

Things Change

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# Things Change

*Black Material Culture and the Development of a  
Consumer Society in South Africa, 1800–2020*

By

Robert Ross



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Cover illustration: Lounge, Wattville, Benoni, c. 1959. Ngilima collection, University of the Witwatersrand, courtesy of the Ngilima family

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*For Jack,  
and for Lily, Luca and Hugo*





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## Introduction

This is a book about things, about objects, specifically about those owned and used by Black<sup>1</sup> South Africans over the last couple of centuries, and about the sort of society which those who possessed the things created. The setting of such a subject immediately raises three overlapping questions out of which the backbone of this book has developed. The first is the factual: what are the changes which have occurred in the composition of the collection of things which Black South Africans have owned? In other words, how have massive urbanisation and even more extensive conversion to Christianity led to a decisive alteration in their possessions and in the interiors of their houses? How was this effected by apartheid, and later by its demise and the loosening of bonds subsequent to the first democratic elections, and the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as the country's president in 1994. Thus, secondly, there is the question as to how far the desire for these, and other goods have led to the creation of a consumer society in South Africa.

Thirdly, there is the question: what did these new ranges of possessions mean? The purchase, and later possession and display of, for instance, a sofa, or a particular car, or whatever is a statement – over and above any utilitarian value – to the world around that “I am the sort of person who has such an object” and thus “this is the sort of person I want you to think that I am.” It is thus a claim to an identity which may or may not be accepted widely. It is also likely to be somewhat ambiguous. But, in various ways, since the early days of colonial rule, Black South Africans have been struggling to escape from an identity which was thrust upon them, and to find ways to recognise and adopt the demands of the modern world. As elsewhere throughout the world, the exhibition of the objects of desire has been strengthened by a whole range of other means to demonstrate the position to which an individual or a community was aspiring. These include, among others, the language they speak and, within that language, the vocabulary and accent they use, the clothing they wear, what they eat and drink, with whom and where they worship which God, the music to which they listen, and the dances they enjoy, the animals

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1 In this book, “Black”, in the designation of persons, is used in its most restrictive sense, thus excluding those known under apartheid as “Coloureds” and “Indians”, whose historical trajectory with regard to material culture has been significantly different to that of the “Blacks”. “African” is occasionally used as a synonym for “Black”, purely for stylistic reasons.

and plants they keep around them, with which they may become identified, the political allegiances they hold, and the ways in which they express such allegiances, and no doubt many more. In this book, I discuss one of the most potent of such markers of existence, namely through the things that are used and possessed. In English, at least, belongings are a major part of belonging. Human beings and human societies are magnificently diverse, but in one way they are consistent. We are what we have.<sup>2</sup>

All of these ways by which people demonstrate who they were and are have a history, although they often owe their success to the denial of change. They are seen as part of “culture” and, as such, produce unreflexive actions. Those aspects of our life, which we do unconsciously, most clearly demonstrate the forming we have undergone, consciously and unconsciously, in the course of upbringing, and as such they have become part of our natural and uncontested world. The most successful of these ways of demonstrating power are, indeed, those which produce unthinking acceptance, which are known, ever since Gramsci,<sup>3</sup> as hegemony. But for all this, the ways in which we say who we are, and who we would like people to think that we are, are continually changing. This means that there is a history of the things we have around us, formally known as the study of material culture.

The study of material culture in many parts of the world, including Southern Africa, has far too often been a rather stuffy occupation. Above all associated with ethnographic museums, it has, stereotypically, made two statements, namely “this is what the [ethnonym to be decided] make in order to go about their daily business” and “doesn’t it look beautiful, even though it may appear ‘primitive’, and exotic.” In this book, such approaches are systematically rejected. Peoples are not to be defined by their pots, or their basketry, or whatever. Certain objects are used, like a uniform, to signal a political adherence, as, for instance, the conical hats and blankets, complete with a weaver’s flaw, which demonstrate allegiance to the line of kings founded by Moshoeshoe I in the early nineteenth century, and thus to the Kingdom of Lesotho.<sup>4</sup> Here is a clear contrast here. The academic study of Black material culture has largely been concerned with “traditional” settings, either to bolster “tribal” leaders or to provide information for archaeologists, and generally stress the importance

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2 This can of course be (next to) nothing.

3 Antonio Gramsci and Joseph A. Buttigieg, *Prison Notebooks*.

4 The best description of African political life is Paul S. Landau, *Popular Politics in the History of South Africa, 1400–1948*; on Lesotho, there are many works, perhaps most germanely Elizabeth A. Eldredge, *Power in Colonial Africa: Conflict and discourse in Lesotho, 1870–1960*.

of the ethnic group from which the objects in question derive.<sup>5</sup> As against this, the prime statement which was made through objects in South Africa has been a claim to modernity. Roughly translated from the language of material things to the language of speech, in which, indeed, it could often not be expressed, Black South Africans have been saying: "Look at me, I am as up-to-date, as modern, as civilised as you are." The same message had at least two distinct meanings, depending on whom it was addressed to. On the one hand, if directed towards White compatriots, it was a claim to equality and thus a defiant political act. On the other, it was a message interior to Black society, and thus a play within the continual struggle for status in which, in different arenas, all humans continually take part. Thus, a claim to equality with the Whites could be a powerful weapon within the local struggle for prestige.

There are clear difficulties in this statement, notably in that the definition and description of modernity was open to continual discussion. In the colonial situation in which Black South Africans found themselves until the last decade of the twentieth century, modernity could be seen as that which the Whites did, or at least were thought to do.<sup>6</sup> In general terms this claim to modernity entailed and provided the impulse for the great transformation in material culture that has occurred in South Africa (and much of the rest of the continent) beginning in the first half of the nineteenth century and reaching its conclusion towards the end of the twentieth. In this period, the assertion of modernity has led to a virtually total shift in the things which are now to be found in any South African house. These are now mostly goods whose prototypes were first created outside the region, in Europe, perhaps in North Africa or Western Asia, and far more than most Europeans are prepared to admit, probably in China or India. In this sense, tables and chairs, knives, forks, and spoons, plates, cups, and saucers, dishes and glasses, pots and iron pans, shoes, socks, trousers, shirts and jackets, combs and brushes, beds, sheets, blankets and pillows, books, bookshelves, and cupboards are each in their own way symbols of colonial invasion. Nevertheless, Black South Africans adopted and purchased

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5 For example, E.M. Shaw & N.J. van Warmelo, "The Material Culture of the Cape Nguni", 4 parts, *Annals of the South African Museum*; see Carolyn Hamilton & Nessa Leibhammer. *Tribing and Untribing the Archive: Identity and the Material Record in Southern KwaZulu-Natal in the Late Independent and Colonial Periods*, notably Nessa Leibhammer, "Negotiating a South African Inheritance: Nineteenth – and Early Twentieth-century 'Traditional' Collections at the Johannesburg Art Gallery", pp. 52–86.

6 It was, however, not necessarily what the South African Whites did which drove the actions of the Africans. The importance of American film for the development of the style of Johannesburg's gangsters in the 1950s and 1960s is but one indication of this. See Clive Glazer, *Bo-Tsotsi: The youth gangs of Soweto, 1835–1976*.

these goods by choice. This transformation of the living environment has been a matter of African agency and division. The goods that constituted the transformation were very rarely imposed on South Africans by colonial invaders in the same sense as political subjection and economic dependency followed on from colonial conquest. Outside of boarding schools, those classic institutions of the “civilising mission”,<sup>7</sup> and domestic service, there were few moments at which Black South Africans were required to demonstrate their adoption of the material culture of Europeans. The wearing of body-covering clothing in the towns was probably the most important such imposition.<sup>8</sup> For the rest, it may well have been necessary to take on some of the outward and visible signs of colonial society in order to enhance one’s position within it. However, if Africans did so, it was entirely at their own discretion. To give an example, which is only trivial at first sight, there was no-one who had required a Black domestic worker in Johannesburg in 1959 to have 23 separate beauty products on her dressing table, where they were listed by one of the first Blacks to have a creative position at a major advertising agency in the city. On the contrary, indeed, the lady’s employers might well have been shocked and dismayed at the “sophistication” that their domestic worker displayed, to say nothing of her allowing Nimrod Mkele into a position where he could take the audit.<sup>9</sup>

Beyond the tensions that there may or may not have been within the household to which Mkele had access, there is a deeper point to be made. European reactions to the impact they had on African thought and behaviour had two main facets. On the one hand there was the “civilising mission” of some among the colonial invaders,<sup>10</sup> and the various attempts to colonise South African consciousness.<sup>11</sup> These were always doomed to failure, at least if consciousness is thought to be susceptible to colonization in the same way as, for instance, the land or political power. It is tempting, though mistaken, to confuse the

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7 Natalie Swanepoel, “Not Built in a Day: The Evolving Landscape of the Botshabelo Mission Station, South Africa, 1865–2015”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 44:4, 681–702; Megan Healy-Clancy, *A World of Their Own: A History of South African Women’s Education*.

8 See, for instance, the Grahamstown municipality Regulations for 1847, published in Keith S. Hunt, “The Development of Municipal Government in the Eastern Province of the Cape of Good Hope with Special Reference to Grahamstown, 1827–1862”, *Archives Year Book for South African History*, 1961, p. 272.

9 See below p. 128.

10 In addition to missionaries and their allies, there were a number of colonial officials, perhaps most notably the Governors Sir Harry Smith and Sir George Grey, who believed their actions would lead to the “civilisation” of the Africans.

11 John & Jean Comaroff, “The Colonization of Consciousness in South Africa”, *Economy and Society*, 18, 1989, 267–296.

hope and the intention of the missionaries – that their congregations would take on board both the sacred and the secular messages which they were propagating – with the extent to which their congregations actually internalised those messages. In so far as the missionaries made converts to Christianity, the massive shift to the Western religion only came when African pastors, and their wives, began to work in the churches. There were of course, earlier converts, many of whom were sincere, and a number of whom were giving the socially expected answers to the missionaries' probings in exchange for the material benefits that Christianity entailed. The missionaries hoped they could distinguish between these two groups, but in the nature of things there must have been many in the latter category. Whatever they may have claimed, and missionaries were no less prone than anyone else to exaggerate the degree to which they had been successful, missionaries had no means to enforce sincerity.

In contrast to this, there was a strong tendency among Europeans to distrust those Blacks who had come to absorb too much of the European "culture". It was always safer for colonists to see their subjects as savages. This gave them a reason, and an excuse, to hold the Blacks under control and to treat them as children. In reaction to this, Blacks maintained a continual and very widespread challenge to White rule, and White domination, whether in its early colonial form or later under segregation and apartheid.<sup>12</sup> This resistance took many forms, from the violence of the Armed Struggle and the township revolts of the 1970s and 1980s<sup>13</sup> to the quiet adoption of a way of life which was in itself a rejection and a falsification of the tenets on which White rule and apartheid were based. These latter forms of resistance did not have to be translated into words or into direct political action. Indeed, in general they could not be. It was sufficient for those who could do so to demonstrate the signs of their success, in their dress, in their homes – even if few Whites ever set foot in an African's house – perhaps in their car, or in what they drank and ate. From the point of view of the African elite, a claim to participation in, and in time to domination of, the various organs of state could be made by showing civilisation and respectability. This was much more of a threat to White authority than the "tribal" way of life could ever be. Therefore, to consolidate their domination, the rulers of the segregationist and apartheid state attempted to

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12 The best recent discussion of the history of apartheid is Saul Dubow, *Apartheid, 1948–1994*.

13 Thula Simpson, *Umkhonto we Sizwe: The ANC's armed struggle*; Gary Kynoch, *Township Violence and the End of Apartheid: War on the Reef*.

forge coalitions with the conservative heads of “tribal” institutions.<sup>14</sup> The latter might themselves be under pressure from the new elite, who forced the recognition that the old bases of power, in people, land, and cattle, were eroding in the face of people who could demonstrate other, and more “modern” bases of prestige.

## 1 The Development of a Consumer Society

This, then, is a book about consumption, and about the politics of consumption, specifically in a society which had undergone military conquest. Since the 1980s, if not earlier, historians of various countries in the world have been attempting to write the history of what they call a “consumer society”,<sup>15</sup> or alternatively arguing that this is not a category which should be used.<sup>16</sup> That said, it is not easy to find a definition of “consumer society”, nor a set of criteria by which such a society can be identified. In part, the study of consumption within economic history has grown out of, but is generally still subordinate to, the study of production. There has been more attention paid to the supply side, rather than to the demand. Adam Smith had written that “Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production; and the interest of the producer ought to be attended to only so far as it may be necessary for promoting that of the consumer.”<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the history of the Industrial Revolution of Western Europe and parts of North America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been much more about the development of more efficient means of producing goods, and about the use of fossil fuels to do so, than it has been about the increasing demand for these goods, and the improved ways which were found to satisfy those wants.<sup>18</sup> In South African history, there is

14 Notably, Jeff Guy, “An Accommodation of Patriarchs’: Theophilus Shepstone and the Foundations of the System of Native Administration in Natal”, *Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, 32(1), pp. 81–99; Anne Kelk Mager, *Gender and the Making of a South African Bantustan: A Social History of the Ciskei*, pp. 194–1959.

15 Notably, Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, & J.H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialisation of Eighteenth-century England*.

16 Frank Trentmann, “The Long History of Contemporary Consumer Society; Chronologies, Practices, and Politics in Modern Europe”, *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 49, 2009, pp. 107–128.

17 Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* [1776] (Book IV, Ch. 8, p. 49).

18 To give two (relatively) recent examples, see Robert C. Allen, *The British Industrial Revolution in Global Perspective*; E.A. Wrigley, *Energy and the English Industrial Revolution*; c.f. Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behaviour and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present*.

perhaps an excuse for an approach in which the supply side was paramount, because the great accelerations in the economic growth of the country came as a result of foreign demand for wool, and to a much greater degree, for diamonds and gold. The chains of causation ran from the discovery of diamonds and gold in the later nineteenth century to the development of new categories of society collectively if problematically known as the “middle class”. These people, whose prosperity in large measure derived from their connection, at one or more removes, to the mineral economy, were to provide a market within the country.<sup>19</sup> Initially they were almost exclusively “White”, the descendants of the immigrants who had conquered the county. Increasingly, members of the Black population began to aspire to participation in the world of the colonisers, as participants in the economy at a level above that of manual labour,<sup>20</sup> in its politics, and also, crucially for this book, in the material world which the European colonisers had introduced to the country. In the process, they became consumers, in the restricted sense that they were open to the blandishments of the advertising industry, with their specific demands. Together with their White counterparts, they formed the basis on which secondary industry, and the production of consumer goods, for instance, automobiles, in South Africa could be established – at least when local production could compete with overseas imports. This in turn led to the creation of retailing firms with outlets throughout the country and, since the 1994 change in the system of South African government, in many regions north of the Limpopo. This new South African penetration to its north has been above all in the retail and also the banking sectors, with the result that the shopping malls of many African countries look surprisingly familiar to those who know South Africa.

How this is to be judged forms part of an argument which goes back to at least the first century of the Common Era. In approximately 98 C.E., the great Roman historian Tacitus wrote a biography of his father-in-law, Cnaeus Julius Agricola, who had been Governor of the relatively newly conquered Roman province of Britain. In that book, Tacitus describes how Agricola had encouraged the Britons in the acceptance of the Roman way of life, in language, dress, food, and the comforts of living. Then, with typical acerbity, Tacitus wrote: “All this in their ignorance they called civilization, when it was but a part of their

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19 Through its exploitation of systems of migrant labour and other measures, the mineral sector also led directly to enormous levels of poverty within South Africa.

20 This despite the claim made by Hendrik Verwoerd as Minister of Native Affairs in 1954 that “There is no place for [a Black man] in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour”, *South African Hansard*, 7.6.1954.

servitude.”<sup>21</sup> This argument, though attractive, is not one which this book defends. On the contrary, the key argument of this book is that the acquisition of the material culture of their conquerors was a part of the Black South Africans’ liberation from colonial domination, not a part of their servitude. It was so because it ran counter to the precepts of the invading power. Whereas for Agricola’s subjects, their adoption of the Roman way of life was in accord with colonial policy, for Black South Africans the goal of the state was in general to keep them as far as possible from the lifestyle of the ruling class. In such circumstances, their actions were designed to counter attempts to keep them from the enjoyment of the new modern world which they saw around them. The purchase of goods for within their houses and for display outside was therefore sending a message to both their fellow Africans and to the rulers of segregated and apartheid South Africa that they were not prepared to acquiesce in the position to which they had been assigned. As Hlonipha Mokoena recently commented, the group of literate Africans, in connection to the missions, in the later nineteenth century were using clothing, and other items of daily life “to establish a novel manner and way of being African.”<sup>22</sup> So long as it was conspicuous, consumption was an act of defiance.

While this was the attitude of a significant proportion of Black South Africans, for a long period of time, it was never universal among them. It had its own particular history. There were those who had benefitted by the old order, and wished it to be continued, as far as possible, in alliance with the colonial authorities. To put the matter in its most crude and simplified form, there was a contest between the chiefly order and the African “progressives” with, as its prize, power over what was the majority of Black South Africans, namely those who lived in the Bantustans, or alternatively freedom from the exercise of “tribal” jurisdiction and regulation. There were so many exceptions to this statement that maybe it should be totally abandoned, but nevertheless it provides a leading narrative against which all the various manifestations of the relationship between the “traditional leaders” and the “progressive elite” can be judged. For the purposes of this book, what matters is the extent to which chiefs restricted or at least discouraged the adoption of European ways

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21 *Agricola* 21. The Latin of the crucial sentence is “*Idque apud imperitos humanitas vocabatur; cum pars servitutis esse.*” See also Robert Ross, *A Respectable Age*, Leiden University, 19 September 2014; see also Keith Thomas, *In Pursuit of Civility: Manners and Civilization in Early Modern England*, p. 318.

22 Hlonipha Mokoena, “The hardness of the times and the dearness of all the necessaries of life’: class and consumption in bilingual nineteenth-century newspapers”, *Social History*, 45(4), pp. 453–475.

within the areas over which they had power. Certainly, when they were put in a position where they could make a choice, it was very rare for Black South Africans to maintain a “traditional” way of life. Nevertheless, there were those on both sides of the “racial” divide who took positions opposed to what might be expected. These included, on the one hand, many of the architects and town planners responsible for the building of the African suburbs of the major cities. They often based their planning on the assumption that the houses which they had constructed would be occupied by middle class nuclear families, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, there were those Africans who, at least at the ideological level, rejected the White man and all his works. Nevertheless, the proponents of the Black Consciousness movement, who went furthest in this line of thought, did not attempt to recreate a South Africa divorced from modernisation. Except with regard to the adornment of the body, through cosmetics, hair straighteners, and so forth, the materialities of the country as it was in the 1960s and 1970s were, wisely, accepted as a given.<sup>24</sup>

This argument depends on one axiom and a whole set of observations which comprise the empirical basis of what follows. The axiom is that there is a close relationship between the world of the everyday and what is conventionally described as politics, just as there is a clearer interaction between the micro-economics of individual households and the macro-economics of the country, the continent, or the globe. Even if it is not axiomatic in the strict sense of the word, it is at the very least a proposition for which there is overwhelming evidence, at least in Southern Africa. Much that is seemingly trivial has its political ramifications when properly investigated. To take one example, Mia Brandel-Syrier, an anthropologist who did field work among the elite households of the Gauteng suburb of Katlehong in the 1960s, commented that there was a dispute between those who advocated built-in clothes closets in the bedroom, and those who preferred a stand-alone wardrobe as part of an integrated bedroom suite of furniture.<sup>25</sup> This was an act of defiance. The outcome of the debate as such does not really matter. Rather it was the very fact that such a debate was held that is important. These men and women were engaged in creating, in their homes, the sort of world in which to live as they

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23 See below pp. 118.

24 See below, pp. 165; also, Daniel R. Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets: Black Consciousness in South Africa, 1968–1977*, esp. p. 111; Lynn M. Thomas, *Beneath the Surface: A Layered History of Skin Lighteners*, pp. 190–204.

25 Mia Brandel-Syrier, *Reeftown Elite: a study in social mobility in a modern African community on the Reef*, pp. 89–90.

hoped, despite living in the world of high apartheid, which aimed to control and dominate the lives of all Africans, especially those who had come to live in South Africa's cities.

These are comments which, *mutatis mutandis*, could be transferred to the history of much of Europe before and during World War II, and to that of the communist states which arose in the Eastern part of the continent thereafter. In other words, am I engaged in writing a form of *Alltagsgeschichte* (the history of everyday life)? Though I have undoubtedly been influenced by the work of the *Alltagsgeschichte* historians in Germany, and indeed by their intellectual confreres who practice “micro-history”,<sup>26</sup> this work does not contain the detailed, localised narratives which characterise, and indeed define, those ways of writing history.<sup>27</sup> The topic of this book does not lend itself to the exploitation of one or more lodes of detailed, personal information, as micro-history is wont to do. There has indeed been much work which would qualify as microhistory done in southern Africa over the last decades,<sup>28</sup> but this is not one of them.

## 2 The Participants in the Consumer Society

While virtually all Africans were prepared to take imported goods into their homes when they became available, and if they could be afforded, the earliest major participants in the very small consumer society as it began to develop were the first converts to Christianity, from the first half of the nineteenth century on. Conversion in Southern Africa was not just a spiritual matter; indeed, in some accounts the spiritual hardly occurs. As I demonstrate below, in the minds of most missionaries Christianity and civilization were inextricable. While there were of course the standard denominational disputes about what

26 For an overview, see David F. Crew, “Alltagsgeschichte: A New Social “History from Below”?” *Central European History*, 22(3–4), pp. 394–407; For recent work, see Alf Lüdtke, *Everyday Life in Mass Dictatorship. Collusion and Evasion*; John Brewer (2010), “Microhistory and the Histories of Everyday Life”, *Cultural and Social History*, 7(1), pp. 87–109; among the more recent examples of micro-history, see Keith Wrightson, *Ralph Taylor's Summer: A Scrivener, his City and the Plague*.

27 For comments on micro-history in particular, see, *The Borders of Race in Colonial South Africa: The Kat River Settlement, 1829–1856*, pp. 3–4.

28 Some examples: Nigel Penn, *Rogues, Rebels and Runaways: Eighteenth Century Cape Characters*; idem, *Murderers, Miscreants and Mutineers, Early Cape Lives*; and many works by Charles van Onselen, notably, *The Seed is Mine: The life of Kas Maine, A South African Sharecropper, 1894–1985*.

Christianity was, the arguments as to what civilization entailed were at least as sharp, and not confined to the churches. The Superintendent of the London Missionary Society in South Africa, Dr John Philip, once reminisced on his conflicts with a Governor of the Cape Colony, the aristocratic and military Lord Charles Somerset. Philip wrote: “The question between us and the government was one of civilization. The criterion of a people’s civilization with Lord Charles Somerset was whether the people used knives and forks.”<sup>29</sup> In fact, almost all missionaries would have agreed with Lord Charles, except in that the definition was far too narrow. Conversion to Christianity required not just a change of heart, and a change of mind, but also a change of habits and lifestyle.

The converts to mission Christianity took on the message of the churches as to the “equality of believers” and the necessity of adopting “civilized” ways of life seriously, far more seriously indeed than many of the missionaries who propounded it.<sup>30</sup> For them, there was an implicit pay-off to their activities. The men and women who had been through the mission schools had been shown a model of a life which was both comfortable and moral, and they accepted it as goal for which they must strive. In the course of time, this attitude towards the goods of the Whites, and the way of life of the Whites, spread very widely among Africans. In the course of the following chapters I attempt to trace how this happened, and thus how a consumer society was slowly created in South Africa. In the culmination of this process, the advertising industry played a major role, one that the industry’s spokesmen and women were by no means loth to proclaim, as befitted their profession. In this, though, they were reacting to the long and silent struggles of countless African families and individuals to build lives for themselves in which they could feel that they were in control of their own circumstances. It was in the end a struggle for respectability.<sup>31</sup>

In this, the struggle for respectability was intertwined with *THE STRUGGLE*, as the long contest to achieve full political rights in South Africa for the African (and Coloured and Indian) population of the country is known. In order to live a respectable life, men and women needed a sufficient income, decent housing, and such amenities as a working sewage disposal system. By the last quarter of the twentieth century, further amenities such as the presence of running water and electricity in homes had become part of the package of utilities to which at least all urban dwellers felt entitled. The life also entailed safety, to

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29 John Philip, “A Narrative Written for Buxton”, Archives of the Council for World Missions (the successor to the London Missionary Society).

30 Richard Elphick, *The Equality of Believers: Protestant Missionaries and the Racial Politics of South Africa*.

31 David Goodhew, *Respectability and Resistance: A History of Sophiatown*.

allow workers to get to their work in some semblance of public transport, and to provide reasonable hope that they could get home on a Friday evening without being robbed of their wages, to say nothing of the chances of being caught in the crossfire of gang warfare, or being raped by those same gang members, or others. Above all, they needed to be sure that they could consume the fruits of their labour in relative peace. None of these were guaranteed by the White-run state, neither in the era of segregation, before 1948, nor under apartheid, thereafter. Moreover, apartheid at least placed substantial obstacles against Blacks earning enough to satisfy the requirements of the drive for respectability and property. Not surprisingly, the inhabitants of the African townships, by a great majority, supported the efforts of those who were actively attempting to overthrow the political order under which they lived, even if part of this struggle could consist of working to ensure that the wild youth were kept reasonably under the control of their elders.<sup>32</sup> At least to judge by the political and economic behaviour of these people after the end of apartheid and the institution of full democracy, the Struggle was fuelled by visions of furniture, flat-screen televisions, and so forth. For some the result has been a disillusion, and for others a true liberation, but for all the revolution which culminated in the election of Nelson Mandela as President of South Africa in 1994 was, and has remained, a revolution of things.

This is of course an argument which privileges, perhaps over-privileges, the Black urban middle class.<sup>33</sup> As is notorious, the level of income inequality within South Africa is usually considered to be the highest in the world, and indeed uniquely approaches that of the world as a whole. Thus, it may be that outside the towns, and particularly among the rural poor, some vestiges of the old material culture can still be met with. Such survey work as is available on these people does not suggest that that this is in any way a significant portion of the population. This is in contrast to the situation further north in Africa. There the transition to “Western” – in fact, these days, primarily “Eastern” – goods has not been as complete as in South Africa. Although there will be few households which do not possess, at the very least, an enamel bowl made in China, or elsewhere in Asia, there are still places where the reliance on local manufacture has not entirely disappeared.<sup>34</sup> But these are the exceptions. Without the nationalism that maintains a level of high cultural use of older

32 Ineke van Kessel, *“Beyond our Wildest Dreams”: the United Democratic Front and the Transformation of South Africa*.

33 For example, Roger Southall, *The New Black Middle Class in South Africa*.

34 But see Kate Frederick, *De-industrialisation in East Africa: textile production in an era of globalization and colonization, c. 1830–1940*.

forms, as in parts of West Africa, the likelihood is that all areas of the continent will succumb to the homogenization of material culture in the near future, if they have not already done so. This book, then, is an attempt to put things into the cultural-cum-political narrative of South African history. There are difficulties associated with such an effort. In the historiography of South Africa, too much has too often been given a political edge, of which the people at the time may well not have been aware. Even when they discuss them, it is rare for historians to assess the emotional advantages, or the improved comfort, provided by the various goods which came into African households during the twentieth century. Life becomes much easier, and more agreeable, in a house with piped water,<sup>35</sup> a functioning sewage system, a connection to the electricity network, comfortable chairs, and indeed a radio, a television, and a sound system. It was also good to be able to travel in one's own car, rather than to be condemned to use the mini-bus taxi service for transportation. Most of these were not within the budget of more than a small, though growing, proportion of the African population.

Some of these goods had more than a simple utilitarian function. They came into houses that already existed, usually, and then functioned in relation to other objects. In so doing they allowed Africans to demonstrate their aesthetic taste, in the same way as clothing and cosmetics allowed individuals of both sexes to proclaim and exhibit their own beauty and personality.<sup>36</sup> The competition engendered by the possibility of acquiring the new sorts of possession could become very keen. To some extent, this was a question of "keeping up with the Joneses", or the Van der Merwes, which was part of the cultural-political contest across racial lines. But at the same time, houses, and above all serious cars, were also about "keeping up with the Kumalos".<sup>37</sup> The interior stratification of African communities in the course of the twentieth century was not as great as has been developing since 1994, as the accumulation of great riches was hindered by segregationary and apartheid rules, but it

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35 Comfort could come in many ways. Brandel-Syrier reports a household with all the modern conveniences in the bathroom, but also with a chipped enamel washstand, which was cattily commented on by the neighbours as the only object in daily use. But, particularly with regard to personal hygiene, the habits of a lifetime are difficult to change. See *Reeftown Elite*, p. 58.

