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4 *Structure and culture in pre-industrial Cape Town: A survey of knowledge and ignorance*

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It is perhaps best to begin this analysis by examining the fount of power within the colony. In South Africa before 1870, power was only very partially, though increasingly over time, a derivation of local relations of production and exchange.¹ To the extent that power did depend on such relations, it was only at several removes, and, moreover, not on those located within the continent of Africa. Rather, power at the Cape derived in the first instance from the strength of the Dutch and British imperial systems, in which the colony at the southern tip of Africa was of minor and essentially strategic significance. This was of course by no means an atypical relationship between a colony and a colonising country.

The concrete consequence of this rather abstract statement is the realisation that the prime locus of power in the colony and the city lay with the governor and his high officials, subject only to the constraints and orders that they received from Batavia, Amsterdam and London. Such power was manifest in their legal monopoly of force and thus of life, death and corporal punishment above a certain level, which in Cape Town, if not on the frontier, they could make reality.² This was the case not only during the period of Dutch East India Company rule, when the Council of Policy and the Court of Justice were composed of very much the same men (except that the governor did not sit on the latter since in criminal cases he had to confirm sentences). It continued to be the case after the arrival of the British, and even after the judicial reorganisation of 1827. The judges, although now independent of the executive, nevertheless came from outside the colony and were in general close allies of the high officials.³ And, of course, until 1854, the governor and his council made the laws.

In the last instance, though, the power of the government did not rest on the law courts, or, in practice, on the army and fleet, even though the several thousand imperial troops in the colony were the theoretical guarantors of colonial control. The army, after all, was only called out once to quell civil disorder, against the slaves' march on the city in October 1808.⁴ Even at the height of the convict crisis the maintenance of order in Cape Town was left in the hands of the police (no more than 40 strong) although Lady Smith had to have an escort of dragoons when she rode through the Heerengracht, and soldiers protected the house of the council member Jacob Letterstedt in Rondebosch.⁵ Rather the government was maintained on a day-to-day basis by two less tangible, though no less real attributes, namely its symbolic power and the alliances that it could build up – in other words the practice of politics.

On the symbolic power of the successive governments, we know little. Such matters as 'state' ritual have yet to receive the serious attention of historians of the Cape, although such works as *The Invention of Tradition* edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger⁶ demonstrate the importance that should be attached not only to the inner practice but also to the outer show of rule. The officials of the VOC were well aware of this form of power, in part because the society from which they came had no hereditary titles of any import and

had replaced the obvious ostentation of landed wealth by the less evident power of the bank balance. As a result, in the Netherlands civic and individual show had to perform the task left in England to broad acres. Certainly at the Cape symbolic displays of authority were regular and on a grand scale. The official diarist only became truly eloquent when describing the annual visits of the admiral of the return and outbound fleets, with a full description of the parades and the salutes fired. These were only exceeded by the grandiose pomp that accompanied the funerals of Cape governors and those of their wives. In these ceremonies, all men holding official office and the late governor's connections, many more than a hundred strong, followed the coffin in strict order of precedence.⁷

These great civic rituals were backed up by the regulation of the outward signs of status, so that the social hierarchy was continually visible. Clothing was rigorously regulated, with each grade in the social order having its own badges, from the wearing of embroidered silk reserved for the Council of Policy and their wives to the wearing of shoes, only allowed to the free.⁸ But the slaves did not escape the regulation of their lives, or at least their deaths. By an ordinance of 1754 the number of slaves allowed to follow a slave's funeral was dependent on the rank of the late man's owner.⁹

The British do not seem to have made use of such measures, unless the governor's ostrich-plumed uniform can be said to have replaced his predecessors' monopoly over the finest fabrics. Rather the British governors and high officials saw their position as that of the leaders of society. It is in this context that the letters of Lady Anne Barnard, for instance, should be read, as they demonstrate the process whereby the British attempted, successfully, to acquire social hegemony. The comments that Lady Anne and other observers make on the adoption by the colony's elite women of British fashions (replacing the French, which had been worn during the presence of a French garrison in the 1780s) should not be dismissed as mere tittle-tattle.¹⁰ Indeed they represent a clear political statement on behalf of the wearers, as definite, if somewhat less conscious, as the wearing of black, gold and green in South Africa today.

