumstance, households have been shown to sustain an extended form which is markedly agnatic in character. Among the Pedi, on the other hand, there is a broader variation: from the simple nuclear through simple three-generational households, to an extended unit which, although agnatic in its origins, has a predominance of uterine links between the members of its younger and those of its older generations. While this extended form reflects a need, similar to that experienced in Ndebele families, to share unequally available and scarce resources and to provide childminding facilities, the smaller, independent variants of the Pedi household indicate the more general access their members have to things like land, migrant wages and networks of support in the village. On the other hand, there exists among both the Pedi- and the Ndebele-speaking sections of the village's population a number of households whose small size indicates, not a resilience or security of livelihood but an isolation and destitution - the small female-headed type. Like similar units observed by Murray (1980:109), these are among the poorest in the whole community. Murray attributes the existence of such households to the tendency he notes for the earnings of those men who do have jobs as migrants to become concentrated within these men's own households, rather than being distributed to the members of the wider or extended family. While this is true for some of the small female-headed households observed in Morotse, in other cases - notably those of female heads whose families have long been resident in the area - the presence

nearby of family members, affines and even friends can act as a buffer against the worst effects of poverty.

Although this chapter's contents have amounted to a qualification of the statements, cited earlier, that the size of residential and commensal units in rural Southern Africa has diminished, this should not be seen as an endorsement of the view that, whatever the exigencies of life on the rural peripheries, the "extended family" will somehow vitiate these, by accommodating "everyone (the sick, the unemployed, the elderly) in default of decent wages or adequate social security arrangements" (Murray 1981:103). In the developmental cycle which has been described above, the parameters and conditions are set by the facts of resettlement, of land shortage in reserve areas, of migrancy, the shortage of work, and unemployment. Although a kind of differentiation between households has been demonstrated, it should be clear from the case-studies cited that the majority of families find it extremely difficult to make ends meet. In such conditions, a household which does expand to accommodate an extra member does so at great cost to its extant members, forcing them to divide into even smaller portions an income which was already inadequate to meet their needs.

"I cannot get a pension, so my sons have to pay me money from their work. But they should be working to feed their own families". This statement by the widow Dina Kabeni indicates the deprivation frequently involved in the sharing of resources between a wide group of family members, and the fact that most people in the village would like to live in a nuclear household of their own: in a domestic unit which, at least in economic terms, is independent of others around it.



#### Chapter 4: Land Shortage and Inheritance

In Chapter 3 I have been concerned to emphasise the importance of the individual household as a primary domestic grouping, and to contrast this situation with the traditional one described by earlier ethnographers, in which large groups of related males and their families lived in close proximity and constituted ritual and social wholes. But although I have accentuated the separateness in economic terms of these individual households in present-day Morotse, they have nevertheless been linked together with other such units in several ways. As one might expect, this linkage has occurred most frequently through bonds of kinship, both consanguineal and affinal. That is, the older households in Morotse have been linked - and even situated in close proximity to each other - by virtue of the fact that, in many cases, their heads are related in the male line; many, too, have been linked by marriage, and in the oldest parts of the village there are traditions of cousin marriage creating inter-family connections for several generations back.

This set of social and residential connections between households is still evident in the longest-established parts of Morotse, but is undergoing drastic changes as a result of population pressure on land. It is in this contemporary context that inheritance of land comes to play a new and fundamentally different role: whereas previously it provided one of the bases for the unity of a family group, it now functions mainly to divide. In setting up new and different linkages, between fewer households than before, it excludes households that would previously have been incorporated in a wider set of relationships. The part played by inheritance in restructuring the local community will constitute the main point of discussion of this chapter. The first part will be devoted to

a discussion of inheritance rules and practices in the Pedi section of the village, and the Ndebele case will be discussed further on.

Before discussing these recent changes, it is necessary first to demonstrate the links of descent and marriage which bind together the older families in Morotse. The Madihlaba family, from the Pedi section of the village, serves as a good example. Firstly, Figure 11 shows the way in which their residential arrangements were structured by descent. The founder of this agnatically structured neighbourhood was Sekgeti, who moved to the area from the farm Buffelsvallei with his first wife Nkwetuna and their sons, and with the widow and children of his elder deceased brother Manaas, whom he, as levir, was caring for. His sons from both marriages settled in a cluster of homesteads around his own. The heart of the cluster consists of a few diverging lines of fathers and their last-born inheriting sons, who set up house on their parents' stands.

Thus, Sekgeti and his first wife lived in house (B), where their youngest son Karel and his wife later built their house (J). Rapoto, who as the widow of Manaas had her own residential plot and lands, lives in house (A), and her heir Johannes built his house (E) on the same plot, and brought his wife to live there. In turn, Sekgeti's oldest son Masele, who had acquired an adjacent plot to his father (F), then called his younger son Tholo to build on his plot (K); and, in similar vein, Sekgeti's second son Jacobs, living in house (G), now has his only son Moses' house (M) on his plot, and Klaas, in (I), has Eskia's house (N). Sons who were not heirs, like Masele and Jacobs, nevertheless acquired stands very close to the parental home, and this can be seen, too, in the cases of Jonas (H), Elias (C), Lekgowa (D), and Tautona (L).

Some of the other old families in the village manifest a similar pattern of residence, with agnates occupying contiguous residential plots and raising crops on contiguous fields. In the Pedi part of the village, two other families - besides the Madihlabas - which show this tendency

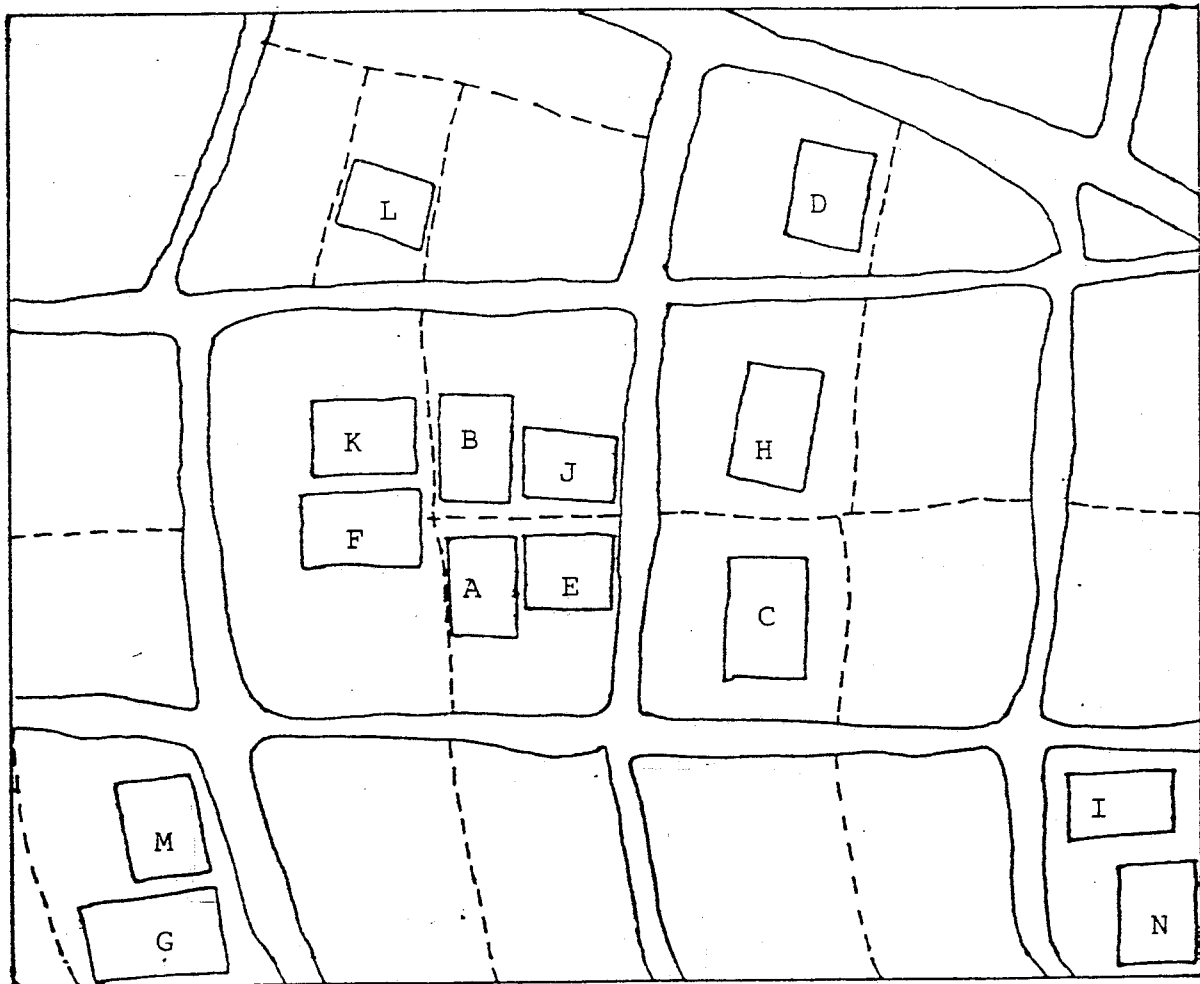
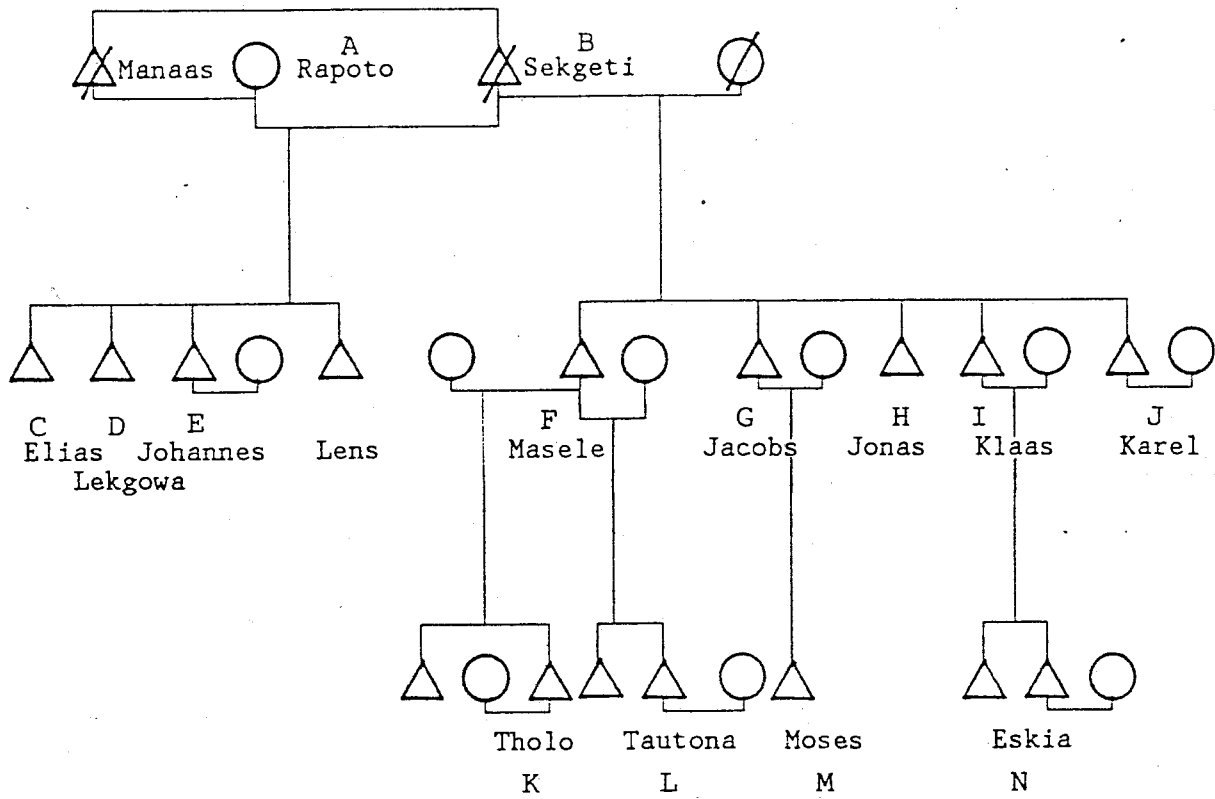


Figure 11: The Madihlaba family - kinship and locality

particularly are the Chegos and the Lerobanes: all three in fact moved together from Buffelsvallei in the early 1930s. Since well before the move, these families had been intermarrying, and they continued to do so after arriving in the area. Figure 12 shows the extent of this intermarriage in my sample of households belonging to these three families, demonstrating, in particular, the range of types of cousin marriage involved, including matrilateral cross cousin marriage and patrilateral parallel cousin marriage. The local network of interrelations created by this ongoing pattern of marriage means that family members have a large range of closely related kin, both consanguineal and affinal, to call on for assistance, support and general solidarity. Such a network is valued by all those who have access to it, but is especially important for people lacking a reliable income, or for members of small, poor, female-headed households of the type described in the last chapter.

The pattern of settlement and interrelation illustrated here begins to change considerably as the next generation of children - and especially sons - moves out of home to marry and start their own families. Most have grown up close to the core homestead founded by their paternal grandparents, and with fathers' brothers' families as neighbours. Because of the connections established by cousin marriage, many, in addition, have resided close to their mothers' parents' homes. When sons of this new generation reach the age when they wish to build their own houses, the stands adjacent to the original family cluster of homes have already been taken, mostly by people newly arrived in the area who are unrelated to the family. In addition, the rigid standardisation and alignment of residential stands imposed by the Betterment planning of the 1950s has acted as a brake on the natural and gradual expansion of a family group's living area to accommodate the homes of its sons and its grandsons. In the present circumstances, then, all save one son must move away from the family home to the outskirts of the village, or - as happens more often - to other villages altogether.