36 See e.g., Thomas, *Beneath the Surface*; Robert Ross, *Clothing: A Global History; or the Imperialists' New Clothes*; Deborah Posel & Ilona Van Wyk (Eds.), *Conspicuous Consumption in Africa*.

37 Nimrod Mkele, "Advertising to the Bantu", *Second Advertising Convention in South Africa*, p. 127.

was nevertheless considerable. The myth of the unified, single-minded African community, shoulder to shoulder against apartheid is precisely that: a myth.

If anyone still propounds such a myth it is in contradiction of the civil strife within the African townships in the latter years of apartheid, not just between the primarily Zulu Inkatha Freedom Party and the ANC, but internal to the African townships, particularly on the Witwatersrand.<sup>38</sup> These conflicts were described, including by the participants, as political. Those who were executed by the so-called “comrades” were seen as “sell-outs”. In parts of the countryside, the lynchings performed in the name of liberation were of those identified as witches.<sup>39</sup> In the townships, such a designation was not generally used, even though the punishment imposed on the unfortunate victims was in many ways analogous to that used to eliminate witchcraft. After 1994, the number of extra-judicial executions declined, but the perceived incidence of witchcraft almost certainly increased, although perhaps only temporarily.<sup>40</sup> In this the accumulation of wealth and goods by the middle class and their reluctance to share it with less fortunate kinspeople was of prime importance. Throughout the twentieth century, and indeed in various places both before and after that, it was important for the wealthier Africans to put aside the threat of an occult attack on their prosperity, or alternatively the danger of themselves being accused of witchcraft. How far they managed this, is uncertain, but their possessions were never neutral.

### 3 Sources

In order to acquire the sort of information required for this book, historians in Western Europe, or for that matter the Cape Colony, before the mid-nineteenth century, have generally had recourse to the inventories of property drawn up after their owner had died.<sup>41</sup> I do not believe that this sort of information is available in the various archives of South Africa, at least for those people on whom this book focusses. So far as I can see, the various files contained in the archives of the location superintendents of twentieth-century South African cities do not contain detail on the possessions of those who held houses in the

38 Van Kessel, *Beyond Our Wildest Dreams*; Gary Kynoch, *Township Violence*.

39 Van Kessel, *Beyond Our Wildest Dreams*, Ch. 3; Peter Delius, *A Lion among the Cattle: Reconstruction and Resistance in the Northern Transvaal*, Ch. 6.

40 Adam Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence and Democracy in South Africa*.

41 For example, Johan Fourie, “The remarkable wealth of the Dutch Cape Colony: measurements from eighteenth-century probate inventories”, *Economic History Review*, pp. 419–448.

various townships.<sup>42</sup> As a result, I have been forced to rely on three main sorts of sources. The first are the works of ethnography and anthropology, written over the past two hundred and twenty years. In this sense, there is a convergence with those historians of European countries who take part of their inspiration from anthropology. This comes easily in Southern Africa, since in these fields the fence between ethnography and history is very permeable – and not electrified. In southern Africa, ethnographers include many who wrote accounts of the people they lived among, even though their reason for being where they were was not in the first instance to pursue ethnographic research. Among the early ethnographers, there were those whose contacts with those who might be thought of as their subjects were a number of government officials,<sup>43</sup> and above all some missionaries, those who did not allow their zeal for the conversion of Africans to Christianity to cloud their vision of the lives of those among whom they worked. These last may not have approved of what they saw, but at least they described it as accurately as they could.<sup>44</sup>

The danger with this material is that the exotic, from the point of view of the African householders, has often not been recorded, and that there has been too much stress on the “traditional.” This temptation to avoid the modern is even more real for photographers, so that, for instance the works of A.M. Duggan-Cronin<sup>45</sup> or of Brother Aegidius at the Mariannahill mission in KwaZulu-Natal<sup>46</sup> are not usable in this study. Fortunately, a number of

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42 The National Archives in Pretoria contains at least 60,000 files on the estates of men and women who lived (legally) in the “townships” of Johannesburg (call mark KJB, 44,027 files), Benoni (call mark KBN, 7736 files), and Pretoria (call mark KPA 8415 files). In addition, there are smaller collections deriving from the smaller towns of what was once the Transvaal. They do contain some indication of wealth, which could be of great importance for investigations into the changing patterns of prosperity and poverty in urban South Africa. Perhaps the files concerning bankruptcy could yield significant information on possessions, but the problems of representativeness would be enormous.

43 Ludwig Alberti, *Account of the Tribal Life of the Xhosa in 1807*, was the first, and in many ways the best.

44 Pre-eminent among these were Johannes van der Kemp, “An account of the religion, customs, population, government, language, history and natural productions of Caffraria” *Transactions of the London Missionary Society*, pp. 432–468.; Eugène Casalis, *My Life in Basutoland*, & Henri A. Junod, *The Life of a South African Tribe*.

45 Michael Godby, “Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin’s Photographs for *The Bantu Tribes of South Africa* (1928–954); the construction of an ambiguous idyll”, pp. 54–83.

46 Christoph Rippe, “Auxiliary Modes of Collecting: Circulation and Curation of Photographs from the Mariannahill Mission in KwaZulu-Natal, 1880s to 1914”, in Hamilton & Liebhammer (Eds.), *Tribing and Untribing the Archive*, pp. 378–14.

Southern Africa's early academic anthropologists, notably Isaac Schapera,<sup>47</sup> Monica Hunter (Wilson),<sup>48</sup> and Ellen Hellmann,<sup>49</sup> reported what they saw, not what they could reconstruct. Their example has been followed by many subsequent fieldworkers, who also often had a political reason for describing the dire current state of affairs, rather than attempting to recreate some mythical pre-colonial utopia or dystopia.

Secondly, there was the Black press, that is to say the newspapers and magazines that were aimed at a "Black" market. They were, however, always owned by Whites, who maintained a greater or lesser degree of control over what got published. In all cases they propagated a middle-class lifestyle, and generally the nuclear family, with the wife staying at home, something that hardly any Black families could afford. Some of the papers were didactic, such as *Bantu World* before World War Two, where the "Page of Interest to Women of the Race" was largely written by the "editress", who was the notable (male) journalist Rolfes Robert Reginald Dhlomo. He even ventriloquised to the extent that he (probably) wrote some of the so-called letters from the public, including a major attack on African women wearing cosmetics.<sup>50</sup> Or there was the short-lived *Township Housewife*, put out for a few months in 1968–9 by the Ministry of Bantu affairs, which consisted very largely of recipes. Other magazines had a looser editorial stance, notably *Drum Magazine*. During its glory days in the 1950s, it was in touch with the political fervour of the decade. Nonetheless, *Drum Magazine* consisted for between 50% and 60% of advertisements, so that its clear project was to enhance the embourgeoisement of the Black "middle class." In addition, I have on occasion used fictional writing by Black South Africans, which is generally surprisingly realistic in tone, and often not merely illustrative but also in its way more accurate than apparently "truthful" accounts, for instance some photography.

Thirdly, I have made use of various surveys. Initially, from the 1930s onwards, the research was into the household budgets of the urban African population. The best of these were organised by the Institute of Race Relations in Johannesburg, though the Institute did not always publish the findings.<sup>51</sup> At

47 Isaac Schapera, *Migrant labour and tribal life: a study of conditions in the Bechuanaland protectorate*; idem, *Married Life in an African Tribe*.

48 Monica Hunter, *Reaction to Conquest*.

49 Ellen Hellmann, *Rooiyard: A Sociological Survey of an Urban Native Slum Yard*.

50 Lynn M. Thomas, "The Modern Girl and Racial Respectability in 1930s South Africa", *Journal of African history*, pp. 461–491.

51 Lynn Saffrey, "Report of Inquiry into wages and cost of living of natives, at Kroonstad, Orange Free State", typescript is in University of the Witwatersrand, Historical Papers AD 843B; Gertrude Kark, "Alexandra township: a study of a pocket of ill health", typescript in

least since 1960, there has been the development of market research, which now forms the basis for most informed comment on South African living standards. Now, a social survey is at best as good as the sampling methods by which those surveyed are chosen, and the early budget research was, to say the least, questionable in this regard.<sup>52</sup> Equally, such research is dependent on the interviewer being able to elucidate accurate answers from the people he or she is interviewing. Initially, most field workers were White, who were probably not fluent in the home language of their subjects and who were further encumbered by the racial etiquette which led them to receive what their interlocutors thought were the socially appropriate answers.<sup>53</sup> From 1960, first the Bureau of Market Research (BMR) at the University of South Africa in Pretoria and then the South African Advertising Research Foundation (SAARF) – later the South African Audience Research Foundation – had the funds and the ambition to organise large-scale and repeated surveys. The BMR worked among other things on the income and expenditure of the inhabitants of the Black townships of the Southern Transvaal. The SAARF, which received 1% of the advertising industry's turn-over in order to do market research, organises annual carefully constructed surveys, with eventually up to 13,000 respondents, on the country's reading, listening, and eventually viewing habits, and how these fitted with what South Africans bought and consumed, both in terms of food and of other household goods. These data, gathered into the All Media Products Survey, and giving rise to the Living Standard Measure, give an empirical basis to the study of Black household contents at a level which had previously been absent.

In much of this literature, the members of the Black communities are often described as “The African”, in the singular, and further as “He”. In my direct quotations, I have maintained this, and also, on occasion, the even more pejorative, and ungrammatical, description of Blacks as “The Bantu”, who “is” or “does” something, in the singular. Equally some writers refer to “The White

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University of the Witwatersrand, Historical Papers AD 843B; Miriam Janisch, *A Study of African Income and Expenditure in 987 Families in Johannesburg, January–November 1940*; Ethel Wix, *The Cost of Living: an enquiry into the cost of essential requirements for African families living in Johannesburg, Pretoria and the Reef towns, August–December 1950*; Olive Gibson, *The Cost of Living for Africans*; Joy de Gruchy, *The Cost of Living for Urban Africans, Johannesburg, 1959*.

52 Robert Ross, “The Politics of African Household Budget Studies in South Africa”, *History in Africa*, 43, pp. 205–228.

53 Deborah Posel, “Getting Inside the Skin of the Consumer: Race, Market Research and the Consumerist Project in Apartheid South Africa”, *Itinerario*, pp. 120–138; even today, so Erik Bähre informs me, it is not unknown for the subjects of surveys to receive T-shirts, not so much for their time and effort, but rather for giving the right answers.

man” meaning the generality of “White” people. It would not be appropriate to use one of a historian’s favourite words, namely “[Sic]”, on each occasion when it should be included. It translates, more or less, as “believe it or not, this is what the author actually wrote”. I hope this paragraph can serve as a collective “[Sic]” for the rest of this book.

Fourthly, I have made some use of vernacular photography, that is to say, those photographs taken by and for urban Africans. This material is rare; I know of only two sizable archives of such pictures, those of Daniel Morolong in East London and of Ronald and Torrance Ngilima in Benoni, and in both cases the collection of negatives survived only by lucky chance.<sup>54</sup> It is known that numerous such collections from the 1950s have disappeared. These collections, and also a number of individual albums,<sup>55</sup> provide a gate of entry into the world of the African townships and their inhabitants which even the most sensitive of ethnographies can rarely achieve.

These photographs and some of the writing in *Drum Magazine* were examples of Blacks communicating with other Blacks, without any White intermediaries, or threats of censoring. This does not make them any “truer” than the other sorts of sources which I have used, but it does mean that they are closer to expressing goals to which Blacks in twentieth century South Africa were striving. For most Blacks, certainly in the cities, the aim was to create a respectable, even bourgeois, household, and to maintain that into old age. This was at once a matter of status within the Black urban communities and a political act, sending a message, generally not received, to those who held power in South Africa that the Blacks were claiming equality with the other inhabitants of the country. From 1994, this has become the case, and the steady embourgeoisement of urban Blacks is accompanying the exercise of democratic power.

There is of course another side to this. Having things almost necessarily entails having more, or less, (or better or worse) things than someone else. In other words, possessions are markers for inequality and may indeed be the cause of that inequality. Now, the dominant societies of Southern Africa have not been egalitarian for at least a thousand years. There have been divisions on

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54 Sophie Feyder, “Portraits of Resilience: Writing a socio-cultural history of a Black South Africa location with the Ngilima Photographic collection, Benoni 1950s-1960s”; idem, “Lounge Photography and the Politics of Township interiors: the representation of the Black South African Home in the Ngilima Photographic collection, East Rand, 1950s”, *Kronos: Southern African Histories*, pp. 131–154; On Morolong, see <http://www.digitalcollections.lib.uct.ac.za/daniel-morolong?page=1>.

55 For example, Sophie Feyder, “Think positive, make negatives: Black popular photography and urban identities in Johannesburg townships, 1920–1960”.

the basis of gender, of natal status, and of wealth, particularly in cattle. Those who were born male into a chiefly family have had considerable advantages over the rest of society. But up to a couple of hundred years ago, this did not include, to any great extent, wealth in things. As will be argued in the following chapter, there was a remarkable lack of distinction based on possessions. The material circumstances of the rulers scarcely differed from that of the ruled.

This is something that has changed profoundly. South Africa today, notoriously, has one of the highest levels of income inequality in the world. Just as shockingly, this has remained more or less at the same level, according to the standard measures of the Gini coefficient, since before the change of government in 1994, at the end of apartheid. There are all sorts of qualifications of this measure which are appropriate when assessing the modern situation, most notably that estimates of cash income do not take into account the improvement which there has been in the provision of services, water and electricity above all. These have greatly improved the lot of many of the poor, but do not appear in the information on which the Gini statistics are based. There are also questions between a measure based on income, on the one hand, and levels of wealth, on the other, and further between measures in which money is the unit of measurement and those in which assets are what is counted. Common sense, however, makes clear that the various measures are strongly, if not perfectly, correlated. In other words, South Africa has gone from containing societies with low levels of inequality in terms of available goods to one in which goods are very unequally distributed.

The point, for this purpose, is that the goods which are unevenly spread around South Africans are precisely those which have been imported, at least in design, from Europe, North America, and Asia. Thus, the material embourgeoisement of the Black South African middle classes is part of the process by which the divisions in terms of wealth, living comforts, and so forth have been created. Historically, the struggle for civil rights and majority rule, and more generally the drive towards inclusion in the ranks of the country's elite, has powered much of the socio-political conflict in South Africa. However, this has long required a complicated balance between the electoral necessity on the part of the elite to maintain the adherence of the mass of poorer citizens<sup>56</sup> and, against this, the social exclusion which is inherent in the striving for inclusion in what is known, however erroneously, as the Black Middle Class.<sup>57</sup> This tension could also be seen as a conflict between identity politics, which denies

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56 This, it seems to me, has been the main driver of national and provincial level politics in South Africa since 1994.

57 For the various definitions, see Southall, *New Black Middle Class*, Ch.1.

certain divisions, and class-based politics, which admits and exploits them. This has long been the stuff of South African politics.

This, then, is the central argument of this book. It is based on my interpretations of the source material outlined above. It is, I must point out, an argument from the outside. Even though I have been visiting the country for more than half a century, I have never lived in South Africa. I can only hope that I have found a way to convert what I have read into a narrative that can convince those who are the subjects of this book, or their descendants. At the same time, it can, I hope, function as an explanation of some part of South African society for those who come from outside the country's borders and are trying to understand what is a highly complex, and continually surprising, society.

#### 4 Structure of This Book

Following this introduction, in which I have attempted to set out the lines of enquiry in this book and to give some indication of the sources I have used, their advantages and deficiencies, Chapter 1 is concerned with a more distant past. It argues that for a long time there were few material ways in which the chiefly elite of what was to become South Africa and its neighbouring territories could distinguish itself from the rest of society. In consequence, power was based to a very large degree on wealth in cattle and the establishment of ties of dependence. However, the slave trade, on the fringes of Southern Africa, and also the exportation of Zimbabwean gold was, by the eighteenth century CE, beginning to establish differentiation in wealth in things, in addition to wealth in people and wealth in cattle.

Chapter 2 discusses the processes of the conquest of the Southern African agro-pastoralists, which began in earnest with the annexation by the British of Western Xhosaland in the 1840s and ended with the colonisation of the VhaVenda half a century later. Proceeding alongside, but at a different pace to, the loss of independence was the adoption by African families of groups of European goods, initially most notably iron cooking pots, blankets, and firearms. By the early twentieth century, a proportion of Southern Africa's rural dwellers had taken on a fairly complete western material culture. In the first instance, these were those who had accepted the secular (and for that matter the religious) message of Christian missionaries. Increasingly though, participation in migrant labour allowed young men to acquire and bring home with them a wide range of goods, including beds, bicycles, record players, sewing machines, as well as many smaller items, such as mirrors, combs, crockery, and of course clothing.

Chapter 4 is concerned with the material lives of those among the Black population who during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century had become permanently urbanised. On the basis, above all, of reports by ethnographers, it attempts to show how the inhabitants of the segregated Black suburbs of the major towns created domestic interiors which contained a wide variety of European goods. Further, prestige in these suburbs to a significant degree derived from the possession of such items. In this, of course, the activities of the segregationist and, later, the apartheid state determined the size and the amenities of the houses, which the Black residents of the South African cities might inhabit, and also severely restricted their earning power. Nevertheless, a substantial minority of the Black residents of South Africa's cities were able to accumulate the possessions which they felt necessary for a "civilised"<sup>58</sup> life-style.

This did not go unnoticed. As Chapter 5 demonstrates, the South African advertising industry was increasingly aware of the potential of the market provided by the ever-growing numbers of Africans who had managed to escape the depths of poverty. In order to enter this new market, commercial firms had to work through the advertisers, who were generally White men (though there was a handful of Blacks in the offices to give advice and to claim greater knowledge on the Black inhabitants of the cities in which they both lived). The most important such lesson was the argument that creating new brands for the African market was a recipe for failure. Those who lived in the African suburbs would not purchase goods of inferior quality, and generally considered goods which were marketed specifically with them in mind to have been so compromised that it would not be wise to buy them. Rather, Blacks consistently bought the best they could afford and, above all, items which were also on sale to Whites. Be that as it may, the market research of the advertising agencies, and of the related university departments, provided the first clear indications of the development of a Black South African middle class, in particular on and around the Witwatersrand.

This was not what the social engineers of apartheid intended. African economic advancement was tolerated, even encouraged, so long as it took place in the "Bantustans", those areas, often in the process of becoming rural slums, which were set apart as the "homelands" of the various African ethnic groups of the republic. It was not the planners' intention that a prosperous Black social

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58 This should not be taken to mean that the lifestyle of, in particular, the communities of agro-pastoralist South Africans before the colonial conquest, was in any objective way "uncivilised"; it is rather a comment on the blinkered vision of most South African Whites, and many South African Blacks, as to the characteristics of "modern civilisation".

stratum should emerge in the cities of “White” South Africa. Nevertheless, as Chapter 6 argues, such was clearly the case. Both studies of Black income and various anthropological reports attest to the growth of this group, whose members were engaged in a continual struggle with the authorities to maintain and to improve their socio-economic position. Increasingly it came to be realised that this was closely connected with the desired acquisition of political rights. Admittedly, it was never acknowledged as such. There was generally a tension between the desire of the Black elite for political status and their concern at the potential threats from disorder to their established lifestyle. Nevertheless, both before the introduction of non-racial majority rule in 1994, and thereafter, Black South Africans have behaved as though the goal of the Struggle has been primarily the ending of the economic restrictions imposed under apartheid and the further development of a society which has slowly, but ever increasingly, been driven by the desire to consume and to do so in what are, in effect, bourgeois homes.

# Pre-colonial Trade and the Conspicuous Consumption of Persons

Southern Africa, it is now difficult to realize, was once a place at the end of the world. Until not much more than two thousand years ago it was inhabited solely by hunter-gatherers. It was one of the last regions of the Old World where domestic stock, agriculture, and iron tools and pottery were introduced, primarily, so far as it can be seen, by people who were coming into the region from the north, and thus not by the transfer of techniques to the people who already lived there. The exception, it would seem, is the transfer of sheep and cattle to Khoe speakers in southern Angola or northern Namibia.<sup>1</sup> All the same, the first millennium CE saw the establishment of a society of mixed agriculture and pastoralism across the Southern Savanna, through the highlands of what is now Zimbabwe and across all those parts of South Africa and Botswana where it was agriculturally feasible, essentially the area east of a line from around Port Elizabeth (now Gqeberha) to the source of the Limpopo, and then north to the Zambezi. Even then, though, the contacts with the rest of the world were slight. The Atlantic coast was without shipping until the end of the fifteenth century, while on the Indian Ocean, the dhows of the Swahili Coast could not guarantee their return if they travelled beyond Inhambane and the mouth of the Zambezi. There were of course contacts, from village to village, all the way from the equator, and further, to the mouth of the Fish River. Southern Africans were certainly not isolated biologically from the rest of the world, nor did they avoid the effects of the way in which things were distributed.

## 1 Power over People and the Equality of All Consumers

By the beginning of the millennium which has recently ended, societies had developed throughout the east and north of the region based on the growing of grain crops, notably millet and sorghum, the cultivation of vegetables and pulses and, at least south of the Zambezi, on the herding of cattle and goats. It

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1 Karim, Sadr K., "Livestock First Reached Southern Africa in Two Separate Events". *PLoS ONE*, 10(8).

was not an egalitarian society. Almost invariably, women were under the control of men, and this lay at the heart of the constitution of the social and indeed political structure.<sup>2</sup> Somehow or other, men from certain families were able to assert their supremacy over the rest of society and build up their power. By the time information is available in sufficient detail in Southern Africa, this was organized through the manipulation of the bridewealth system (*lobola* in isiXhosa and isiZulu, *bogadi* in Sesotho and Setswana). This entailed that, when a woman married, her natal family received a number of cattle from the family into which she was marrying, in partial compensation for her labour and personal fertility. Within this system, chiefs could acquire wives for relatively few cattle, while their daughters brought a heavy lobola back to their father when they married. As a result, both women and cattle came to be congregated at the upper levels of society.<sup>3</sup> To be a chief was to be rich in cattle, rich in wives, rich in descendants. It was a Darwinian world in which those of high status were more likely to see their genes passed on to the next generation and more likely to survive the periodic famines which devastated the regions. Power and wealth came directly from the control of people.

It was a world in which one could be rich in people, and in cattle, but not in things. The material distinction between the highest and the lowest of society was not great. No doubt the chiefs had warmer furs to combat the cold of a highveld night, but that was about it. Clothing was sparse. A man was decently clothed with a leather cap covering the glans of his penis. Chiefs and commoners drank out of the same types of gourds, slept on the same rush mats, and lived in huts that were similar in style, if not necessarily in size. Their food was cooked in the same locally made pots. In Great Zimbabwe, the ruling family ate the succulent beef of two-year-old cattle, and left the flesh of the old cows and oxen to their subjects, but further they did not possess any other luxuries.<sup>4</sup> The

2 For example, Margaret Kinsman “Beasts of Burden: The Subordination of Southern Tswana Women, ca. 1800–1840”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 10(1), pp. 39–54; Jeff Guy, “Gender Oppression in Southern Africa’s Precapitalist Societies”, in Cheryl Walker (Ed.), *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, pp. 33–47.

3 Adam Kuper, *Wives for Cattle: Bridewealth and marriage in Southern Africa*.

4 Graeme Barker, “Economic Models for the Manekweni Zimbabwe”, *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa*, pp. 71–100; *idem*, “Cows and Kings: Models for Zimbabwe”, *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, 54, pp. 223–239; C. Thorp, Faunal Remains as Evidence for Social Stratification at Great Zimbabwe; J.C.A. Boeyens & I. Plug “‘A chief is like an ash-heap on which is gathered all the refuse’: the faunal remains from the central court midden at Kaditshwene”, *Annals of the Ditsong National Museum of Natural History*; Alison J. Moffett & Shadreck Chirikure, “Exotica in Context: Reconfiguring Prestige, Power and Wealth in the Southern African Iron Age”, *Journal of World Prehistory*, 29, pp. 337–382.

men carried the same spears, with a wooden shaft and an iron tip. Materially there was little distinction. Inequality in possessions was slight.

This only meant that the conspicuous consumption of persons was considerable. A chief, or a member of a chiefly family, would expect to be served with drink by an underling holding the drinking vessel to his mouth. Or again, at the end of this tradition, when Tshivhase, a Venda chief in what is now Limpopo province, made his appearance before a visiting missionary, Reinhold Wessmann, sometime in the 1880s. Tshivhase, a very fat man, clad in a (Western) shirt and trousers, sat down on a mat to conduct business. As Wessmann describes it, "In order ... that he may not overbalance himself, a nearly nude maiden supports him on her back, whilst another girl serves as his footstool. Still another lady sits in front of him, almost like a wax statue, holding up a tin tray with his own always filled cup, so that he may take a drink in comfort whenever he pleases."<sup>5</sup>

This was an exercise in naked power, but not one in which that power was exerted to achieve luxury. As the missionary ethnographer A.T. Bryant commented: "From our point of view a Zulu king was no more majestic than any other Native man of standing; a queen no more elegant or less odiferous than an ordinary Native housewife".<sup>6</sup> It became part of the accepted White wisdom in the 1930s, best articulated by Max Gluckman, the noted anthropologist, who made the following comment on the Zululand that was by then past: "Wealth did not give a chief opportunity to live a higher level than his inferiors. He had more wives and bigger homesteads, but he could not surround himself with luxuries, for there were none"<sup>7</sup>

This was an anthropological reconstruction, an attempt to describe a point zero when the society was in its pristine form, before European incursion. Thus, almost by definition, it cannot be confirmed by direct observation reported in the written sources. Nevertheless, it does not seem to be in conflict with the archaeological record. It is, moreover, confirmed by at least a couple of the early European observers. During his journey north in 1802, William Somerville wrote of Molehabangwe, the chief of the Batlhaping, the most southerly of the Tswana polities that:

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5 Cited in Alan Kirkaldy, *Capturing the Soul: The VhaVenda and the Missionaries*, p. 175. If there seems a degree of longing in Wessmann's account, I should point out that he was eventually expelled from the mission for the sexual harassment of a number of his female converts.

6 A.T. Bryant, *Olden times in Zululand and Natal*, p. 73.

7 Max Gluckman, "The Kingdom of the Zulu of South Africa", in Meyer Fortes & E.E. Evans-Pritchard (Eds.), *African Political Systems*.

He wears no distinguishing marks either in dress or ornament, except that the skins of his dress are either of a more valuable sort or that he has more rings and beads on his neck and arms, which are a proof of his riches and not of any dignity, since they may be worn by anyone who can purchase the like. His riches consist in the strength of his cattle, but in proportion to the number of his milk cows he has a troop of servants and followers who are employed in milking them ... in addition to his wives and children which are not few.<sup>8</sup>

William Burchell, a few years later, also commented that, to his surprise, “the dwelling of the chief ... [was] less important in size and outward appearance than those of many of the inferior chieftains.”<sup>9</sup> Burchell did give full descriptions of just about all the things which the Batlhaping used in their daily life. Clothing for both men and women was simple in the extreme, little more than a cloak, sandals and a leather triangle as an apron. The richer wore ivory arm rings and copper ear-pendants. Their articles for use were above all their knives, manufactured of what was surprisingly good steel. Their needles, which allowed for very strong seams as each stitch was separately fastened with sinews as thread, and in addition cooking pots, bags, and baskets. It was a meagre collection.<sup>10</sup>

One observation of the early European travellers to Dithakong, Molehabangwe's capital town, has resonances into the twentieth century. Burchell noted that:

There is one quality for which the Bachapins [Batlhaping], and probably the other tribes of Bichuanas [Batswana], are greatly to be admired, and in which they exceed all the more southern inhabitants of this part of Africa; the neatness, good order and cleanness of their dwellings. Nothing can exceed their neatness; and by cleanness I mean to say, the great carefulness which they show to remove all rubbish and everything [sic] unsightly: not a twig, nor loose pebble, nor dust, nor even a straw, is to be seen on the floor within the fenced; nothing lies out of its place, and it is evident that in the better houses they are continually attending to these circumstances. The houses of the poorer people are not so remarkable for this care; but still they exhibit much neatness.<sup>11</sup>

8 Edna & Frank Bradlow (Eds.), *William Somerville's narrative of his Journeys to the Eastern Cape Frontier and to Latakoe, 1799–1802*, p. 137.