It is also in this context, and not just as some quirk of taste, that we should view the patronage by various British governors, notably Lord Charles Somerset and Sir Harry Smith (not coincidentally, the two most authoritarian), of the horse races at Green Point and the 'fox'-hunting (actually black-backed jackal) from Wynberg onto the Cape flats and in the Tjiggerberg.¹¹ They represented not just the barbarous recreations of the British military, but also one of the ways in which links were built up between the new rulers and the colony's elite, and helped transform the latter into overseas variants of the British landed gentry.¹²

Important though this outward show was, no government could survive entirely on the basis of funerals, fox-hunts, balls and gubernatorial receptions. To acquire the consent of a sufficient proportion of the governed for it to function, it had also to demonstrate some material convergence with them. This, however, was not difficult. As has been pointed out for the general class of 'white settler' colonies, of which the Cape with its large slave (or ex-slave) and indigenous population was a somewhat aberrant example, 'political collaboration stemmed largely from economic dependence'.¹³ Government demands were rarely considered exorbitant, and government patronage, direct or indirect, was very considerable. Moreover, the government was seen, correctly, as the main guarantor of the social order, with the result that those who profited from that order considered it important not to undermine the basis of their own position. The compact was symbolised in the composition of the Legislative Council after 1827. The 'unofficial' members were to be chosen, so it was decreed from London and accepted in the Cape, from 'the Chief Landed proprietors and Principal merchants' of the colony.¹⁴

This compact only broke down on three occasions, during the Patriot movement of the 1780s, the resistance to the slave ordinances of the late 1820s and early 1830s, and the convict crisis and its aftermath from 1848 to 1854. Even then, the crises were only

temporary. As for the first two, it was clear that the government had not maintained its side of the compact (although it could be argued that before the 1780s the burghers were too weak and the VOC too strong for there to have been a tacit compact at all). On the former occasion, the officials of the VOC had engrossed too much of the economic activity of the colony, and in particular too much of the commercial relations with the outside world, for them to be free of attack.¹⁵ In this sense it was a replay of the W. A. van der Stel affair earlier in the century. On the second occasion, the government had been forced by its own superiors in London to abrogate its role as the maintainer of social order and was required, against its will, to make half-hearted attempts to benefit the underlings.¹⁶

The third occasion, that of the convict crisis, is more complex. Essentially, though, three strands can be disentangled. In the first place, there was a strong feeling within the colony that the time had come for the development of various forms of representative institutions. In some ways, this was a move which went against the immediate financial interests of the colony, since it would eventually entail the withdrawal of British support for the British troops stationed in South Africa, whose presence alone precluded the colony's bankruptcy. Against this, there was the belief that the colony had now achieved sufficient 'maturity' to make it worthy of a parliament, and that this maturity in itself would ensure economic survival. In this, the example of other British colonies, notably Canada and Australia, was crucial.

Secondly, there was by the late 1840s considerable opposition to what has been termed the 'family compact' whereby the Colonial Secretary, John Montagu, controlled the administration and used government patronage to benefit a small clique of supporters, friends and family rather than to extend the political support for the administration.¹⁷ Thirdly, there was the symbolic importance of the convict question. The colony's elite (it is certainly too early to describe them as a ruling class, since their control over the government was still very limited) believed, with justice, that their control over the mass of the Cape's population was weak, and interpreted all resistance to itself as 'crime'. It was therefore in general resolutely opposed to the introduction of yet more 'criminals', especially as these were Europeans whose presence would offend against the racial hierarchy which was being re-established as a means of discipline in the aftermath of emancipation.