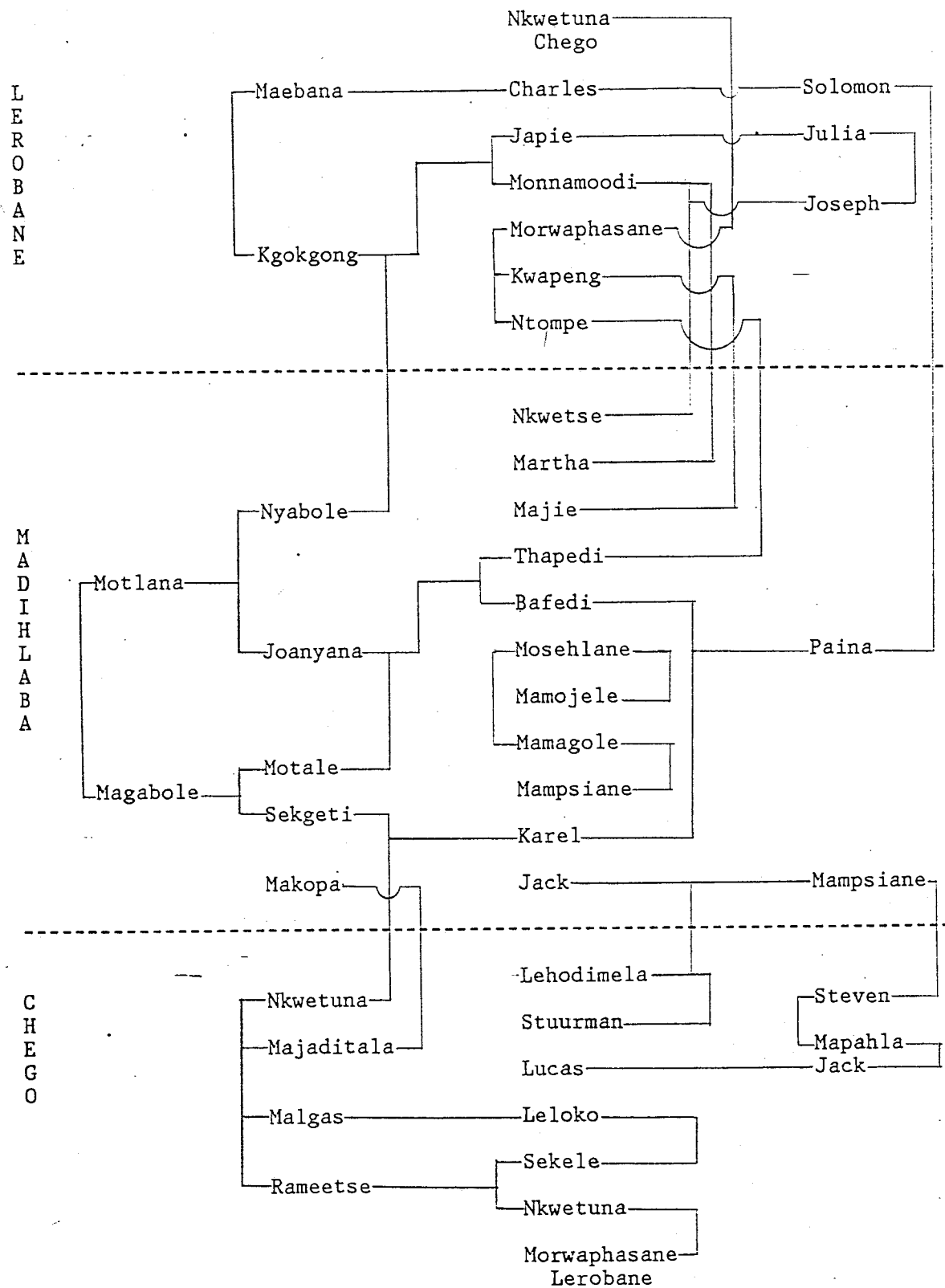


Figure 12: Cousin Marriage in Three Old Families

This change immediately lessens the likelihood of marriages between cousins occurring in succeeding generations, since sons who move to other places will probably find wives away from their birthplace. Figure 12 bears this out, revealing that cousin marriages between members of the youngest marrying generation - four - are far less frequent than those in the ascending generation - ten. It can be seen, then, that the implications of land shortage for the general shape of this oldest core of the community are far-reaching. Instead of being surrounded by its sons, a family now has local continuity only through its single heir - the youngest son - who inherits his parents' stand and their three morgen field.

#### *Land Shortage and Last born Inheritance*

In a recent seminar paper describing agricultural production in another Lebowa village, Molepo (1983) gives an account of the transfer of property from parents to their youngest sons. Evidence from his case-study "points to the last-born as the heir..." and this, he says, is "contrary to ethnographic literature which suggests that it is the first son of a first wife who takes his father's property..." (*ibid.*:5). In the following pages, I will examine the question of inheritance in Morotse, attempting to show that this "seemingly contradictory" (*ibid.*) change from primo- to ultimogeniture is not so much a complete reversal of customary procedure as a response to a situation of extreme pressure on land, in which certain aspects of custom have been intensified while others have lapsed altogether.

There was a pattern of first-born inheritance, not among the Pedi (Monnig 1967:336; Harries 1929:40) but in other southern African societies such as the Tswana (Schapera 1955:230-2) and Zulu (Reader 1966:66) as well. What these societies all had in common was the institution of the house-property complex, which enabled the wealth belonging to a wife's

house to be retained by that house and eventually to be transferred to its heir.<sup>1</sup> This wealth consisted mostly of cattle, and although it devolved upon the first born son of the house, the transfer should not be seen as the passing of privately-owned resources from a man to one particular child who was singled out for the privilege. Rather, the son who received the cattle was, in theory at least, burdened thereby with the responsibility of administering this joint stock of resources for the benefit of the woman who founded the house and of all other sons born to it (Schapera 1955:232; Monnig 1967:337; Reader 1966:66). Since, by this process, the eldest son would become controller rather than owner of the group's joint resources, the word "inheritance" might, indeed, be thought almost inappropriate to describe this transfer of property.

This chapter's immediate concern, however, is with the inheritance of land. Cattle, I deduce from the literature, were communally held and so could not be "inherited" in the strict sense of the word. It might be thought even less fruitful to seek in the ethnographies for evidence of the transfer from one person to another of land - a resource which most certainly could never be privately owned in traditional Southern African society. Schapera, however, provides clarity on this point, stating that although a man could hold only usufructary rights in a piece of land, he was entitled to transfer these rights to his children, other relatives, or friends (*ibid.*:205). It is suggested by Goody (1962:305) that the term "inheritance" be defined sufficiently broadly as to include the transfer of such rights.

Even given this broader definition, the Pedi ethnographers, Monnig and Harries, have little documentation on land inheritance. Schapera's more detailed and substantial writings on the law and customs of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Where a man had more than one wife, it was customary for the eldest son of each house to inherit its property, while any general property not owned by a particular house would be inherited by the eldest son of the principal house (Monnig *op. cit.*, Schapera *op. cit.*)

neighbouring Tswana (1955), on the other hand, tell us that the transfer of land from one generation to another usually happened, not on the occasion of a father's death, but on that of a son's marriage. After finding a wife, a young man would be given fields either from the family's allotment, by the household head, or from the ward's allotment, by its headman (*ibid.*:202-3). In theory there was no limit to the amount of land a man could be given, but the area of his cultivation was determined, in practice, by the amount of labour he could mobilise. This depended on the size and number of his houses, and, in turn, on the number of his wives - a particular field was usually thought of as "belonging" to the married woman who worked it.

The acquisition of land, then, was something associated with marriage rather than with death, and so was remote from the practice of inheritance as the word is usually understood. In a situation where land was still a plentiful resource, and where it could be readily acquired for use at the most appropriate time - that is, on setting up an independent household - there would be no need to await the retirement or decease of a relative who held usufructary rights in a particular portion of it.

The importance of this system of land acquisition for my argument becomes clearer when looking at the one case in which land *was* directly transferred from parents to children - that of a woman's youngest son, that is, the last-born son of a particular "house" (*ibid.*:235).<sup>2</sup> In the light of the above account of land acquisition, it can be seen that this was not because the son was being favoured over his brothers, or singled out for special attention. It was simply because all the older brothers of that house would probably already have procured allotments of land in the way described above. To restate the point in Goody's words, the

---

<sup>2</sup> He inherited his mother's homestead as well. Hunter (1961:119-120) reports a similar custom for the Mpondo; Monnig (1967:337) says that a Pedi youngest son inherited his mother's homestead and domestic effects, but he omits any mention of what happened to the mother's fields.



application of the rule of ultimogeniture in such a context does not imply the "exclusion of elder siblings from inheritance", but rather involves the transfer of residual parental rights "after other members of the sibling group have received a share in (the parent's) lifetime" (1962:326). Far from amounting to preferential treatment for the youngest, this type of inheritance involves a substantial burden of responsibility upon the heir, whose duty it then becomes to care for his ageing mother, or for both parents in the case of a monogamous marriage. The property he receives is conditional upon his performing this duty, and might be seen as a kind of bribe persuading him to fulfil it. "The special obligations of the youngest son to his parents are buttressed by additional rewards out of the inheritance" (*ibid.*:327). This point will be further discussed in the next section of the chapter.

One might think of these different means by which elder and youngest sons acquired land as quite distinct and unrelated. In an article on Nyuzwa-Zulu descent groups and land, for example, Preston-Whyte and Sibisi conceive of them as entirely separate processes. They describe the inheritance of land rights as "completely different" from the situation that arises "when a man ... wishes to establish an independent homestead" (1975:301) and is, with the endorsement of the headman, allocated land for this purpose by his father or another senior agnate.

An alternative and more comprehensive view, however, is outlined by Goody. Using his approach, one would include both those transfers of property which happen after a person's death, and those occurring during his/her lifetime, under the general heading of "devolution" (*ibid.*:311-2).

Perhaps, then, one could describe as "devolution" the process whereby a young Nyuzwa male was given land by his father or another agnate from the area over which his local descent group had control. Even the aforementioned Tswana - and the Pedi - system of land allocation can be

seen in this light. Although Preston-Whyte and Sibisi claim that in most Sotho-Tswana groups land allocation was done by chiefs or headmen rather than through the mechanism of a descent group (1975:281), in practice a man usually got a piece of land from his family holding, and it is only if none was available from this area that the headman needed to be approached (Schapera 1955:198; Monnig 1967:339).

The usefulness of seeing these means by which different sons acquired land as aspects of the same broad process will become clear when looking at the changes that have led to the current situation in a village like Morotse. Formerly, these two different means catered, in combination, for all eventualities involved in land allocation within a family group. But as land became scarcer the role played by inheritance - that is, by the direct transfer of land from parent to child - gradually expanded, edging out all other means of gaining access to land. In present-day Morotse, as in many other parts of contemporary Southern Africa, land has become such a scarce resource that inheritance, previously one of the least important means of intergenerational devolution, is now almost the only means.<sup>3</sup>

When land is in short supply, then, the lineal principle becomes crucial in determining access to it. In trying to understand the historical process whereby inheritance has come to assume this central role in the devolution of usufructary rights, a number of tangential sources are helpful. Both Preston-Whyte and Sibisi (1975) and Shipton (1984) examine the relationship between land scarcity and descent used as an organising device. From their Nyuzwa-Zulu case study, Preston-Whyte and Sibisi deduce that there has been a change from "traditional times", when cattle provided the material basis for a local descent group's unity, to the present day, when land - the scarcest resource - is the main focus for

---

<sup>3</sup> See also Sansom (1970:128-30) for an account of a similar process in a Pedi heartland community.

"corporate descent group action". The land shortage has the effect of consolidating and strengthening such groups by uniting their members in competition with others (*ibid.*:310-1).

There is an even more striking example of the same kind of change furnished by Shipton, in his analysis of material from East Africa. He finds that, in societies with ready access to land, its allocation - and other aspects of social life - are organised via formal political systems rather than through "informal links of agnation and affinity". This is because after people marry, they are likely to move away from their natal homes in search of fresh ground which is freely available for cultivation. Because couples move beyond the bounds of influence of their local kin groups, it is to a territorially- rather than kin-based authority that the allocation of land is entrusted. In contrast, he says, in areas with high population pressure on land the life of the society - and its system of land tenure - are structured by the patrilineage. "Staying on and inheriting part of a paternal holding is an easier way of obtaining land than asking the headman of a crowded village or neighbourhood" (1984:620).

Shipton cites cases in which a rapid increase of population pressure on land has resulted in a startlingly sudden change from a territorial or "locality-based" polity to a "descent-based" (*ibid.*:618) system of organisation. Examples are cited, too, in which the opposite change has occurred (*ibid.*:620-3).

This correlation, and the insights into its processual workings through time provided by the case studies cited above, allow for a more precise and detailed picture of the recent change in Southern African land inheritance that I have been trying to outline. To restate my argument so far: the reason why so little information is available concerning the inheritance of land in traditional Southern African societies is precisely because land did not usually devolve through this mechanism. Where

land inheritance did occur, it coexisted with other systems of land allocation which were usually organised along the lines of descent or at least via a family group, but which happened before the death of the family head. The fact that kinship played some role in determining this allocation would be seen by Shipton as an indication that land, while not necessarily scarce in these societies, was already having to be husbanded with some care. Between his two types, "the locality-based and descent-based configurations", which he sees as poles on a continuum (1984:618), one could place the Tswana of the 1920s and 30s, with the family head giving land to his sons from the family holding, subject to the jurisdiction of a territorially defined authority (Schapera 1955:202-4). Closer to the descent-based/land shortage pole would be the Nyuzwa of the 1970s, with a lineage segment exercising effective control over a particular area of land, and with the head of this lineage segment deciding on the siting of new fields for one of its members (Preston-Whyte and Sibisi 1975: 299-301).

The case of Morotse, with its recent waves of relocated people, manifests an even more extreme shortage of land than the Nyuzwa case, and it belongs logically, therefore, closest to the "descent-based" pole in this model. But Shipton points out that "the broad relationship between population pressures and the residential cohesion of lineages can obtain only up to a point": where population pressure becomes too great and subdivision of land is no longer feasible, there is no option other than "the migration of ... married men and their conjugal families away from paternal homesteads" (*ibid.*:628). Had the original families in Morotse expanded by a natural process of population increase, there might have been a gradually intensifying reliance on a descent-based organisation of land tenure. But any potential "natural" development along these lines was leapfrogged because of the extremely rapid, non-organic populating of the village and surrounding villages by labour-tenants expelled from the white farms.

As it is, descent has acquired an exaggerated importance out of all proportion to its former role. But there is no possibility, now, of a descent-based group having control over, or an ongoing relationship to, an area of land. It is an individual household that has rights of access to a particular field which may not be subdivided, and these rights are transferred by inheritance to a single heir - the youngest son. The inheritance may be *post mortem*, or it may precede the death of the heir's father or of his widowed mother. In this situation, the use of descent in transferring land has been narrowed down to favour a single person only. It has come to resemble most closely the system in some Mediterranean and other European peasant communities: a system of impartible inheritance, with one plot passed down from a father to a son whose eligibility as heir is defined in terms of his place in the birth sequence of siblings.