9 Burchell, *Travels*, p. 367.

10 Burchell *Travels*, pp. 399 – 403.

11 Burchell; *Travels*, pp. 366–7.

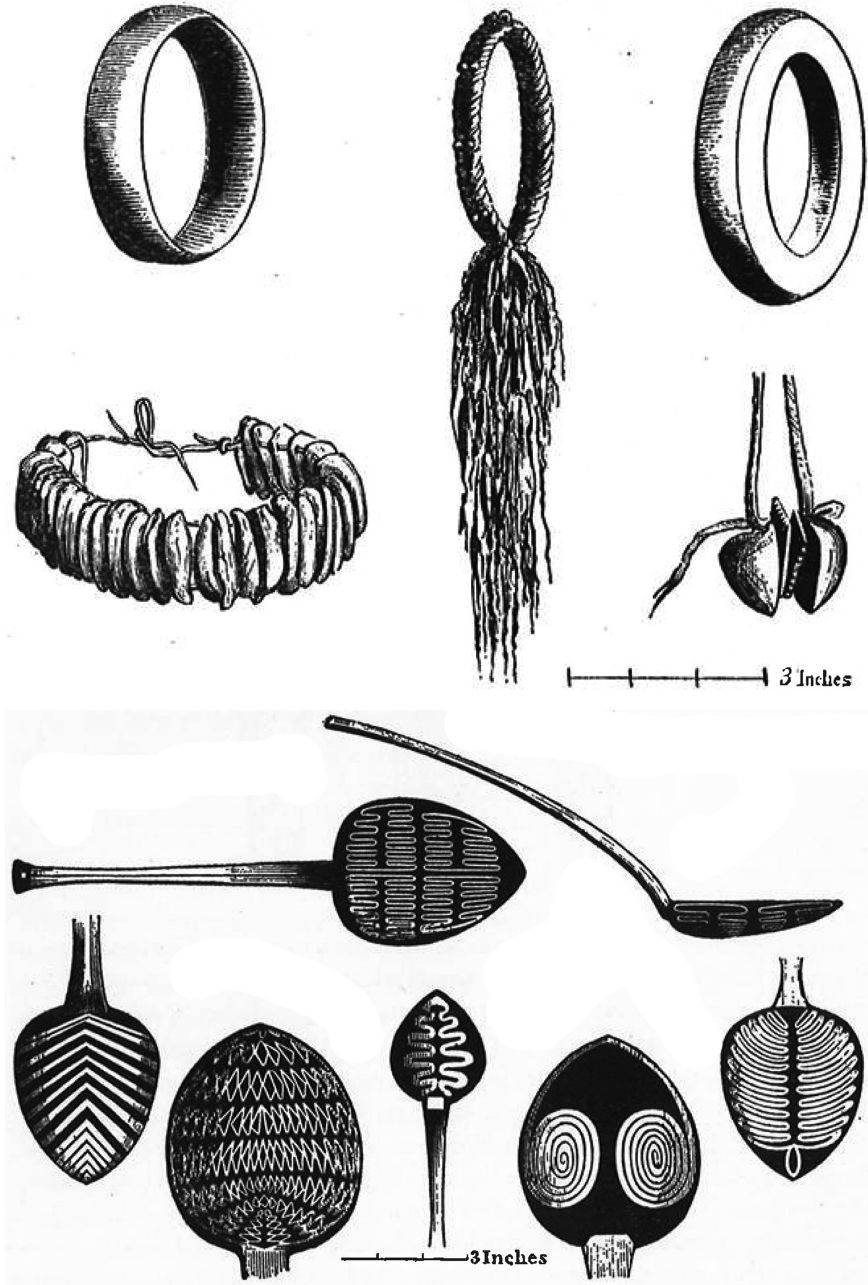


FIGURE 1 Tlhaping material culture, Burchell, *Travels*, 11, 404, 416 2

These comments were echoed by George Thompson a couple of decades later. For him, the Tlhaping capital, which had moved 40 miles to Kuruman, was “built without any plan or attention to regularity,<sup>12</sup> [but] it has a very lively and agreeable appearance. Everything [sic] is kept so neat and clean, that one cannot but feel pleased with the inhabitants, in wandering through the streets and lanes ... [which] are kept perfectly clean; neither bushes, rubbish, bones, nor any other nuisance, are allowed to be thrown upon them.” All the houses were built to the same plan and were of the same dimensions, “except for the king’s, which is almost double the size of the rest.”<sup>13</sup> It was indeed the ruler who ensured the good order of the town. In an outlying village of the chiefdom, so Somerville noted, “the manners of the people are ruder and their dress less ornamented – neatness in the construction of the huts is much less attended to.”<sup>14</sup>

The plan of the houses, compounds, and settlements was invariably circular. Just as European architecture has been based, for at least two millennia, on the straight line, so in Southern Africa the dwellings were constructed to fit an ideal type in which the circle was all important. This was the case both for the individual hut and for the relative positioning of the huts of the various inhabitants of the compound, both human and bovine. The precise rules could obviously vary from place to place, but they all related to the relative seniority of the human inhabitants of the homestead, and their relations with the cattle kraal, which the other structures surrounded. The local manifestations, reported by ethnographers, are demonstrably distinct manifestations of an underlying structure. For example, in a polygamous household, the various wives lived in huts located strictly according to their seniority, to the right and left of the *indlunkulu*,<sup>15</sup> the “great hut”. This was occupied by the senior woman, in some places the chief wife, in others the mother of the homestead head. Which was right and which was left, however, varied. In some places the right is that on the right hand of an imaginary observer looking out from the *indlunkulu*; elsewhere the direction designated right is precisely the opposite. To give another example, the introduction of a door to a hut, which would always have the hinge on the left, looking in, and opening inwards, led to the area immediately behind the door being considered the most private. Thus, it became the place where the wife of the hut slept and sat. Previously this had

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12 This only meant that he could not envisage a structure without straight lines.

13 Thompson, *Travels and Adventures in Southern Africa*, pp. 84–5.

14 Bradlow & Bradlow (Eds.), *William Somerville's Narrative*, p. 158.

15 This is the isiZulu appellation.

been the area deepest from the opening. In many, systematic and symbolic ways, space was marked.<sup>16</sup>

These sorts of arrangements are old. Archaeologists have identified many of the settlements in Southern Africa occupied by mixed farmers and pastoralists, at least since the beginning of the second millennium, as conforming to the “Central Cattle pattern”, which follows the rules in force when ethnographers visited and reported on African societies, roughly between 1800 and 1940.<sup>17</sup> The questions which then arise are: firstly, whether the people who built their homes in this way belonged to some particular super-ethnic entity – presumably the speakers of one of the Southern Bantu languages; and, secondly, how deep into the past can such an arrangement be recognised. As far as I can judge, the continual movement of men and women around the Southern African cultural space was too great for there to have been long-term ethnic and political identities recognisable on the basis of architecture. Rather, it may very well have been the case that the regular structure of spatial arrangements provided a grammar which newcomers could learn, and so feel literally at home, precisely because it was a variation on the deep pattern to which they were accustomed. The analogy with the Bantu languages of South Africa, which are linguistically closely related, is evident.

The earliest extended discussions of a South African Bantu-speaking people, based on direct observation, also demonstrate the lack of stratification in the possession of things. These were written by Johannes van der Kemp and Louis Alberti,<sup>18</sup> around 1800 on the amaXhosa. They do not make any attempt to describe the material culture of the amaXhosa, except for relatively sparse clothing and bodily ornaments. The rulers they met were not set off from their subjects by their surroundings. This was confirmed by Stephen Kay, a Methodist missionary, who wrote in the 1820s that: “Between the houses of the nobles and those of the most indigent, there is no material difference, excepting that the former class are perhaps a little neater at first, but not at all more substantial, nor yet more convenient”.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Shaw and Van Warmelo’s account of the material culture of the Cape Nguni does not contain much mention of

16 I follow the structuralist account by Kuper, *Wives for Cattle*, pp. 140–157.

17 The latter date was the last at which the fiction of an unchanged African society could reasonably be maintained. In general, see Thomas N. Huffman, *Handbook to the Iron Age: The Archaeology of Pre-colonial Farming Societies in Southern Africa*. For a description of the sort of sites with which the archaeologists work, see, Tim Maggs, *Iron Age Communities of the southern Highveld*.

18 Van der Kemp “Account”; Alberti, *Account*.

19 Stephen Kay, *Travels and Researches in Caffraria*, p. 117.

differentiation between the aristocracy and the common people, and confirms the impression of a material culture with fewer components than in many other parts of the world.<sup>20</sup> In this they were in conformity with a long tradition of representations of South African material culture. To give one example, in the course of the nineteenth century, the museum of the London Missionary Society came to contain virtually no examples of Southern African artisanal production or artwork, despite the fact that the Society was particularly heavily involved in the region. Africa was portrayed as a place of wild animals, with a stuffed giraffe as the museum's centrepiece, this in contrast to the Pacific islands, from where a large number of religious objects (pagan "idols" to the missionaries) were on view.<sup>21</sup>

## 2 The Mountain Kingdom of Lesotho

The range of the local production can best be seen in the mountain kingdom of Lesotho during the mid-nineteenth century. Under Moshoeshe, the country was relatively prosperous from its foundation in the 1820s up till the defeat by the Orange Free State in 1868, when a considerable area of its most fertile land in the Caledon River valley was taken over by the Orange Free State. This gave artisans the possibility to devote more time to their craft, and perhaps rely on others for their basic subsistence.

Artisanal work was in a variety of sectors. In some ways, the most impressive was metal-working. In those days, Lesotho was not as bereft of tree cover as it now is. As a result, iron could be smelted in the local earthenware kilns, to a level which, at its best had "almost the strength of steel", when the impurities have been driven out by a long process of hammering. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Basotho were able to produce fires hot enough to melt the iron and cast cannons, guns, and bullets from it, but this was exceptional. Much more general was the hammering of iron at a lower temperature, which could nevertheless allow the manufacture of spears, and other sharp instruments. The most general use for Sotho ironwork, though, was in the production

20 Shaw & van Warmelo, "The Material Culture of the Cape Nguni".

21 Chris Wingfield, "Articles of dress, domestic utensils, arms and other curiosities: Excavating early nineteenth century collections from southern African at the London Missionary Society Museum", *JSAS*, 44(5). C.f. for a later date, William Beinart, "The Renaturing of African animals: film and literature in the 1950s and 1960s", *Kronos*, 27, pp. 201–226; c.f. Patricia Davison, *Material Culture, Context and Meaning: A critical investigation of museum practice, with particular reference to the South African Museum*.

of hoes, which remained the basic agricultural tool. Ploughshares, in contrast, do not seem to have been produced locally, although smiths undoubtedly did repair work as necessary. Ploughing was apparently a package which was imported whole. Sotho smiths were also highly skilled in the working of brass and copper, which of course have a lower melting point than iron. This was primarily used for jewellery, including earrings, bracelets, and leglets.<sup>22</sup>

Further, there were very accomplished Sotho tanners, leather workers, and furriers. Their products included leather bags to hold grain, the bellows used to heat the iron forges, and indeed the shields which the warriors carried into battle, and presumably the tackle used to guide the horses, on whose bare backs the Basotho had become a formidable military force in their conflicts with both the British and the Free State through the latter half of the nineteenth century. The harnesses of the oxen used in ploughing may also have been locally made, though they were no doubt initially purchased together with the share. They also made luxuriant karosses, the fur cloaks which allowed some of the Basotho to survive in the country's highlands during their freezing winters.<sup>23</sup> The Basotho also made both large and small baskets for grain, and various mats, sieves, and ropes from plant and animal material. These were used both to store and transport grain, and as the basis for women's skirts. Women living close to where suitable clay could be found also made pots for brewing beer and making porridge. Many pots broke during firing; the reputation of an individual potter depended on her success rate and also on the aesthetic quality of the pots she produced. The two criteria were of course closely related. Similarly, carved items, made by men in the gender-specific division of labour, could be spread over a wide area.<sup>24</sup>

The argument is made, in particular by Elizabeth Eldredge, that Sotho craftsmen and women could not compete with imports. Blankets, cloth, cast-iron pots, and standardised hoes made by European firms drove the Sotho artisans out of business. Clearly, migrant labour led to levels of income which allowed the Sotho households to purchase a range of foreign manufactures. However, the disappearance of the local traditions, for instance of potting, can be exaggerated. The only agricultural village in Lesotho to have been excavated, Ha

22 Elizabeth A. Eldredge, *A South African Kingdom: The pursuit of security in nineteenth-century Lesotho*, pp. 83–7; the quotation is from Eugène Casalis, *Les Bassoutos ou vingt-trois années d'études et d'observations au sud de l'Afrique* (Eldredge's translation).

23 It was of course the introduction of the woven wool blanket which provided not only much of the colour to the mountain kingdom, but also allowed the much more intensive settlement of the highlands.

24 Eldredge, *South African Kingdom*, pp. 87–93.

Makoanyane, in a valley in the lowlands, did not yield a single sherd of factory-made earthenware but rather a wide range of artisanal pottery. Until well into the twentieth century, local production clearly enjoyed the preference of the village's inhabitants.<sup>25</sup> The goods that were manufactured locally may not have been particularly diverse, but they often were favoured over industrial products, when there was a choice.

### 3 The Slave Trade in Southern Africa and the Beginning of Distinction

A broader range of consumer goods came into Southern Africa, in so far as they did, from the outside, and thus over the sea, not the land. Three distinct phases of contact can be discerned. The oldest was that over the Indian Ocean. From at least the beginning of the second millennium CE, the gold deposits of the Zimbabwe plateau, and the associated riches of the Zambezi and Limpopo valleys, brought the people who lived there into contact with the trading communities of the Indian Ocean, whose dhows could reach at least as far South as Inhambane in modern Mozambique. Secondly, there was the contact with, primarily, the Portuguese, based on the ports of Angola, to the north of the Namib desert, which began from the middle of the second millennium. Thirdly, and eventually most decisively, there was the European shipping round the Cape of Good Hope, linking the two oceans. Eventually, this would lead to the establishment of a Dutch colony close to the southern tip of Africa, which would develop into what was to become the modern state of South Africa.

To begin with the second of these phenomena, contact with the Atlantic world came to change the world of southern Africa. In particular, the connections established between the ocean and the world of the southern Savannah, inland from the port of Luanda above all, produced new ways in which wealth was displayed and consumed. As everywhere in Central and Southern Africa (and far beyond within the continent) power was derived from the control of people, particularly women, not only for their reproductive power, but also because they were the main source of agricultural labour. They formed the ruler's capital, which as everywhere is in some sense that portion of the proceeds of production and exchange, which is employed for further production, not for consumption. Power, then, derived from the accumulation of human beings,

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25 Rachel King, Charles Arthur, & Peter Mitchell, "Ha Makoanyane: the archaeology and history of colonial transitions in Lesotho", *Southern African Humanities*, 26, pp. 57–81.

as dependents, in a much more direct sense than in Eurasia, where power tended to derive from control over scarce resources, which can thus be used to hold populations, by the threat of deprivation and starvation.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the emphasis on the direct control of people which dominated the political economy of the southern Savannah, goods of various types were essential to its functioning. Goods could not be exchanged for people, in a crude sense, but rather those who held goods, and could enforce a relation of dependence on underlings on the basis of a gift. To recognize a gift was to place oneself in a position of subordinate, which might require the transfer of individual persons to the gift-giver, as a partial recognition of the relationship.

Given this political economy of dependence and personhood, the introduction of European goods, on a scale which was unprecedented, had very considerable effects. They gave those who had access to them the ability to increase the number of those women over whom they could claim authority. In part, this was the result of the display of the goods they had received. While there had been opportunities in the region that was to become Angola, Zambia, and Congo for powerful and rich men to display their possession, above all of raffia cloth, this was greatly enhanced with the introduction of Asian cotton cloth by European traders. Furthermore, powerful men had the opportunity to distribute their goods to their followers, and their potential followers, so that the domination of the one over the other was made thoroughly manifest. Moreover, the European traders on the coast prudently worked in a different calculus and did not demand the same form of subordination of their African trading partners, as they saw it.<sup>27</sup>

In the early years of the relationship, after the arrival of Portuguese ships off the coast of West Africa, Africans could supply the Europeans with things which were purchased in the region and which responded to overseas demand, notably copper, dyewoods, and ivory (and in the region of the Kingdom of Kongo, also conversion to Christianity). This could not, or at least did not, last. From the early part of the sixteenth century, the export trade of West Central Africa came to be dominated by the sale of enslaved people, to work and die in the fields of the Americas. Over the subsequent three and a half centuries slightly over five and a half million Africans were shipped from the parts of West Central Africa to the Americas. This made up about 45% of the total

26 In this discussion, I am following Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730–1830*.

27 C.f. Beatrix Heintze, "Der portugiesisch-afrikanische Vasallenvertrag in Angola im 17. Jahrhundert", *Paideuma*, 25, pp. 195–223.

trade.<sup>28</sup> In addition there were those whose destinations were within Africa, for instance, in the sixteenth century, the Gold Coast (modern Ghana) or later on the islands of São Tomé, Príncipe, and Fernando Po.<sup>29</sup>

It is a tragic irony that a political economy whose goal was the accumulation of people should lead to such a staggering population loss over the centuries. Nevertheless, there is a rationality, based on the advantages which the powerful men of the African coastal regions, and eventually deep into the interior, could gain from the export of the enslaved. There was what might be seen as an economically virtuous cycle – in all other respects it was totally vicious – whereby, in effect, people could be sold for consumer goods, which in their turn could be converted into more people coming under the control of the rulers. This was particularly as the European demand was primarily for men, many who could be seen as a surplus to the requirements of both agricultural and human fertility.

In return for people, the Africans received things. These things were not in the first instance the worthless trinkets of legend, although on occasion these did form part of the assortment, which the slavers presented. Rather goods consisted primarily of four categories. First in quantity and value there was cloth, mainly of Indian provenance, at least before around 1800. Cloth had its utilitarian value over much of the Savannah, where temperatures fall surprisingly fast at night and where goatskins were the only viable alternative. Its value in preserving modesty is also considerable, if culturally defined. Above all, though cloth could be used to demonstrate status, either of the big man (in this part of Africa, women chiefs were very rare) himself or his dependents. It was also a storable good, and thus a way of conserving wealth until such time as it needed to be converted into power.

Secondly, there was distilled liquor, above all rum. Whatever effect this may have had in enhancing the pleasure of the consumer, at least temporarily, strong drink could be used in the most crucial of political activities, the dispensing of hospitality, and the massaging of relationships. The quantities dispensed could on occasion be very considerable.

The other main goods, guns and gunpowder, on the one hand, and axes, knives, and household equipment, on the other, in many ways made the slave trade possible, by increasing the productivity of young men. It may seem strange that firearms are seen as a production tool, as they were generally used

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28 Figures Derived from The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, <http://www.slavevoyages.org>.

29 For a recent, and very good, survey, see Toby Green *A Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution*.

for destruction.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, the same men were much more effective as hunters with guns than without them, so that fewer were needed to kill an elephant. Small groups of armed warriors, moreover, would prove more than a match for much larger numbers who merely possessed stabbing and cutting weapons. The necessity of having many men for protection was thus reduced, especially as the imports were never great enough to equip large armies with guns, gunpowder, and shot. In time, firearms were used primarily for defence rather than attack, as communities took shelter from armed raiders behind earthen walls.<sup>31</sup> Equally, the introduction of, in particular, bush knives and axes made the tasks of the men in agriculture much easier. It was, and in those parts of the region where forms of swidden agriculture are still practiced, remains male work to clean the growth of trees, and to set the timber on fire, so as to provide as fertile a field as possible in the generally harsh world of the savannah. There was of course an upper limit on the acreage that any community could cultivate, depending on the quantity of female labour available for planting, hoeing, and harvesting. This could not be increased without seriously reorganizing gender relationships.<sup>32</sup> But the introduction of the axe and large knife ensured that the removal of many able-bodied men did not create serious bottlenecks in the farming year.

This pernicious system of values was in operation throughout much of what is now Angola, parts of southern Congo, and into Zambia. The central and Eastern parts of the savanna also suffered from the slave trade. Traders from the East Coast of the continent found their way to the region, certainly by the early nineteenth century if not earlier. By this time, though, it was the possession of firearms which gave them, and their local collaborators, the power to capture, enslave and sell human beings in large numbers. Force prevailed, rather than the more culturally embedded mechanisms that pertained further West. Further South, though, few enslaved people were exported, except through Delagoa Bay (now Maputo) from the later eighteenth century on.<sup>33</sup>

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30 In this discussion, I am much influenced by Giacomo Macola, *The Gun in Central Africa: A History of Technology and Politics*.

31 The coming of Europeans armed with Gatling guns made this tactic obsolete, as a volley from the Gatling gun could swiftly cause a defensive wall to collapse.

32 This was not impossible. See Jan Vansina, *The Children of Woot: A History of the Kuba Peoples*.

33 Patrick Harries, "The Middle Passages of the Southwest Indian Ocean: a century of forced immigration from Africa to the Cape of Good Hope", *Journal of African History*, 55(2), pp. 173–190; *idem*, "Mozambique Island, Cape Town and the organisation of the slave trade in the South-West Indian Ocean, c. 1797–1807", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 44(3), pp. 409–429.

This had clear effects in the immediate hinterland of the Bay, and into what is now northern KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga, as well as in Southern Mozambique.<sup>34</sup> A number of captives from Natal were also exported as slaves. There were undoubted ripple effects from the Bay into the Southern African interior, but in general what is now South Africa was not the source of individuals who were to become members of the enslaved population both in the Indian Ocean and in South America, to the country's lasting benefit. The Cape Colony was of course an importer of enslaved people, both legally (until 1808) from around the Indian Ocean, and illegally with the capture and enslavement of "bushmen" and "Mantatee" children from north of the Gariep who were brought into the Cape Colony. Later the *inboekelingen* in the South African Republic (Transvaal) were effectively enslaved. The effects of all these trades are still to be found within South African society.

In the first half of the second millennium CE, the gold deposits of the Zimbabwe plateau, and the associated riches of the Zambezi and Limpopo valleys, brought the people who lived there into contact with the trading communities of the Indian Ocean. The kingdoms based on Mapungubwe above the Limpopo, Great Zimbabwe, and the other capitals of the Zimbabwe plateau, all had their imports from the East Coast. Indeed, the shifting of the political centre of the plateau from its southern slopes to the northern ones was probably the result of the increased resources which could be exploited from the Zambezi valley, as opposed to the Limpopo. But none of the kingdoms of the region, from Mapungubwe on the Limpopo, through Great Zimbabwe to the Rozwi and Mutapa empires of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, could maintain their positions without exploiting their relationships with merchants and others coming from the coast.

During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the possibilities of trade to the coasts of the Indian Ocean became more evident. The Dutch had a small settlement in Delagoa Bay, what is now Maputo, in the 1730s. They soon left, driven out by the Bay's malaria and their own failure to see a commercial advantage for their presence.<sup>35</sup> Thereafter, Portuguese moved south from their established posts at Inhambane and Mozambique islands, so that Delagoa Bay became a more established locale for trade between the Ocean and eastern

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34 Linell Chewins & Peter Delius, "The Northeastern factor in South African history: re-evaluating the volume of the slave trade out of Delagoa Bay and its impact on its hinterland in the early nineteenth century", *The Journal of African History*, 61(1), pp. 89–110.

35 C.G. Coetzee, "Die Kompanjie se besetting van Delagoabaai", *Archives Yearbook for South African History*.

parts of modern South Africa.<sup>36</sup> In addition, English and Austrian merchants began to build up a substantial trade at the Bay. Their main interest was to acquire as much ivory as possible, and, later from the 1790s, American whalers frequented the Bay, and purchased considerable quantities of provisions. In exchange, the Europeans provided brass. This came to be a sign of the elite in the regions between the Drakensberg and the sea. As Linell Chewins has written:

Chiefs wore flat neck rings, while men and women of high rank wore neck rings made up out of one or more brass rings. Chiefs' wives had solid brass balls threaded on a string and worn around their necks, and small cast-brass buttons or studs decorated their skin garments.

In time, the regiments of the Zulu army would wear brass ornaments, and brass wire was fashioned into rings to adorn the wrists, arms, and calves of the rich and powerful. Even before the Zulu kingdom was founded, the assumption made by Bryant and Gluckman that there was nothing material to distinguish the rulers from their subjects was beginning to break down.<sup>37</sup>

From the 1820s, Delagoa Bay began to receive significant competition from a small but increasing number of English traders, who had come to settle at Port Natal, later, and still, known as Durban. The opening of these outlets for trade coincided with a major shift in the political constellation of the region. It is thus not surprising that the import of Western goods into southern Mozambique and north KwaZulu-Natal, and the concomitant export of a small number of slaves, and of ivory and other products of the hunt, should be seen as a major cause of the processes which led, at its end, to the establishment of the Zulu kingdom and to the general increase in political scale in the region.<sup>38</sup> This

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36 These groups, certainly the Venda of Limpopo province, had had contacts with the trading networks based at Inhambane for many years. See Gerhard Liesegang, "New Light on Venda Traditions", *History in Africa*, 4, pp. 163–181.

37 Linell Chewins, "The Relationship between Trade in Southern Mozambique and State formation: reassessing Hedges on Cattle, Ivory and Brass", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 42(4), pp. 725–742.

38 The discussions around the growth of political scale in South-eastern Africa during the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries have been at the centre of the so-called "Mfecane debate". The literature on this is vast, but can probably best be accessed via Carolyn Hamilton (Ed.), *The Mfecane Aftermath: Reconstructive Debates in Southern African history*; and John Wright, "Turbulent Times: Political Transformations in the North and East, 1760s–1830s", in Carolyn Hamilton, Bernard K. Mbenga, & Robert Ross (Eds.), *The Cambridge History of South Africa, Volume 1, from Early times to 1885*, pp. 211–252.

is an attractive idea. Nevertheless, it is not clear quite how the goods which members of the chiefly elite could acquire by dominating the trade could be translated into political power. In some ways it is evident. The guns which Europeans from Port Natal, with their African followings, were able to wield in support of Shaka were perhaps not decisive in ensuring his success in the wars of the region, but certainly they helped. But, at the same time, the prestige of the Zulu elite was being bolstered through its control of the foreign trade. This allowed them to dominate the possession of exotic goods, fur, feathers, and locally manufactured items such as “woven baskets, carved staffs, and brass rings.” In addition, beads were in the first instance used by royal women, but in time, as the *isigodlo* girls (who had been brought to the royal households to serve and to allow the King to bind followers to him) were married off into the families of the kingdom, and took their beadwork and the latest fashions with them. Blankets, too, were “strictly controlled commodities, with particular colours initially reserved only for senior figures.”<sup>39</sup>

The result of this was that there was a clear distinction between the possessions of the elite of the Zulu kingdom and those who did not have access to the goods which emanated from the royal court. The control of these prestige goods was one of the ways through which the Zulu royal house attempted to maintain its hegemony over the initially disparate groups which it had brought under its control in the early part of the nineteenth century. Power was developing a new idiom, in which control over commodities was becoming an essential intermediary to maintain power over people. For as long as possible, distinction had to be maintained. It was not until the amaZulu commoners began to engage in migrant labour, on the farms of Natal, on the docks of Durban, and in the mines of the Witwatersrand, that Western goods began to be found regularly in any homestead in the kingdom. In contrast to this, those who lived within the colony of Natal were not subject to the same pressure and began to take on board some Western goods considerably earlier than their fellows north of the Tsekela river.

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39 Carolyn Hamilton, “Political Centralisation and the making of social categories east of the Drakensberg in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 32(2), pp. 291–301, citing Sandra Klopper, “The Art of Zulu-speakers in Northern Natal-Zululand: an investigation of the History of Beadwork, Carving and Dress from Shaka to Inkatha”.

#### 4 Conclusion

Histories have to start somewhere, and that somewhere has to be a moment of rest, however transitory. This can give the impression that nothing very much happened in the time before the narrative begins. This is of course not the case. The archaeology of the southern portion of Africa, as has been developed over the past sixty years has shown, in ever greater detail, how the human societies of that part of the world have been changing and developing in ways which were not to be foreseen. The interaction between the researchers and the physical remains on which they work has demonstrated a dynamism in the adaptability of the societies (and for that matter of the archaeologists and other scholars) which is the equal of any in the world. To give one example, the terraced landscapes of the Mpumalanga Drakensberg, known now as the Bokoni settlements, are outside the limits of what used to be the understanding of the South African agricultural past.<sup>40</sup>

The consequence of this is that the anchoring of the rest of this book in the relatively recent past may be necessary for expository purposes. However, there is no sense in which the statements I have made about that past, though perhaps generalising and static, should be seen as anything other than an attempt to give a context from which derived the developments I discern in the material culture of Southern Africa.<sup>41</sup> There was never a static, or uniform, moment, except in the reconstructions of historians attempting to provide a basis for their subsequent work.