Although the first and, above all, the third, of these conflicts were played out in the political theatre of Cape Town, and although the Cape Town municipality took a leading role in the convict crisis, claiming to be the senior democratic institution in the colony, nevertheless, politics were not primarily about specifically Capetonian issues. Within the Cape Town municipality itself, there were of course disputes on the normal range of administrative matters but, so far as I am aware, they had not yet developed into an articulation of specific interests within the town, although perhaps the problems round the harbour and in the complex of slum formation and sanitation may already have been beginning to take this form.¹⁸ Rather, the social oppositions within the town were expressed in terms of what was seen from above as 'crime' and thus the province of the police and the judiciary, a pattern that is not unfamiliar in South Africa's more recent history.

The economy of Cape Town was thus dominated by its dual function as a port and a government centre. Basically, therefore, it was a service city. This had considerable consequences for the size of the economic enterprises. There were only a few with large workforces. The largest establishment would have been the docks, and the largest public works the construction of the breakwaters, which both in the early years of the colony and in the mid-nineteenth century entailed the use of convict labour. The production of building materials was also on a large scale, whether in the Robben Island quarries (which of course used convict labour) or the private kilns for the burning of lime.¹⁹ There were also some

building contractors who worked, at least for the erection of particular buildings, on a fairly large scale.²⁰ Apart from these, the biggest employers were those concerned with the preparation of foodstuffs, above all the slaughterhouses, the corn mills and the breweries, but even these were, with some exceptions, rather small.²¹

Manufacturing industry, in contrast, was virtually absent. In this sector, Cape Town's requirements were largely met by enterprises which had an artisanal character, with small tailors' shops, smithies, carpenters' works and so forth. Fishing was also organised on a small scale, with many individual boat owners, who were often free blacks.

The retailing of food was also a very important source of income. Initially this was very largely in the hands of the slaves, who had to render '*coeli-geld*' to their masters at the end of the day or week – or in other words rent for their own time. This was a practice which could lead to considerable conflict, as slaves who had failed to accumulate sufficient money at the end of the day were liable to punishment. The threat of such punishment was indeed one of the major motives for slaves to run away.²² On the other hand, those few who were successful were sometimes able to buy their own freedom with the profits from their trading. By the early nineteenth century this meant that there was a substantial minority of free blacks (in other words manumitted slaves) among the food retailers.²³ Indeed, in 1812, all Cape Town's 'chop houses', or cheap restaurants, which catered largely for sailors and the urban poor, were in the hands of free blacks.²⁴

Certainly in these artisanal, small trading and fishing occupations, there was never a clear racial division of labour in Cape Town. From the time of slavery, many of the skilled trades were performed by both slaves and free, and by both free blacks and whites; and since often the tasks were for one man, with no division of labour in the production process, there was also no clear racial hierarchy within the trade. Skilled slaves could also achieve a considerable degree of independence. To take one example, Louis of Mauritius, a tailor, was hired out by his owner to his wife, a free woman, and was thus presumably able to live a life free from the worst trammels of slavery, at least until the impending death of his wife threatened to end his privileged status and drove him to lead the slave 'rebellion' of 1808.²⁵ There will have been few slaves who had Louis's degree of independence, but nevertheless the number in Cape Town who were potentially at least able to exploit the advantages of their degree of skill would not have been negligible.

It would be fascinating to have an occupational census of Cape Town, cross-tabulated by status or race, but although the documentary record would probably allow this, at least for around 1820,²⁶ it has yet to be done. Nevertheless, speculating on the results of such a census, it seems reasonable to assume that both during slavery and thereafter there would have been a large number of occupations which were in no way the monopoly of either slaves (or ex-slaves) or the free, so that there was a peculiarly convoluted – and in the South African context, specifically Capetonian – interplay between racial categorisation and occupation. Yet, it would be the worst kind of economism to assume that this entailed either equality or open social interaction between individuals of differing legal or, later, so-called 'racial' status. Rather, there was an elaborate etiquette regulating their relationships. (This point would be made stronger if I was writing in Dutch, or for that matter in French or in Afrikaans, where the word 'etiquette' has maintained its original meaning of 'label' in addition to that current in English.) In Cape Town, more than elsewhere in South Africa, social relations have never been a direct function of economic activity, but have been heavily influenced by all sorts of other considerations, including physiognomy, clothing, language, religious affiliation, even food, which are at best tangentially or derivatively linked to the production and exchange processes of the town.²⁷