The correlation of this style of inheritance with extreme land shortage is noted by several writers. Goody, identifying it as a peculiarly Eurasian phenomenon, states its underlying logic:

the scarcer productive resources become and the more intensively they are used, then the greater the tendency towards the retention of these resources within the basic productive and reproductive unit, which in the large majority of cases is the nuclear family (1976:20).

Wolf, using mid-nineteenth century Ireland as his case study, shows how single-heir, impartible inheritance took over from earlier, partible forms "under pressures of severe over-population" (1966:75). The implication of such an inheritance system, he says, is the separation of a small group of landholders from a large mass of disinherited people, who may form a reservoir of rural or urban labour (*ibid.*:76).

It would seem, then, that a land shortage such as exists in present-day Morotse militates against the retention of broadly based agnatic groups. If, as several authors claim, the solidarity and perpetuation of a local

descent group is predicated upon its connection to and control over land,<sup>4</sup> then the converse relationship, in this village, between lack of land and lack of descent groups - or even loosely-structured agnatic clusters like that of the Madihlabas - seems inevitable. I have suggested above that the nature of community life in Morotse during the present generation has been considerably affected by the movement of non-inheriting sons away from the village because of the lack of access to land and residential stands. While this indicates the accuracy of the idea that the formation or perpetuation of descent-based family groups is inhibited by the contemporary demographic situation, the converse idea, expressed by Goody, that single-heir inheritance favours the nuclear family form, requires some qualification in the case of this village. As has been demonstrated in the previous chapter, Morotse has a wide range of household and family types, and each copes with the problem of inheritance slightly differently.

*Last born inheritance in Morotse*

The accompanying table shows that, in contrast to a time when very few

Table 5: Youngest Sons and Land Allocation

| Age                         | Youngest Sons | Other    |
|-----------------------------|---------------|----------|
| over 50                     | 3 (5%)        | 29 (47%) |
| 35-50                       | 6 (10%)       | 14 (23%) |
| 20-34                       | 8 (13%)       | 1 (2%)   |
| Total                       | 17 (28%)      | 44 (72%) |
| Total landholders in sample |               | 61(100%) |

<sup>4</sup> "Land is necessarily the basis of descent group cohesion. Without it the descent group must be new or dwindling, and in either case of little standing." (Reader 1966:71). Also see Preston-Whyte and Sibisi (1975:311).

men became plottolders through inheritance, land can now be acquired only by heirs. This can be seen from the fact that in the 20-35 age group almost the only plottolders are last-born sons, that is, heirs. The only exception is a young man from an old and influential family, who acquired a field as a direct result of his family's connections with the chief and the authorities. This pattern is in sharp contrast to that which can be seen in the 35-50, and especially the over-50, age groups: most of these men, when young, did not inherit land, but were allocated it by the Trust authorities. Together the "other" sons over 35 constitute 70% of the total number of plottolders in the sample, and this shows that most village land is still held and farmed by people to whom it was originally allotted, rather than having been transferred to their heirs. It would seem, then, that the full effects of the changeover to impartible inheritance have yet to be felt. On the other hand, the bland statistics are qualified by the knowledge that a number of these older plottolders have already started to rely on the last-born son - or more accurately on his wife - to help them farm on these fields, and in some cases the land may effectively have been transferred to the heir in all but name.

A strong commitment to the idea of last-born inheritance is demonstrated not only by this table, but also by the statements made by villagers about the practice. Like Goody (1962:327) they see its logic in terms of a kind of bargain in which the provision of land is exchanged for the security of filial care for aged parents. David Mthimunye, for instance, claims that his parents passed their field on to him because he had for years ploughed it with them, and later for them, and because he had looked after them in their old age. The practice of ultimogeniture is, however, not a rigidly defined one, and the observing of it allows for exceptions: if the last-born does not want the land, one offers it to one's other son or sons. In a number of cases, circumstances have caused the rule to be interpreted in this more flexible sense. Of the Masilo family's two sons, for example, the younger, Daniel, has proved a disappointment to his parents: far from contributing to their welfare, he has often

needed their financial help. It is the older brother, Rudolph, who has shown his commitment to his parents and to their country home by helping them to build their house and by sending them monthly remittances from his job in Kempton Park. When he eventually inherits their house, stand and fields, it will not only be because of this concern for and assistance to them, but also because they know that Daniel has no interest in living in the country - "he likes it in town" (see Figure 4 on p106).

This example further demonstrates the accuracy of Goody's claim that last-born inheritance does have something of the quality of a bribe or a bargain (*ibid.*:327), and it prompts me to look at the transactional nature of the arrangement in greater detail, and to examine whether the kinds of the rewards gained by both parties have changed over time.

A number of studies in different parts of rural Southern Africa have noted that the mutual dependency which binds elders to their young relatives, and parents to their children, has undergone radical transformations with the entrenchment of migrant labour. From very early on the independent earning power of young male migrants has represented a threat to their senior male relatives' authority, previously based in large part on the control exercised by these elders over material and social resources (Delius 1983:76). Murray, writing of a later period, suggests that this economic independence of young migrants, which was established "for example through the purchase rather than the inheritance of livestock ... subverted the traditional balance of authority between the senior and junior generations, in favour of the latter" (1980:109). A similar process is described by McAllister for the Gcaleka of the Transkei (1985:128) and he, like Delius, writes about the attempts made by elders to counter or control this independence. In the Gcaleka example, this control is exerted by means of ritual belief and invocation which stresses the social and ritual dependence of a migrant on his seniors, "as if to counter the economic independence that migratory earnings give to the young" (*ibid.*:124).



Returning to the question of last-born inheritance, it may be that this practice, too, represents a form of attempted control over the earnings of a son - here, the son who will in any case stay on with his parents for longest. The custom of offering at least this one child the security of an agricultural supplement to his income, and a rural home for his eventual retirement, may help to ensure that he will remain based at his parents' home, and will continue to remit to them the cash essential for their livelihood.<sup>5</sup>

Looking specifically at Morotse once again, one can see that there has been a change in the kinds of benefits involved in entering into the bargain that inheritance implies. For a last-born son and heir from the over-50 age group, for instance, the issues that were involved in deciding to support his aged parents were quite different from those facing a young man about to make a similar decision in recent times.

John Masilo, Rudolph's father, is a good example of an inheriting son in the over-50 age group (see Figure 4 on p106). He tells the story of his father's funeral, an event which seems to represent for him the culmination of his sustained efforts in providing his parents with many years of financial and other support. It is a matter of some pride to John that his father's sister, who came to the funeral from her distant home, was so deeply impressed with the lavishness of the coffin, the ceremony, and other arrangements. She praised him for being better than those children who "just take their parents' money and then wrap them up in a sack and throw them away after they die". But John says he got very little from his parents: there was no money or stock, only their

---

<sup>5</sup> It is probable that migrancy has other implications for, and effects on, the institution of last-born inheritance. According to David Webster, ultimogeniture is the norm even in his fieldwork area of Kwa Dapha where there is no shortage of land. He suggests that, because last-born sons are the last to leave the family home when all their older brothers have been migrants for several years, it is logical that they should be the ones to live with and care for their parents (personal communication). In the case of Morotse, this explanation appears to complement the one I have offered.

house on its stand and their field. These, he says, he would prefer not to have taken, since they carried with them the arduous task of caring for the old people - "even if you try your hardest they still will not be satisfied". Whatever his misgivings, however, he had accepted the responsibility - especially great since he was not merely the youngest, but also the only son - of performing this filial duty. Although his decision was, no doubt, prompted partly by moral obligation, it did have a rational component as well. His house in the village and the land he was given by his parents are important components of the package of resources he manages on behalf of the large household he heads. Not only did he find it convenient to retire here, paying no rent, and leaving his son Rudolph to live in the family's Tembisa house while earning money for the family's upkeep, but he has also become a very active farmer. He places great importance on the contribution made by his fields to the household finances, and he acts as a vociferous village commentator and critic on the question of the Co-op.

It should, of course, be remembered that men in the same age group as John Masilo who wanted a stand or land in the village did not need to rely on inheritance to procure these resources, since they were still freely available at the time. It has been mentioned earlier how the Madihlaba brothers, all now well into their 50s, built their houses on stands close to that of their parents, and were allotted fields. For a man of this generation to have undertaken the task of caring for his parents does not, then, indicate a calculated decision made purely in terms of material benefits, since these benefits were readily available even to non-inheriting sons. Conversely, the fact that it was possible - and probable - for sons of this generation to settle close to their parents also meant that several or all of them could, and frequently did, contribute towards their aged parents' upkeep, thus lessening the burden on the heir himself.

For young men of the present generation the situation has changed. The only ones who can acquire fields in the area, and residence close to the parental home, are those who acquiesce in the duty of parental support that inheritance implies, and there is less likelihood of help from their siblings since these often settle in other villages, even other areas. Here the question of whether the rewards are worth the sacrifice, or whether the filial ideology is sufficiently strong to overcome such considerations, becomes more crucial. As Table 5 and its accompanying commentary indicates, there are a number of youngest sons who *have* settled for the role of heir and provider. Certainly, most parents still expect their youngest son - or another son defined as heir for some reason - to live with them, and most are busy beginning to make provision for this projected situation. Miccah Khubedu and his wife Betty, for example, are helping their last-born son Paulus to build a house next door to their own on their residential stand; they are relieved that at least one of their sons will be based close by, but saddened by the fact that the older son, Moses, has moved to a village 50 kms away. Similarly, Monnamoodi Mokoana and his wife are watching and assisting with the gradual progress in the building of their youngest son Samuel's house in their yard, but they worry that, because he remits money to them so irregularly, this may indicate that he is losing interest in coming to live there. An old woman like Mamulopu Kgwete, in contrast, cannot cherish even a slight hope of the return of her youngest son, who left home without trace six years ago. Her first born son, she says, will probably not return to live with her either, as he has been lured away to the city by the charms of his second wife.

The issue appears in a different light when seen from the point of view, not of these anxious parents, but of their sons. Whether or not they intend to play the role of heir depends partly on whether the advantages of living closer to transport and town are outweighed by the benefits of access to agricultural land, and of rootedness in a long established rural network of relatives and friends. In either case, it will be

primarily the man's wife, and his children, who will experience these things as beneficial or otherwise. And even though he may shoulder the full burden of providing his parents with their cash needs, it is his wife who must take over responsibility for farming after her parents in-law have grown too old to work on their own fields.

#### *Women and Inheritance*

Ironically, it is women, outsiders to the family, whose role in inheritance and in the use of the land transferred by it is most central. This role was already a crucial one before the drastic transformation of rural societies: a man acquired fields when marrying, and these were associated with, and worked by, his wives. But in the contemporary situation, women's role in this regard has been greatly intensified. For both parties in the inheritance transaction - the parents and the heir - it is crucial that the daughter-in-law play her role as expected. From the parents' point of view the daughter-in-law who lives next door or with them provides general help in the household and, especially importantly, in the fields. From his point of view, her fulfilling these functions lessens the burden placed on him in caring for his parents.

The importance of having a daughter in-law to work one's land is shown by a case such as that of Rapoto Madihlaba. When she became too old to tend her fields, she favoured her married, middle son over her single, youngest son as her heir (see Figure 11 on p135). Like a previous example, this demonstrates the flexibility of last-born inheritance: it is often the most suitable son, rather than the youngest, who inherits from his parents, and suitability is measured especially in terms of marital status.

The importance of the dutiful daughter in-law is illustrated still more vividly by the "abnormal" examples of defaulters who fail to perform their expected role. The wife of Sara Nthobeng's youngest son is one such

defaulter. She was unwilling to do any work in the fields or in the house, and the tension between her and her in-laws finally culminated in a court case following a bitter quarrel during which she swore at them. As a result, the son now lives with his wife in a different part of the village; his parents are voluble in their disapproval of this situation and in their concern that they have no one to help them in the house and on their fields. Some villagers attribute this kind of tension between parents- and daughters-in-law to the fact that youths nowadays no longer marry their cousins. In-laws in the previous generation were often related, which, it is believed, made it likely that not only the two individuals but also the two families would get along well together.

It is not only daughters-in-law who default but, of course, sons as well. There are numerous cases in which the cash remittance sent home by a migrant to his wife and parents dwindles in size, or becomes infrequent or even non-existent. Very often this development coincides with the virtual desertion of the man from the village, and from his familial involvements. If he is a youngest son, this means abandoning the obligation to care for his parents, and if he has a wife, she is also left to fend for herself. Where this deserted wife stays in the village, however, her access to the land inherited by her husband may become crucial, for her and for her parents-in-law. Even though her husband's desertion may mean that she has little or no cash to put into farming, and therefore is forced to harvest and thresh with only those family members that are available, and who work for a share of the harvest rather than for pay, she may still be able to glean a meagre amount of grain from her fields. Bafedi Ralebetse is one such woman. Her husband Karel, a last-born son in the 35-50 age bracket, has been living with another woman in Tembisa for years, and sends no money back to his wife and two daughters in the reserve. He did, however, inherit his father's field and stand, and Bafedi's use of this land provides the household with its only reliable source of food. In her case, there are no extra mouths to feed, as her parents in-law died some years ago. Nonetheless, the

case of Bafedi and others in a similar position - or with the added responsibility of caring for ageing affines - points to the central role played by women in inheritance, agriculture and the care of older people.

This role is important not only in the case of the women who marry into a family, but also in that of its own daughters. It will be remembered that Morotse has a number of large families - especially Pedi-speaking ones - in which uterine links predominate, and in which an ageing couple is supported and kept company, not by sons and their wives, but by unmarried daughters. There is, in fact, a homily repeated by many of the village's inhabitants: that "a daughter will care for you better than a son". Ironically, however, whereas a man may bequeath a field to his son as a safeguard ensuring filial support and commitment, he is in no position to do the same for a daughter, since this would be contrary to tribal custom as perpetuated by the local government bureaucracy in charge of agricultural matters. In other words, a woman who marries into a family may acquire land from that family through its inheritance by her husband - even if, as in the case of Bafedi, her husband later abandons her. But the unmarried daughter of a family may not be given land - even if there are no other claimants to it. This means that the person who, in many cases, is thought to be most reliable in supporting her parents, and who would therefore be the most suitable heir, is denied the full privileges of this status due to the anachronistic survival - and purposeful conservation - of an inappropriate customary law. As in so many other aspects of contemporary life in the South African reserve areas, the perpetuation of tradition under the rubric of the Homeland system of government is completely out of kilter with the reality of changing needs, circumstances, and family structures.

This paradoxical situation confronted by families who have only daughters to provide intergenerational continuity will be elaborated in the following section.