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40 See above all Peter Delius, Alex Schoeman & Tim Maggs, *Forgotten world: the stone walled settlements of the Mpumalanga Escarpment*; Peter Delius & Stefan Schirmer, "Order, openness, and economic change in precolonial southern Africa: a perspective from the Bokoni terraces", *Journal of African History*, 55(1), pp. 37–54.

41 This despite my use of structuralist anthropology in this chapter. As I understand it, by positing an underlying structure of which the various attested patterns are argued to be manifestations, structuralist anthropology sets questions which it is up to historical research to answer, and also to investigate the limits of its applicability in time and space.

## The Colonial Countryside

### *Colonial Conquest, Pots, Blankets, and Guns*

From the end of the eighteenth century, the Bantu-speaking peoples of Southern Africa came increasingly into contact with Europeans, in a variety of roles. It was from them that the Africans would take over the things within the household, and outside it, which have so affected the way all South Africans live. It is thus necessary to begin by discussing briefly the processes of colonization and evangelization – not the same thing – which South Africans underwent.

As is well known, the colonial history of South African began in earnest in 1652, when the Dutch founded what was to become Cape Town. Thereafter, the colony expanded across the interior of what was to become the Western Cape Province, and into the East. In the process, the colonists broke the societies of the Khoesan people who lived there and impoverished most of them. By the late eighteenth century, the most easterly European cattle and sheep farmers were in contact with the amaXhosa. From then on, the European conquest of the agro-pastoral African societies began. In what was to become the Eastern Cape Province, this resulted in a long series of wars, and, from the late 1840s, the subjugation of large African populations to White rule.<sup>1</sup>

By this time, there had long been White settlement across the Highveld and into Natal, which steadily increased, but most of the various African kingdoms remained independent until the late 1870s, when they were subdued in what has been described as “The First British War for South African Unification.”<sup>2</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, within the current boundaries of South Africa, there were no longer any independent African communities, and indeed the surrounding countries, which were to become Botswana, Lesotho, and Eswatini, were under British rule, as, under a different dispensation, was Zimbabwe. However, the degree of interference of the colonial state in the

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1 For further details see the various chapters in Carolyn Hamilton, Bernard K. Mbenga, & Robert Ross (Eds.), *The Cambridge History of South Africa, Volume 1, from early times to 1885*.

2 Norman Etherington, Patrick Harries, & Bernard K. Mbenga, “From Colonial Hegemonies to Imperial Conquest, 1840–1880”, in Hamilton, Mbenga, & Ross (Eds.) *Cambridge History*, 1, p. 383.

individual lives of Africans varied very greatly from region to region, and was often, at least in the early days, fairly minimal.

Initially the British officials and the soldiers who had conquered the westernmost amaXhosa and began to impose British rule, expected that they would be able to impose “civilization” on the new subjects of the British Crown. The short-lived Queen Adelaide Province, as the Ciskei was known between its annexation in 1835 and its retrocession to the amaXhosa a couple of years later, was based on the presumption that the new subjects could be transformed into swarthy Englishmen by an act of colonial will – and also on the hope that the paler Englishmen would be able to take up and cultivate the Province’s land.<sup>3</sup> Ten years later, after the War of the Axe (1846–7), the permanent establishment of British Kaffraria allowed the replaying of the same experiment. The result of these efforts was an almost immediate armed uprising against the amaXhosa’s new masters. After what is known as Mlanjeni’s war, the longest and bloodiest war in the nineteenth century conquest of South Africa, the hope of a transformed, malleable African subjecthood faded away. The official policy of colonial rule tended to be much less interventionist than it had been for the brief moment before Mlanjeni’s war, and even then the hope of transformation had been little but a figment of Governor Sir Harry Smith’s remarkable imagination. British Governments were prepared, on occasion, to reward modernising behaviour on the part of their subjects. In Natal, for instance, the Secretary of Native Affairs, Theophilus Shepstone, exempted the inhabitants of rectangular houses from the hut tax, on the assumption that they had contributed sufficiently to the colonial budget through the purchase of imported, mainly British, commodities.<sup>4</sup> British governments, however, were not prepared to enforce Westernized behaviour on their African subjects. The risks of so doing were too great, and even without this the colonial government had sufficient levers to extract labour from African communities, which was an important, perhaps the most important, function of colonial rule, particularly after the discovery of the mineral riches of the country in the later nineteenth century.

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3 Alan Lester, *Imperial Networks: Creating identities in nineteenth century South Africa and Britain*, esp. Ch. 4.

4 Norman Etherington, *Preachers, Peasants and Politics in Southeast Africa, 1835–1880: African Christian Communities in Natal, Pondoland and Zululand*, p. 116.

## 1 Trading Stores and Missionaries

There were other forces which did aim more determinedly to introduce Africans to Western commodities, and such objects into African homes. In parallel with the political advance of White rule was the extension of a network of trading stores, both in the small towns which grew up across the country, but also in the countryside in those areas where the Africans still maintained their hold on the land. Initially, they carried a specific collection of goods, generally of low quality and known as “Kaffir truck”. This would have included objects such as cloth, knives, beads, and mirrors, plus some ironwork. In time, the material goods in question – on which incidentally a much higher import duty was paid than for commodities intended for Europeans<sup>5</sup> – came to be seen by Africans as inferior, and thus not desirable. By the early twentieth century, the trading stores of the African areas of South Africa were carrying much the same assortment of goods as in the stores in the European areas of the country. Their presence meant that throughout the countryside even those who did not have the opportunity to visit the cities were able to see what was on offer and to covet new goods.<sup>6</sup>

Even more than the trading store, the major external pressure for the changing of African material culture came from the missionaries. From the last decade of the eighteenth century, missionaries were continually present, and the region was probably the most densely missionized area in the world. It was of course the prime purpose of a missionaries to change the beliefs of those to whom they were bringing their message, but in general this went together with the propagation of a change in behaviour. Through the nineteenth century, it was generally thought that true conversion to Christianity entailed the acceptance of Western norms, values, and living arrangements. Not every missionary thought along these lines. Dr Johannes van der Kemp, the remarkable first missionary to South Africa of the London Missionary Society (LMS), once commented that “all civilization is from the devil”,<sup>7</sup> and argued that “in order to raise the natives to his own level he must in everything that was not reprehensible go down to theirs.” His lifestyle was thus exceedingly simple, and the salaries of the London Society were notoriously low. However, within a couple

5 See “Addendum” by F.A.W. Lucas to *Report of Native Economic Commission, 1930–1932*.

6 I owe this point to a description the late Elizabeth Colson made at a workshop in Zambia in 2010. It was based on her fieldwork in the Southern Province of the country, which then had lasted over sixty years.

7 Robert Ross, *Status and Respectability in the Cape Colony, 1750–1870: A Tragedy of Manners*, p. 112.

of decades, another missionary would comment of this principle that “experience has demonstrated [its] falsity.”<sup>8</sup> Missionaries were thus in the business of changing their potential converts’ lifestyles as much as their beliefs.

The basic principle under which the missionaries acted was enunciated fairly early in the nineteenth century by Dr John Philip, the superintendent of the LMS in South Africa. Referring primarily to the Khoekhoe of the Eastern Cape, among whom the LMS had had its major successes at that stage (and indeed for much longer), Philip wrote:

While I am satisfied, from abundance of incontrovertible facts, that permanent societies of Christians can never be maintained among an uncivilized people, without imparting to them the arts and habits of civilized life, I am satisfied, upon grounds no less evident, that if missionaries lose their religion and sink into mere mechanics, the work of civilization and moral improvement will speedily retrograde.<sup>9</sup>

Civilization was measured in material things, particularly clothing, but also in terms of housing, and the contents of houses. Whereas, throughout pre-colonial Southern Africa, houses were built round, the European and thus missionary architectural vision required straight lines. In the old order, so it was perceived, it was impossible for the Khoekhoe women to keep their clothing in order, and needles were far too easily lost. Since many of them were very conscious of their appearance, notably at church on Sundays, this was something which had to be addressed.<sup>10</sup> Also while Khoe and Xhosa houses were, in essence, thatched affairs in which the thatch came down to the ground, Europeans made a clear distinction between the wall and the roof. At the very least, missionaries demanded that those who lived on their stations build houses with walls. As the Wesleyan minister, the Rev H. Dugmore wrote:

It is found to be the case that the operation of religious influence upon the *mind* leads, almost with the regularity of a natural law, to a sense of decency and respectability in the clothing of the *body*. ... Could they be induced generally to abandon their grass huts and adopt a kind of dwelling more favourable to habits of cleanliness, it would greatly tend to promote the use of European apparel. It would indeed almost render

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8 Eugene Casalis, *My Life in Basutoland*, p. 104.

9 John Philip, *Researches in South Africa: Illustrating the Civil, Moral and Religious Condition of the Native Tribes*.

10 Philip, *Researches*, I, p. 210.

it necessary. Their huts are so low, and so hot and smoky, that European clothes can scarcely be born in them; and the loose kaross, and squatting posture, seem an almost necessary accompaniment to their habitation. The use of walled houses would necessitate the use of more clothing; at the same time, it would enable the wearer to preserve it in a way that is impossible in a Fingo Hut.<sup>11</sup>

As far as possible, missionaries preferred the inhabitants of the mission villages to live in rectangular cottages, which were literally aligned, along a street.<sup>12</sup>

In the process of evangelisation and the concomitant spreading of what the Europeans considered to be civilization passed down the female line, from the missionaries' wife and daughters to the girls and young women who were becoming their converts. A surprisingly high proportion of the early Africans to receive a Western education, certainly at the lower levels, were girls, probably because the boys were occupied in looking after the cattle from a young age.<sup>13</sup> The missionaries hoped that they would be able thereafter to build a civilized society, though, as Monica Wilson, heir to the missionary tradition, was to note, for all missionaries civilisation without Christianity would have been unthinkable, and perhaps impossible.<sup>14</sup> In Natal, the Lindley family, missionaries under the aegis of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, always had a number of African girls in their house, and the daughters would be expected to go through the "alphabet of civilization" with the girls. This meant that they watched over the Africans and

taught [them] various things, from the use of soap and water, of forks and dishcloths and tablecloths, to the fashioning and putting on of clothes. Everyone in the family had to help in some way. The daughter whose week

11 A.E. Du Toit, *The Earliest South African Documents on the Education and Civilization of the Bantu*, p. 72.

12 Ross, *Status and Respectability*, pp. 120–2; Jean & John L. Comaroff, "Home-made Hegemony: modernity, domesticity and colonialism in South Africa", in Karen Transberg Hansen (Ed.), *African Encounters with Domesticity*, pp. 52–9.

13 When I taught in Botswana in the 1960s, many of my male pupils reminisced nostalgically about their time as herd boys. This had, however, meant that they often had not begun primary school until they were eleven or more, and thus were still in secondary school in their early twenties (and thus much older than me!).

14 Monica Wilson, 'Cooperation and Conflict: The Eastern Cape Frontier', *Oxford History of South Africa*, pp. 264–8. On this, see also Sean Morrow, *The Fires Beneath: The Life of Monica Wilson, South African Anthropologist*; Andrew Bank, *Pioneers of the Field, South Africa's Women Anthropologists*, pp. 64–103.

it was to look after the girls had to transplant herself with the lesson-books into the kitchen and mix history, philosophy, mathematics, and poetry, with pots and pans and dishwater.

This allowed for the “social reproduction of *khohwa* [Christian African] society” as these young ladies often founded their own families, together with the male converts of the American mission.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the best description of what was happening is that given by Elizabeth Rolland of Beersheba, a mission station that she had established together with her husband for the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society on the West bank of the Caledon River, in what was then the Orange Free State. It is a poignant document because it was written after the station had been destroyed by the forces of the Orange Free State, as part of the war between that State and Moshoeshoe’s Lesotho, to which the PEMS, and the Rollands, were allied. Thus, the description is to some extent idealised, as a memory of a Christian community that Elizabeth had built up together with her husband. She wrote:

As regards civilization and industry, the following statistics will show what real progress the natives were making. They were nearly all dressed in European clothing. More than a hundred cottages had been built, many of them by good masons. These houses were furnished with tables, chairs, boxes and all kinds of things, bought with the produce of their own industry from the traders, or at the English shops in the Colony. From this station alone, the native brought to Smithfield [the closest colonial town] either in money or in value, the worth of £4000, a fact stated by the shopkeepers themselves.

Her daughter Elise had previously produced a painting of Beersheba, in which the most evident feature is the straight road running through the village.<sup>16</sup> This is how the mission villages were supposed to be, and on occasion actually may have been.

The inhabitants of Beersheba acquired their goods in exchange for the agricultural produce they grew, using ploughs, and brought to market. This continued to be the most desired way for rural African to acquire the wherewithal

15 Healy-Clancy, *A World of Their Own*, p. 27, citing E.W. Smith, *The Life and Times of Daniel Lindley 1801–1880*, p. 281.

16 Karel Schoeman (Ed.) *The Recollections of Elizabeth Rolland (1803–1901)*, p. 90, and Figure 5. Elizabeth Rolland, incidentally, was Olive Schreiner’s aunt.



FIGURE 2 The ideal mission station: Beersheba c. 1855  
PAINTED BY ELISE ROLLAND, PRIVATELY HELD

necessary to equip a household in a modern style. Throughout the country, communities of small-scale African farmers, producing both for the market and for their own subsistence, came into being.<sup>17</sup> Where conditions, particularly as regards transport, were favourable, these could become relatively prosperous, and build family houses in accordance with the models provided by the missionaries, among others, while at the same time sending their children for the education which might lead them to higher things. Perhaps the archetypical family of this type would be the Mbekis, in Nqamakwe district in the Transkei, one of whose members, Govan, was named after a Church of Scotland missionary, and whose house still contains a massive wooden table for family celebrations.<sup>18</sup>

17 Colin Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry*.

18 Colin Bundy, *Govan Mbeki*, p. 12.

## 2 Migrant Labour, Clothes, Guns, and Pots

A much more common way to acquire western goods, though, was through the performance of migrant labour. From 1870 onwards, the economy of Southern Africa came to be centred on the mines, first in and around Kimberley, where diamonds were extracted, and then on the Witwatersrand, notably, Johannesburg, the location of what was then the greatest assemblage of gold mines in the world. Nevertheless, migrant labour in South Africa antedated the advent of the mining industry, even though before 1870 the numbers were much smaller. In 1848, thus in the short interval between the War of the Axe and Mlanjeni's war, the artist Thomas Baines met a group of amaXhosa returning to their homes from the colonial farms on which they had spent a few months. They, like him, were travelling through Howison's Poort, to the west of Grahamstown, now known as Makhanda. Baines made a drawing of his companions, which he later worked up into an engraved plate. It shows them wearing torn clothes and leading an ox, but also carrying bundles of what may have been cloth, guns, and a three-legged cooking pot.<sup>19</sup>

These, then, became the main goods which were sold into African households from the mid-1840s onwards. They were not the first. From the 1820s, there had been regular trade between the Cape colony and the amaXhosa, initially at organized fairs in the region of Fort Willshire on the Keiskamma River. There in 1827 and 1828, the amaXhosa and the abaThembu sold ivory, knives, and a few cattle, worth in total, by colonial reckoning, £1432.<sup>20</sup> In return they purchased beads, brass, knives, axes, tinderboxes, and iron bars. In time, though, the amounts of ivory offered for sale diminished, and the quantities of beads increased till they dominated all other goods. But beadwork, though part of the assortment that went into African territories, would not rival the use of clothing for general wear, nor indeed the European blankets which went to make the highlands of the Transkei and Lesotho habitable. Indeed, it is most unlikely that the Kingdom of Lesotho could have survived in the foothills of the Drakensberg without the introduction of woollen blankets, as it was in the cold plateau lands that the Basotho held their cattle, free from the threat of armed raids from other African Kingdoms and from the Europeans. Winters in the mountains were just too cold, and furs too rare, for there to have been any major settlement in the area without the cover the blanket provides. It is not

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19 For a broader analysis of this print, see Jan-Bart Gewald, *To Grahamstown and Back: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of Southern Africa*.

20 Roger B. Beck, *The Legalization and Development of Trade on the Cape Frontier, 1817–1830*, p. 275.



FIGURE 3 Thomas Baines AmaXhosa, having made their fortune, leaving the Colony, 1848  
BY THOMAS BAINES, WEBSITE LEIDEN UNIVERSITY, PUBLIC DOMAIN VIA  
WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

for nothing that the Sotho blanket – woven of the wool of imported sheep and eventually fabricated in South Africa in its manifold colours – has become, with the conical straw hut, the sartorial symbol of the kingdom which Moshoeshoe founded in the 1820s. The first consignment to reach Lesotho is said to have included a weaving flaw, which ever since has been a sign of genuineness of the article and of its wearer's adherence to the house of Moshoeshoe.

If the blanket gave the mountain kingdom part of its economic basis in the highland grazing lands, and the cultivation of grains in the (relative) lowlands of the Caledon valley, the other main part, it was guns which protected Lesotho from incorporation into the South African colonies. The family whom Thomas Baines met were the precursors of those who conducted a largely clandestine trade in muskets into the African kingdoms of Southern Africa.

From the 1820s, Maqoma, the sharpest military strategist among the Xhosa chiefs, had been attempting to build up a force of mounted musketeers with which to combat the colonized advance.<sup>21</sup> He failed to do so, because of the

21 Timothy J. Stapleton, *Maqoma: Xhosa resistance to colonial advance*, esp. Ch. 3.

difficulties of obtaining sufficient numbers of guns and also no doubt sufficient horses. It was left to Moshoeshoe to the north to create a more successful force.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the attempts of the British and later the Burghers of the Orange Free State to reduce Lesotho to subservience foundered on the skill with which Moshoeshoe and his sons led the mounted forces against them. In particular at the Battle of the Berea, in 1852, when the Basotho came close to trapping a major British force – and then declared that they had lost so that the British did not lose face – it was evident that the highlanders had mastered the techniques entailed in this new method of fighting.

In the years after the Battle of the Berea, both Moshoeshoe's Basotho and other African Kingdoms, most notably the Bapedi in Sekhukhuneland (Limpopo Province), made serious efforts to acquire sufficient weaponry to fight off European incursion. From the 1840s, Bapedi men working as migrant labourers in the Port Elizabeth harbour used the proceeds to refurbish Sekukhune's arsenal.<sup>23</sup> The Basotho did so too, certainly after the opening of the diamond mines around Kimberley in 1870.<sup>24</sup>

The opening of the diamond mines coincided, roughly, with the annexation of Lesotho to the Cape Colony. Although this change of status had been engineered by the Sotho chiefs as a form of protection against the Orange Free State, the measures adopted by the Cape Colony, particularly the attempt to disarm the Basotho, did not meet with their approval. The Basotho had chosen to be annexed to the Cape, rather than Natal, because they believed that they would be able to keep their arms, and also govern themselves in a form of indirect rule. However, through the 1870s, the Cape government attempted to extend the policy it had been applying in the Eastern Cape, where disarmament and the decrease in the power of the chiefly elite ran hand in hand. The Basotho were never going to tolerate this, essentially because they recognized that the maintenance of their independence up to 1868 had depended on their possession of, and skilled use of, firearms. The mounted musketeers who had won the Battle of the Berea in 1852 and fought off Free State attacks in 1858 now saw their nationality as linked to their guns. The result was that the measures were opposed most stringently and the Basotho went into revolt. The resulting

22 Sandra Swart, *Riding High: Horse, humans and history in South Africa*, Ch. iv.

23 Peter Delius, "Migrant Labour and the Pedi, 1840–180", in Shula Marks & Anthony Atmore (Eds.), *Economy and society in pre-industrial South Africa*, pp. 293–312.

24 The processes of change are discussed in Cornelis W. de Kiewiet, *The Imperial Factor in South Africa: A study in politics and economics*, Ch. VII, "The Economics of War", which even after eighty-five years is still probably the best single chapter ever written on South African history.

conflict has gone into history as the Gun War.<sup>25</sup> It demonstrated that the Cape forces, like their British and Orange Free State predecessors, were unable to enforce their will on the Mountain Kingdom. Lesotho remained a British protectorate, but under the direct and relatively benevolent rule of Great Britain, not the settlers of the Cape. The guns had done their work in Lesotho. Elsewhere, throughout what is now South Africa, the attempts of African rulers to build up a sufficient arsenal to significantly alter the terms of their incorporation failed. The result was the colonial conquest of Sekhukhuneland and, later, the Venda chiefdoms of the Transvaal, and also the destruction of the Zulu Kingdom, which had tried to defend itself as much by acquiring fire-arms as by the legendary bravery of the assegai wielding impi.<sup>26</sup>

The third item which the 1848 party was seen to be bringing back was a three-legged iron pot, presumably cast in Birmingham and imported. This was to become the most pervasive item of material culture introduced by Europeans into Southern Africa, but, on the other hand, it is the most difficult to trace, as it gets hidden in categories of “general ironwork” in the import statistics, and there were never any attempts to count the numbers that any community possessed, at least to my knowledge. Nevertheless, the three-legged pot quickly became a universal item in black households, replacing locally produced pottery for the cooking of the basic porridge, made of either maize or sorghum, which formed the staple of most rural diets. Cooking was still done outside. The introduction of the pot thus could not have any immediate effects on the social relations of the household and family who made use of it. It “merely” changed the techniques of food preparation, to some minor extent, probably above all because the fire which could be used under such a pot was larger than under earthenware, and thus perhaps the amount of food cooked at any one time could be increased.

In the first instance, these goods were obtained in exchange either for labour on colonial farms or on the docks or alternatively for ivory and hides, perhaps stock on occasion, and certainly grain, since at least some of the African communities who were able to supply corn to colonial markets.<sup>27</sup> With the opening

25 Peter B. Sanders, “*Throwing down white man*”: *Cape rule and misrule in colonial Lesotho, 1871–1884*; also Rachel King, “Cattle, raiding and disorder in Southern African history”, *Africa* 87 (3), pp. 607–30; also *idem*, “Living on Edge: New Perspectives on Anxiety, Refuge and Colonialism in Southern Africa”, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* (27)3, pp. 533–551.

26 For a recent military history, see John Laband, *Zulu Warriors: The battle for the South African frontier*; also William Kelleher Storey, *Guns, Race and Power in Colonial South Africa*.

27 The expansion of trade networks can be followed through the annual “Native Affairs Blue Book”, presented to the Parliament of the Cape Colony, from 1874 to 1910.

of mines, things changed, both by providing larger markets, which were supplied, in part and for a few decades, by African peasants,<sup>28</sup> and by offering much more substantial opportunities for the earning of money in migrant labour.

As is well known, the labour force of these mines consisted largely of men (and adolescents) who worked for up to eighteen months before returning to their rural homes with the goods and the money they had acquired.<sup>29</sup> The South African economy was thus dependent on attracting, by whatever means, a sufficiency of labourers, both from within South Africa and from across its borders, notably from Lesotho, Mozambique, and Botswana.<sup>30</sup> There were a number of ways of doing this. The most blatant was the imposition of taxes on the African population, which had to be paid in cash, and thus through labour. Indeed 202 out of 297 recently returned migrants interviewed by Isaac Schapera in Botswana in the late 1930s saw the need to pay tax as one of the main reasons for going to the mines.<sup>31</sup> However, this could only work up to a point, and Africans needed some more positive inducement for them to go to the mines. To some extent they did so to acquire money, which could be invested in the agricultural economy of their place of origin.<sup>32</sup> This was particularly necessary after the rinderpest epidemic of the 1890s had killed off 90% of Southern Africa's cattle.<sup>33</sup> A man could also use his mine earnings for the cattle he was to give as *lobola* (bride price) to his future in-laws. However, the most important reason for individuals to go to the mines was to acquire things.

This was something that at least some of the White employers recognised. In 1904, Godfrey Lagden, chairman of the South African Native Affairs Commission and head of the equivalent reconstituted department in the Transvaal after the Anglo-Boer War, and a man of long experience as a colonial official in what was to become Lesotho, gave as evidence to the Transvaal Labour Commission that

There are those in this country who believe that to keep the natives down to the lowest level is the best, because he is an animal and will work as

28 Colin Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry*.

29 Charles H. Feinstein, *An Economic History of South Africa*, Cambridge, esp. Ch. 3.

30 For a brief period after 1900, Chinese labourers were imported, but this was a temporary measure; see Peter Richardson, *Chinese Mine Labour in the Transvaal*.

31 I. Schapera, *Migrant Labour and Tribal Life: a study of conditions in the Bechuanaland protectorate*, pp. 121–2.

32 William Beinart, "Joyini Inkomo: cattle advances and the origins of migrancy from Pondoland", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 5(2), pp. 199–219.

33 Pule Phoofolo, "Face to Face with famine: the Basotho and the rinderpest, 1897–1899", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29(2), pp. 503–527.

an animal. That view, I think, is a false one. What we have got to do is to consider what will induce the native to work; to create in him a certain number of wants, and according to the standard of the native's wants, so will his efforts be to gratify them, and if he wants to wear decent clothes, and have a looking-glass, and a chest of drawers, and a decent house overhead, and if the children – taking example from them – want also to be clothed, then it means that every man who has ideas of that standard, together with his wife and children, has got to work harder to maintain that standard.<sup>34</sup>

This was one of those occasions when even the central figures of the colonial administration understood what moved those under their rule actually to come to work for the Whites. It did of course entail the possibilities of profit. The relation between the mine-owners and those who sold goods to the black miners was symbiotic. Thus, the miners were able to obtain the goods which they required primarily at the stores attached to the various mines, under the licence of the owners. These were profitable establishments. In the immediate aftermath of World War I, for instance, the stores were making a profit of 11 to 15% net.<sup>35</sup> By the 1930s, the goodwill for a single store was said to be worth £10,000.<sup>36</sup> They were able to benefit from the fact that each migrant, at least those from Mozambique, would have a tin box in the store's bunkroom, in which he stored his purchases until it was time to go home. On the other hand, it was always possible, at least in theory, for workers to acquire what they desired elsewhere. The keenness of the competition between the stores was considerable and, with the exception of items "which were almost universally purchased, there was never a fixed price. The Africans would bargain for a unit of clothes or a pair of trousers, because they vary in quality", but not for "bedspreads, soap, candles, and things like that."<sup>37</sup>

What was it that was being purchased by miners? The contents of ten trunks brought home to Mozambique in the first years of the twentieth century have been listed. According to the late Patrick Harries, these show that

34 *Report of the Transvaal Labour Commission, Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence*, 1904, para 1835, cited in Franco Barchiesi, "The Violence of Work: Revisiting South Africa's 'Labour Question' through Precarity and Anti-Blackness", *JSAS* 42(5), pp. 887–8.

35 South African Parliamentary Paper, UG 4 1919, Report of Special Commissioners on the Boycotting of Rand Storekeepers by Natives, p. 3.

36 *Bantu World*, 13.1.1934.

37 UG 4 1919, p. 3.

the buying patterns were determined by questions of symbol and status as much as by practical concerns ... Over three-quarters of the sum was spent on knives, boots, cloths and blankets, the diversity and cheapness of which could not be matched in Mozambique. The presence of table knives and spoons, bedspreads and table cloths, brushes and combs, vests, waistcoats, shirts, jackets, socks and belts suggest a new comportment. Most of the men brought mirrors and knives of various shapes and sizes and several carried iron files to reforge at home. Half the trunks contained up to 12 kilos of soap in rough bars.<sup>38</sup>

As any Southern Africanist would expect, the best description of what the miners brought home with them, and how these new goods were penetrating society, comes from Isaac Schapera, primarily on the basis of his anthropological fieldwork in Mochudi, Botswana, in the 1930s and early 1940s. He listed the goods to be found in local stores, what miners actually brought home with them, and those goods consigned to the local railway station. What was carried home was mainly clothing and smaller items, such as knives and lavender water. Beds, chairs, mattresses, and so forth tended to come by train. Clothing could also be found in the stores, though there was a change as footwear began to be sold in the 1930s. Socks, ties, etc. were “worn only by younger men of educated type”. Sewing machines, with bicycles and wind-up gramophones, were the most expensive items which were purchased, and were of course as much items of production as of consumption. They were generally brought back from the mines. By the early 1940s, the local traders were selling casement windows and zinc hut tops, showing that housing expectations were changing.