If these arguments have any validity, then they signal and justify theoretically the importance of a field of study in which, as yet, our ignorance is great, though not total. This is the question of the various cultures to be found in the city. In the recent historiography of

South Africa, the study of cultures has primarily been concerned with two problems, namely their use for the establishment of hegemony, in the Gramscian sense, and with the opportunities they gave for the maintenance of African resistance.²⁸ In Cape Town, it had another function, which may also have played a role on the Witwatersrand, namely the establishment and marking of 'identity', a term which is of great importance for the modern sociology of the city.²⁹ This is one of the contexts in which we must see the Green Point horse races and the fox-hunting meets, but it is also, perhaps more interestingly, an important facet of the relevance of the Islamic rites and conversions described by Robert Shell.³⁰ Shell has shown how Islam developed the institutions which it had evolved during the period of slavery to provide a haven for many disadvantaged men and women of all nationalities. Although Islam was primarily a religion of the somewhat better situated among the disadvantaged, it could also act as a bridge between the artisans and the small independent traders, on one hand, and some of the manual labourers, on the other.

Valuable though this study and others which deal with Islam are,³¹ they present a potential distortion for the study of Cape Town as a whole if used in a way their authors would not intend. The greater historical visibility – and also to a certain extent the exoticism – of the Muslim community has tended to divert attention from the various other cultural manifestations in the city. Islam, after all, was in some ways a religion and a way of life that set its adherents apart from the other inhabitants of the city, except to the extent that they could be converted. What we need to know more about are the ways in which people who were initially outside the established order came to make a cultural claim for a place within it. This would require, above all, placing the history of the Christian churches and of education definitely in their social context, since it was by converting to Christianity and by acquiring education that such a claim could be made. 'Respectability', too, had its origins in the nineteenth century, but as yet we do not have much idea of the contours of its development.

There were, thus, two major strategies among the upper levels of the so-called 'coloured' population. Either they rejected the cultural hegemony of the whites to take up Islam or they accepted the terms of the 'white' society, taking on Christianity and Western education. Only from the last years of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, with the development of the Stone meeting and later of the APO, was there any attempt to challenge the established order on its own terms.³² However, in particular the strategy of respectability for individuals is in itself evidence that things had changed since the time of the VOC, when full acceptance of the very small number of upwardly mobile, particularly among the women, was not impossible.³³ There were two reasons for this. First, with the economic expansion of Cape Town and above all with the emancipation of slaves, there were many more potential recruits to upper- and middle-class society, so that a pattern, if not a community, could develop. Previously such social careers had been largely a matter of individual choice and fortune. Secondly, increased racism among the whites meant that the great majority of men and women of slave descent were seen by the elite as 'coloureds', and thus not as potential peers. 'Respectability' thus became a terminus, not a way-station.

Even if these suppositions are accurate, there remain considerable problems. Most fundamentally, the ways in which social status was marked and social hierarchies were maintained were not as clear as might be suggested. In Cape Town, more than anywhere else in South Africa, it is not enough merely to look at economics in order to gauge status, but neither should one fall into the opposite trap of accepting at face value the racist classification schemes of the elite. There were very important social boundaries, but exactly where they were and how they were maintained are far from clear. The colour line was definitely blurred, but it was nonetheless clearly present. Indeed some of the institutions by which it might seem to have been broken, such as the 'Rainbow balls' (organised opportunities for British officers and others to pick up 'coloured' women), probably did

more to confirm both those whites who frequented such gatherings and those who condemned them in their stereotypical views of 'coloured' behaviour.³⁴

These ambiguities can be seen clearly in the residential pattern that emerged after emancipation. The ex-slaves took advantage of the opportunities they now had to desert their masters en masse. By the 1850s, living-in servants were virtually unobtainable, since this carried too much of the stigma of slavery.³⁵ Indeed in only one house in Cape Town have the outhouses which were the old slave quarters survived.³⁶ The consequence, of course, was the establishment of Cape Town's slums, in which the ex-slaves exchanged the exploitation of their masters for that of their new landlords, who were very often the same people, as slave compensation money was often invested in house-building.³⁷ In these slums individuals of all origins were to be found,³⁸ but it is most questionable whether those Europeans who had been forced by poverty to take up residence in the alleys along the foreshore were ever able to quit them, or to move to the delights of, say, the Gardens. They were thus likely to be assimilated into Cape Town's lumpenproletariat, which itself was then categorised as 'coloured'.