*Different Households and Strategies of Inheritance*

Among the changes outlined in Chapter 3 is the gradually increasing dependence of plottolders on cash input in order to make a reasonable success of farming. This is an important factor influencing changes in inheritance, and I will show in this section the varying strategies of heirship adopted by people occupying different levels of the income hierarchy, and living in different types of household.

I have outlined above a recent tendency in Morotse's style of residential settlement for youngest sons to settle with their parents while other sons must leave to live elsewhere. The logic of this tendency derives from a situation of land shortage. I have intimated, however, that there are certain cases which do not fit the stereotype. The households which do conform most starkly to my description are those I call "simple three-generational" in Chapter 3; that is, small households extended only to incorporate certain members of the ascending generation - the heir's parents. These households do possess the requirements I identified in the same chapter as necessary for a small male-headed household to survive: a reasonable supply of cash earned in town, which in turn makes the expenditure of effort and resources on agriculture a viable economic proposition. True to the stereotype, the non-inheriting sons from such families do set up house either elsewhere in the village or, more frequently, in other areas altogether. Indeed, the almost nuclear appearance of the heir's household derives not only from its relatively comfortable economic position, but also from the fact that these other sons are wholly absent.

I have already mentioned Goody's view that it is when productive resources, such as land, are scarce that they tend to become concentrated within "the basic productive and reproductive unit, ... the nuclear family" (1976:20) or other small household types. Wolf's corollary to this is that the non-inheriting sons, excluded from the small landholding

family, become dispossessed and move away, often to the urban areas. Several writers on Southern Africa have noted a similar process. Beinart writes of certain Pondo households in the early twentieth century which, due to their large size and number of cattle, were able to withstand the pressures to migrate, but he shows that "as these families broke up, usually only one branch, based around the eldest son of the great house, would be able to survive in a similar way" (1982:137).<sup>6</sup> Tracing the process of dispossession from the urban perspective, Pauw shows that, among the fathers of the men in his East Bank location sample, those who became most completely and quickly urbanised were those who - because of their place in the sequence of birth - had no prospect of acquiring land (1963:9-11)

The simple three-generational household in Morotse thus seems to represent a more general pattern associated with impartible inheritance and land shortage. But it is by no means the only pattern found in the village. Although the cases outlined below in which the last-born rule is not followed might be thought to disprove my overall argument, it should be emphasised that whatever strategies people are forced to adopt in reality they always state their adherence to the ideal of ultimogeniture. Like the nuclear family described in Chapter 3, the transfer of property and land to a youngest son is an ideal which all villagers aspire to even if it was unattainable.

When looking at the households extended on agnatic lines - households described in Chapter 2 as being found more commonly among the Ndebele - it was extraordinarily difficult to identify the heir in the various cases, and it gradually became clear that, most often, there *was* none. The explanation of this apparently nonsensical claim lies in the way in

---

<sup>6</sup> The fact that the *eldest* son was at the core of this small family branch suggests that, in this case, it was the livestock inherited by him, rather than agricultural land, which provided the basis of the household economy.



which such households are structured. It has already been described how, in these domestic units, a level of poverty and financial insecurity prompts a continuing interdependence between the families of related males - families which might, in different circumstances, have moved away to form independent units. Seen from the perspective of inheritance, this extended household form implies a reluctance to allow one of its important joint resources - its land - to pass from the hands of the household as a whole into the possession of only one of its constituent nuclear families. There is a commitment, rather, to continuing to farm this land for the benefit of the entire unit, and to drawing on its joint kitty for any expenses incurred in the process.<sup>7</sup>

Inheritance in such households can thus be seen to be congruent with the strong commitment to a large, patrilineally structured family described in the last chapter. Indeed, the system of inheritance - or rather, the reluctance to allow inheritance to occur - and the household type contribute to each other's continuation. Interestingly, this pattern departs from the typical or logical programme of impartible inheritance and land shortage outlined by Goody and Wolf (*op. cit.*). It is, nevertheless, a pattern rooted in the practical necessity of sharing scarce goods.

There is another consideration, as well, which reinforces this trend. It has become customary among the village's Ndebele community for a young woman to spend a period of time working as a domestic servant in Pretoria. This may start when she is still living at her parents' home, but continues into her life as a married woman and as a mother. During this period, she is a *de jure*, but mostly absent, member of her husband's natal household, and her mother-in-law takes care of the children, who may be

---

<sup>7</sup> A similar delay in the transfer of property occurs in parts of peasant Europe, but in such cases the land is always finally parcelled out on the death of the father (Friedl 1962), whereas in the households under discussion the land will continue to be managed by his widow.

well into their teens before their mother finally returns to "build a house" of her own - frequently on the same stand as that of her in-laws.<sup>8</sup>

A claim made earlier - that a man can inherit only if he has a wife to work the field - must here be qualified, then. The wife must also be *available* to do such work. In many of the Ndebele agnatically extended households, the sons' wives are at work in Pretoria, leaving the father-in-law or more frequently his wife or widow to continue as manager of the household's agricultural endeavours. The absence of young to middle-aged women from such a domestic unit thus militates against the transfer of its land from the older generation to a specific heir in the younger one, and this factor combines with the general tendency for these households to remain as large agglomerates of kin rather than splitting into separate families with separate property. As a result, though Ndebele informants claim to follow the system of ultimogeniture, in many of their households there seems to be a reluctance to acknowledge the necessity for any kind of inheritance, or at least a tendency to delay the transferring of land for as long as possible.<sup>9</sup> One of the implications of all this is that the task of caring for parents is also shared out between family members, rather than devolving upon one in particular.

It may be thought that this tendency to delay the process of inheritance, and to leave the land in the possession of the wider family, contradicts

---

<sup>8</sup> This lengthy period of absence from home is probably dictated by economic necessity, but certain details - like the fact that the employment is always in Pretoria, and always procured via a well-established network of quasi-feudal ties with Afrikaans families there, and the fact that it is considered appropriate, even essential, for every woman to do this - give it something of the quality of a tradition, almost a rite of passage. This is borne out by the disparaging comments of Pedi who say of this custom that Ndebele girls think they are properly grown up only when they have left school as soon as possible to go and work in the kitchens in Pretoria.

<sup>9</sup> A similar pattern is discernible even among Ndebele families who have no land, though in these the property is limited to a residential stand, a house, and domestic equipment.

my earlier contention that a severe shortage of land inhibits the development or perpetuation of groups based on descent. But an extended family of parents, their sons and spouses, and grandchildren cannot, however large, be thought of as a descent group of the kind referred to by Shipton, and by Preston Whyte and Sibisi. And the strategy adopted by these households does not represent a solution to the problem of land shortage, so much as a temporary stalling, an attempt to counteract or deny the inevitable. Ultimately, the fact remains that plots and fields are unavailable locally, and if a household grows beyond a certain size its members will have to face this fact, and some of them will have to move. One would have to observe such a household over time to see how it dealt with this kind of crisis.

In the household type extended along uterine lines, which I have identified as more characteristically Pedi - though uterine extension may be found in both groups and may, indeed, coexist with agnatic extension - a similar inhibition to the early devolution of land is found. The case of Magdalena Mokoana is a good example. She is an old widow, none of whose three sons has taken a wife. Lacking a married heir, she thus continues to work on the fields herself, with the help of her daughters. The married daughters are paid in kind, and the remainder of the produce goes to feed her household which includes an unmarried daughter and several grandchildren. Since there is no male who can feasibly take over the fields as heir, the question of inheritance is delayed for the time being. Should a widow like Magdalena finally die without a willing heir, her land would revert to the chief, who would then reallocate it to some other married man.

Families in this situation complain about the fact that land may not be transferred to unmarried daughters. A daughter - as mentioned earlier in this chapter - is thought to be the child who "will care for you better" than a son will, and her support should be able to be safeguarded by a bequeathing of land. Daughters who have remained as members of their

parental households are well placed to use farming land to good effect, since they often have small children, experience difficulty migrating to industrial centres to work, and so are in a position to provide the frequent but non-intensive attention required in working on the fields.

It might be supposed that the inheritance of land by daughters is a possibility so remote in both customary and contemporary tribal law that people would hardly bother to discuss or complain about the issue. On the contrary, however, it is a matter of great concern, and can sometimes result in fierce conflict in the village.

The case of Anna Ralebetse's land demonstrates this very well (see Figure 8 on p121). Although Anna was once married, the union lasted for such a short time that there was no land allocated to her as a wife - the normal means whereby a woman may legitimately acquire fields. On returning to Morotse after a long working life on the Reef she felt confident, however, that she would not lack the means to grow her own food. This was because her father Jacobs, the founder of the small Christian peasant family described on p74, had a piece of land for her. This he had originally procured for his son Moses, thinking that there would be at least one other son to take over his land at a later stage. But Moses, as it turned out, was the only son, and it was he who came to inherit Jacobs' land as custom dictates. Jacobs then told Anna that she could take the fields that had been set aside for her brother; because she had produced a son whom Jacobs came to regard as almost his own and therefore as a deserving heir, but also because she had worked hard to support her parents' household and so had behaved "as a son should".

During Anna's long absence in Johannesburg, however, the piece of land in question had been "borrowed" by her older sister Makgethwa for use by her newly married son Thomas and his wife, on the understanding that it would later be given back to Anna on her return to the village. They later showed that they had no intention of letting her take possession

of the land again, and bitter arguments and conflict ensued. The headman enjoined the family members to try to work things out between themselves, but when the quarrel was taken to the chief, and to the administrators of the Co-op to whose authority he always bows, they failed to adjudicate in favour of Anna. The plot, effectively, was reallocated to her sister's son. This outcome to the quarrel made it clear that customary law in its present bureaucratised form was not to be moved on this issue - no woman may own land except through her husband.

### *Conclusion*

Perhaps the most important theme running through this chapter has been that of dependence and interdependence. In the present day, one generation is linked to its successor by its reliance on that succeeding generation for the resource of migrant remittances. It, in turn, has control over a crucial resource for agricultural production - land - and by means of a "bargain" the promise of this land is exchanged for continuing support of a financial kind. Depending on the circumstances and the particular type of household concerned, the bargain may be struck between parents and a single son. This pattern, whose genesis I have tried to demonstrate, is the "customary" one for both Pedi and Ndebele speakers, and the one to which most informants claim to adhere. There may, alternatively, be a transaction between parents and a wider group of sons, or daughters, or both. In such cases the household appears to withstand or resist the pressures promoting impartible inheritance.

I have tried to look at some of the factors which influence children in their decision to take on the responsibility of supporting their parents, in return for a place at their parents' home and for the opportunity of farming there. Pursuing the metaphor of a bargain, it has been suggested that this commitment may be partly prompted by rational considerations: by an awareness of the benefits of access to agricultural land, and of rootedness in a long established rural network of relatives and friends.

As is shown in Chapter 2, farming provides real returns only to those who invest money in it, so it is those sons earning the highest wages in town who will really experience their - and their wives' - access to fields as most beneficial in material terms. These are also the men whose households conform most often to the "simple three-generational" type described elsewhere as characteristic of slightly better-off people.

There are, however, heirs, or wives of heirs, whose farming of the parental land is not propped up by a sufficient input of cash. In such a case, strictly material considerations may not necessarily explain why people continue to regard possession of land as important, as their returns on agriculture may be minimal. Murray suggests, after Spiegel, that migrants "continue to invest in agriculture and livestock, even when they cannot ensure a worthwhile return in the short term, in order to demonstrate a long-term commitment to the rural social system" (1981:77). There is a more generalised rationality in this kind of commitment, since a migrant must always return to the reserve when he reaches retirement age, and he therefore relies, in the last instance, on the continuation of some kind of agricultural enterprise.

There are other important considerations determining whether or not a son decides to accept the responsibility of heirship. It is recounted in Chapter 2 how the viability of agriculture - objectively and as perceived by the villagers - has been affected by recent changes in the techniques and social relationships of production, especially since the introduction of the Co-op. The intrusion of wider forces beyond local control in their farming has caused uncertainty and resentment in the village, and one can only speculate at this stage whether plottolders might voluntarily begin to withdraw from this unpredictable enterprise, or whether these political and market forces might gradually act to exclude most of them from it. These factors will have a bearing on whether, in future years, last-born - or any - sons continue to accept the filial duty implied by heirship.

All the considerations outlined above are based more or less on calculations of long or short term material benefit. But it may be that an overemphasis on this aspect leads to a neglect of other, less tangible factors contributing to intergenerational continuity. Although I have illustrated broad patterns followed by richer and poorer people, there is, in the end, no narrowly economic explanation why the son of one household should return to live with his parents and do his duty by his family while another, from a similar background, should fail to do so. I suggest that there is, then, as with McAllister's account of the Gcaleka, an ideological dimension to the institution of heirship, to which some people submit more readily than do others. My study of Morotse did not include an in-depth investigation into concepts, cosmologies or ritual beliefs, but I certainly gained an impression from talking to informants that there was a strong morality attached to the idea of behaving as a good son should, including - in the case of a youngest son - an acceptance and willing performance of the duties of an heir. This morality, expressed in terms of ethnic tradition - "in Sotho (or Ndebele) custom, a last-born must care for his parents" - appears to have a role similar to that of the ritual invocations pronounced by Gcaleka elders in their attempts to conceal the true direction of dependency between their sons and themselves.

## Chapter 5: The Problem of Ethnicity

It has been seen from the preceding chapters that many aspects of the lives of Morotse's residents appear to be influenced by their membership of one or other ethnic group. In trying to understand these strongly-marked divisions, I draw in this chapter on some recent historical and anthropological literature on ethnicity. Using an approach gleaned from these writings, I gather, and interpret, the fragments of evidence about ethnic difference and interaction from earlier chapters. Differing experiences of recent history, combined with competition for resources in the present day, provide the focus of my explanation.

### *Ethnicity in the Literature*

In a number of recent writings which attempt to explain the phenomenon of ethnicity, there are criticisms of older, more conventional approaches. This "conventional wisdom" sees ethnicity or tribalism as involving a survival into a modern context of traditional beliefs, practices and institutions, and is ascribed by critics to two different sources. Firstly, structural-functionalist anthropology, with its monographs on various distinct tribes, emphasised these as separate units, each with its own systemic integration of institutions such as politics, religion and law. The precise demarcation of these tribal units was not a matter of great concern to scholars, although Evans-Pritchard did define the tribe, in political terms, as something within which a common rule of law was recognised, and beyond which warfare would be resorted to (Gulliver 1969:9). Extending this definition to make it encompass other aspects of culture: a tribe was a unit within which the systematically and logically interrelated aspects of that tribe's culture



"worked". Where one tribe ended and the next began was where a different culture was operative, with a similarly patterned organic unity integrating its various components.