Schapera also most importantly highlighted the fact that the introduction of new goods was not uniform across society. There were distinctions based on wealth and on conviction. The two were indeed closely related, as the more prosperous were likely to be Christian, and the converse also held true. However, by the 1930s, “even the poorest household tries to provide itself with a plough, axes, knives, and other handmade implements, salt, soap, matches, candles, paraffin, and various patent medicines.” Those who could also bought “more and better clothes and implements, as well as sugar and tea, arms and ammunition, wagons, crockery of some kind, sewing machines, tables, and chairs and large empty petrol drums”, to transport water. “More progressive men” acquired better ploughs and stock, good houses, and European style

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38 Patrick Harries, *Work, culture, and identity: migrant labourers in Mozambique and South Africa, c. 1860–1910*, p. 174.



FIGURE 4 Sewing in Mochudi, c. 1937  
 PICTURING A COLONIAL PAST: THE AFRICAN PHOTOGRAPHS OF ISAAC  
 SCHAPER, P. 95

furniture and foods, and other goods still considered luxuries, as by now this concept had been introduced into Tswana society. Schapera also commented that migrant labourers had developed a taste for such luxuries outside of Mochudi. The Christians now owned a bible and other religious books, as well as providing education for their children. Those who had returned from such education, above all, probably at the London Missionary Society institution of Tiger Kloof, or elsewhere in South Africa, were “beginning to indulge in such extreme local luxuries as bicycles, newspapers, and even gramophones and cameras”.

Schapera realized that the introduction of a money economy, and the consequent purchase of many goods, had its profound effect on the fabric of Tswana society. He was not romantic about the past which it had replaced – or for that matter about anything or anyone else. He commented that “the material standards of life have ... been improved, and the range of individual possessions increased”.<sup>39</sup> There had been crafts which were lost, notably

39 I. Schapera, *Western Civilization and the Natives of South Africa: studies in culture contact*, p. 42.

metal work, leatherwork, basketry, and pottery, but there were others – dress-making, new forms of building and thatching – which had been introduced. New forms of stratification were developing, based on a man's possessions, but these replaced older ones, where prestige and power came from a man having multiple wives.

There were others who were less sanguine, or perhaps less hard-headed, about the consequences of social change. Worry about “detrribalisation” was rife among both Europeans and some African spokesmen in South Africa. It was, of course, precisely the same process as “modernisation”, “civilisation”, or “following a progressive way of life”, though with a diametrically opposed emotional charge and valuation. How far this process, however it was to be defined and described, was congruent with the adoption of European goods is hard to say, nor is it evident what was the spread of such goods across Southern Africa. Distribution was a worry, rather than a confirmable fact.

### 3 Sanac and the Natives Economic Commission

The closest that it is possible to come to mapping out the spread of European goods, at least in the first half of the twentieth century, comes from the evidence presented to two major commissions, the Southern African Native Affairs Commission of 1903–5 and the Native Economic Commission of 1930–32. Both sent out questionnaires across the country (and, in the former case, into Rhodesia and Lesotho as well) and received several dozen written replies, this in addition to the numerous interviews the commissioners conducted across the country. There are obvious difficulties in using this material. Although the respondents were men (and a very occasional woman) who were well acquainted with life in the areas about which they reported, inevitably the use of their replies forces a historian to recognise that they basically reflect the prejudices and hopes of the respondents, as well as whatever might have been disclosed by a full census of the relevant articles – and even that would have necessarily contained biases. All the same, at the very least, the comparison of the answers may well reveal the differences between the various parts of the country.

To begin with SANAC, the question that was asked, among many others included: “what influence has the teaching of Christianity exercised upon the Native mind and character? Has it tended to advance their material welfare” and further “what goods does he [the native] consume and what does he contribute in forms other than taxation?” The answers, given mainly by White officials (but also a number of missionaries) could reveal the prejudices of the

era. G.W. Barnes, for instance the “Protector of Natives” in Kimberley, gave it as his opinion that teaching Christianity to Africans did not have the effect it should on their character.<sup>40</sup> To him “the civilised uneducated or unchristianised native is by far the most reliable and trustworthy individual”. More generally a three-way categorization of the answers could be made. There were those who considered that “there are very few articles of European consumption which are not now in use amongst the Natives”, as H.M. Elliot, the retired chief magistrate of the Transkei put it.<sup>41</sup> There were also those who believed that the Africans’ wants were easily supplied, that they needed little more than blankets, beads, copper wire (as jewellery), iron pots, and hoes. Finally, there were those who saw the differentiation in African society between those, mainly Christian converts who had taken on the European goods, and those who had not. The comments even from the same place, were not always in agreement. Thus, the comments by the Protector of Natives in Kimberley, cited above, have to be set against those of the chief registrar of servants in the same city, E.W.H. Morris, who was in agreement that the “heathen” men were reliable, but nevertheless believed that the Africans “consume practically the same goods as the Europeans”,<sup>42</sup> and the inspector of location in Herbert, and also in Griqualand West, concurred that Africans purchase “almost everything that Europeans consume”.<sup>43</sup> Similar comments were made from places as diverse as Port Alfred, on the coast near Grahamstown, by Donald Strachan, a trader with 40 years’ experience on the Umzimkulu River,<sup>44</sup> on the southern border of Natal, or from the deepest Transkeian districts of Mount Frere and Nqamakwe. A missionary from Toleni, near Mount Frere, commented that: “The stock-in-trade of a well-to-do ... trader is an indication of what the Native consumes: Beads, red ochre, brass and copper wire, hoes, ploughs, axes, knives, etc., boots and shoes, hats and all manner of clothing, from blankets to white satin dresses, patent medicines of all values and quantities, condensed milk, tinned meats and fish, meal and all kinds of sweets and groceries. In fact the stock-in-trade is far more comprehensive and varied than anyone who has

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40 *South African Native Affairs Commission* 5 volumes, Cape Town, Cape Times, 1904–5, (hereafter SANAC) vol. v, Appendix D, p. 2; unlike most Europeans, Barnes considered the Africans in the rural areas, whose lifestyle was little changed from its pre-European manifestation to be “civilised”, presumably because they were seen to be honest, deferential, and polite.

41 SANAC, v, Appendix D2, p. 31.

42 SANAC, v, Appendix D 2, p. 31.

43 Evidence of CFH Orpen, SANAC, v, Appendix D3, p. 70.

44 SANAC, v, appendix D5, p. 90.

not examined it can imagine.”<sup>45</sup> There were also a surprising number of residents of the Orange Free State, who considered that the Africans consumed much the same as the Europeans, though perhaps of “an inferior quality”. This included individuals from Fauresmith, Rouxville, Vrede, and Boschrand, and an ex-foreman from Jagersfontein. Perhaps this was, because within the borders of the Province, there were very few areas where the Africans could live on communal land. However, the Rector of Thaba Nchu, one of those areas, commented that the Africans buy their household utensils, so that “those of Native manufacturers [are] becoming scarce”.<sup>46</sup> In Lesotho, where, in contrast to the land across the Caledon River, there were no European farms, there were similar comments, even from Quthing and Mount Moorosi in the mountains,<sup>47</sup> or from the missionaries of the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society, R.M. Dyke and Louis Mabile.<sup>48</sup> J.W. Bowker, the Assistant Commissioner of Mohale’s Hoek, and a scion of one of the most notoriously racist of Eastern Cape English families, was to comment that the Basotho had “developed a taste for luxury. An enormous quantity of blankets, clothing and utensils are consumed in this country”. He further wrote that the progress to civilization had been “lamentably slow”, mainly because it was so expensive, although better homes were being constructed. It was also regularly commented that the Basotho were regularly purchasing saddlery, as might be expected in that horse-travelled country.<sup>49</sup>

Nevertheless, there were those who did not see the African as consumer. Even in East London, the Inspector of Native Locations, W.R. Ellis, thought that African wants “are most readily supplied”.<sup>50</sup> A basket, an iron pot, and a hoe were considered to be all that was necessary for several years. Or the Resident Magistrate at Fort Beaufort, in the heart of the Ciskei, with its Christian improving peasantry, could comment that “they buy blankets, clothes and cattle, tea, coffee, etc.”<sup>51</sup> Throughout the rural Transvaal, too, there was little indication of anything much outside, “picks, ploughs, blankets, beads and shoddy clothing”.<sup>52</sup> These were seen as the contents, along with iron pots and earthenware,

45 Evidence of the Rev. B.J. Ross, SANAC, v, Appendix D4, p. 77.

46 Evidence of Rev C. Day, Rector of Thaba Nchu, SANAC v, Appendix D8, p. 16o.

47 Evidence of Guy Hallifax & J. Hallifax, Quthing and Moorosi, respectively, SANAC v, Appendix D17, pp. 395–398.

48 SANAC v, Appendix v, D17M 392.

49 Evidence of C.P.P. Kenna and William Scott, both from Mafeteng, SANAC, v, Appendix, D17, pp. 41o, 42o.

50 SANAC v, Appendix D2, p. 32.

51 Evidence of R. Tillard, SANAC v, Appendix D5, p. 94.

52 Evidence of J.G. B. Sutherland, Barberton, SANAC, v, Appendix D 14, 293, p. 29.

of what was known as “Kafir truck”, sold throughout the region by an ever increasing and prosperous number of trading stores.<sup>53</sup>

In part, this absence of an appreciation of how things were changing came from the fact that there were no respondents from the Witwatersrand. At this stage, the idea that there could be a large and permanently urbanized African labour force was beyond the imagination of the commission. All the same, there were a number of respondents to the written questionnaire, and indeed in the oral evidence, who understood how things were changing. S.J. Hulley, the Pass Officer of Barberton in the Eastern Transvaal wrote that “in a mixed district like [this], where we have all classes of Natives, from those who are savages pure and simple to the well-educated minister and clerk, the range of goods consumed will be very much the same as would be required by an ordinary European community, with the addition of Kafir truck”.<sup>54</sup> Particularly in Natal, but also in the Eastern Cape, many commented enthusiastically that a mission inhabitant “spends ten times as much as a heathen”. The Rev. James Scott of the Free Church of Scotland wrote succinctly that “education creates wants”,<sup>55</sup> and that the list of imported articles which his charges consumed already included agricultural implements, shop clothing, prints, blankets, iron, paraffin, and matches. It was “daily extending.” Or again, the Rev. J. Harper, a Congregationalist missionary in King William’s Town in the Ciskei wrote that: “As soon as a man changes from heathenism, he washes off the red clay and leaves aside the red blanket and dons European garments. The same with the women. They may not in their homes have many articles of furniture, but as they progress in enlightenment, they gradually acquire a few articles of furniture such as tables, chairs and bedsteads”.<sup>56</sup> In addition European food was coming in, particularly since the Rinderpest epidemic and the consequent shortage of milk. This was in contrast to those who remained under “the tribal system [who] remain in much the same position as before”.<sup>57</sup> The Christians, evidently had much greater expenses despite the fact that he probably earned the same as his non-progressive fellow. Nevertheless, for E.E. Dower, the chief clerk of the Cape Native Affairs Department, and a good son of missionary parents, the advantage of education was to increase African wants so that “he”

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53 Evidence of G.D. Wheelwright, sub-native commissioner, Barberton, SANAC v, Appendix D14, p. 300.

54 SANAC, v, Appendix D12, 134, p. 234.

55 SANAC, v, Appendix D8, pp. 145–6.

56 SANAC, II, p. 697.

57 Evidence of R.W. Rose Innes, King Williams’s Town, SANAC, II, p. 654.

became “a greater purchaser”, and consequently worked harder and became a more useful subject.<sup>58</sup>

The members of the South African Native Affairs Commission used this sort of evidence to come to conclusions which were a reasonably accurate prediction of South Africa’s history over the next century. They wrote that “education and contact with Europeans are beginning to effect a change in the family life and habits of that large section of the Native Population who have not formally adopted Christianity or civilised ways of life. This change has taken the form of a movement towards a higher standard of comfort in the matters of housing, clothing and diet; and improvement in the position and treatment of women has been brought about by the influence of Christian and civilised views on the marriage question.”<sup>59</sup> This is probably true but as always it is difficult to disentangle the ideological from the empirical basis of the claim.

This is equally true of the intervention of A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, one of the major proponents of British functionalist anthropology and the first professor of the subject of South Africa. In his evidence before the Economics and Wages Commission of 1926, he demonstrated the strength of functionalist sociology, at least when divorced from any assumption of social equilibrium.<sup>60</sup> This analysis of South African economic history was, again, sharply accurate. He argued to the commission that “there has occurred a series of important changes in the economic motives of the native, that is to say he is now learning something of the White man’s economic motives and these are modifying his attitude towards life.” Consequently, social differentiation within African society was increasing, as there were still many who were but slightly affected by these social changes. He commented: “[S]ome are living like the natives did hundreds of years ago and some have changed very materially indeed, and they approximate to the European both in the mode of life, economic occupations, their outlook on life generally and in their individualism.” In accepting his arguments, the commission predicted that slowly African communities would become “less unlike the European communities in which, in the end, it is likely to merge.”<sup>61</sup> This argument, it is true, was then used to justify segregationist arguments as the reservation of land for African communities was seen as a way to smooth the inevitable process of transition. There were, of course, other political judgments possible on the basis of the same analysis, certainly

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58 SANAC, II, p. 16.

59 SANAC I, p. 53.

60 UG14, 1926, *Economic and Wages Commission*, p. 154ff.

61 UG 14 '26, p. 157.

incorporationist liberal ones and ideas compatible with forms of Marxism. This only goes to confirm the sharpness of the basic conception.

A generation after SANAC, the Native Economic Commission of 1930–1932 attempted to have at least part of its deliberations on information as detailed as it could get on the spread of European goods. It was launched at the high point of the Great Depression before it became clear that this would in fact provide the basis for considerable industrial growth in the country. The commission was appointed to investigate the process of African urbanization, and the effects that a “surplus” of Africans in the main towns might have on European and colonial employment. In the event, the Commission set itself as a main problem “how best the Native population can be led onward step by step in an orderly march to civilization.” It was admitted that

the movement has already made some advance. Certain classes of Natives have made substantial progress. As a whole it has, however, not been an orderly march. The great bulk of Natives who have been influenced by European contact, has moved on in a haphazard manner, involving many definitely undesirable features.<sup>62</sup>

In order to answer its question, and to back up its conclusions, which may have been determined before the Commission ever met, the NEC effectively conducted research across most of the country. It did this in part by soliciting oral testimony in a great number of centres, and in part by sending questionnaires to every magistracy in the county, and to a variety of other individuals asking for information on many subjects, notably not only about the survival or otherwise of tribal organization and *lobola* but also including questions as to the level of “advance” that had already been achieved. It therefore included in its general questionnaire the following request for information: “Is there a growing tendency on the part of Natives in your district to adopt European dress, homes, furniture, recreation, amenities, reading, education, customs in marriage and in the employment of servants?” The last question suggests a certain ignorance of the economics of African life, and perhaps the structure of African families. The only place where servants were acknowledged was in the region of Mafikeng, when “Vaalpense” were employed as servants, principally,

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62 *Report of the Native Economic Commission, 1930–1932*, Parliamentary Paper UG 22 of 1932, p. 3.

I suspect, in agriculture.<sup>63</sup> But in general the replies are informative and give a convincing pattern of the changes in the country's material culture.

The returns from the various magistrates are not complete, but they can easily be categorized into two groups. First, there were those who saw the Africans in their district as not adopting European things, or only in part. There were primarily to be found in Zululand and in the far north of the country. The magistrates of two districts in what was to become Mpumalanga, Wakkerstrom, and Letaba (Tzaneen), both commented that, except in the matter of dress there was no tendency to adopt European customs.<sup>64</sup> L.F. Goldsworthy, who by this time was the magistrate of Kranskop in Natal, wrote of his time in the Zoutpansberge and the land to the north-east of what is now Pholokwane that "a tendency to adopt civilized methods and means of living in their homes is ... barely noticeable." Although the men wore European dress, the women hardly did. Even so, the Vatsonga and Vhavenda of the region seemed prosperous enough, and better off than those "detrribalized" communities further south. Goldsworthy made an exception in his description of the far north from those Africans who "resided on mission stations". This was also the pattern regularly reported for KwaZulu and Natal. In Nongoma, for instance, the magistrate wrote succinctly of the acceptance of European furniture: "No, except the Christian Natives". In Richmond in Southern Natal, the magistrate commented: "Except in the mission reserves, there is very little tendency to adopt European clothes and furniture."<sup>65</sup> The distinction could even be made within individual households. At about the same time, the Zulu King, Solomon kaDinizulu, shared a brass bedstead with his Christian wife, but, when he was with his other wives, he slept on a mat on the ground.<sup>66</sup> But what is clear is that in the early 1930s there was a moment when the take-up of European-style furniture and so forth had reached the boundary between the Christian and those who were described as the heathen, even in those areas where the conservative hold to the old ways was strongest.

In most of the rest of the country, the magistrates were commenting on the adoption of European clothing, housing, and furniture. Even in the Transkei,

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63 Maria van der Ryst, "The so-called Vaalperse or Masele of the Waterberg: the origins and emergence of a subordinate class of mixed descent", *Anthropology Southern Africa*, Issue 1-2, pp. 42-52.

64 These answers are to be found in the National Archives Repository (hereafter NAR), Pretoria, answers to Questionnaires, Transvaal NTS 1771, and not necessarily in the volumes of written evidence for the NEC.

65 In NAR, NTS 1771, Answers to Questionnaires, Natal.

66 Rebecca Hourwich Reyher, *Zulu Woman*, pp. 47-52.

in Engcobo, Mount Frere, Qumbu, and Willowvale, it was commented that small square houses and European furniture were being acquired, even though “there are still a large number who live under the old conditions”.<sup>67</sup> In Herschel, high against the border with Lesotho, the comment was made both that the stock carried by traders was very little different from that held for European customers and that “the homes in some instances are well built and furnished. The use of beds is quite common with sheets, blankets, and counterpanes”.<sup>68</sup> In Natal too, in much of the province, things had changed sharply. The magistrate of Dundee commented the Africans “live in a different world to that of 25 years ago. Then the storekeeper sold beads and cotton sheets to cover their nakedness, and grease and red ochre to anoint their bodies. Today they sell silks, expensive dress material and sewing machines. The huts now contain tables, chairs, chests of drawers, beds and stoves. In fact, one farmer stated to me that the huts are better furnished than his own house. They all adopt European dress, houses and furniture. They all play tennis, or football and most of the Town natives even read a daily paper. They have their own concerts. They adopt the European form of marriage and the servant has the same food as Europeans”.<sup>69</sup> In Jagersfontein in the Orange Free State it was commented “a certain percentage of houses, more or less confined to urban areas, are built on European ideas. Tables, chairs, bedsteads, crockery, cutlery and stoves are to be found in many houses and a few even have side-boards and bedroom suites. Pianos and organs are kept, but they are very rare, also Gramophones [sic]. Carpets and linoleum are also in use in some houses.”<sup>70</sup> Goldsworthy, again, comments how the Batswana of Rustenburg and Pretoria had taken on the goods of the European to a major extent to such a degree indeed that farming was being replaced almost entirely by employment in the metropolises of Pretoria and Johannesburg, not even in manual labour, but as peddlers, lorry drivers, or store assistants. The creation of new wants, for that is what was documented of most of the country by the commission, obviously entailed a considerable expenditure. It was necessarily difficult to keep up the appearances that were demanded. One of the new would-be elite informed the committee that he was at “a loss to understand how advanced education could be of much benefit to us here, although we realize that education as education is a valuable asset to any person. Education is an affliction to us at present; if I am educated I want to be decently dressed; I want to keep my body clean;

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67 In NAR, NTS 1771, Answers to Questionnaires, Transkei.

68 In NAR, NTS 1771, Answers to Questionnaires, Cape.

69 In NAR, NTS 1771, Answers to Questionnaires, Natal.

70 In NAR, NTS 1771, Answers to Questionnaires, Orange Free State.

I want to have better food, or a more varied diet ... and generally my tastes are more difficult to please than the tastes of the uneducated Native".<sup>71</sup> But because of racial discrimination he was prevented from earning the money he needed to sustain his lifestyle.

Part of the way in which this problem could be addressed was through the supply of credit. In general, the rural trading stores had not extended much credit, as this was reckoned to be a road to ruin, certainly as the competition between the various establishments ensured that the profit margins of rural traders were in general small. Bad debts were rarely a major problem. By the early 1930s, however, this was changing. In the first place the traditional general stores which catered for the African market were being challenged by mail order businesses, centred in both Cape Town and Durban. This, combined with a greater mobility, as motor transport was beginning to spread throughout the country, meant that there was a new flexibility in what even the remotest of Africans could acquire, so long as they had the money.<sup>72</sup>

The corollary of this was that the sale on credit became much more common. In Jagersfontein, it was noted that credit was only extended to those Africans with paid employment.<sup>73</sup> The superintendent of the LMS institution of Tiger Kloof, the Rev. A.E. Jennings, noted that while few European-style homes were being built in his neighbourhood, near Vryburg and Kuruman, this was due to poverty, not prejudice against the introduction of such styles. Furniture was being bought "almost exclusively on the hire system from firms in Cape Town", with the result that those Africans who had enjoyed a better education were "heavily in debt" to such firms. In particular, teachers on a government salary, who both had a position to maintain and could demonstrate credit-worthiness, were susceptible to the temptation. Fully half the teachers around him were in debt, and Jennings expected that many would lose both cash and furniture.<sup>74</sup>

But, in the end, what goods had reached even the deepest countryside by the early 1930's? Some idea can be got, first, from what the members of the Native Economic Commission found in a store they visited in the northern Transvaal, on the road from Makhado (Louis Trichardt) to Sibasa. This store was run by an African shopkeeper, though owned by a White entrepreneur

71 Evidence of Philemon Ntuli, Native Economic Commission, Minutes of Oral evidence, Vol. II, p. 2060.

72 Evidence of Archdeacon Lee, Rorke's Drift, Native Economic Commission, III, p. 1417.

73 In NAR, NTS 1771, Answers to Questionnaires, Orange Free State.

74 Evidence of Rev A.E. Jennings, LMS missionary at Tiger Kloof, Vryburg district, Native Economic Commission, Written evidence I, p. 141.

who had a number of such establishments. He sold cotton blankets of various qualities, whose price ranged from 4/6 to 10 shillings, cotton pants, overcoats, coats, shirts, trousers (mainly Khaki drill), iron pots, corned beef, blue mottled soap, imported carbolic soap, jam, golden syrup, condensed milk, biscuits, paraffin (by the gallon tin), brass and iron wire, lamps, tin pails, sieves, plough shares and parts, enamel and tin dishes and basins, sickles, sewing cotton, and colonial mixture sweets, at 1 shilling a pound. These goods were generally exchanged for mealies, which were paid for in goods to their value not in cash.<sup>75</sup>

At the other end of the country, but at about the same time, Monica Hunter was doing her first fieldwork as an anthropologist in Pondoland and the Eastern Cape farms. Among much else she described what a bride received at her marriage, in other words what was needed to establish a household. She describes how, in a marriage in a poor family in the depths of the Transkei, the bride was given two sleeping mats, and a sheep and also some money, but also 2 pillowcases, 9 plates, 8 tin dishes, 4 tumblers, 18 cups and saucers, 10 spoons, 4 grass plates and a broom. But on a European farm, a bride got, in addition to clothes and shoes, a bucket, kettle, coffee-pot, tea-pot, cooking pot, grid-iron, washbasin, 6 spoons, 3 tin dishes, 6 cups, 4 plates, 2 sleeping mats, 1 mattress, two sheets, two pillows, 3 pillowcases, 1 towel, 1 lamp, and one box.<sup>76</sup> The things of the cities had penetrated deep into the countryside, but the distinctions between those with close contact to the commercial world and those whose contacts ran primarily through the migrant labour of the men were still not far apart.

#### 4 The Batswana of the Republic: a Set of Comparisons

For a variety of reasons, the most consistently useful information on the adoption of European goods and so forth outside the cities is on the various Tswana groups living in what was, in 1994, to become the North West Province, (and

75 Visit of Commission to Sibasa and Mpafuri Locations, 2.8.1930; Native Economic Commission, Written evidence, XIV, p. 61.

76 Monica Hunter, *Reaction to Conquest*, pp. 216, 533; for the context of Monica Hunter (later Wilson)'s fieldwork, see Andrew Bank "The 'Intimate Politics' of fieldwork: Monica Hunter and her African Assistants, Pondoland and the Eastern Cape, 1931–1932", in Andrew Bank & Leslie J. Bank (Eds.), *Inside African Anthropology: Monica Wilson and her Interpreters*, pp. 67–95; Andrew Bank, *Pioneers of the Field: South Africa's Women Anthropologists*, esp. Ch. 2.

a part of the Northern Cape) from Pretoria to the fringes of the Kalahari. The most detailed source is provided by C.A. McDonald, who wrote an MA thesis submitted to UNISA in 1940, based on fieldwork done between 1936 and 1938.<sup>77</sup> He worked among the Bakwena ba Modimosana ba Matlhaku, who lived in the Pella location. Here the Hermansburg Mission had established a station, some 58 miles (95 km), to the north west of Rustenburg.

For these purposes, the most valuable contribution of McDonald's thesis is his accurate survey of 100 Kwena households to see which "traditional" and which "European" goods they possessed. The contrast began with the style of the house itself. In the late 1930s, McDonald found that of the 100 houses in his sample, 55 were rectangular with mud walls and a thatched roof, ten had mud walls and an iron roof, twenty were built of brick with an iron roof, and only 15 were circular with mud walls and a thatched roof.<sup>78</sup> A number of goods were to be found in all of the houses. Of these only clay pots, used not to cook or carry water but rather to keep it cool, belonged to the category "traditional". Among the "European goods, in contrast, hoes, three-legged iron pots, enamel dishes, tea or coffee pots, and metal spoons were to be found in all houses". In 90 or more of the hundred houses were drinking calabashes, wooden spoons, and wooden dishes, representing the Setswana, along with tins, a bath (used to wash clothes), cups, plates, a table, chairs, and at least one bed. And so it could go on. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about this list is that a number of goods were not universally found. Pestles, mortars, grinding stones, winnowing baskets, open grain baskets, and goatskin mats were things a fifth of the households could do without. The equivalents in the "European" category were buckets, saucepans, table knives, and, remarkably, kitchen dressers. It would be possible to continue down the list, but probably it is enough to point to the clocks and the vases. Seventy-five per cent of the former did not work, while none of the latter were used for flowers. Both were there purely for ornamentation. This Europeanisation was despite the fact that, as P.L. Breutz,<sup>79</sup> who visited this group of Bakwena a decade, and a World War later, commented that the "native" goods were generally of a better standard than the European ones.

77 C.A. McDonald, *The Material Culture of the Kwena Tribe of Tswana*, MA UNISA 1940; I know nothing else about this ethnographer (who appears to have been a mature student, but who does not feature in the UNISA Library catalogue, for instance, except for his thesis).

78 See above, no. 12.; this represents a major shift.

79 On Breutz, see above all Jan Boeyens and Fred Morton, "The Tswana's antiquarian: the life and work of state ethnologist Paul-Lenert Breutz (1912–1999)", *South African Humanities*, 32, pp. 109–134.

Nonetheless, European goods were purchased, even in this settlement, one of the most remote in Rustenburg district.<sup>80</sup>

Breutz was able to make these generalisations because, in his work for the Ethnological section of the Native (later Bantu) Affairs Department, he had visited just about all the Tswana settlements in what was to become North West Province. The ethnological reports, which he and his colleagues wrote, followed a set pattern, including a section on “Material Culture.” Because the dates at which the observations described in these reports lay fairly close to each other, and because the observer, Breutz, was the same, the patterns observed when the various texts are compared, and account is taken of their location, can be considered as reflecting “reality” as it was in the years around 1950. These patterns are, first, that within what was then the Transvaal Province, the further westward, and thus the further away from Johannesburg and Pretoria a settlement was, the lower the amount of European goods in the various households. Thus, of the Bakwena ba Magôpa, who lived halfway between Rustenburg and Pretoria, Breutz commented that:

All modern houses are rectangular and have two or three rooms or even more ... some roofs are thatched, but the majority are covered with corrugated iron. Quite a number of houses are built entirely in European fashion, with machined doors and windows. Nearly all families possess some European furniture ... Household utensils are for the greater part of European origin. Most houses boast a sewing machine.<sup>81</sup>

Of the Bafokeng, whose location adjoined Rustenburg town to the north, Breutz wrote that the houses were “more or less of the European type, and many of them are built exactly like European dwellings”.