It was from among the slaves and those ex-slaves who had not made a bid for respectability, that the liveliest expressions of Capetonian popular culture emanated. At the beginning of the nineteenth century Lichtenstein noted that every slave group had its own musical style³⁹ and in the 1820s W. W. Bird observed:

The grand display is in the outskirts of the town, to which the black population rush, on a Sunday, and go through their various awkward movements in quick or slow time, according to the taste of the dancers. The Sunday dance is accompanied by native music of every description. The slave boys from Madagascar and Mosambique bring the stringed instruments of their respective tribes and nation, from which they force sounds, which they regard as melodious. The love of dancing is a ruling passion throughout the Cape population in every rank; but music, though a pursuit favoured by a small part of the society, is here a passion with the negro alone.⁴⁰

It stands to reason that the tradition embodied in such events would not have been extinguished by emancipation, although no doubt it was substantially altered. Perhaps the 'Coon carnival' as it was organised from the 1890s on, was in some ways a transformation of it. However, as yet we know little or nothing about such manifestations. This is greatly to be deplored, not merely because of the intrinsic interest of such events (which can easily lead unwary researchers into the arid antiquarianism of folklore studies) but also because they almost certainly would provide an entry into the visions of their society held by those whose place in it was modest and oppressed. This supposition, moreover, is strengthened by the accounts we do have of slave celebrations of emancipation, which describe parades through the streets of Cape Town with banners flying. (Later they became merely public holidays.)⁴¹ What we can be sure of is that the city's elite looked disparagingly on such events. In common with bourgeois Victorians throughout the world, they saw manifestations of certain popular culture as lewd indiscipline and a potential challenge to the established hierarchy. In this they were united.⁴²

This is another illustration of the fact that in Cape Town allegiances were generally situational rather than immutable. Tony Kirk made a distinction between 'the mercantile elite' and 'the rising commercial class', in mid-nineteenth-century Cape Town.⁴³ His argument is that the two groups can be distinguished on the basis of their economic activities, with the former essentially dependent on their relations with large British shipping and mercantile houses, in which they were often partners, while the latter's financial resources were locally derived and in general re-invested rather than realised for an eventual retirement in Europe. It was in other words a distinction between the financiers and the traders. This distinction, it is claimed, was reflected in the political positions of the two groups during the mid-century crisis. The mercantile elite were in general more conservative and more likely to support the colonial government, while the traders were

more concerned to force the British to grant representative government, hoping in this way that they could use the colonial state to back local speculative schemes, notably in relation to Namaqualand copper.

Without wanting to assume that such dichotomies, which recur regularly in South African historiography, are intrinsically impossible, I would suggest that in this case the distinction is overdrawn, if not entirely false. Obviously, given their necessarily distinct portfolios of activities, there will always be points on which the interest of any two businessmen will differ, and if these become matters of public debate, then they will assume opposite positions. Nevertheless, this does not mean that excessive weight should be given to their conflicts, and indeed their political positions may be determined as much by personal loyalties, for instance to members of the administration, as by their direct economic interests. In Cape Town, to the extent that a genuine division can be discerned, it was, I would argue, more of a generational conflict, or one between the successful and the less so, especially as many of the large financiers also had extensive investments in Cape colonial land.⁴⁴ Certainly Hamilton Ross and J. B. Ebdon, the two most prominent of the mercantile elite, did not begin their careers from a significantly more advantageous position than many of their colleagues. Their wealth and prominence came from the successful exploitation of the colony's commercial potential. Moreover, as evidenced by their and their families' marriages, their social relations were with the colony's old elite. While still a British army officer, Ross eloped with the daughter of a VOC official turned wholesale cattle and sheep merchant, in one of Cape Town's finest scandals, and it was this position bridging the gap between the Dutch commercial elite of the eighteenth century and the links to Britain that became important after 1806, which enabled him, like several others, to flourish. Ebdon's love life was more prosaic, but it is nevertheless notable that he himself married into a family of Cape Town merchants and two of his children married the descendants of that local accumulator par excellence, Maarten Melck. That they advocated more conservative financial politics than many who were not as established is quite unsurprising.⁴⁵ They did not need to exploit the colonial state to acquire fortunes, and they were much more likely to fear the economic crash that might result from excessively risky undertakings. But it would be mistaken to elevate such differences of interest to the status of long-lasting class divisions. They were purely temporary conflicts, just as the contemporary collaboration of John Fairbairn and *De Zuid-Afrikaan*⁴⁶ was a temporary alliance, for specific purposes. When other matters were high on the political agenda, for instance Eastern Cape separatism and the call for Vagrancy Acts, then other coalitions would be formed.