This kind of approach found its relevance to the modern context in the assumptions of modernisation theory. Where, in a post-colonial or industrialised urban situation, people chose to define themselves in terms of apparently tribal aspects of culture, and thus came into conflict with members of other tribes defining themselves by markedly different traits, this was seen as a "traditional aberration in a modern world, a consequence of some deep seated irrationality on the part of non-western peoples failing to come to grips with a western rationality which will inevitably triumph" (Kahn 1981:49). According to this view, then, tribalism or ethnicity represents a persistence of or a reversion to tradition and the precolonial past. It is a view that has been criticised - by later anthropologists, and by underdevelopment and Marxist theorists - for different reasons. Despite their varying theoretical standpoints, however, what these criticisms have in common is their insistence that, even if the cultural practices and symbols used to emphasise ethnicity are apparently primordial, they are invoked for reasons deriving from the contemporary political and economic situation.

One of the earliest writers to make this observation was Mitchell, in his study of African workers on the Copperbelt (1956). He shows that workers' rural affiliation to a tribe plays an important role in allocating them, once in an urban context, to drinking clubs, dance teams, burial societies and the like. The notion of "tribe", then, provides an important category of interaction amongst and between the large numbers of industrial workers from societies which, in pre-colonial times, had had little or no contact with people from widely differing areas, and therefore no need to formulate methods of regulating social contact with them. What Mitchell stresses is that this significance of tribal membership in the urban setting is of a completely different order from

that of belonging to a tribe in a rural area. In the country, "tribe" implies involvement in a total social/political system which structures virtually every aspect of life, whereas in the urban context it provides, rather, a system of social categorisation and a way of interacting with strangers (*ibid.*:30). Indeed, even the symbols used by Copperbelt workers to denote tribal membership are not primordial or imbued with apparent tradition as one might expect: the Kalela dancers wear western outfits such as doctors' and nurses' uniforms. In stressing this newness of meaning in a modern context, then, Mitchell demonstrates his definitive break with the school of thought - outlined above - which assumes a continuity of significance in the fact of allegiance to a tribe.

This approach presages a number of other interpretations which lay a similar stress on tribalism as a contemporary phenomenon, rather than as an anachronistic hangover from the past. One of the most extremely stated of these is that of Leys (1975), who writes on underdevelopment in Kenya. He commits himself to the radical position that tribalism, far from having any roots at all in precolonial society, is the child exclusively of colonialism and of capitalist processes of production and exploitation. Although he nowhere refers to Mitchell's work, he shares some of his views, but goes further than his somewhat functionalist account - "tribal differences in town are emphasised because they provide an effective means for interacting with strangers" - in offering an explanation of how these tribal attributes come to be selected for emphasis. The real divisions that developed between people in the post-colonial era in Kenya, he says, were those of socio-economic class, and where tribal divisions were stressed these served, either to express the materially grounded class interests, or, at times, to disguise these class interests by providing links between people whose material interests were in fact radically opposed.

In support of the first claim - that there is a very close correlation between tribe and class - Leys cites the example of ethnic conflict be-

tween the Luo and the Kikuyu in the era immediately following the departure of the colonial authorities from Kenya. It was because the Kikuyu had an especially early experience of underdevelopment and therefore adapted quickly to - and were soon integrated into - the capitalist economy, he claims, that many of them in turn took early advantage of opportunities for land purchase and the possibilities of accumulating capital, and so began to constitute a bourgeoisie (1975:199). With this example, he demonstrates the first part of his argument: that "tribe" may express something that is actually "class". His other, apparently paradoxical, claim is that "tribe" sometimes expresses something that is very definitely *not* "class", and so serves to blind protagonists to the true nature of their material interests, by making them, as exploited people, "identify other exploited people as the source of their insecurity and frustrations, rather than their common exploiters" (*ibid.*). This happens through the formation of patron-client relationships, in which - to refer again to the above example - members of the Kikuyu tribe who have not acquired bourgeois status attach themselves to middle-class Kikuyu patrons, hoping for help from them in finding jobs, while the patrons in turn need substantial mass support in their quest to acquire business licences, contracts and the like (*ibid.*:203). The ties of "Kikuyu-ness" thus cross-cut and override ties which might unite the mass of peasants and/or workers against the new African elites which exploit them.

Leys' approach to the phenomenon of tribalism has been criticised by Kahn (1981). He points to the way in which Leys, like the modernisation theorists he attacks, assumes some kind of preordained or "given" quality in the nature of the tribal or ethnic groupings he discusses (*ibid.*:46, 49). As Kahn shows, when the call of "tribe" moves beyond the simple identification it may have with a given class there is no reason given why this, rather than an appeal to or assertion of any other type of grouping, should be the one strong enough to subsume and cancel the divisions of class. The reader is left to assume, then, that there is some

primordial pull inherent in tribal membership and its paraphernalia of custom, which will be felt by people as some kind of hail from the past. This point, although it is a major weakness of Leys' argument in the eyes of writers using the same materialist paradigm as he (Kahn 1981; Saul 1979), may suggest that there is something about ethnicity which cannot be explained in purely material terms.

Another, related, body of writing adds some useful observations on the political dimensions of these newly-significant tribal units. The suggestion is that, not only did tribes become significant categories of interaction post-colonially due to the juxtaposition of and competition between hitherto remote peoples but, indeed, that particular groupings were only constituted as "tribes" at all as a result of colonial processes. So, for instance, Ranger (1984) shows how the keenness of various missionary bodies in Southern Rhodesia to find a language in which they could teach and proselytise led eventually to their conceptualising an area, a group and a culture which became designated as "Manika" - a categorisation which the people thus designated also came to accept and use themselves. Gulliver, in similar vein, points out that colonists in East Africa not only "froze" in time those tribal configurations that they found there, but also augmented them: missionaries identified a tribe with a particular language, while anthropologists aligned it with definite traits and cultural artefacts (1969:13). But even more important than these processes was the way in which groups were designated and reinforced - or even quite newly created - by the system of colonial administration (Iliffe 1979:329-30). A tribe became identified with an area, a system of courts and a definite leader whose rule was reinforced by the colonial authorities (Gulliver 1969:13). In this process, especially in the case of societies which had previously been segmentary and acephalous, one can see very clearly how tribes were "created".

This observation of the relationship between a "tribe" in the postcolonial era and the accompanying system of colonial administration

is a very interesting one, and it has clear implications for an understanding of the evolution of Pedi and Ndebele authority in the area under discussion in this thesis. These will be elaborated on in the next section of the chapter. In particular, the stress on this link between tribe and politics in the modern era allows Gulliver and Iliffe a flexibility denied to those writers - like Leys, Kahn and Saul - who tie themselves to a strictly "scientific" materialist explanation. Thus, they can explore dimensions of tribalism or ethnicity which, although contemporary, are not necessarily, irrevocably linked to the existence of "capitalism" as such. There is more freedom in these accounts to look in an empirical way at detailed aspects of how the colonial appointment of chiefs and leaders promoted the existence of tribes or ethnic groups, and these accounts, as I will demonstrate, are far more suggestive for my task of interpreting the authority/ethnicity link in Lebowa than are highly abstract analyses of generalised relationships between ethnicity and the capitalist mode of production.

Also dealing with the links between the resurgence of ethnicity in a group and the political dimensions of that group's existence is Abner Cohen's book on Hausa traders living in the Yoruba town of Ibadan (1969). He is interested, however, in a more informal aspect of political activity which began to occur in the postcolonial era, when indirect rule was already a thing of the past. Small, informal groups began to emerge within the wider, formally-structured political "state" system. Although such groups defined themselves in cultural "ethnic" terms - that is, in terms of strongly stated religious affiliation, shared myths of origin, language, and the like - Cohen argues that these groups served primarily to maintain their members' hold over scarce resources, and that they were therefore political in nature. In the case he describes, Hausa traders in Ibadan have developed a marked ethnic exclusiveness, manifest especially in the practice of intensive Islamic mysticism, which serves to distinguish these Hausa very clearly from the rest of the (mostly Yoruba) population. Cohen attributes this religious fervour, not - as some

writers have done - merely to the Islamic doctrine of obedience, nor just to the fact that these Hausa, as migrants and strangers from a land further north, are trying to "make a statement" about cultural distinctiveness in a foreign situation, but rather to their wish to maintain a monopoly over the region's long-distance trade in certain commodities such as kola and cattle (*ibid.*:188-90). A strong group-affiliation, though expressed in a cultural idiom, is here serving more importantly to safeguard that group's economic and political interests, but through a means other than participation in formal state structures. The author shows, in fact, that it was only with the disappearance of the British system of indirect rule, which had institutionalised and given official recognition to "tribal divisions" such as those distinguishing Hausa from Yoruba, that it became necessary for the Hausa themselves - in everyday, informal, cultural ways - to accentuate this group strength which the newly-written constitution of independent Nigeria failed to recognise or acknowledge (*ibid.*:184).

Like Mitchell, Cohen stresses that this ethnicity does not merely represent a survival of tenaciously held-to traditional practices. On the contrary, he points to a complete discontinuity in the significance of tribal membership from its place of origin to its new context in Yorubaland. The manifestation of "Hausa-ness" among Ibadan Hausa traders - especially through this intense Islamic mysticism - bears little resemblance to the behaviour of Hausa still living in the northern Hausa heartland (*ibid.*:15). The former cannot, then, be assumed to derive from or be a conservation of the latter, but rather involves a dynamic rearrangement of customs and relationships (*ibid.*:198).

In this stress on the newness of ethnicity's significance, Cohen's approach also resembles that of Marxist and underdevelopment theorists such as Leys. Unlike these writers, however, he is not concerned to demonstrate a necessary link between the phenomenon of ethnicity - or what he calls "retribalisation" (*ibid.*:1) - and capitalism. His emphasis,

which could be applied in capitalist or non-capitalist situations, is on the way in which groups in competition with each other endeavour to safeguard their own political and economic interests.

There is another point of similarity between Cohen's approach and that of Marxist writers on ethnicity. Both view an exaggerated stress on ethnic or tribal differences as masking or acting as a "disguise" (*ibid.*:3) for relationships based on very different considerations. For the Marxists, ethnicity hides or cloaks relationships of socio-economic class, whereas for Cohen it can be stripped away to reveal groupings that are fundamentally political in their functions - and of course, though different paradigms are being used, these interpretations need not necessarily be in conflict with each other.

Cohen does, however, demonstrate in a much more thorough and detailed way than most of the Marxist writers the bridging of the gap between ethnic symbolism (the "language") and political organisation (the thing expressed). In this lies the real usefulness of his work to my task in understanding Pedi and Ndebele ethnicity. Here I will briefly summarise his observations, though these will be elaborated on when I discuss my case study. He shows firstly how, through myths of origin and of superiority, through shared and strongly adhered-to cultural features, and through the accompanying practice of co-residence and endogamy, a group acquires distinctiveness. Given this, aspects of informal political organisation - such as decision-making, the exercise of authority and discipline, and the presence of a strong ideology - may be provided by means, say, of kinship (a commonly occurring manifestation of ethnicity) but even more frequently by means of ritual, with its rules, its personnel, its frequent meetings and its all-pervasive sense of moral coercion. In this way, a group such as a separatist church, or an Islamic mystical movement, may provide the organisational and ideological means for informal political activity (*ibid.*:202-11).

In an article published at about the same time, La Fontaine discusses tribalism among the Gisu of Uganda (1969), and makes some similar observations about the latent political functions of a group's adherence to apparently cultural, tribal traits. Like other writers mentioned so far, she is describing a situation in which tribalism only began to be accentuated in the colonial era, during the implementation of indirect rule: it was only then that the Gisu, from having been a "loose association of autonomous units" (*ibid.*:182), were grouped together into a broader whole. In an unusual departure from the normal practice, the British authorities initially appointed non-Gisu chiefs, and it was this which, through a process of fierce reaction, fed the growth of Gisu tribalist consciousness. There were various elements involved in this intense fostering of cultural pride - a stress on language, for example, and an attempt to re-instigate traditional systems of land tenure - but La Fontaine emphasises especially the central role of male initiation, which became even more important as a distinguishing feature of tribal membership after independence, when restrictions on the practice were lifted. She explains this crucial symbolic role played by initiation by indicating its importance in equipping a youth to enter the adult world in which political power can be acquired and exercised. As in the case described by Cohen, a grouping which was not formally recognised as having a political existence, or acknowledged as a distinct unit in the official post-independence constitution, was here defining itself primarily in moral, ritual terms. But in the process of acquiring these readily-recognisable boundaries of a ritual kind - "I am a Gisu because I have been initiated in Gisu rituals" (*ibid.*:180) - the group may define for itself and facilitate its involvement in an informal political function. Initiation, here, is the badge which signifies one's membership in a political grouping.

La Fontaine's concern, in this paper, to arrive at an accurate definition of "tribe" poses some interesting questions about the possibilities of determining the boundaries of any ethnic unit. She points out that there



have been two ways in which the word has been understood: one involves political criteria (as in Evans-Pritchard's definition cited earlier) and the other refers to cultural homogeneity and conservatism. While the whole point of her article is to show how these two concepts are in fact part of a single unity, since the cultural dimension acts as a symbol for the political one, she still maintains the dichotomy when expressing doubts about which of the two concepts one should use when defining, objectively, one's unit of study (*ibid.*:178-80). This question of definition, or what is referred to in a review article as "the unit problem" (Cohen 1978:381), is one which has only fairly recently begun to preoccupy anthropologists. As I have mentioned above, early ethnographers elected to write monographs on particular, distinct "tribes" with specific sets of customs, but few were sufficiently self-conscious to stand back from their subject-matter and ask themselves about the exact nature of these tribes, or to concern themselves with the related problem of analysing situations in which there was an interaction between members of several tribes or ethnic groups. When anthropologists did begin to be aware of these questions of definition, there were some serious attempts to enumerate a set of criteria for measuring where one tribe ended and another began: Naroll, for example, listed "trait distributions, territorial contiguity, political organisation, language, ecological adjustment, and local community structure" (1964, cited by Moermann 1965:1215). But quite apart from the difficulties involved in determining discontinuities in each of these criteria independently, there is the more fundamental problem that their limits or boundaries do not necessarily coincide with each other. So, for instance, a political unit may encompass two distinct language areas, or several different areas of trait distribution.