Round huts were only used as outbuildings. Though most of the old tribal utensils are still in use ... [n]early all the houses contain some European furniture. All common European household utensils are used. Besides bicycles, gramophones, battery radios, some families own motorcars, planters and other agricultural machinery. There are two privately owned tractors.<sup>82</sup>

80 P.L. Breutz, *The Tribes of Rustenburg and Pilansberg Districts*, Department of Native Affairs, Ethnological Publications, p. 13; McDonald, *Material Culture*, Appendix 2.

81 Breutz, *Tribes of Rustenburg and Pilansberg*, pp. 100–1.

82 Breutz, *Tribes of Rustenburg and Pilansberg*, p. 74.

Similar comments were made of the Bapo ba Mogale, to the east of Rustenburg, and of the Bakgatla бага Kgafêla of Saulspoort, some way to the north. Breutz was to make similar comments about the African groups living in Lichtenburg and Ventersdorp districts, to the south of Rustenburg. Of the former, Breutz wrote:

For all the African groups in Ventersdorp district, the material culture is evidence of a more intensive contact with European civilisation [than, for instance in Marico or Pilansberg]. In most huts the necessary European furniture, such as tables, chairs, beds, chests or racks, are in use. A large number of families use modern things, such as, for example, sewing machines, bicycles, mills for mealies, gramophones and agricultural machinery. Simple European kitchen utensils are in general use in most groups. Of the traditional material culture, little has survived in this district.

In most places streets had been laid out, and plots distributed, alongside which building was allowed. The houses were all rectangular and had two or three rooms, in addition to a couple of rectangular sheds which served as kitchens or storage spaces, and where sometimes the children slept.<sup>83</sup> In Lichtenburg, too, most houses had “suitable furniture and kitchen utensils as Europeans use”. The houses themselves were rectangular and had zinc roofs. Only outhouses used for cooking and storage were round and thatched with grass.<sup>84</sup> The view of the town had changed thoroughly.

There was a clear contrast with those who lived well to the west of Rustenburg, including the Bakwena ba Modimosana ba Matlhaku described above, their neighbours the Batlhôkwa бага Bogatsu, whose take up of European goods was considered more or less the same,<sup>85</sup> and the Bahurutshe бага Mokgatla, of whom Breutz wrote that “with the exception of clothes and metal objects, the old material culture is still intact.”<sup>86</sup>

83 P.L. Breutz, *Die Stamme van die Distrik Ventersdorp*, Department of Native Affairs, Ethnological Publications, p. 31 (my translation). It is a notable fact, for which I have no explanation, that Breutz never writes about “European [or White] civilisation” in those ethnographies when he was writing in English, but uses the Afrikaans equivalent “Europese [or blanke] beskawing”) when writing in that language. See also P.L. Breutz, *Die Stamme van die Distrikte Lichtenburg en Delareyville*, Department of Native Affairs, Ethnological Publications, 37, p. 55.

84 Breutz, *Stamme van Lichtenburg en Delareyville*, p. 55.

85 Breutz, *Tribes of Rustenburg and Pilansberg*, pp. 209–10.

86 Breutz, *Tribes of Rustenburg and Pilansberg*, p. 239.

This became even more clear when Breutz came to deal with the various, primarily Hurutshe, groups living in the Marico district. Most were settled very close to the border with the Bechuanaland Protectorate, later Botswana. Of one group he wrote that:

Most of the old types of household utensils are still locally made and used. One comes across mortars and pestles, clay pots of various sizes ... round wooden porridge dishes, grain baskets, winnowing baskets, different types of calabashes, goat skin and grass mats, beer strainers, spoons etc. Many houses have simple European furniture and utensils. As in the other tribes of this district, material culture is not European to the same extent as in the larger tribes of Rustenburg district.<sup>87</sup>

And of another:

On the whole, the people seem to possess only the most essential European furniture, such as tables, chairs, beds and cupboards. A few European household utensils and three-legged iron pots (pitsa) are obtainable from the local stores. Sewing machines and bicycles may be found in the huts of many families. They make the traditional Tswana utensils for their own use.

And there follows a long list of what they made.<sup>88</sup>

When he came to survey the Tswana groups in the Cape Province, from Mafeking to Kuruman, Breutz seems to have been slightly more attuned to the impact of segregation and apartheid. He did his fieldwork mainly in 1956, eight years after he went to Rustenburg. The impact of planned settlement was becoming far more evident, and the poverty of the region was clear in the descriptions he gives of the housing. Moreover, as the state's power over the locations increased, so the requirement to build rectangular houses was more rigorously imposed, where individual households were more prosperous, as apparently in parts of Mafeking district:

In houses of the European type and in the larger square huts all the principal items of European furniture including easy chairs, sofas and linoleum carpets are usually found, but in the small villages only a few chairs,

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87 P.L. Breutz, *The Tribes of Marico District*, Department of Native Affairs, Ethnological Publications, 30, p. 69.

88 Breutz, *Tribes of the Marico District*, p. 114.

a table and perhaps a bed. Sometimes the only contents of a hut is a homemade bed covered with skins. Many people possess gramophones, sewing machines and bicycles.<sup>89</sup>

But this was also a reaction to forced resettlement, known euphemistically as “betterment”. On this, he wrote:

When a scattered village is moved to a new residential site after new agricultural and land planning of an area has been carried out, the people build larger and better houses than they had before. Also on approaching an old village established again after a few years absence, one sees many more corrugated iron roofs shining in the sun.<sup>90</sup>

Throughout these descriptions there are regular comments that the circular huts and complicated village plans of nineteenth-century Batswana had been replaced by rectangular houses. This was a trend that was followed, and imposed, throughout the country. This raises a number of anthropological questions to which I do not have the answer. These relate to the interaction between an individual’s status and his or her place, quite literally, in the dwelling. Were new rules established to determine where people should sit? What is the symbolic meaning of tables and chairs? Is it possible to extend the structural analysis of social space, which has been so interesting, if contested, for the study of “pre-colonial” and “traditional” societies in Southern Africa, to the rooms of a rectangular Tswana house? Was it even possible to be formally polygynous in a rectangular house? Against this, so much more of life now happened indoors, cooking was done on a stove and eating, in smaller groups, at a table. Have new ways of marking space and rules of interaction had the opportunity to develop, to cope with the new circumstances within and around the households? In other words, are there generalised rules of etiquette which have to be observed in these houses, or are there little more than *ad hoc* arrangements for dealing with the tensions within what often became very crowded dwellings? And what are the consequences of these changes for

89 P.L. Breutz, *The Tribes of Mafeking District*, Department of Native Affairs, Ethnological Publications, 32, p. 86. This passage is repeated verbatim in P.L. Breutz, *The Tribes of Vryburg District*, Department of Native Affairs, Ethnological Publications, 46, p. 55.

90 P.L. Breutz, *The Tribes of the Districts of Kuruman and Postmasburg*, Department of Native Affairs, Ethnological Publications, 49, p. 75; see also Nancy J. Jacobs, *Environment, Power, and Injustice: a South African History*, for a description of the suffering this entailed.

the social history of black families in South Africa, as they became ever more urbanised?

Answers to such questions, and much more, cannot easily be found. In relevant publications, the issue has not been addressed, largely because the structuralist premises have not been adopted. Certainly, the information required cannot be extracted from Breutz's comments, as he was a strict adherent of the idea that every African was born as a member of a "tribe" and thereby highly conservative, and furthermore he was resolutely empirical in his approach. Luckily there were two other anthropologists who worked among the Batswana of the Union, before and during World War II, and whose writing provide an explanatory take on the cross-sections which Breutz, a decade later, was to encounter, if only to a limited extent on these questions. Both were to have highly distinguished careers, in which their times working in the Transvaal and the Northern Cape were relatively short interludes, but both were most insightful. The first was Zachariah Keodirelang Matthews,<sup>91</sup> who in the summer of 1938–9, a year of drought, did fieldwork among the Barolong bo Ratlou in the Vryburg district. He described them as "much less progressive"<sup>92</sup> than their Tshidi Rolong fellows in and around Mafikeng. As he wrote:

They have been less ready to accept the benefits usually associated with western civilisation. The coming of the White man caused them to scatter in various directions into the more remote parts of the country in an attempt, as they point out, to escape European taxation, and they still seem to look upon all aspects of western civilisation as various forms of taxation.<sup>93</sup>

In these circumstances, however only "the weakest aspects of Barolong culture seemed to thrive." Chiefly power had ebbed away, and, with it, the institutions of Tswana life and its accompanying goods

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91 Z.K. Matthews became Professor of African Studies at Fort Hare University, a senior member of the ANC, instigator of the Congress of the People and the Freedom Charter, a leading staff member of the World Council of Churches and the first ambassador to the United Nations of the Republic of Botswana. See Z.K. Matthews, *Freedom for My People: The Autobiography of Z.K. Matthews 1901 to 1968*.

92 As a Fort Hare teacher, and leading member of the South African Black elite, Matthews had implicitly accepted the tenets of progressivism. See, for example, Peter Walshe, *The Rise of African nationalism in South Africa*.

93 "Third fieldwork report (November 1938 to February 1939)", ZK Matthews Papers, A2, Barolong research, UNISA library).

The second anthropologist was Audrey Richards, who, in her vacations from lecturing at the University of the Witwatersrand, had worked among the Bakgatla ba Moseitlha, a small Tswana group living at Makapanstad, just north of Pretoria. She wrote a single short article on her work there.<sup>94</sup> This has been both denigrated<sup>95</sup> and highly praised.<sup>96</sup> I adhere to the latter view, especially when a letter which Richards wrote to Godfrey Wilson in 1940 is taken into account. In these two pieces, Richards comments first, that among these Bakgatla, “Europeanization appears complete as regards clothing, housing, recreation, and economic activities. Nevertheless, they are steadily and enthusiastically reintroducing lapsed tribal obligations in order to enable them to raise money, carry out corporal enterprises etc. (Classic co-op and age-grade tea-shop) just because the Government can’t [sic] or wont [sic] help them. BUT they freeze on to their linoleum floors, their kitchen dressers, their tea and sugar and the like.” This was happening because the government was opposing the people’s entry into the bigger world by every means (including physical force). In consequence, the African “is consciously striving to enter the bigger world by adopting its manners, reading its literature, trying to gain political power in it, be educated in its methods or even overseas.” As a result, Kgatla political consciousness was increasing fast, with a new tribal council or “pitso” being introduced, though with “new business methods, book-keeping, file-keeping, etc.” As a result, “tribalism in the sociological sense” could be combined with “an almost complete abandonment of the old cultural forms, material culture, ceremonial life. etc.” It is an argument that would reappear much later, with discussions of the “Invention of Tradition” or “the Creation of Tribalism”, in both cases without Richards being cited in the seminal works.<sup>97</sup>

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94 Audrey Richards, “Some causes of a Revival of Tribalism in South African native Reserves”, *Man*, 41 pp. 89–90.

95 Notably by N.J. van Warmelo, South African Government ethnologist, who in *The Bakgatla ba ga Mosêtlha*, Ethnological Publications, Department of Native Affairs, 17, p. 11, described it as containing “a few facts.”

96 Adam Kuper “Audrey Richards: A Career in Anthropology”, in Adam Kuper, *Among the Anthropologists: History and Context in Anthropology*, cited in Andrew Bank, *Pioneers of the Field: South Africa’s Women Anthropologists* Cambridge, p. 184.

97 Eric Hobsbawm & Terence Ranger (Eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*; Leroy Vail (Ed.), *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*.

## 5 The Jabavus of the Transkei

The high point of this rural shift to European material goods can perhaps be seen in Noni Jabavu's descriptions of her family's houses in the Eastern Cape during the 1950s. It was of course an exceptional family, leading members of the Christian elite which centred around the renowned educational establishments of Fort Hare and Lovedale in Alice. Her father, D.D.T. Jabavu, had been professor of African languages at Fort Hare, and she was related to a wide range of South Africa's leading intellectuals. Her uncle Cecil, though, was not such an intellectual, but had a farm in Pondoland, deep in the Transkei. Cecil Jabavu's house, his niece relates, consisted of "large rondavels<sup>98</sup> linked by a rectangular passage, which was generally used as a day-room." This room had belonged to Noni's aunt Valetta.

There was a low couch in it, and occasional tables strewn with her favourite supplements from my uncle's farming journals and other magazines; and near the window her treadle sewing-machine, the ubiquitous Singer on which she made all the clothes for the family when they were young. A door at one end led into the rondavel which she and my uncle had used as double bed-sitting-room-cum-study, a very large room. Under one of its big windows stood my uncle's old roll-top desk, stuffed to overflowing with farming papers, bills, receipts, family records. There were bookshelves, upright chairs and a rocking chair.<sup>99</sup>

The other door out of the main hallway led to the dining room, where there was an old harmonium, designated an organ, and from there steps down to the kitchen "which was efficiently arranged and fitted with shelves where my aunt had stored home-made pickles, biscuits, bottles of fruit; in her day it had seemed as if they never bought food but produced everything on the farm, even salting bacon in great vats."<sup>100</sup> Further out was the laundry, with

a compliment of zinc double-handled containers of various sizes in which clothes were put overnight to soak. There were the corrugated boards that were propped up in those vessels in order to rub at obstinate stains; coppers for boiling 'whites', the 'coloureds' washed separately.

<sup>98</sup> Rondavels are essentially cylindrical huts with a conical roof, most characteristic of the South African countryside, especially west of the Drakensberg.

<sup>99</sup> Noni Jabavu, *The Ochre People*, p. 141.

<sup>100</sup> Jabavu, *Ochre People*, p. 142.

There were yard-long sticks of yellow soap' or 'blue (mottled) soap', and small muslin bags holding cubes of Reckitt's Blue; flat-irons that were warmed on the kitchen range.

These were people who would not use liquid detergents, for "could they ever be as satisfying to use as solid soap?"<sup>101</sup>

As Noni Jabavu commented, these people, and indeed her own natal family "were wedded to the Victorian way of life, the kind of 'Westernization' that seemed to have truly penetrated."<sup>102</sup> By the 1950s, this sort of house was becoming old-fashioned, but it was testament to the strength of a particular vision of "civilisation" which the Christian elite had been the first to adopt, but which had by then spread to most South Africans, in so far as they could afford it. Like so many pioneers, the Jabavu family had remained fixed in the condition which they had taken on as innovators. The design movements of the twentieth century had passed them by. Indeed, the original idea of "civilisation" became the norm to which Black South Africans would aspire, long after it had become very old-fashioned in the metropolis whence it had come to the colony.<sup>103</sup>

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101 Jabavu, *Ochre People*, p. 157.

102 Jabavu, *Ochre People*, p. 157.

103 C.f. Monica Hunter, *Reaction to Conquest: effects of contact with Europeans on the Pondo of South Africa*, pp. 446–7.

# “White Men Did Not Like You to Own Nice Things”

## *The World of the Cities*

### 1 The Beginnings of a Black Urban Middle Class

The development of a relatively prosperous Black urban population was a matter of the twentieth century, and, above all, one which followed on the process of industrialization in the country of the 1930s and the 1940s. South Africa benefitted from the anti-cyclical effects of gold production and the country's isolation from the major theatres of World War II. Its economy had grown with some alacrity during this period.<sup>1</sup> What was to become known as a Black urban middle class, but which could better be described as a Black elite which had taken on the way of life of the White middle class, had begun to take shape. The deeper roots of this group, though, were earlier. As early as the 1870s, the Berlin Lutheran missionaries in Pretoria felt required to take action against those of their congregation who were in their eyes displaying an immodest ostentation.<sup>2</sup> In late-nineteenth-century Kimberley, the first real centre of urban development, there were not just the migrant labourers. A small but affluent elite of mission-trained clerks and interpreters, centred around Isaiah Bud-M'belle and Sol Plaatje, were able to develop what would become the characteristic style of the Black elite, one in which the Africans were making claims to be as good and, above all, as civilized as the Whites who were, far too often, denigrating their attempts to do just that.<sup>3</sup>

From Kimberley, the centre of the African elite moved, as did so much of the White elite, to the Witwatersrand. The goldmines were able to provide a basis for the desired style of life to a substantial degree, although there were,

1 Charles H. Feinstein, *An Economic History of South Africa: Conquest, Discrimination and Development*, esp. pp. 113–143; Nicoli Nattrass, “Economic Growth and Transformation in the 1940s”, in Saul Dubow & Alan Jeeves (Eds.), *South Africa's 1940s: Worlds of Possibilities*, pp. 20–43.

2 Kirsten Ruether, “Heated Debates over Crinolines: European Clothing on Nineteenth-Century Lutheran Mission Stations in the Transvaal,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 28(2), pp. 359–78.

3 Brian Willan, “An African in Kimberley: Sol T. Plaatje, 1894–1898”, in Shula Marks & Richard Rathbone (Eds.), *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa: African class formation, culture and consciousness, 1870–1930*, pp. 238–258.

of course, considerable efforts on the part of the White employees to hold Africans in what was thought to be their place. In a number of cities, areas came to be open for Black freehold purchase. The most notable of these were Alexandra, to the north of Johannesburg, and Sophiatown, in its western suburbs. Both of these places allowed a small number of members of the aspiring African middle class to build homes – quite literally – by which they could escape the levelling and degrading effects of the Natives (Urban Areas) Act, which came into force at the beginning of 1924, and from which they could, often, claim exemption. But there were of course other such areas, on the margins (and occasionally, such as District Six in Cape Town, in the centre) of most of the Union’s cities. Most were to be destroyed in the 1950s and 1960s, as a result of apartheid legislation which did not recognise, or attempted to destroy, the distinction between the classes of Black Urban society.<sup>4</sup>

Those who had managed to acquire the freehold houses in the cities, and even more those who aspired or hoped to do so, or envied those who had, might receive advice on how to organise their lives and their homes from the Black press, most notably *Bantu World*, which was founded in 1932. *Bantu World* was a multi-lingual paper, the only one at the time which both catered to a Black readership and had a national distribution. It was owned by Europeans with close links both to the mines and to broader commercial interests, and it also had to satisfy its advertisers, who were finding a way to influence the African consumers. The task which the ownership laid on its Black editor, R.V. Selope Thema,<sup>5</sup> and the journalists, was effectively to justify the ways of segregation to the Africans. In so doing, it kept the coverage of Black politics, particularly protest politics to a minimum. It nevertheless stressed the possibilities of “modernisation”, of individual advancement, and certainly of Black consumption. In its first issue, the paper extolled the possibilities of modernising the African market. Under the heading “Old customs lose appeal for Natives”, it pointed out that the number of male wage owners had tripled since the beginning of the century, and together with the women who worked in domestic service or agriculture, made up “more than a million and a quarter consumers”, with a combined spending power of 30 million pounds. These people’s wants were

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4 Philip Bonner & Noor Niefertogdien, *Alexandra: A History*, pp. 3–5 and 17–51; André Proctor, “Class Struggle, Segregation and the City: a history of Sophiatown, 1905–1947”, in Belinda Bozzoli (Ed.), *Labour, Townships and Protest: Studies in the Social History of the Witwatersrand*, pp. 49–90; Alan Gregor Cobley, *Class and Consciousness: The Black Petty Bourgeoisie in South Africa, 1924 to 1950*.

5 See Alan Cobley (Ed.), *From Cattle-herding to Editor’s Chair: The Unfinished Autobiography and Writings of Richard Victor Selope Thema*.

increasing and “commodities, but a short time back considered luxuries, are to-day in demand as necessities. Beads, billycans and blankets have had their day.” Women were adopting European dress, with those in the countryside led by their “urban sisters”. “Commodities such as tea, coffee, cocoa, sugar, jam, tinned foodstuffs, fruit drinks, paraffin oil, candles and matches are being consumed in ever increasing quantities.” As always with such pieces, it is not certain how far the journalists were reporting established facts, and how far what they wrote was of a more prescriptive nature. What is clear, however, is that the paper was eager to hail and to promote the signs of what they saw as progress.<sup>6</sup>

*Bantu World* expended much of its space to promoting the middle-class lifestyle, and its consumption patterns. This tended to appear in the sections headed “Women’s Home Page” and “Page of Interest to Women of the Race”. These pages were put together, and often largely written, by the paper’s “editress”, who despite the appellation was the well-known, and very male, writer Rolfe Robert Reginald Dhlomo.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the 1930s, for example, the magazine propagated the ideal of the cosy nuclear family, with the husband going out to work, and bringing in enough to keep his wife and children, without the lady of the house having to earn money herself. In fact, of course, hardly any African household in the towns could survive on a single income, so that most women had to have remunerative employment, in addition to keeping their household running. Many of the women had invested so much in their own education and qualifications, as nurses and teachers above all, that it would have been madness for them to forego the opportunities which they had.

In January 1934, to give one example, *Bantu World* published an article under the heading “Young People should be Proud of their Dwellings”. It laid down that a house should be built of brick, though in the country districts it was allowed, still, to replace “a big square house” with a number of interconnected rondavels. But it was above all important that there were distinct rooms for distinct activities: an eating room, with a table and chairs, a sleeping room and separate rooms for the male and female children. There would be a pantry to store food and a separate kitchen, probably in a hut.<sup>8</sup> A couple of years later, the same paper gave “Advice to the Brides”, in which the about-to-be-married women were reminded that they needed to acquire, not just crepe de chine underwear, but also aluminium and iron saucepans and pots, cutlery, a large aluminium kitchen basin (if there is no in-built sink), “a good cook’s knife for

6 *Bantu World*, 9 April 1932.

7 Lynn M. Thomas, “The modern girl and racial respectability in 1930s South Africa”, pp. 461–490.

8 *Bantu World*, 27.1.193 (Capitalisation as in the original).

peeling vegetables and a board for chopping onions” and various bins for mealie meal and flour. The assumptions were clear. It was the wife who would be doing the cooking, and that cooking (and eating) would be done indoors.<sup>9</sup>

This ideal was of course repeated in the advertisements. In the same issue, for instance, the women’s pages propagated the use of Dover model coal stoves – a South African precursor of the Aga – primuses for those with less space, a paraffin lamp, and Brasso metal polish, in addition to ready ground mealie meal, various baby powders and patented medicines. Elsewhere in the number, readers were informed that “Over 150,000 Bantu use Singer [sewing] machines.” As it happened, this issue did not have advertisements for furniture, but elsewhere the Africans were encouraged to visit Henwoods, opposite the city hall in Johannesburg “where you get the same quality goods as are sold to Europeans”. These goods included tables, chairs, bedroom suites and beds, all made of teak, as well as blankets and rugs. From Plaza Furnishing, on Harrison Street, Johannesburg, it was possible to buy single or double beds, at 20 shillings (one pound) down and five shillings a week, or a dining room suite at 40 shillings down and seven shillings a week. The advertisement did not say how many weeks it would take to pay off the debt in full!<sup>10</sup> On another occasion, the “Editress” felt called upon to expand on the advantages of the instalment system, but also warn of the dangers. As s/he wrote:

The plan of buying goods is an excellent system to enable people in all stations in life to furnish their homes comfortably and easily. The old way, one had to save up for years and then buy the furniture. Now we are able to buy the furniture at once and do the saving up afterwards by making small payments each month.

This should of course be only for those who considered themselves secure in their jobs and had worked out how much they could afford each month, but, provided these precautions were taken, it was possible to have a “proper place for one’s clothes and comfortable chairs to sit in” much sooner than used to be possible. It was a message which *Bantu World’s* advertisers were glad to hear.<sup>11</sup>

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9 *Bantu World*, 8.8.1934.

10 *Bantu World*, 5.8.1933; this reliance on hire purchase at usurious rates of interest has continued in South Africa. See most recently, and cogently, Deborah James, *Money from Nothing: Indebtedness and aspiration in South Africa*.

11 *Bantu World*, 21.7.1934.

## 2 Civilised Standards of Living

These were matters of high political and economic importance, not just in the domestic sphere. In June 1934, the paper led with the news that the Department of Labour in Durban was pressurising employers only to employ men who “conform to what are regarded as ‘civilised’ standards of living.” This might include Coloureds and Indians, but Africans would remain, “for the purposes of Departmental policy, uncivilised”. For just about the only time in its pre-war existence, *Bantu World* called for vigorous, if constitutional, protest against government action.<sup>12</sup> The protests, channelled through the Johannesburg Joint Council of Europeans and Africans, had the desired effect. Some months later, the Secretary for Labour issued a statement that, as had been defined previously,

Civilised labour is to be considered as the labour rendered by persons whose standard of living conforms to the standard generally recognized as tolerable from the usual European standpoint. ... Generally Native labourers do not come within the definition of civilized labour, but it is certain that there are Natives whose standards of living do conform to the standard generally recognizes as tolerable from the usual European standpoint, and such persons would be regarded by this Department [of Labour] as civilized.

To stress the point, *Bantu World* printed these comments below a photograph of Dr A.B. Xuma, the first South African Black to be a fully qualified medical doctor, and later president of the ANC. He stood, together with his father, both wearing dark suits, ties, and well-polished shoes. Xuma senior was seated in a wide wooden armchair, and the two were standing on what looks like a leopard-skin carpet. Clearly, they had reached the standard of living the Department of Labour required.<sup>13</sup>

## 3 East London

Throughout the Union of South Africa, the African elite was responding in much the same way to the opportunities for material advancement and their example

<sup>12</sup> *Bantu World*, 9.6.1934.

<sup>13</sup> *Bantu World*, 17.11.1934; see further Peter Limb (Ed.) A.B. Xuma: *Autobiography and Selected Works*.

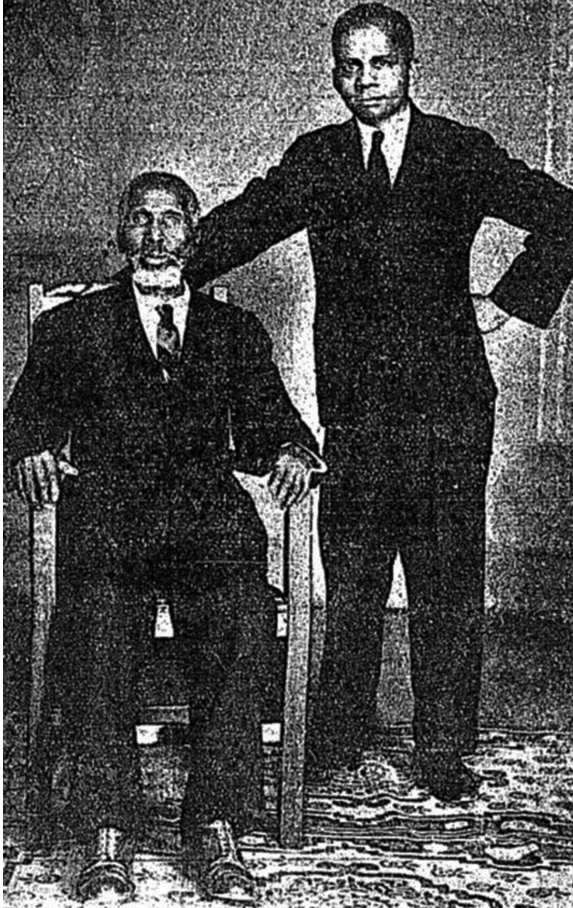


FIGURE 5 Dr. A.B. Xuma and his father  
*BANTU WORLD*, 3.10.1934

was being recognised lower down the social scale. Perhaps the best description of how the new group of people was ordering their life came from East London, in the Eastern Cape. By the late 1920s this city, on the coast of the Eastern Cape, with a harbour and the beginnings of a manufacturing industry, was a town which had maintained its contacts with its immediate Xhosa hinterland in the Ciskei and Transkei. The ways of the inhabitants, at least many of them, were changing. In 1931, Mr. R.H. Godlo, representing the East Bank Location Advisory Board, gave evidence to the Native Economic Commission, to the effect that:

The days are gone, never to return, when a Native worker needed little more than a “tin shanty”, mealie porridge and odd bits of clothes to satisfy

all his wants, while working for wages which were to supplement his subsistence farming when he returns to his kraal. Today he has his wife and family with him in town, and he needs a house of at least two rooms; the whole family eats European food and wears European clothes and the children go to school, and for all these things he pays the same price as the European. In fact, the Native worker today lives on a level with the unskilled European worker.<sup>14</sup>

The Chairman of the Location Advisory Board was the Rev Walter Rubusana, a notable politician and literary figure as well as a minister – the combination of political activism and the pastorship of a congregational church was naturally common. In 1932, he almost certainly arranged that Godlo became the interpreter and bodyguard of a young woman anthropologist, Monica Hunter.<sup>15</sup> Hunter had been brought up at the mission school of Lovedale in the East London hinterland. Rubusana would have known of her all her life. Hunter had previously worked, as we have seen, in the Transkeian countryside, in an attempt to find a baseline from which social change could be measured. When she came to the city, she was to observe how the children of those she had known in Pondoland were building a life in the city. She later produced what was the first major work of urban anthropology in South Africa. In it, she described why the men and women, most of whom came from the Ciskeian and Transkeian hinterlands of the port, had come to the town.