The conclusion that should be drawn from this is perhaps unnecessary in the current state of the historiography, but is nonetheless worth restating. A desire to understand South African history in class terms should not result in the elevation of every dispute to the status of class conflict. If this is so, then it becomes imperative to decide what model can best be used to render intelligible the conflicts that did occur in Cape Town. Probably the answer must be that to reduce all clashes to a single category would be to oversimplify drastically the complexity of the city's social structure, as it was perceived and acted upon by the people who formed it. Cape Town was and is no place for a Manichaean. Its inhabitants classified themselves and each other in terms of gender, colour, class, occupation, legal status, religion and ethnicity, to give a by no means exhaustive list. The hierarchies produced by these various taxonomies were by no means coincident. Only during periods of very sharp social conflict were they likely to be reduced, as the categories became either equivalent or irrelevant. In pre-industrial Cape Town, matters did not reach such a stage. Therefore, our analysis must be multivariate, not reductionist.

5 A 'special tradition of multi-racialism'? Segregation in Cape Town in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

VIVIAN BICKFORD-SMITH

Introduction

In Cape Town, throughout most of the nineteenth century, the 'traditional system' of social relations had been one of white dominance and black subordination. Mirroring a similar development described by Andrews for Buenos Aires, this traditional system was challenged and endangered in the last quarter of the century.¹ This happened as a consequence of the dramatic economic and demographic growth and change wrought by the discovery of diamonds and gold in the South African interior, the mineral revolution.

By the 1890s, social separation of the 'races' became the generally accepted way of maintaining 'traditional' social relations for Cape Town's dominant class. But the latter could not reach unanimity over the extent to which social separation should be actively pursued and enforced, should become formal or *de jure* segregation. The complexity of the debate over this issue reflected the complexity of the city's social formation and was also informed by a similar debate within the dominant white class in the colony as a whole in this period. The outcome of the debate determined the extent, and limitations, of segregation in Cape Town. White supremacy and social separation in a racially ordered society was the Holy Grail for virtually all the participants in the debate; but their quest for this elusive trophy took them along a number of different routes and with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

Finding order through social separation

De facto segregation, in the sense of separation between white and black in institutions such as churches and government undenominational schools had existed in the Cape Colony from the first half of the nineteenth century, replacing the vertical relationship of white over black, characteristic of Cape slavery. This segregation, albeit of a particular and limited kind, originated well before the mineral revolution in South Africa. Its origins were similar to the origins of segregation in post-emancipation North American societies.² What was new about segregation at the Cape in the late nineteenth century was, firstly, its extent and, secondly, the new institutional developments that accompanied it.

The extent of segregation increased in part to prevent the upward mobility of 'other than whites' – to prevent the latter claiming access to dominant class status. It also increased by reaching down into the hitherto undifferentiated lower classes – not only to distinguish white from black, but also to act on that distinction. Integration, such as it was, was a lower-class phenomenon. Even if the definition of who could pass for white was flexible, whiteness was inextricably linked with social and political supremacy. New institutions of segregation came into being as the Cape government and employers of labour at the Cape were faced with the twin problems, and ultimately linked solutions, of newly conquered