A breakthrough in answering such questions was made when Barth (1969) questioned the relevance of this kind of statistical quantifying and measuring of cultures on continua. He showed, instead, that the important question to ask in studies of ethnicity was not what features a tribe was characterised by, but why it was concerned to maintain itself as so

strongly distinct from other groups. Barth's emphasis, then, was on the dynamic process whereby a group maintains its boundaries and marks itself off from others, rather than on a static, morphological enumeration of the group's cultural features (*ibid.*:10). This shifts attention from supposedly "objective" cultural differences to those differences which actors themselves - both within and outside the group - regard as important in marking themselves off as distinct from other people (*ibid.*:14). In this approach, the folk definition becomes the new focus. So, for instance, in the case of the Gisu cited above, the crucial factor in determining an actor's ethnic affiliation would be, not his inclusion in a political or cultural unit defined by allegedly objective criteria, but the stress laid - by him, or by an outsider striving to emphasise his non-Gisu-ness - on the fact of initiation by Gisu ritual.

The emphasis on understanding how and why boundaries are so strongly maintained provides me with a unifying device, allowing for the incorporation and subsuming of many of the other elements of ethnicity mentioned so far. The composite argument might be summarised as follows. A group of people is thrown into a situation in which it is forced to compete with another, or with several other, groups, for resources which have become scarce. This is most common - but does not only occur - in a post-colonial situation, and it may be heightened by the fact that most members of the group have been incorporated into a capitalist economy as members of a distinct class, whose interests are thus opposed to those of another such class/group. Where the group alignment overlaps with or incorporates membership of other classes, this may be disguised by an emphasis on the importance of the group and its origins, and a denial of the importance of its precise class composition. In the process of interacting with various other groups in the social field, the group may come to be defined in terms of particular cultural traits. The defining may be done by members of the group itself - "I am an X because I have been initiated by X rituals" - or, in negative or positive terms, by members of another group with which it is competing for socio-political

resources - "The X always behave with great respect to their in-laws", or "The X are very backward and primitive". A definition may also be elaborated by members of a ruling group which has its own interests in, or has evolved its own way of, attributing particular features to the group - "The X occupy this region, speak this language, and we will place them under such and such a ruler for the purposes of administration". Similarly, those who act most often as employers of the group's members may categorise them as possessing definite traits as a tribe - "the X make very good boss-boys" - a definition which will probably reflect the way in which the group was incorporated, as a class or section of a class, into the labour force of the capitalist economy. In these various folk definitions, from outside of or within the group, the features selected for emphasis may be primordial - that is, referring to apparently ancient tradition - but whether these are genuinely, authentically traditional is unimportant. Equally, but perhaps less frequently, the stressed features may be modern - like the clothes and behavioural trappings of the Kalela dance described by Mitchell - or may involve some kind of cultural reconstruction or revivalism - like the prayers and religious meetings of Cohen's modern-day Hausa mystics.

#### *A case-study of ethnicity*

During the course of this dissertation, I have indicated that a strong sense of ethnic differentiation pervades everyday life in Morotse village. Ethnic differences have been shown to affect things like family and household types, the use of agnation as a principle of co-residence, the various ways in which the rule of last-born inheritance is applied, and the like. Ethnic differences - though not necessarily the same ones as these - are also remarked on by villagers themselves, and indeed provide one of the most important sets of categories through which they view the life of the village. Ethnic stereotypes in terms of which members of the two groups reciprocally describe each other will be elaborated on later in this chapter, but one occasion for the invoking

of these has already been recounted in Chapter 2: the Co-op incident. In this, members of each group blamed those of the other for their responses to directives from the chief and the Co-op authorities. The division between "capitulators" and "resisters" was thought by some to be synonymous with that between Ndebele and Pedi.

As well as showing contemporary ethnic-linked features in Chapters 2 and 3, I have described, in Chapter 1, something of the history of interaction between Pedi, Ndebele and white farmers in the Middelburg district of the 19th and early 20th centuries. It is during this last, fifth chapter that I hope to show the intrinsic link between the historical and the contemporary material. Ethnicity, as Barth, Cohen *et al* have stressed, is something that asserts itself in the contemporary context of struggle over scarce resources. Although the cultural features stressed may derive from ancient tradition, their significance should thus be seen as deriving from recent and present-day circumstances.

Ndebele and Pedi in Morotse define themselves and each other through means that refer to the past but that acquire new significance during the course of their everyday interactions. But within the broad context of the division between the two groups, it became apparent to me during fieldwork that the Ndzundza 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 the "outgroup" more frequently than they, in turn, construct stereotypes about the members of this outgroup. The Pedi view of Ndzundza as hidebound traditionalists is shared by observers from further afield, as is shown by a number of anthropological and historical accounts to be cited in the following pages.

The case-study to which I wish to apply the theoretical insights on ethnicity thus has two facets. It is situated in the specific context of Pedi-Ndebele interaction in Morotse village, but must be seen against the broader backdrop of a more general Ndebele ethnicity or

"traditionalism" which has been perceived by various observers in interaction with this group.

To give an impression of the processes by which the two ethnic groups in the village retain their separation, one might start by mentioning the most obvious and easily visible of these. As mentioned in the Introduction, the village is divided into two fairly rigidly demarcated sections, with Ndebele living high up on the hillside and Pedi living on its lower slopes closer to the main road. According to informants, this separation dates from the time, in the 1930s, when the earliest tenants began to settle on the farm. These first homesteads clustered around two distinct ethnic cores, which gradually expanded with the growth of existing families and the arrival of new tenants over the years. Although Betterment interrupted this organic expansion by imposing its typical grid plan, it did nothing to interfere with the fundamental separation into Pedi and Ndebele village sections. And although the village's subsequent rapid growth has caused the two sections to meet each other geographically, and has also prompted the development of a periphery of small, new plots where newcomers in recent years have had to take whatever plot became available, the minimal ethnic residential integration in these areas has not substantially altered the basic fact of the village's ethnic zoning. One mechanism for ensuring and perpetuating group distinctiveness, then, is spatial proximity; a factor also described by Cohen in his study of Hausa in Ibadan (1969:204).

Another mechanism identified by Cohen by which ethnic boundaries are maintained is endogamy. In Morotse, although there are occasional inter-ethnic marriages, the overall pattern is one of marriage within one's own group. The few ethnically mixed marriages that do occur usually end in divorce, and my investigations into why this happens produced the same kind of response from informants as did my queries about why such marriages are so rare in the first place: "They are not like us", "They have different ways". More specifically, though, villagers cited the

fact that the two groups have different initiation rituals as the main deterrent to intermarriage, or as the major cause of marital breakdown. Although this explanation may seem puzzlingly remote and abstract as a reason for not marrying or for divorcing, its force derives from two things: the fact that it invokes the power of ritual as a symbol which condenses other aspects of social life, and the fact that it has a bearing on the perpetuation of a family - and thus of the group - through its children.

It is in the ritual domain, as La Fontaine (1969) and Cohen (1969) have indicated, that the crux of ethnic group membership is often found, and it is here too that any threats to the group's integrity are most strongly experienced, through a process that I will spell out in the following description. Even if intermarriage does not pose difficulties to the adult parties concerned, it is when they have children, and when the time comes for these children to be initiated, that the ethnic blurring involved becomes most apparent, and most problematic. This is because a child cannot become an adult without also becoming "a Pedi" or "an Ndebele": the acquisition of such a status, for a child of either sex, involves undergoing rituals the details of which which are secret to members of other ethnic groups, but which are known to their own parents who have been through these rituals to become adults in their turn, and who may even have to perform crucial roles during the ritual process of bringing their children to adulthood. But in the case of an inter-ethnic marriage, one parent - the mother - will always be defined as being outside of the group in whose rituals her children are to be initiated. The process of initiation thus makes tangible her exclusion from that group, and - in a way - from the very family she has married into and helped to perpetuate. (This is true for most Christian as well as traditionalist or pagan families in Morotse. The unifying qualities of ethnicity, as I have mentioned in the Introduction, transcend in some instances even this most fundamental division of rural life in southern Africa.) To corroborate my point about the importance of initiation

ritual as a designator of ethnic-group affiliation, I draw attention to La Fontaine's observation of a similar phenomenon among the Gisu (1969:180), but I will leave until later a consideration of her suggestion that such ritual may provide a rubric for more concrete, political activities.

It is by these means - residential separation, endogamy and esoteric ritual - that each group appears distinct from, and closed to, the other. But I have mentioned above that, within this field of strong ethnicity, the Ndebele seem to be the more culturally distinctive of the two groups. This quality is variously described by different observers. Anthropologists have spoken of them as clinging tenaciously to their original Nguni culture, a view which echoes earlier reports by state functionaries and administrators of the group's conservatism and adherence to tradition (Delius 1987:1). Not differing substantially from this view, but with more negative overtones, is the attitude of Pedi villagers in Morotse, who see the Ndebele as primitive, backward and opposed to civilising influences. white Co-op officials, on the other hand, regard the Ndebele as 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 is an illustration of Barth's point that ethnicity is a situational phenomenon involving, not absolute or objective cultural differences, "but only those which the actors themselves regard as significant" (1969:14). In the case of the Ndebele, different features are seen as significant by different actors addressing different issues in their contacts with the members of this group. It is only through an examination of these various kinds of contacts that we may come to understand why such identifying characteristics - sometimes so unlike each other as to be positively contradictory - have been selected.

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 (van Warmelo 1974:67, Schapera 1949:206). Their language, style of initiation, descent groups and marriage rules appear to be typically Nguni, and since the group is known to have moved away from Natal Nguni territory during the 16th century, it is thought that these features are Nguni traits which have been tenaciously clung to.

There are a number of problems with this interpretation. Firstly, it assumes that all Southern Ndebele cultural traits, simply because they have the appearance of strong traditionalism, are necessarily survivals of the group's Nguni origins. Secondly, even if one were to accept that these characteristics do derive from the distant past, this interpretation begs the question - identified as crucial by writers such as Mitchell and Coehn - of what historical or contemporary circumstances have led to the retention of these customs. This question demands an answer especially urgently in the light of the fact that another group - the Northern Ndebele - who shared the same Nguni origins and have lived close to Pedi influence for an equivalent amount of time, did *not* retain Nguni language or tradition in any measure. The existence of the Northern Ndebele, then, provides something of a control in an experiment to test under what conditions ethnicity comes into play.

A look at the attitudes expressed by Pedi villagers may provide 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 final 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. As I have mentioned, this stereotype and that of anthropologists both emphasise the group's traditionalism: its clinging onto old-fashioned ways. But I have already suggested in Chapter 3 that one aspect of this - the strongly agnatic, patriarchal and extended nature of Ndebele families - is attributable to the period spent by Ndzundza as indentured, or almost captive, labour tenants on White farms, and that its continuation in the Trust village of Morotse may be ascribed to an extreme shortage of resources. Arguing along the same lines, I have shown in Chapter 4 how even the rules of inheritance, whose operation in contemporary circumstances might be expected to cause segmentation, often fail to split the strongly-grouped Ndebele family. The idea that these and other apparently traditional aspects of social structure and culture are in fact results of the period of indenture and its aftermath was first suggested to me by Peter Delius, and is convincingly argued in his subsequent paper on the topic (1987).

Delius demonstrates that at the peak of its power in the 19th century, the Ndzundza chiefdom included not only people of Nguni origin but also

a wide range of heterogeneous groups seeking to escape from troubles and conflicts in the central and eastern Transvaal. It was only subsequent to this, during the period of indenture, that these people forged a homogenous culture. One way in which the Ndzundza responded to the life of the farms was to attempt "to regroup and to revive key social institutions like the homestead and male initiation" (*ibid:18*). These socio-cultural reconstructions, Delius argues, provided the tenants with a template of a lifestyle beyond the one dictated by the restrictive environment of the farms. In addition, 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 (*ibid.:19-20*).

And in similar vein, it seems unlikely that any church or 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 at 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 illuminates 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

reflection 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 1930s.

One can explain in a similar light Pedi stereotypes of Ndebele as country bumpkins rather than townspeople. It is shown in Chapter 1 that, during the first two or three decades of the 20th century, Ndzundza were prevented from becoming migrants by the constraints of their labour contracts and the lack of resources or alternative accommodation which might have provided a basis for relative independence. During the same era, 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.<sup>1</sup> 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. In this connection, one can accept the claims of writers like Leys (1975) that ethnicity may sometimes be a reflection of class position. The Ndzundza were uneducated, lacked resources and so were "relatively disadvantaged within rural society" as Delius suggests (*ibid:19*). Their change of domicile from white farm to Trust area had entailed a series of disadvantages outlined in Chapter 2: they lost whatever cattle they had, and were unable to acquire land in their new abode. When they did begin to

---

<sup>1</sup> For an account of a similar process involving Pedi from a heartland area, see Sansom (1970:71-4, 97-8).

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 status of all-but-captive labour force which lies at the basis, too, of Co-op officials' ethnic stereotypes of Ndebele villagers. In the context of the Co-op, Ndebele are seen 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 fact that Ndebele responded positively to the idea of the Co-op in the first place in contrast to the suspicion or downright antagonism 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 is 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. Plottolders' yields for the period 1979-82 indicate no significant difference between ethnic groups. And I have shown in Chapter 1 that Pedi as well as Ndebele inhabitants of Morotse 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 known 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 Afrikaans whites, that contrasts markedly with the reserve and suspicion of Pedi villagers, and that 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 best placed to appreciate, are not in fact ordinary plottolders but rather members of the chiefly family who belong to the Co-op's Functioning Committee.<sup>2</sup> 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 elite Ndzundza and Afrikaner officials are played out. The insistence by these 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 plottolders were supporters of this initiative, and if they continued in apparent support of it even when it was being roundly rejected by other villagers as is described

---

<sup>2</sup> See pp 79-80 for an account of the Functioning Committee and the Co-op's constitution.

in Chapter 2, 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 decision 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 chapter.

*Ethnicity and authority*

With this background, I move on to analyse the Co-op incident in which inter-ethnic distinctions were sharpened to become antagonisms. The stereotype of Pedi as fighters and resisters in contrast to the perceived obedience and quiescence of the Ndebele are indicative of the relationship of members to leaders in the ethnic groups concerned and of the role of chiefly authority in constituting and reinforcing ethnicity. Considerations of leaders and their authority also direct our attention to the broader political functioning of these groups. So far I have examined the manifestations of ethnicity and the ways in which it is perpetuated, but Barth (1969:14) claims that these questions are subsidiary to a more important one: why is it that groups, in a contemporary context, emphasise their differences so strongly? To answer this, it is necessary to look at the ways in which these groups compete with each other for scarce resources - a competition which Cohen (1969) defines as political, and which he and La Fontaine (1969) see as containing the crux of ethnicity. My final discussion, then, will be about this struggle by both groups to maintain a hold over crucial resources, and will thus be an attempt to outline the real reasons behind ethnicity in Morotse village.