The attractions of town ... are the possibility of earning money to pay taxes, to buy food when there is a shortage in the country, and to satisfy all the new wants in clothing, housing, amusement &c., created by contact with European civilisation.

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14 Native Economic Commission, Oral Evidence, 8, p. 5541. Later in the 1930s, Godlo was to become a member of Natives' Representative Council from 1936 onwards and a member of the National Executive Committee of the ANC in the 1940s. He also edited *Umlini we Nyanga*, a newspaper and advertising vehicle put out in East London from 1934. See Les Switzer, "Bantu World and the Origins of a Captive African Press" in Les Switzer (Ed.), *South Africa's Alternative Press: Voices of Protest and Resistance, 1880s-1960s*, p. 206.

15 Monica Hunter's field notes do not, apparently, record the name of her interpreter/bodyguard, whose task was as much to introduce her to potential informants and facilitate her research. Nevertheless, there is some evidence to suggest that it was Godlo who performed the task. Hunter and Rubusana were certainly very close. See Andrew Bank, "The 'Intimate Politics' of Fieldwork: Monica Hunter and Her African Assistants, Pondoland and the Eastern Cape, 1931-1932", in Andrew Bank & Leslie J., Bank (Eds.), *Inside African Anthropology: Monica Wilson and Her Interpreters*, p. 82. Monica Hunter is of course better known by her married name, Monica Wilson.

In addition, there was also on occasion the need to escape enemies, and indeed for some to escape the dependence on kin. Some thought they would be in town for a long period, others for much shorter terms. Some enjoyed town life, “others detest it”, and dreamed<sup>16</sup> of a return to the countryside. For all of them, there was a “a speedy transference of at least the superficialities of [European] culture”, so that “houses, furniture, and food are all as European as earnings permit.”<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps under the influence of the veteran Rubusana, who as a pastor was struggling against what he saw to be the deleterious effects of urbanisation and kinlessness in the city, she was not particularly complementary about the conditions they were creating in town:

Some of the houses are filthy with vermin and a perpetual odour of bad meat. Many are scrupulously clean. The degree of cleanliness has a correlation with the degree of education, but it is also dependent upon the wages earned. European furnishing is aimed at ... Victorian fashions still prevail. Second-hand furniture is bought at sales, and in the house of a well-to-do tradesman or teacher one finds the horsehair sofa, plush tablecloth, lace curtains and elaborated frilled bed hangings of Victorian England. Only the aspidistra is lacking. It is often replaced by artificial flowers. In these surrounding a gramophone is a bizarre modern note. Only goatskins on the linoleum-covered floor remind one that the owner's father was a herdsman. Often the walls are papered with sheets of old magazines as the only available substitute for wall paper, and photographs of members of the family or of school teams, and crude prints, usually representing Biblical scenes, are hung up. The crudity and ugliness often make one shiver, but the European furniture is treasured, and most women take a housewife's pride in their rooms. Outside many of the better houses are borders of flowers or rows of pot plants, or sometimes a small patch of vegetables.<sup>18</sup>

This was an aberration, though an insightful one. It was at the very heart a recognition that the richer black inhabitants of East London had not yet

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16 Quite literally. Hunter collected a number of dreams from her informants, and analysed them as showing a desire to return “home”. See Monica Hunter, *Reaction to Conquest*, pp. 486–91. See also Leslie J. Bank, “City Dreams, Country Magic: Re-Reading Monica Hunter's East London Fieldnotes”, in Bank & Bank, *Inside African Anthropology*, 95–128.

17 Hunter, *Reaction to Conquest*, pp. 436–7.

18 Hunter, *Reaction to Conquest*, pp. 446–7.

achieved their goal of equality with the Europeans among whom they lived. Hunter might well have made an exception for Rubusana, but the others still had, in her eyes, a way to go. It was however the educated who were “adapting themselves with some success to the new conditions in town, and are working out new values, and new standards of behaviour compatible with urban life.” This, Monica Hunter claimed, was because black education had hitherto been almost entirely in the hands of the missions, and because Christianity provided “a remedy for the cancers of Western civilization as it exists among Europeans, and as it is transferred” to the Africans.<sup>19</sup>

#### 4 Johannesburg

Monica Hunter’s ethnographic studies in East London have tended to be overlooked, or at least not given the credit they deserved. They consist of 68 pages in *Reaction to Conquest*, following more than 400 on the lives of deep rural amaMpondo in the Transkei. It was even left out of the third edition of the work published in 1979, when she herself apologised (unnecessarily) for the relative lack of depth of her urban fieldwork.<sup>20</sup> However, Monica Hunter’s description of Black East London deserves to rate alongside – though not above – Ellen Hellmann’s classic *Rooiyard*, an ethnography of a slum quarter in central Johannesburg.<sup>21</sup> To the outsider, the courtyard life may seem in some ways more exotic than the emerging urbanism of the port city, even though Hunter’s linguistic knowledge and broader contacts would make her account closer to the ideals of ethnography.

Hellmann’s work, too, did not meet with immediate recognition. It was only published some fourteen years after it was originally submitted for an MA degree at the University of the Witwatersrand, and then not even in South Africa, let alone Britain or the U.S. It only acquired a certain cult status in the 1980s. Ellen Hellmann was persuaded to work on Rooiyard as part of a wider investigation into liquor production.<sup>22</sup> The study soon became wider, and, as with Monica Hunter’s, resolved around the questions of social change and cultural contact. Hellmann chose the yard as her subject of study precisely because of the squalor which it appeared to show. This would thus, in some sense, provide a terminus against which the rest of the city could be judged.

19 Hunter, *Reaction to Conquest*, p. 504.

20 Bank, “City Dreams, Country Magic”, p. 127.

21 Ellen Hellmann, *Rooiyard: A Sociological Survey of an Urban Native Slum Yard*.

22 Bank, *Pioneers of the Field*, p. 115.



FIGURE 6 The House of an African Minister, East London, 1932  
 MONICA HUNTER, REACTION TO CONQUEST, 1ST EDITION, FACING P. 444  
 (COURTESY OF THE WILSON FAMILY)

She had hoped to be able to investigate questions of culture contrast on the basis of a rather naïve model in which cultures behaved like paints, mixing to produce a new colour. This failed, largely because in her own honest appreciation, she knew too little of “traditional culture”, the backgrounds of the inhabitants of the yard were too mixed, and at least the material culture of this archetypical slum had little if anything of the African rural world surviving. Even the pestle and mortar had almost disappeared when she was working there in 1932. Maize was not pounded, but bought ready ground. The inhabitants were so poor that they lived as families in a single room. Nonetheless, every room, barring three belonging to very recent arrivals, had a bed, which was occupied by the parents and sheltered from the rest of the room by a chintz curtain. Possessions were held in tin trunks, generally stored under the bed. Cooking was done on braziers placed outside the rooms, in the courtyard; the utensils were saucepans, metal pots, and paraffin drums, which were also used to transport water and to brew beer. Furniture was the main sign of social status, and its acquisition “synchronized with gradual achievement of a modicum of prosperity”. One of the best rooms had a bed, a sideboard, a table and four chairs, and a gramophone. The walls had been covered in wallpaper, rather than with old newspaper posters as was generally the case. Instead, there were



FIGURE 7 Interior of house of “School People” in Town, East London, 1932  
 HUNTER, *REACTION TO CONQUEST*, 1ST EDITION, FACING P. 444 (COURTESY  
 OF THE WILSON FAMILY)

numerous framed photographs, mostly of American film stars on the walls. Linoleum, “a much coveted article”, was on the floor. The curtains for bed and windows were silk and there was a table to hold a paraffin cooker.

In this room, nothing except for the cooking table and the rough benches had been of “African manufacture”, and even these were of common European patterns. Nowhere were there African handcrafts, and the skill needed to produce them was considered superfluous. There could be no doubt, Hellman wrote, that “this absorption of European culture is not a transient and fluctuating, but a cumulative and permanent phenomenon.” Africans worked very largely because they aspired “to possess the amenities which the invading culture had to offer”. To the extent that their attempts to acquire this were partially successful, then the advice being peddled by *Bantu World* would be avidly followed.

Hellmann’s written descriptions were accompanied by an array of photographs, which have marked her out as a pioneer of ethnographic photography in South Africa.<sup>23</sup> These were all taken outside; presumably Hellmann did not dispose over flash technology. What they show, as she describes, is the squalor

23 Marijke du Toit, “The General View and Beyond: From Slum-Yard to Township in Ellen Hellmann’s Photographs of Women and the African Familial in the 1930s”, *Gender and History*, 17(3), pp. 593–626.

created by the absence of any efficient refuse collection and the earthen surface of the yard, which turned into a quagmire after every rain storm. However,

The interiors of the greater number of the rooms present a striking contrast to the unsavoury disorderliness of the yard. Although the ceilings are often covered with cobwebs, the floors are well scrubbed and the belongings of the family tidily arranged. That this cleanliness is achieved only by the tireless expenditure of energy and labour is conclusively proved by the constant preoccupation of the Rooiyard woman with her washing, scrubbing, polishing and dusting.<sup>24</sup>

Other descriptions of African life in the towns of the 1930s did not, in general, deal with the lowest economic groups in society – and in any case the slum yards, including the one which Hellmann had observed, were cleared in the course of the decade.<sup>25</sup> J.D. Rheinallt Jones, who ran the Institute of Race Relations and was for many years one of the most prominent members of the liberal establishment, also stressed the importance of European-style furniture in the creation of urban households. These houses were generally not well kept on the outside, though Jones also admitted how tidy and clean the interiors were kept. After the cash that was spent on the children’s education, furniture was second in the allocation of their incomes: a table, chairs, a sideboard, often “more elaborate than commodious” and “a large and comparatively expensive double bedstead” were the first articles to be bought. They were, Jones felt, often of poor quality and generally bought on the hire purchase system, as were pianos, bicycles, and gramophones, which were frequently lost as the payments were not kept up.<sup>26</sup> Extravagance was rife, and uncontrolled purchases contributed substantially to urban poverty (as it did, Rheinallt Jones was careful to point out, among the poor Whites). Wastage was rife, and Africans were having to learn how to deal with their cash.<sup>27</sup>

One summary of the financial position of forty-eight Johannesburg families of “educated” men made in 1935, did show how important the hire purchase

24 Hellmann, *Rooiyard*, p. 9.

25 Eddie Koch, “‘Without Visible Means of Subsistence’: Slumyard Culture in Johannesburg 1918–1940”, in Belinda Bozzoli (Ed.), *Town and Countryside in the Transvaal: Capitalist Penetration and Popular resource*, pp. 151–175.

26 Radiograms, which still needed to be attached to the electricity network, were scarce. In general, see Elizabeth Gunner, *Radio Soundings: South Africa and the Black Modern*.

27 J.D. Rheinallt Jones, “Social and Economic Condition of the Urban Native”, in Isaac Schapera (Ed.), *Western Civilization and the Natives of South Africa: Studies in Culture Contact*, pp. 159–192, esp. pp. 187–8.

could be, in their striving for respectability. Only eight of the forty-eight did not have any debts at all, although a number of the other forty had deposits in the banks or building societies, which might be higher than their cash liabilities, while one other, who owed the bank £ 554 (more than double the next highest debtor) had an investment in real estate to the tune of around £1000. Sixty per cent of the families owed money to “furniture and other dealers”. This debt amounted to an average of just over £17.3 a family or around 146% of their recorded monthly income. This was around £11.14.0, which was probably close to double that of an average family. The ratio of debt to income was substantial but, at least if the wage-earners held their jobs, not crippling.<sup>28</sup>

This investigation by Ray Phillips was only one of a large number of investigations into the economics of Black households, which took place between about 1930 and about 1960. Both Monica Hunter and Ellen Hellmann had begun their work by collecting budgets from their respondents.<sup>29</sup> Probably the first such survey was that conducted in Durban by Selby Ngcobo and Mabel Palmer, on behalf of the “Joint Council of Europeans and Natives” and presented to the Native Economic Commission. A variety of families were interviewed, and distinctions made between the educated, civilised, or Christianised Africans – the report uses all three terms – and the unskilled, single men living in the compounds. The wages paid to the latter were, it was calculated “not insufficient” when he was single and in regular employment, but he could neither maintain a family nor tide over the inevitable breaks in employment.<sup>30</sup> Those paid to the educated, for instance, the teachers or a trained cook at a hotel, were “inappropriate for a reasonably satisfactory existence, and must be supplemented by the work of the wife by liquor brewing and selling and that natives cannot keep out of debt.” This was in part because the educated Africans were having to pay for the schooling of the next generation. The cook in question, for instance, had a son at Fort Hare University College and a daughter at Amanzimtoti, a mission secondary school, and thus the family was likely to be economically upwardly mobile.<sup>31</sup>

28 Ray E. Phillips, *The Bantu in the city: a study of cultural adjustment on the Witwatersrand*, pp. 415–7.

29 In general, on these see Robert Ross, “The Politics of African Household Budget Studies in South Africa”, *History in Africa*, 43, pp. 205–228; unaccountably, I failed to discuss Monica Hunter’s work on household budgets, to be found in *Reaction to Conquest*.

30 C.f. David Hemson, “Dock Workers, Labour Circulation, and Class Struggles in Durban, 1940–59.” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 4, 1, pp. 88–124.

31 Natives Economic Commission, *Written Evidence*, II, pp. 1–17.

From then on, there followed a large number of studies of the development both of Black incomes and of the cost of living against which these had to be set. Most were in Johannesburg and its surroundings. These studies were originally conducted by the Joint Council and the Johannesburg municipality, and on one occasion fully incorporated into national government recommendations.<sup>32</sup> Increasingly, though, and certainly after 1948, they came to be the task of the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR). There was also a very influential, if unpublished survey of Kroonstad in the Free State<sup>33</sup> and also much work on Cape Town, it was indeed in Cape Town that the concept of Poverty Datum Line was worked out. This was a measure of the absolute minimum level at which something like a reasonably human existence could be maintained, and it was regularly criticized for ignoring much that was essential. It was, as its creator Edward Batson regularly pointed out, not a good guide to action but rather a way to understand and compare the most poverty-stricken situations in which South Africans might find themselves.

These studies, all in their different ways, were concerned to demonstrate how rough things were for the majority of urban Africans. They consistently showed that the mean family incomes were below the national levels that were required for health and decency. This discrepancy was seen to be rising over the decades, at least until the end of the 1950s. According to the SAIRR, whose repeated studies were thought to be comparable, in 1944 average family income was reckoned to be 76.6% of “total minimum expenditure”, in 1950 72.90, and 1954 67.8%. By 1958–9 it had risen slightly to 71.6% and by another calculation of wages and costs to 80.7%.<sup>34</sup>

These studies all had their deficiencies, though these decreased in time. The first study, that by Mirjam Janisch, took its respondents primarily from those who came to the city’s offices as rent defaulters, not, it must seem, the most unbiased of samples. One of the more candid researchers, Gertrude Kark, commented of her study of Alexandra, the African suburb in northern Johannesburg, that “the difficulties she encountered in securing detailed information, on both

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32 Miriam Janisch, *A Study of African Income and Expenditure in 987 Families in Johannesburg, January–November 1940*; Ethel Wix, *The Cost of Living: an enquiry into the cost of essential requirements for African families living in Johannesburg, Pretoria and the Reef towns, August–December 1950*; Olive Gibson, *The Cost of Living for Africans*, pp. 39–41; Joy de Gruchy, *The Cost of Living for Urban Africans, Johannesburg, 1959*; Gertrude Kark, “Alexandra township: a study of a pocket of ill health”.

33 A. Lynn Saffery, “Report of Inquiry into wages and cost of living of natives, at Kroonstad, Orange Free State”.

34 Calculated on the basis of Table XLIII in de Gruchy, *Cost of Living*, p. 63. Before the calculations, I rounded the figures given to the nearest half shilling.

income and expenditure” led to the conclusion that family budgets which were compiled in the course of the survey are to a large extent hypothetical and “so do not permit of deduction or generalization”. On one family she commented that “no expenditure on alcohol recorded, but the family head was habitually drunk, and spent all the money he could spare from his addiction on Fah-fee gambling.”<sup>35</sup> Consistently, the income which was earned by the illegal brewing of beer, let alone prostitution and theft, was not recorded. Even without such lacunae, the statistical procedures left much to be desired. To give one blatant example, an investigation by the Johannesburg Political Economy Club in 1939 into African budgets, rejected from further consideration two outliers, a bus driver and a works manager, from their sample of 57 men. The reason was that they both brought home over twice as much as the average cash earnings of those in their category, and it was felt that their (statistical) presence would provide an “unduly heavy weight in the small sample”.<sup>36</sup>

This illustrates a general problem. The social researchers were campaigning against the poverty in which a majority of the urban African population was suffering.<sup>37</sup> They wanted higher wages, and systematically a higher wage economy, as, for instance, did the chambers of commerce, unlike those such as notoriously the miners and the farmers who were able to benefit from the low wages they had to pay.<sup>38</sup> It was this that led the SAIRR to report in 1959 that the urban Blacks “manage to survive for the reason that they maintain a standard of living far below the theoretical minimum based on Western standards: in fact very few, relatively speaking, are able to maintain a standard of living which would be tolerated by the average White South African”. Indeed “the income of at least 50% and possibly 75% of African families is inadequate to meet necessary expenditure.”<sup>39</sup>

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- 35 Wits archives, 1239, 150–1. One wonders whether this level of candidness led to this remarkable report not being published; it might have been seen as undermining the reputation of objectivity which the Institute for Race Relations was trying to build up. In addition, two African members of the Board of Management of the Health centre “that the publication of a report of this nature would be harmful to the population of the Township” because “the conditions described are not peculiar to Alexandra Township [which in itself may be true enough] and would simply be used as a political weapon against the Township.” See Kark to Rheinallt Jones, 10 October 1947, in University of the Witwatersrand, Historical Papers AD 843B, 74/5.
- 36 *South African Journal of Economics*, 1, 1940, p. 131. It should be pointed out that the club included Professor S.H. Frankel, one of the country’s leading economists.
- 37 E.g., de Gruchy, *Cost of Living*, p. 67.
- 38 But c.f. Terence Moll, “Did the Apartheid Economy ‘Fail?’” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 17(2), pp. 271–91, on the competitiveness of the apartheid economy.
- 39 De Gruchy, *Cost of Living*, pp. 66–7.

If this was the case, then it could equally be argued that the income of at least 25% and possibly 50% of African families were adequate, by the admittedly fairly paltry standards which the SAIRR used. Indeed, as Joy de Gruchy, the researcher in question, reported for the “Council’s Townships”, largely in Soweto, 83.4% of families had an income below £20 pounds and 88.5% below £25, which at that date was approximately the figure calculated as the “total minimum expenditure”. The income on which this figure was calculated did not include the earnings of the wives nor most of what was acquired in the informal sector.<sup>40</sup> Though it did include a proportion of that money earned by the children. It also did not include information on those parts of Soweto – Orlando West Extension, Mofolo and Dube villages – where there were many home owners, though equally it also did not give figures for those who were then living in “site and service and slum clearance areas” nor in Alexandra, Sophiatown, Martindale, and Newclare, to the extent that their clearance of the latter three had not been effected.<sup>41</sup> The figures that the SAIRR gave were thus generally biased downwards, by the absence of woman’s wages, and certainly did not fully reflect the distribution of income within the African population of Johannesburg, or elsewhere. Statistical means are one thing; it is also clear that the right (or most prosperous) tail of the distribution was not insubstantial and probably growing. This then was where the African middle class was to be found. They were the people who drove the material transformation of African homes, and others were to follow.

Even without the difficulties of producing statistically robust accounts of African budgets, the package of goods and services which appeared in both the actual budgets and the hypothetical assumptions as to what was tolerable were in fact only items of current expenditure. There was little to suggest the outlay by which a couple would acquire, at the beginning of their marriage, the essential goods of their lives together. *Bantu World* even on one occasion published a cautionary tale of young women who had bought furniture, only for it to be spoiled by smoke before they eventually got married.<sup>42</sup> In addition, men and women were continually trying to move up the scale of possessions, and thus status, and found themselves blocked. One such man told Ray Phillips:

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40 See John Iliffe, (1999), “The South African economy, 1652–1997”, *The Economic History Review*, 52, pp. 87–103, where he argues that the South African informal economy has been relatively small, in continental terms.

41 Tom Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945*, pp. 91–113.

42 *Bantu World*, 16 Dec. 1933.

The African has now reached a stage where he needs most, if not all, European conveniences, because the old order has changed. He must dress, eat, sleep according to convention. He must read a newspaper, play a piano, and perhaps travel by car. His meagre wage cannot meet all these.<sup>43</sup>

They were being judged, and paid, not equivalently to the Whites, to whose life-style they aspired, but in relation to the migrant workers, who were seen as still having a stake in the countryside economy. Rather, the men Phillips interviewed were making a plea for colour-blind wage patterns and for succour to the emerging Black middle class, respectable but nevertheless deferent.

It was of course a struggle. In 1941, Mirjam Janisch published the results of her survey of Johannesburg African budgets, which she had done on behalf of the Municipal Non-European and Native Affairs Department.<sup>44</sup> This was to be the first in the line of such publications, latterly mainly under the auspices of the South African Institute for Race Relations. As was noted above, Janisch's study is not without its faults. She did however have a good ethnographic eye. She described how:

Fuel and light, i.e. candles, matches, paraffin, wood and coal accounted for more than thirteen per cent of the income and were heavy items of expenditure. (...) As electric light is not yet provided, candles and paraffin lamps have to be used and costs increase appreciably during the winter months. Most people go to bed as soon as possible after dark to save fuel. Wood and coal for stoves and fire buckets are purchased from hawkers and shopkeepers in the townships at approximately threepence per bundle of half-a-dozen pieces of wood, and two shillings to two and sixpence for two hundred lbs of coal of a grade which costs 12sh 1d per ton delivered at Orlando. In winter, that half of the population less adequately fed and clothed has to pay the greater amount for warmth. There are no seasonal changes in fuel costs to Europeans. The expenditure on fuel and light is increased by the fact that so many women do washing for a living. Coal is needed for washing and ironing and it is not unusual for the work to be finished by candle light. Almost every household, except the very unsophisticated, possesses a primus stove. This, like other appurtenances of civilisation, may or may not be in use. For general use, a homemade

43 Phillips, *Bantu in the City*, p. 41.

44 Janisch, *Study of African Income and Expenditure*.

lamp, consisting of a bottle and a rag wick with a cord through the cork, is popular and cheaper than candles.<sup>45</sup>

These households were frequently in debt, largely as a result of the hire-purchase of furniture. “It has become part of the urban tradition to possess cheap European furniture. A dining room suite, a double bed, and a wardrobe are almost essential outward and visible signs of an inward and urbanised culture.”<sup>46</sup> Far too often families fell behind with the payments, and the furniture was repossessed. In addition, most women had sewing machines, in part as a source of income. Wages, particularly male wages, were clearly too low to allow this style of life, to the detriment of the economy as a whole, as Janisch cited A.J. Norval, the Acting Chairman of the Board of Trade and Industry, to the effect that “before South Africa is able to progress industrially, it is essential that the native’s consumption of industrial products shall be increased. This can only be done by raising his [sic] standard of living.”<sup>47</sup>

## 5 Post War Modernity

From the end of World War II, a number of anthropological and ethnographic works were put out, building on Hunter and Hellmann, and indeed on the work which Monica Hunter’s husband Godfrey Wilson had done in what was then Northern Rhodesia,<sup>48</sup> to develop an urban anthropology in South Africa with its own particular characteristics. These works covered several of the major cities of the country. The first substantial work to appear after 1945 was Ruth Levin’s account of Langa, the main African “location” of Cape Town, based on fieldwork in 1945 and 1946. While the main part of this work concerns the institution of marriage, she also gives useful descriptions of the living conditions in Langa immediately after the end of the War. There were five classes of houses in the township, four of which were built of brick with corrugated iron or asbestos roofs and wooden floors and ceilings. They had been built without access to electricity, though a few had had electric light installed, shared an outside tap and an outside toilet linked to a waterborne sewerage system. They differed from each other primarily in terms of the number of rooms, and

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45 Janisch, *Study of African Income and Expenditure*, p. 16.

46 Janisch, *Study of African Income and Expenditure*, p. 18.

47 Janisch, *Study of African Income and Expenditure*, p. 1.

48 Godfrey Wilson, *The Economics of Detribalisation in Northern Rhodesia*, Livingstone, Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, 1941–2.

the presence, or otherwise, of a *stoep*.<sup>49</sup> Just under a fifth of the 1030 houses, in contrast, though also built of brick with a corrugated asbestos roof, came with “built-in food cupboards, electric lighting and a private bathroom and lavatory.” Although this type had fewer rooms than some of the others, the monthly rental was the highest.

The state of these houses depended largely on the economic condition of the tenants, and also on whether or not the wife worked outside the house, when there was a sharp contrast with the “homes of the unemployed [sic] housewife, who spends most of the day cleaning and tidying her home.” The interiors of the houses also varied considerably.

A minority of the houses, some of the more expensively equipped, have radios or gramophones, and attractive bedroom and lounge suites. Many of these better equipped houses, however, are overladen with tables and sideboards which are covered with a motley variety of vases and pots, the walls being adorned with illuminated texts, heavily framed photographs, and pictures. In contrast to these well-kept and comparatively expensively equipped homes are the dirty unkempt homes of several residents, particularly some of the small two-roomed houses; usually the only bare furnishings in these houses are a bed, a table and a few chairs.

This was a period before the massive overcrowding of Langa, and the other Cape Town locations. These married quarters, as they were known, housed 4509 people, under 4.5 per house. There were another 2872 men living in “the barracks”, 544 in single rooms, and probably 144 sharing 36 of the newest type of housing. These are described as having little to do with the permanently urbanised in the family houses, but within the latter there was little distinction, as segregation on the basis of ethnicity, religion, or even wealth had not been introduced.<sup>50</sup>

It was not a situation which was to last. As a result of the attempts to reduce the permanent urbanisation of Africans, particularly in the Western Cape, the apartheid government refused to allow the building of any more “family houses” after 1954, though residence for (temporarily) single men were constructed after that date.<sup>51</sup>

49 South African English for “verandah”.

50 Ruth Levin, *Marriage in Langa Native Location*, pp. 5–7. On the later life of Ruth Levin, see Bank, *Pioneers of the Field*, p. 107.

51 Monica Wilson and Archie Mafeje, *Langa: A Study of Social Groups in an African Township*, p. 4. The single men might of course have had wives who had remained in the countryside.

The most extensive urban fieldwork in the 1950s was in East London, where Monica Hunter had also worked a generation earlier. This work was to result in Philip and Iona Mayer's *Townsmen and Tribesmen*.<sup>52</sup> In this book, and in a number of related papers, Philip Mayer expanded on the distinction what had long been made in the Eastern Cape between the “school” and the “Red” styles among the amaXhosa. The two ways of behaving were two different reactions to European conquest, which had been more brutal in the Eastern Cape than anywhere else in South Africa.<sup>53</sup> The Reds were those who strove for human dignity by following the ways of the ancestors (*iminyanga*). This entailed putting the health and prosperity of the homestead before all else, and sticking with stringent conservatism to the old ways. Up to the late 1970s, and perhaps longer, there were such communities where the men and women wore blankets adorned with red ochre (the origin of the name), slept on woven mats, used locally made baskets and beer strainers, and had little furniture. It was a form of resistance to the overarching drive of the wider South African society. It could be maintained even by those men who had come, temporarily, to live in East London where they worked to earn the money, they needed so that the homestead could function and expand.