Like other ethnic stereotypes mentioned so far, the image of Ndebele as collaborators and Pedi as resisters is far from entirely accurate. It will be remembered from Chapter 2 that, despite some informants' insistence that it was the Pedi villagers who decided to turn the tractor away from the fields, strong dissatisfaction and voluble protest about the

Co-op came from both sides of the ethnic divide (see p94). This shows up as false the officials' attitude that 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. In his speech, while apologising for not having been present to ensure that plowholders received their mealies straight after threshing, he also chastised them for their bad behaviour and accused them of disloyalty to him. Various participants describe the chief as having put himself at great personal risk during this meeting, and the emotive style of speech he used at the time seems to bear this out. "If any of you wants to kill me or throw stones at me," he pronounced "let them throw them here" (pointing at his forehead). "Don't attack me from behind". Although the village had been more or less united in its opposition to the Co-op, it was in responding to this dramatic appeal by the chief that its members appear to have divided along ethnic lines, into compliant Ndebele and defiant Pedi. This split, in its perceived as well as its actual dimensions, defused the impact of the villagers' dissatisfaction. One Pedi informant complained that it was impossible to maintain any unity of opposition in the face of the deferential and obedient attitudes of the Ndebele to their chief: "they just clap their hands and say 'Mahlangu' when he speaks".

My task is thus one of explaining the power of this chiefly appeal to Ndebele loyalty. It is apparently a power sufficiently strong to pull against real dissatisfaction with some of the Homeland institutions the chief has been called into service to prop up.

It might of course be argued here that Ndebele were compliant because it was their chief who happened to be reigning in the area and who made the appeal, and that Pedi villagers would have responded with equal docility to a speech by a Pedi chief. In what follows, I will show that

I believe this was not the case, and that the Ndebele stood in a peculiar relationship to chiefly authority.

It is true that there is no effective representation of Pedi or Pedi traditional authority in the area. The Bantu Authority system makes no provision for a sharing of power between ethnic groups, and in this case it has designated one chiefly position, to be occupied by an Ndebele. Although there is a Pedi family of chiefly descent living in the village, the only voice granted this family in the officially-recognised political sphere is that of headman of the village's Pedi section. As is described in the Introduction, almost the only effective role played by this man is that of acting as a mouthpiece to the community for decisions taken by the Co-op and by agricultural functionaries of the Lebowa Government. In other words, the village's Pedi headman like its Ndebele headman and like the Ndebele chief of the area functions primarily as a messenger for directives from a sphere of influence beyond his own. To the extent that these functions are effectively the same, one could measure and compare the responses to ensconced authority by the two ethnic groups. But there is a significant difference. The Pedi headman is subordinate to the Ndebele chief and does not not enjoy the power - however circumscribed and even illusory this may be - which his superior can use to gain private rewards within the Bantu Authorities system or to play the role of patron towards his followers.

Our attention must thus be focussed on directives from this chief rather than on those from his subordinate. Understanding Ndebele submission to his authority involves two major areas of consideration. The first relates to the recent history of chiefship 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' opinions 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.

*Chiefly power in historical context*

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. He sent messages to his subjects from prison and later dispatched an emissary who, according to oral tradition, was the man later to become acting chief: Matsitsi. The story I was told of this man's escape, recounted on p46, may be exaggerated or almost legendary, but recourse to reliable historical sources has shown that chiefly functions - most notably that of supervising male initiation - were being re-established for Ndzundza on the farms around 1886 (Delius 1987:11-13). 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 (*ibid.*:17). A small group, including the chiefly family of Matsitsi and later his son Jonas, did live as rent tenants at 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 submission 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 generation in the circumstances of labour tenancy where farmers wanted the whole family to work on their lands.<sup>3</sup> 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" (*ibid.*:19).

It is interesting to note that one area at least in which Southern Ndebele culture does not display an apparent conservation of 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 (Kuper 1978:117-9; Sansom 1974b:269). 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 focused 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

---

<sup>3</sup> See also pp128-30 for a discussion of intergenerational dependence in the Ndebele tenant family

- 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. First and most important, 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 S A Government's 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 in the authority-structure left by people's reluctance to acknowledge these headmen, local groups of unofficial leaders called *bashalagae* had emerged by the time Sansom conducted fieldwork in the 1960s. These men had the advantage of being beyond the control of the Commissioner since their existence as leaders was unknown to him (Sansom 1970:38-43, 53-5).<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> These leaders were most often migrants who had earned enough money to buy a plough and so make a living by ploughing others' fields in the reserve area (see p69 for a fuller description). In addition, they often functioned to manage resources for absent migrants, and it was on this service that many other aspects of their leadership were built up.

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 (SAIRR survey 1957-8:72-6).

The later parts of this saga did of course spell a kind of defeat for resisters, since those chiefs who continued with the support of their subjects to oppose the new system were simply bypassed, and surrogate "chiefs" were installed in their place. To this day the incumbents and supporters of the Mohlaletse Paramountcy, eventually allocated the status of a mere Tribal Authority in the S A Government's schema in 1965, insist on the higher ranking of this chiefship, and are embittered by the refusal of surrounding Tribal Authorities to acknowledge its superiority (Delius 1980:356).

From the evidence cited here, it can be seen that for inhabitants of the Pedi reserve chiefship 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 a high degree of contact between the farms and the reserve area. A number of informants, for instance, told me that when their families were living on farms in the 1920s and early 1930s their sons 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 (1974). 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. It was this same man who 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 a 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 plholders which forms its core.

Earlier in this chapter I have shown how the strength of Pedi and Ndebele ethnicity in the village is accounted for partly by the infrequency of intermarriage between the two village sections. It remains to explore the effect of marriage rules and practices in structuring these sections internally and constituting them as ethnic groups.

One can see how the Pedi section of the village acquired solidarity in this way from the account on p137: a number of old families were tied together over several generations by cousin marriage. Let us look now at marriages in the Ndebele village section. 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 (Kuper 1978:114). 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 (Kuper 1978:114-6; Preston-Whyte 1974:205).

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 practice 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 fieldwork: in the core group of plotholding Ndebeles 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 is related, at least by marriage, to Chief Mahlangu.

The effects of this tendency towards exogamy are made still more pronounced by the practice 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 is that the ties of kinship are here acting to reinforce the ethos of loyalty to royal authority described earlier in this chapter. 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 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 plotters' 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 dissertation 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 practice of "marrying out" can create widespread alliances (Webster 1977:197; Preston-Whyte 1974:192). 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 (1970:12-13). 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



(Leach 1971; Bonner 1980; Delius 1983), but the important point is that such links, to be perpetuated, must first be initiated, and this must happen via the practice of exogamy at least in the initial stages of overrule (see Bonner 1980:91; Delius 1983:55). 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 Ndebele 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 dissertation. But the idea that these affinal relationships are paralleled by, or express, relationships of a 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, question 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 functions, in Cohen's terms, ultimately underlie ethnicity in the case being discussed here?

*Political underpinnings of ethnicity*

I have suggested that important differences between Pedi and Ndebele in Morotse, which led to conflict between the two groups, lie in their recent historical experiences, particularly those relating to chiefly authority. This suggestion has been qualified by showing how the contemporary practice of marriage cements relationships between royals and commoners, and functions to knit Ndebele inhabitants of the area together into a tightly-structured group. Ethnic solidarity may thus owe more to marriage and the links it establishes than to historical experience. The proposed explanation must be further qualified, however, to establish its truth in relation to this specific historical and geographical setting. This is necessary because it is clear from a look at Ndzundza Ndebele in other areas that very different relationships have developed between royals and their subjects. More specifically, the recent events in KwaNdebele described in Chapter 1, which involve people with the same kind of history as the Nebo Ndebele, show evidence that chiefs may be profoundly influenced by, and even brought into line with, majority popular opinion. Here, the royal family was at first party to the "independence" proposed by the South African Government, even though no member was actually to be designated as Chief Minister. But in the light of fierce and uncompromising popular resistance to the proposals, the family has swung about to identify itself with those opposed to independence, and some of its members have even been detained in official attempts to silence them as voicers of protest (see pp59-60).

This must lead me to try and identify something very specific about the contemporary context of the Nebo Ndebele which, added to the factors of history and kinship mentioned earlier, 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.

Morotse's Ndzundza villagers, according to evidence provided by my fieldwork, felt threatened in the context of Lebowa. Although the immediate area, as stated in the Introduction, 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 here. This feeling of insecurity has been engendered mainly by the 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 Mabusa Mahlangu's home at Weltevreden (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 Morotse Ndebele had been driven by these fears to pack their bags and leave. On the other hand, if KwaNdebele were to be situated at the twelve farms on Nebo's southern border, as other rumours predicted,<sup>5</sup> 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

---

<sup>5</sup> See pp56-7 for an account of the controversy over the Homeland's situation.

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 Ndzundza 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 are 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 plotters' 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 from 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.<sup>6</sup>

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

---

<sup>6</sup> The sense of outrage at the unfair partitioning of land, funds and aid is engendered by a situation of scarce resources and strong ethnicity, but it is also, of course, a product of the conduct of this particular chief. Although the kind of weakness and propensity to corruption he demonstrates are not unknown in other areas, they were not for instance shared by his predecessor. See Appendix 1 for a fuller account of his doings.

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 kinship 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 emic 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 homogenous and undifferentiated wholes which act in terms of single uniting interests. Besides the finely-graded economic stratification outlined in Chapter 3, there is also a more 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, coal-merchants, and the like - exercise a hold over some of these things. Although this hold over resources is a tenuous and strictly circumscribed one - as is shown, for instance, by the account in Chapter 2 of the chief's effective subordination to Mr de Jager of the Co-op - it is nevertheless significant in the context of local-level relationships in the village. Ndebele ascendance 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 own by no means guarantees priority in the allocation of resources, but their links to the chief - of 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 Ley's observation 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 (1975:203). 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 La Fontaine (1969) and Cohen (1969), is that this group's definitive, apparently old-fashioned traits are serving important political functions. In his 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 and organisation relating to political issues: in this case, control over long-distance trade in Nigeria.

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 kinship 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 S A 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 (Leys 1975:199) and/or by the colonial authorities in their attempts to construct a system of administration for the colonies (Gulliver 1969:13; Iliffe 1979:326-8). It was only after independence, once these divisions were no longer officially enforced or recognised, 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 (Cohen 1969:13-4, 184; La Fontaine 1969:182).

The trajectory followed by the Ndzundza Ndebele has been almost exactly the opposite. Up until very recently the group has had no official re-



cognition at all, and even when state policy about African administration had 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 in this chapter. 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 in this chapter. One can only speculate about whether this strong ethnicity would fade away if the official policy of ethnic separation to be abandoned.

List of References

- Barnett, T 1977 *The Gezira Scheme* London, Frank Cass.
- Barth, F 1969 "Introduction" to F Barth (ed) *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* London, Allen & Unwin.
- Beinart, W 1982 *The Political Economy of Pondoland: 1860 to 1930*, Johannesburg, Ravan.
- Beinart, W & P Delius 1979 "The family and early migrancy in Southern Africa" unpublished mimeo, University of London.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1986 "Introduction" to S Trapido, W Beinart & P Delius (eds) *Putting a Plough to the Ground* Johannesburg, Ravan.
- Bonner, P 1980 "Classes, the mode of production and the state in pre-colonial Swaziland" in S Marks & A Atmore (eds) *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa* London, Longman.
- Cloete, D 1985 "Maize production schemes in the Transkei" unpublished mimeo, ASSA conference.
- Cohen, A 1969 *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa* Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Cohen, R 1978 "Ethnicity: problem and focus in anthropology" *Annual Review of Anthropology* 7.
- Coetzee, C J 1980 "Die Strewe tot Etniese Konsolidasie en Nasionale Selfverwesening by die Ndebele van Transvaal" unpublished PhD thesis, University of Potchefstroom.
- Comaroff, J 1974 "Chiefship in a South African Homeland" *Journal of Southern African Studies* 1 (1).

- Comaroff, J                    1982        "Dialectic systems, history and anthropology: units of study and questions of theory" *Journal of Southern African Studies* 8
- Cooper, C                    1974        "Land and Labour in the Transvaal c. 1900" unpublished MA thesis, University of London.
- Cooper, D                    1981        "An overview of the Botswana Urban Class Structure and its articulation with the rural mode of production: insights from Selebi-Phikwe" mimeo, African Studies Institute, University of Witwatersrand
- Davis, J H R                1973        *Land and Family in Pisticci* London, Athlone Press.
- Delius, P                    1980        "The Pedi Polity Under Sekwati and Sekhukhune 1828-1880" Unpublished PhD thesis, University of London.
- \_\_\_\_\_                    1983        *The Land Belongs to Us*, Johannesburg, Ravan.
- \_\_\_\_\_                    1987        "The Ndzundza Ndebele: Indenture and the Making of Ethnic Identity" mimeo, Wits History Workshop.
- Devons, E & M Gluckman                1964        "Introduction" to M Gluckman (ed) *Closed Systems and Open Minds: the Limits of Naivety in Social Anthropology* London, Oliver & Boyd.
- de Wet, C & P McAllister                1983        "Rural communities in transition: a study of the socio-economic and agricultural implications of agricultural betterment and development" Working paper No. 16, ISER, Rhodes University.
- Evans-Pritchard, E E                1962        "Anthropology and history" in *Essays in Social Anthropology*
- Fortes, M                    1949        "Time and Social Structure: an Ashanti Case Study" in Fortes, M (ed) *Social Structure* London, Oxford University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_                    1958        "Introduction" to Goody, J (ed) *The Developmental Cycle in Domestic Groups*, Cambridge University Press.
- Fourie, H C M                1921        *Amandebele van Fene Mahlangu en hun Religieus-Sociaal Leven*, Zwolle, La Riviere & Voorhoeve.

- Friedl, E 1962 *Vasilika. A Village in Modern Greece*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Gluckman, M 1950 "Kinship and Marriage among the Lozi of Northern Rhodesia and the Zulu of Natal" in A R Radcliffe-Brown, & Daryll Forde (eds) *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage* London, Oxford University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1970 "The Peace in the Feud" in *Custom and Conflict in Africa* Oxford, Blackwell.
- Goody, J 1962 *Death, Property and the Ancestors*, London, Tavistock.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1976 *Production and Reproduction* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Gulliver, P 1969 "Introduction" to P Gulliver (ed) *Tradition and Transition in East Africa*", Berkeley and Los Angeles.
- Hammond-Tooke, W D (ed) 1974 *The Bantu-Speaking Peoples of Southern Africa* London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Hammond-Tooke, W D 1975 *Command or Consensus* Cape Town, David Philip.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1984 "In Search of the Lineage: the Cape Nguni Case" *Man* 19, 1.
- Harries, C L 1929 *The Laws and Customs of the BaPedi and Cognate Tribes of the Transvaal* Johannesburg, Hortors.
- Heyer, J, P Roberts & G Williams 1981 "Rural Development" in J Heyer, P Roberts & G Williams (eds) *Rural Development in Tropical Africa* London, MacMillan.
- Hunt, D R 1931 "An Account of the Bapedi" *Bantu Studies* V (4).
- Hunter, M 1937 "The Bantu on European-owned Farms" in Schapera, I (ed) *The Bantu-Speaking Tribes of South Africa* London, Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1961 *Reaction to Conquest* London, Oxford University Press.

- Hutton, C & R Cohen 1975 "African Peasants and Resistance to Change: a Reconsideration of Sociological Approaches" in I Oxaal, T Barnett & D Booth (eds) *Beyond the Sociology of Development* London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Illiffe, J 1979 *A Modern History of Tanganyika*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- James, D 1983 *The Road from Doornkop* Johannesburg, SAIRR.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1985 "Family and household in a Lebowa village" *African Studies* 44 (2)
- Kahn, Joel S 1981 "Explaining Ethnicity: a Review Article" *Critique of Anthropology* 16
- Keenan, J 1984 "Agribusiness in the Bantustans" in *South African Review Service* 2., Johannesburg, Ravan.
- Kuckertz, H 1984 "Authority Structure and Homestead in a Mpondo Village" unpublished PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand.
- Kuper, Adam 1978 "Fourie and the Southern Transvaal Ndebele" *African Studies* 37, 1.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1982 "Lineage Theory: a critical retrospect" *Annual Review of Anthropology* 11.
- Ladurie, E Le Roy 1978 *Montaillou: Cathars and Catholics in a French Village 1294-1324* Hampshire, Scholars Press.
- La Fontaine, J 1969 "Tribalism among the Gisu" in P Gulliver (ed) *op. cit.*
- Leach, E R 1961 *Rethinking Anthropology* London, The Athlone Press
- Leys, C 1975 *Underdevelopment in Kenya* London, Heinemann.
- Long, N 1968 *Social Change and the Individual: a study of the social and religious responses to innovation* Manchester, Manchester University Press.
- Mare, G 1980 *African Population Relocation in South Africa* Johannesburg, SAIRR.

- Massie, R 1905 *The Native Tribes of the Transvaal* London, British War Office.
- Mayer, Philip 1971 *Townsmen or Tribesmen* Cape Town, Oxford University Press.
- McAllister, P 1985 "Beasts to beer pots - migrant labour and ritual change in Willowvale district, Transkei" *African Studies* 44 (2).
- Mitchell, J Clyde 1956 *The Kalela Dance* Rhodes-Livingstone Papers No. 27
- Moermann, M 1965 "Ethnic identification in a complex civilisation: who are the Lue? *American Anthropologist* 67 (4) Molepo, M M 1983 "Peasants and/or Proletariat? A case study of a group of migrant workers at Haggie Rand from Molepo Tribal Village" mimeo, African Studies Institute, Wits University.
- Monnig, H O 1967 *The Pedi* Pretoria, J L van Schaik.
- Morrell, R 1983 "Rural Transformations in the Transvaal: the Middelburg District 1919-1930" unpublished MA thesis, Wits University.
- Murray, Colin 1980 "Kinship: Continuity and Change" in Lye, William F & Colin Murray (eds) *Transformations on the Highveld: the Tswana and Southern Sotho* Cape Town, David Philip.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1981 *Families Divided* Johannesburg, Ravan Press.
- Ngubane, H 1977 *Body and Mind in Zulu Medecine* London, Academic Press.
- Pauw, B A 1963 *The Second Generation* Cape Town, Oxford University Press.
- Pitt-Rivers, J 1971 *The People of the Sierra* Chicago, Chicago University Press.
- Platzky, L & C Walker 1985 *The Surplus People: forced removals in South Africa* Johannesburg, Ravan.
- Preston-Whyte, E 1974 "Kinship and Marriage" in Hammond-Tooke, W D (ed) *op. cit.*

- Preston-Whyte, E 1978 "Families Without Marriage: a Zulu Case Study" in Argyle, John and Eleanor Preston-Whyte (eds) *Social System and Tradition in Southern Africa* Cape Town, Oxford University Press.
- Preston-Whyte, E and H Sibisi 1975 "Ethnographic Oddity or Ecological Sense? Nyuzwa-Zulu Descent Groups and Land Allocation" *African Studies* 34 (4).
- Ranger, T 1984 "Missionaries, Migrants and the Manyika: the Invention of Ethnicity in Zimbabwe" mimeo, African Studies Institute, Wits University.
- Reader, D H 1966 *Zulu Tribe in Transition* Manchester, Manchester University Press.
- Roodt, M J 1984 "Capitalist Agriculture and Bantustan Employment Patterns: Case Studies in Bophutatswana" *South African Review Service* 2, Johannesburg, Ravan.
- SAIRR Survey 1957-8, 1972, 1979, 1982, 1984; Johannesburg, South African Institute for Race Relations.
- Sansom, B 1970 "Leadership and Authority in a Pedi Chiefdom" unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Manchester.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1974a "Traditional Economic Systems" in Hammond-Tooke, W D (ed) *op. cit.*
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1974b "Traditional Rulers and their Realms" in W D Hammond-Tooke (ed) *op.cit*
- Saul, John S 1979 "The Dialectic of Class and Tribe" in John S Saul (ed) *The State and Revolution in Eastern Africa* New York and London, Monthly Review Press.
- Schapera, I 1940 *Married Life in an African Tribe*, London, Faber & Faber.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1949 "The Ndebele of South Africa" *Natural History*
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1955 *A Handbook of Tswana Law and Custom*, London, Frank Cass.

- Schapera, I 1962 "Should anthropologists be historians?" *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*
- Schneider, E A 1985 "Ndebele Mural Art" *African Arts* xviii (3).
- Sharp, J S 1985 "Unit of study, context and culture: towards an historical anthropology" *African Studies* 44
- Sharp, J S & A Spiegel 1985 "Vulnerability to impoverishment in South African rural areas: the erosion of kinship and neighbourhood as social resources" *Africa* 55 (2). Shipton, Parker M 1984 "Strips and Patches: a Demographic Dimension in some African Land-Holding and Political Systems" in *Man* 19 (4).
- van Warmelo, N J 1952 *Language Map of South Africa* Pretoria, Dept. of Native Affairs.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1974 "The Classification of Cultural Groups" in Hammond-Tooke, W D (ed) *op. cit.*
- Webster, D 1977 "Spreading the Risk: the Principle of Laterality among the Chopi" *Africa* 47 (2).
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1987 "Family and household in Kwa Dapha, Kwa Zulu" mimeo, Conference of South African Anthropologists.
- White, C 1980 *Patrons and Partisans: a study of politics in two southern Italian communities* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Williams, G 1976 "Taking the Part of Peasants: Rural Development in Nigeria and Tanzania" in P Gutkind & I Wallerstein (eds) *The Political Economy of Contemporary Africa* London and Beverley Hills, Sage.
- Wilson, M, S Kaplan  
T Maki & E Walton 1952 "Social Structure" *Keiskammahoek Rural Survey* vol 3, Pietermaritzburg, Shuter & Shooter.
- Wolf, E 1966 *Peasants*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall.
- Wolpe, H 1972 "Cheap labour power in South Africa" *Economy & Society* 1 (4).
- Yawitch, J 1981 *Betterment. The Myth of Homeland Agriculture* Johannesburg, South African Institute of Race Relations.



1982 "Women and Squatting: a Winterveld Case Study" in Bonner, P (ed) *Working Papers in Southern African Studies*, vol. 1 Johannesburg, Ravan Press.

### Government Sources

Majority Report of the Eastern Transvaal Natives Land Committee  
U G 31-1918, Cape Town, Government Printers.

Minutes of Evidence of the Eastern Transvaal Natives Land Committee  
U G 32-1918, Cape Town, Government Printers.

Evidence to the Native Economic Commission, 1930-2.

Debates of the House of Assembly (Hansard) 1980-1884

### Newspapers

The Star, 1986; The Rand Daily Mail, 1983-4; The Weekly Mail, 1986;  
The Financial Mail, 1986; City Press, 1987.

*Appendix 1: Subsequent developments at the Co-op*

In 1985, a group of Pedi plottolders from Morotse village consulted TRAC (Transvaal Rural Action Committee) of the Black Sash to help them act against the Co-op. TRAC in turn appointed a lawyer from the LRC (Legal Resources Centre) to represent the group of plottolders. The lawyer wrote a number of letters to the Lebowa Registrar of Co-operatives - who had been appointed in terms of an Act of 1980 laying down laws for the workings of these bodies - asking for documents relating to the case, such as financial statements and minutes of meetings of the Ndebele Co-operative.

While these letters were being written - and largely ignored - a number of women from Morotse were arrested for allegedly stealing mealies from the fields: an incident similar to that recounted on p93. When the case went to court in Nebo, the lawyer asked for a postponement, as he was intending to construct a case around the issue of ownership of the land. The magistrate however, seeing that the arrests had been made in June, concluded that there could have been no mealies in the fields at that time and dismissed the case.

Following the writing of more letters by the lawyer to the Registrar and to the LLM (Lebowa Landbou Maatskappy), there was a meeting in Lebowakgomo the capital of Lebowa in October of 1986, at which officials agreed on an interim arrangement pending investigation into the Co-op's affairs. Plottolders were to be allowed to work their own plots again, and to contract directly with the Co-op to perform certain services if desired. A dispute arose when the Co-op claimed that some of these plottolders had let their memberships lapse and that therefore they could not expect to use Co-op facilities, but it later transpired that there had in any case been no collection of membership fees from anyone in the area for two years.

The lawyers continued to request documents relevant to the case, and eventually procured most of them. Examining these in the light of the Co-op Act, they discovered that 35 of the regulations had been contravened. They then wrote to the Registrar who appointed an enquiry in terms of the Lebowa Co-op Act.

An analysis of the Co-op's documents revealed that:

(a) it had not kept to the management agreement, which specified that R10,000 a year should be paid by the Lebowa Government. Instead, these running fees came out of Co-op profits, which meant that plottolders rather than the government were subsidising the organisation.

(b) salaries for various officials in the Co-op, which were supposed to be paid by the Lebowa Government, were being paid by the Co-op as well, partly from profits but also from loans requested from the LDC. These loans were not reflected in the annual financial statements of the Co-op, and even in the routine auditing this matter had not been commented on. This omission may be because the auditor interpreted these loans as subsidies, and therefore did not report the Co-op as being insolvent. The net result of all the loans made is that the Lebowa Government is now owed R1.6 million - either by the Co-op directly, or by the LDC or LLM.

These facts were revealed in the first hearings of the enquiry. Other findings were

(c) an AGM - intended to allow the grassroots membership of the Co-op a say in its running - had not been held for two and a half years. Even meetings of the management committee, intended to be responsible for the day-to-day running of the Co-op, were rare.

(d) members of the management committee, none of whom were supposed to receive any remuneration for sitting on the committee, all received a regular salary. The chief, an ex\_officio member, received the highest salary - R600 - and the white manager of the Co-op admitted that these salaries were used to entice people to management committee meetings, since they were unlikely to come otherwise.

(e) all agreements, contracts and the like are supposed to bear the signatures of three members of the management committee, but in fact these were only ever signed by the chief.

(f) the chief owes R58,000 to the Co-op in respect of goods taken from the property. He was in the habit of driving his truck into the enclosure, and loading up fodder, agricultural equipment, bags of mealies and the like. Although there was a gateman who was supposed to keep a record, he was fired for querying the chief's actions in driving off with these goods. (This man was also one of the chief instigators of the action against the Co-op).

(g) the Tribal Authority - effectively the chief - also owes R12,000 in goods taken. When questioned about how he was intending to reclaim this debt, the manager said that he had instigated a stop-order on the chief's bank account of R100 a month. The LDC, of which the chief is one of the directors, was paying the premium on a life insurance it had taken out for the chief, thus hoping to ensure that the debt would at least be recouped at his death. But the lawyers pointed out the injustice of the fact that, in the interim, plottolders/Co-op members were losing profits to this multiply corrupt enterprise.

Shortly before the enquiry began, the chief fired one of his relatives (though he had no legal authority to do this) who had been a key figure in the administration of the Co-op and who had formerly been a close friend and confidant of his. The reason given by the chief for the dismissal, somewhat ironically, was that the man had been stealing from the Co-op. Investigation of the books by the lawyers revealed that the man had, for several months, been claiming salary for over 100 hours of overtime a month - including a month when he had had three weeks leave. Although his total salary for each month concerned never amounted to more than R500, and therefore represents a much smaller theft from the Co-op than the chief's, it nonetheless is further proof of the general corruption involved - and of the relative freedom enjoyed by the chief's companions to benefit privately from an organisation ostensibly set up to help villagers with their agriculture.

The enquiry has been postponed until October 1987, when there will be five days of hearings at the Co-op offices.

Judging from the initial hearings of the enquiry, the lawyer commented that liability seems to rest partly with the chief, partly with the manager of the Co-op - an employee of the LLM - who should have been responsible for seeing that these things did not occur, and partly with the auditors who failed to report gross irregularities in the Co-op's financial affairs. The lawyer was however of the opinion that the manager had not benefitted personally from the whole affair through large-scale embezzlement. Although he, too, had on occasion helped himself to produce like the chief, his main fault seems to have been that of simply resigning himself to, and thus helping to perpetuate, the liberties taken by the chief and his henchmen and relatives.

Commenting on the possibility of running such a Co-op fairly, and without this kind of massive corruption, the lawyer had the following comments to make. For the first two years - 1979 and 1980 - plottolders enjoyed good returns, partly because these were good years with plentiful rains. The next year, 1981, saw the largest loss to plottolders. This may have been because certain debts were carried over from previous years, or

because moneys were beginning to be paid over illegally to the management committee in that year. It may also have been because 1981 was the year in which a chicken farming project was started by the Co-op, which necessitated a large capital outlay. But this outlay and the profits owed to plotholders should obviously have been kept as separate pools of money.

While the investigation was pending, it was proposed that the plotholders themselves - led by the group who had complained and approached TRAC - take over the running of the Co-op and make it work for them. But these people declined the offer, fearing that they would be taking over all the current problems of the organisation, and that they would even be blamed for some of these.