In contrast, the “school” people attempted to claim their dignity through “civilisation”. It was in the first instance a rural ideology, but one which was heavily influenced by a version of the Christian message propagated by the missionaries, though perhaps not the one which the missionaries were most concerned to have their converts hear. This was the message of the equality of all believers, and the hope in a common society, in which the Blacks were unjustly prevented from participating.<sup>54</sup> It entailed a claim to equality as individuals, rather than one based on the equivalence of cultures, which was the essence of “Red” action. The “school” amaXhosa were in effect telling the Whites that ‘we’ were as good as ‘you’, and thereby, implicitly or explicitly, challenging White Christian hypocrisy. It was thus just as much a nationalist ideology as was that of the Reds. For both school and Red people, their behaviour and outward appearance was a challenge to the White-run political order. Both ways of life were therefore expressions of what in twentieth-century South Africa constituted African nationalism, which was always above all a demand

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52 Philip Mayer, with Iona Mayer, *Townsmen or Tribesmen: Conservatism and the Process of Urbanisation in a South African City*.

53 With the possible exception of the eighteenth century crushing of the Khoisan in the central interior of the country.

54 See Richard Elphick, *The Equality of Believers: Protestant Missionaries and the Racial Politics of South Africa*.

for inclusion in the body politic from which Africans were excluded by segregation and apartheid, rather than an attempt to keep out those who did not belong to the African “nation”, if anyone thought in those terms. School ideology was indeed the basis of the ideas promulgated by the African National Congress – in its origin a political party with strong links to the Christian elite of the Eastern Cape. Rural school people were often poor but nevertheless would be likely to build rectangular houses, put in as much wooden furniture, often homemade, as they could afford, and buy in iron beds and a dresser with crockery and glasses. The things were a claim and a reproach, if not always read as such.

In their ethnography, the Mayers were concerned to see how the ideologies of Red and school was transferred to the city by the Xhosa migrant labourers. Certainly, the Reds, at least, were in the city, but not of the city. Leslie Bank has recently discussed why the ethnography which the Mayers give does not accord with the memories told to him by those who had been forced out of the city by the Group Areas Act, as indeed with the photo collection which they had preserved. He attributes this lack of fit to the fieldwork methods of the Mayers, and also of their associates, notably B.A. Pauw. These anthropologists, constrained by the political situation in which they found themselves, were effectively required to conduct most of their work in the homes, and courtyards, of the migrant labourers, rather than participating fully in what was going on in public. Now, this may well have been the case. At least for the Mayers, their main objects of study, the migrants, probably did not participate as much in the life of the street as did those men and women whose retrospective and nostalgic memory Bank tapped. Pauw, whose work was specifically on the second generation of Africans to be in the city, did not have the same excuse, and Bank castigates him for missing “the power and influence of cosmopolitan cultural styles” among his subjects. It was, Bank argues, his “domestically focused approach” that blinkered him.<sup>55</sup>

Now, there are obvious methodological problems in the evaluation of this difference, which derive from the circumstances under which Pauw and Bank did their fieldwork. Bank’s informants, who looked back on their lives in the East Bank location from a distance of a good forty years, must have all been relatively young at the time, and thus not settled husbands and wives. Pauw, in contrast, was mainly concerned with those who were half a generation older,

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55 Leslie J. Bank, *Home Spaces, Street Styles: Contesting Power and Identity in a South African City*, e.g., p. 59; c.f. B.A. Pauw, *The Second Generation: a study of the family among urbanized Bantu in East London*

and thus the parents of settled families. Even if he had been a great empathetic fieldworker, which he does not seem to have been, Pauw would have had difficulty, as a White minister of the Dutch Reformed Church, in penetrating the world of the Saturday night jazz parties at Peacock Hall (jazz does not appear in his index, though a photo of a jazz band is on the cover of at least the 2nd edition of his book.) It is thus reasonable for him to have concentrated on the domestic arrangements of his subjects, which were probably the main concern of anthropologists at the time anyway.

In any case, by the 1950s, modernity could be displayed as much in the living room as on the streets. Philip Mayer, indeed, recognized that in the town “the whole style of life seems far more open to choice; the wide range of consumer goods available is reflected in the various alternative conventions of home-furnishing, dress, eating and so on.”<sup>56</sup> In fact, though Mayer gives little information on the material world of his subjects, except with regard to clothing. His colleague, B.A. Pauw, on the contrary, discussed which choices actually were made. He made a distinction between those homes which were well-furnished and those that were “simple”, on the basis of the quality and degree of wear of the furniture, and not surprisingly recorded a high, though not complete, correlation between income and his categorisation. The few white-collar households in his sample, though, were all categorized as “well-furnished”. There was a clear gradation in the level of furnishing. A majority was very simply furnished, with a table and a few chairs, a paraffin stove, cooking utensils, a cupboard, and one or more beds. Beyond this, there were those which made “a more sophisticated impression” with dining or sitting room suites, which, if not new, still “make for quite a respectable impression” with a display of ornamental crockery and glass ware. There was “a substantial minority” of homes with at least one, well-cared for, suite of furniture, and in some there was electric light, a radio or radiogram, occasionally an electric stove. These would be the most impressive of the houses. The houses were no longer as behind the times as Monica Hunter had complained a generation earlier. Many of the Africans, who could afford to “buy new, modern furniture of the same design as one would find in many middle-class or working class White homes”, bought by hire-purchase.<sup>57</sup>

The establishment of middle-class homes in East London paralleled similar developments in the country’s industrial and commercial heartland: the Witwatersrand. Here, too, there were anthropologised investigations in the

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56 Mayer, *Townsmen of Tribesmen*, p. 16.

57 Pauw, *Second Generation*, pp. 28–37.

richer Black urban areas. One, by Laura Longmore, was particularly sceptical about the extent of the absorption of Western values. As she wrote, “the adoption of Western modes of life in food habits, clothes, furniture etc ...” had happened too fast for there to be “correspondingly deep alteration in African beliefs and habits of thought.” The basis of her complaint was that the disintegration of the “tribal structure” had left African women in particular open to exploitation. The richer and more established male members of the African communities had too many opportunities to play away, and the wife at home “is a tool to provide him with food, clean clothing and a bed”. There can be little doubt that many African men behaved in such a fashion, and even less that Longmore was relating the opinions and the pain of her female informants. Against this, it would be hard to deny that male adultery was equally a part of the Western culture, in the White suburbs of Johannesburg as much as in London and Paris. The hope for companionable monogamy was always likely to be illusory. But for the historian, what matters is also the image which was presented, and the families, even in the insalubrious conditions of the Eastern Native Townships, were generally attempting to present an image of modernity.

The transformation of Black housing in the 1950s was aided by the Native Building Worker’s Act of 1951, which effectively allowed the payment of lower wages, in relations to other Whites, Coloureds, and Indians, to Africans who were on buildings projects in African areas. As a result, many councils began to train African labourers, and allowed them to develop new skills and occupations. To give one example, the building of Kwa-Thema, a new township attached to the town of Springs, gave work to eight Europeans, in managerial functions, and 543 Africans, including 101 bricklayers, 15 carpenters, 10 plumbers, 22 other skilled workers, and 395 labourers.<sup>58</sup> This was a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it meant that some African incomes rose. More generally, apartheid, even in the cities, gave some slight opportunities to an African business elite. On the other, without the opportunities for building new Black settlements, it would not have been possible to expel the Africans from their homes to the distant suburbs. The inhabitants of Sophiatown in Johannesburg were moved to Soweto, those of the East Bank in East London to Mdantsane, precisely because there had been such investment in the building of new places. Here there was little opportunity for residents to build their own houses. In Soweto, no more than one per cent of the houses were built by their owners. In general, even the most prosperous of the Africans were

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58 D.M. Calderwood, *An Investigation into the Planning of Urban Native Housing in South Africa*, p. 128. See also J.E. Mathewson, *The Establishment of an Urban Bantu Township*.

forced into the “family houses” built by the respective town councils. These were invariably one-storey houses, with at best two bedrooms, a living/dining room, a kitchen, bathroom, and internal toilet. Even the houses at the top end of the range made available via the Councils had a floor space of no more than 680 square feet, approximately 63 square metres. This was a good 50% larger than the 51/6 houses, which constituted most of the “matchboxes” of Soweto.<sup>59</sup>

What was to be built depended on two factors which did not have to produce the same indications and indeed probably never did so. These were, first, the hard information which was at the disposal of the planners. This related to the social composition and size of the groups who were going to constitute the household in the new townships. The most important such study was made at Payneville, near Springs on the eastern end of the Witwatersrand. This survey, made in the first half of 1951, showed that the number of people living in the township houses far exceeded the number for which the houses had been designed. In total, on the 156 stands in the location, there were 1602 individuals, constituting 319 households. In other words, there were just over ten residents per stand. Notably, the average number on privately owned stands, at 13.1%, was considerably higher than on those owned by the municipality (6.6%). The local authority clearly was better able, or at least more willing, to discipline its tenants than private landlords. With very few exceptions (0.4 % of the inhabitants), the residential groups consisted of kinsmen and – women of the stand holder, in what were in effect three-generational households. In order to accommodate them all in a proper way, very many more houses, or much larger ones, would have had to be built, or alternatively the authorities would have had to completely allow the erection of additional housing on the stands assigned to the central families in the township.<sup>60</sup>

Secondly, there was the question of social engineering of the sort of families which the planners were hoping would create themselves in the new townships. Supply of housing was not regulated to reflect demand; on the contrary, supply was employed to manipulate demand. This is clearly demonstrated in Anne Mager’s account of the building of Zwelitsha, a new African settlement attached to King William’s Town in the Eastern Cape. This was built specifically to provide accommodation for the African middle-class, or at least that section of it who worked at the Good Hope Textile factory nearby. This entailed that the houses were designed for a nuclear family, without any room for the kinsmen and – women who had a claim to space in the houses, according to

59 Numerous plans are to be found in Calderwood, *Investigation*.

60 *Final Report of the Socio-economic survey at Payneville location, Springs*, Pretoria, National Building Research Institute, 1953.

local norms if not to those of the Native Affairs Department. For the latter, the urban infrastructure would provide a “bridge over which the landless native will pass smoothly ... to a civilized way of life in the industrial urban basis of modern European society.”<sup>61</sup> Complex households, and also single men, could not gain access to Zwelitsha’s housing. At least that was the theory. In fact, Zwelitsha became much as any other South African township, particularly after H.F. Verwoerd became Minister of Native Affairs, and any special treatment the place had enjoyed disappeared. But an attempt was made to impose a “middle-class” way of life which entailed the disciplining of the tenants to “western” ways, for instance requiring that washing was hung on a line to dry, rather than spread out on the ground. In general, indeed, those who came from the countryside to live in Zwelitsha took on the “imitative ways of the elite”, leaving behind the “rapidly disappearing habits of rural life.” The newcomers were integrated into what was “a culture of ‘Europeanized’ middle-class families”, even though the household structures were very often (much) more complex than the planners had hoped and had tried to shape.<sup>62</sup>

## 6 Wattville

Despite the drabness, smallness, and uniformity of what were often referred to as matchbox houses, those who lived in them were able to “transform these houses into personalised spaces.”<sup>63</sup> How this happened in practice can be gauged from a remarkable archive of photographs taken in the Black suburbs of Benoni between about 1950 and 1965 by Ronald Ngilima and his son Thorence, and recently analysed by Sophie Feyder. Ronald Ngilima was one of the first Black photographers to attach a flash to his camera, so that he could shoot indoors.<sup>64</sup> He, and later his son, worked in Wattville,<sup>65</sup> a township built

61 W.R. Norton, Chief Native Commissioner, evidence to the Fagan Commission, 31 October 1946, as cited in Anne Kelk Mager, *Gender and the Making of a South African Bantustan: A Social History of the Ciskei, 1945–1959*, p. 47. This paragraph relies totally on Mager’s work.

62 Mager, *Gender and the Making of a South African Bantustan*, p. 62.

63 Sophie Feyder, *Portraits of Resilience: Writing a socio-cultural history of a Black South African Location with the Ngilima Photographic Collection, Benoni 1950s-1960s*, p. 228; this section relies heavily on Sophie’s thesis, which I had the great privilege of supervising.

64 The Ngilimas had many colleague Black photographers in this era, most of whom worked part-time as photographers, as indeed the Ngilimas did. The exceptional in this work is that their archive of some thousands of negatives has survived.

65 They also worked in what was known as the “Old Location”, just across a dry river bed, which was becoming a totally Asian settlement as the Blacks were forced out under the Group Areas Act.

after World War II and one of the “best” in the country. It had tarred roads, street lamps, sports grounds, and tennis courts. The houses were equally up to date, with electricity, a coal stove to cook on and keep the rooms warm, and individual taps. Wattville was thus a place where, above all, those who had jobs in the manufacturing industries of the East Rand, booming since the war, could find somewhere commodious to live – if they were lucky and met the criteria to be granted a house, primarily a steady income and a family.

Because of Council regulations, the tenants of the Wattville houses could not alter the exteriors of their houses. As a result, the major effort was put into furnishing the lounge, a space generally reserved for entertaining. Those who let Ronald Ngilima into their homes wanted above all to demonstrate their modernity. They wanted him to photograph them around their radio, or gramophone, or in front of their glass case containing porcelain cups and saucers, and such other items as they might want to display. Alternatively, they might be photographed on the sofa; Doreen Ngilima, Ronald’s daughter, had herself taken lying on the couch which she had bought with her first month’s wages, proud of her ability to help keep the family afloat in the difficult time after her father’s sudden death. Also, the lounge was the place to hang framed photographs on the wall, and then be photographed under them. It was also the place where the prized possessions of the household, within the “Western lifestyle” could be displayed. Feyder describes (and prints) one photograph of

a man and a woman ... sitting comfortably on either side of the gramophone and radio set that occupies the central part of the portrait. The woman sits in an armchair, holding a record and smiling at the camera. The man is holding a pouch in one arm and putting on a record with the other hand. But the eye of the viewer is somewhat distracted, dragged towards the accumulation of objects surrounding them, in particular towards the coffee table on which one sees: teacups, saucers, spoons, a sugar bowl, a tray glasses, open bottles of alcohol, a plant in an improvised vase on a saucer, doilies and ashtrays. On the top of the gramophone are more doilies, another empty glass vase and more ashtrays.<sup>66</sup>

The lounge may never have been quite big enough to allow no sign of the dining table, which was put on the side so as not to obstruct the view of the hosting room as it should have been.<sup>67</sup> Living in the township houses was a

66 Feyder, *Portraits of Resilience*, p. 274.

67 This practice makes clear why photographic evidence has to be taken very carefully indeed.



FIGURE 8 Nora Dlamini and her husband in their new house, Wattville, Benoni c. 1955  
 NGILIMA COLLECTION, UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, COURTESY OF THE NGILIMA FAMILY

continual struggle against the tyranny of space. It was also a continual fight to assert individuality in the face of initial uniformity. Houses were to be altered as far as possible to suit the tastes and the needs of their occupants.

There were, however, limits to the creativity of the inhabitants of Wattville, and other places, and not merely those which were given by the physical dimensions of the houses themselves. The drive in such places was for “respectability”.<sup>68</sup> As a result, the terms of the contest for status were defined against the norms of “White” society. During the 1950s, there were still those who rejected European culture, at least in part. Most notable among these were the “Reds” of

68 On this concept see David Goodhew, *Respectability and Resistance: A History of Sophiatown*; for deeper roots see Robert Ross, *Status and Respectability in the Cape Colony, 1750–1870: A tragedy of manners*.



FIGURE 9 Lounge, Wattville, Benoni, c. 1959  
 NGILIMA COLLECTION, UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, COURTESY  
 OF THE NGILIMA FAMILY

East London and its Eastern Cape hinterland.<sup>69</sup> One of Sophie Feyder’s informants complained about the Sotho women living nearby in houses devoid of furniture. All they had was blankets, because these could be taken back to Lesotho.<sup>70</sup> These sorts of people were the exceptions in the Black urban worlds of the 1950s. Much more generally, though, the city dwellers sought respectability, which entailed not just a degree of personal restraint – sexual and alcohol-related shenanigans were out of order – but also the assumption of the goods of the Europeans, and of the commercial values associated with them. It was a way to claim equality with the Whites, and was in its way a form of resistance. As one of Feyder’s interviewees commented: “White men did not like you to own nice things.”<sup>71</sup>

By this time, the African middle class was being recognized as such. Not everyone was happy with such a description. Mia Brandel-Syrier launched a polemic, in which she noted that the so-called “middle class” made up at best the top one *per cent* of African society, and thus within that framework were

69 Mayer, *Townsmen and Tribesmen*.

70 Feyder, *Portraits of Resilience*, p. 276.

71 Feyder, *Portraits of Resilience*, p. 277.

in fact a tiny elite. This was clear enough, but against this it could be argued that members of this elite were in fact occupying a middling position within South African society as a whole. Equally, their economic positions were those which elsewhere were considered quintessentially middle class. They were teachers, nurses, clerks, and independent businessmen. As Brandel-Syrier commented: “That our upper-class Black group has or aims at a way of living similar to that of middle-class White South Africans, does not make them middle-class” in their place of residence, Katlehong.<sup>72</sup> Ellen Hellmann, who from the SAIRR had as good a vision of South African society as any, commented on how the social classes of Black South Africans were becoming increasingly endogamous, that the higher up the social scale an African family was, the more Westernised its way of life, and that in this it was, as elsewhere, the women who were the pacemakers. They were the ones whose aspirations were expressed “on their fervent endeavours to have their children well educated, in their economic battle to acquire the furniture ‘schemes’ necessary to raise the household’s level, or in the meticulous care with which they arrange and serve teas and luncheons to their friends”. The external signs – furniture, clothes, books – of the respectable middle class were fully apparent. These were the ways in which income and education were translated into status. Esteem was available for anyone who could afford its trappings.<sup>73</sup> This was a trend that would continue up until the end of apartheid, and arguably since then as well.

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72 Mia Brandel-Syrier, *Coming Through: The search for a new cultural identity*, Introduction.

73 Ellen Hellmann, “The Emergent African Middle Class in South Africa”, *The Colonial Review*, IX, March 1956, no page references.

## “Keeping Up with the Kumalos”

### *The Discovery of the African Market*

#### 1 Income, Expenditure, and Advertising

In 1963, the Bureau of Market Research of the University of South Africa published the results of its survey into income and expenditure patterns of Africans in Soweto, one of a whole set relating most of the major economic centres in South Africa.<sup>1</sup> As part of the introduction, the three authors, who included Fritz Raedel, the founder of the Bureau and the doyen of academic market research in the country, made the remarkable comment that: “of the many changes that have occurred in the past decade [in South Africa], two of the most important are probably the rapid growth of the urban population, especially the urban Bantu population, and the considerable rise in their per capita income”. This was undoubtedly an empirically accurate statement, but it would not have been one which would have been taken kindly either by the apartheid government or by the left opposition, at any rate if anyone had noticed it. The left had for decades been campaigning against the low incomes of the urban Black population. The growth of Black prosperity under apartheid was not a message they could tell or probably wanted to hear. Equally, the possibility that South Africa’s cities would come to include a large, increasing, and prosperous Black middle class ran against the prime concerns of the principles of apartheid which still aimed to keep the cities under White domination. A consumer society could be encouraged, but only for Whites.<sup>2</sup> There was a degree of ambivalence in this, as the government used Black prosperity to demonstrate – in its own eyes – that apartheid produced a standard of living far higher than in the rest of Africa. Perhaps the general argument was that the Black Middle class should prosper in what were later to be known as Bantustans, not in and around Johannesburg.<sup>3</sup>

1 F.E. Rädcl, C. De Coning & G.R. Feldmann-Laschin, *Income and Expenditure Patterns of Urban Bantu Households: South Western Townships, Johannesburg*, p. 22.

2 Even this could be ambivalent. See Albert Grundlingh, “Are we Afrikaners getting too rich? Cornucopia and change in Afrikanerdom in the 1960s”, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 21, pp. 143–165.

3 E.g., Dubow, *Apartheid*; Deborah Posel, *The Making of Apartheid, 1948–1961*. I owe this point to a lecture given by Deborah Posel in Amsterdam in March 2019.

The information contained in the reports of the market researchers in the 1960s was undoubtedly more sophisticated than anything that had gone before them. However, the basic premise was widely accepted by the African press around three decades earlier. The Black elite had made it quite clear that the increased participation of the Africans within the modern economy of South Africa could only be beneficial to that economy as a whole. All measures designed to increase their purchasing power were thus of great importance to the country as a whole.<sup>4</sup> This was not an argument which founds favour in the eyes of White politicians and most employers who could not envisage a prosperous African middle class, especially as the mines and most farms were only profitable as a result of the low cost of labour. The representatives of organised commerce had begun to take it on board. It was after all in the interest of those who placed advertisements in their papers.

Raedel's comments came in the introduction to a study of income and expenditure in Soweto, which formed one of a number of such studies in a variety of cities in South Africa, including Pretoria, Cape Town, and Durban. They were to provide the base line against which subsequent economic changes could be measured. The claim that the Africans of the cities were becoming richer was not based on such solid evidence as the discussion of their position during the course of the research. It was, however, one which was current at the time. Even the head of the ministry which at that time was known as the Department of Bantu Administration and Development, Dr. W.W.M. Eiselen, was to comment in 1959 that the "the annual income" of the African part of the South African population had grown by nearly 600% since 1936 – albeit from a very low level (which he did not say). This was double the growth rate of White incomes over the same period.<sup>5</sup> Probably at this stage, African incomes made up somewhere between 10 and 15% of the total for the country, though the various estimates of African spending power ranged from 200 to 450 million pounds.<sup>6</sup> The advertising agency, J. Walter Thompson, which had had an African branch in Johannesburg since the 1920s, on the other hand, claimed that African consumers were "responsible for spending some 25 *per cent* of the country's national income", and were becoming "markedly brand conscious".<sup>7</sup>

4 E.g. *Bantu World*, 10.11. 1934.

5 W.W.M. Eiselen, "The Elasticity of the Bantu Consumer", *Second Advertising Convention in South Africa*, p. 99.

6 Andrew Whiteford & Michael McGrath, *Distribution of Income in South Africa*, Pretoria HSRC, 1994 17; see further the discussion at the *Second Advertising convention*, printed at pp. 109–110.

7 Quoted in *Advertising and Selling*, April 1957; see also Deborah Posel "Getting Inside the Skin of the Consumer: Race, Market Research and the Consumerist Project in Apartheid South Africa" *Itinerario*, 42(1), pp. 120–138.

At the same time the advertising industry produced its stereotyped views of African consumers:

Research into the African market shows that the non-European was becoming increasingly aware of his important spending power and was demanding the best in both products and services. Urban natives were becoming more sophisticated and with their increasing literacy, their newspapers and magazines had now largely taught them to form their own judgement of products. Manufacturers would do well to remember that the [African] truck trade, which long formed an unfortunate aspect of our economy, is now largely a thing of the past. The non-European is fast coming into his own and what is good advertising to Europeans is not necessarily good African appeal.<sup>8</sup>

As always with material which derives from the advertising industry, it is difficult to be sure what is based on empirical, or at least experiential, data, what is puffed up for the benefit of some particular interest, and what is wishful thinking. But some of the statements are so consistent that they clearly reflect a general experience. The first is that when money is available, the Africans would want to spend it.

The European subservience to a bank balance has not yet spread to the African. Their personal prestige is based more on the tangible evidence of furniture, clothing, bicycles or cars ... the African is susceptible to planned advertising.<sup>9</sup>

It was indeed calculated in the late 1950s that Africans only saved 1.75% of their income.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, it was proclaimed that Africans bought the goods they did in an attempt to be as much like the Europeans as possible. The claim was made that:

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8 *Advertising and Selling*, April 1957.

9 William Parr, advertising manager of the Bantu Press (which owned *Bantu World* and a number of other publications) in *Press, Advertising and Radio review*, March 1956, cited in Irwin Stanley Manoim, *The Black Press 1945–1963: the growth of the Black mass media and their role as ideological disseminators*, p. 21.

10 Eiselen, “Elasticity”, p. 101. It is generally assumed that savings as a proportion of income will increase as that income increases. This corollary to Engel’s Law does not appear to apply in South Africa, either among Africans or Whites. Rather, the higher the income, the greater the debt.

The African is eager to adapt himself to a European way of life and advertisements play a part in showing him [sic] ways of setting about this adaptation. His realisation of their use to him in this regard makes him more 'advertisement prone' than the average European.<sup>11</sup>

Aiming a product specifically at the African market was a sure recipe for failure. This argument was propounded, for instance in the journal *Advertising and Selling* in 1957. It claimed that it was

bad psychology to give a product a Bantu label or to identify a product as exclusively for the Native. Natives immediately condemn such a product as being inferior. Many products bought by Europeans for their utility value are bought by Natives because they represent civilisation ... [There were] pianos in some Native homes with no-one in the home able to play. Nevertheless, it had to be remembered that a piano immediately conferred on that family an enhanced social status,<sup>12</sup>

A few years later, the journal *Sales Promotion and Packaging*, reported that Africans were suspicious of "any item specifically introduced for the African Market" and would never forgive misrepresentation of the qualities or advantages of an advertised product.<sup>13</sup> It was believed Africans bought quality goods, even if this might mean that purchases had to be delayed for lack of funds. However, it was not so much a desire to emulate the Whites, as such, which led to this way of thought, but rather the fear that goods produced for the "Black" market would necessarily be of lower quality, so that it was a false economy to purchase them, rather than the top of the market objects which the Whites were seen as buying.

Thirdly, the advertising profession had a high opinion of its own place in the world. A booklet published in 1948 to persuade White businessmen to advertise in newspapers and magazines aimed at a Black readership was not modest, even by the standards of the advertising profession. It wrote:

The advertising profession is in a very real sense the custodian of public progress. Our job is one which should and does dovetail into the development of commerce, without which there could be no civilised progress ... The buying habits and evolution of the Bantu have a direct bearing on

11 Hazel Rosenthal in *Selling Age*, September 1958, cited in Manoim, *The Black Press*, p. 24.

12 *Advertising and Selling*, April 1957.

13 *Sales Promotion and Packaging*, September 1963.

the permanency of our civilisation in South Africa. We are truly serving South Africa by promoting racial harmony, without which there can be neither industrial peace nor commercial progress.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, the advertising profession in post-World War II South Africa saw the consumer society as the epitome and culmination of their civilising offensive.<sup>15</sup> Thus, a decade later in 1959, Charles S. Marx, president of the Federated Chamber of Industries, addressed the Annual Convention of the Society of Advertisers in what would now be seen as a keynote address. He reiterated the comment that Africans were discriminating buyers “in the sense that when they buy a hat, a suit of clothes or a pair of shoes, they want the best.” This was because Africans were “aspiring to what he [sic] believes to be our standard of living and undoubtedly advertising has been a vital influence in this”. This he propounded to back up a remarkable proposition. He commented:

Educationists may differ from me, but I have the idea that advertising has been and is the most important single factor in influencing, particularly our urbanised Bantu towards acceptance of at least the outward symbols of our Western civilisation.

And as a good materialist, at least in his professional life, this Marx was fully aware of the importance of outward symbols in an individual’s personal ontogeny.<sup>16</sup>

## 2 The African press

From the middle of the 1950s, if not earlier, attempts were made to have advertising hoardings erected in the neighbourhood of African locations. These, however, ran afoul of the Department of Native Affairs, as it then was, which wished to obvert the possibility of alternative lines of influence to its own over the appearance of the African residential areas, and their inhabitants. This was despite the fact that those Africans who left the location areas to work in Johannesburg, or in the East Rand factories, for instance, were regularly confronted with advertising posters, including for “Brandy, beer and whisky etc.”,

14 *The Approach to Bantu Press Advertising*, p. 1, cited in Manoim, *The Black Press*, p. 7.

15 Ryan Powell, “The Theoretical Concept of the ‘Civilising Offensive’ (Beschavingsoffensief): Notes on its Origins and Uses”, *Human Figurations*, 2(2).

16 *Second Advertising Convention*, p. 9.

which were not meant for African perusal. Also, the decision deprived councils of a potential source of income.<sup>17</sup>

As a consequence of this, advertising directed specifically at Africans was only to be located in the so-called African Press. This was a misnomer, as the magazines and newspapers in question were invariably owned by Whites, and usually edited by Whites as well. Blacks worked as journalists, and occasionally as photographers, but had little control over the content of the papers. Nevertheless, the various magazines became remarkably popular among urban Africans, especially those living in what was to become Gauteng province.<sup>18</sup>

The first of the magazines to achieve a respectable circulation was *Zonk!* This was set up as early as 1949, by Ike Brooks, who had previously organised an African band playing to servicemen in the latter stages of World War II. It was a populist magazine, aimed at the urban Africans, and concentrating its copy on the sensational. Crime, music, and boxing were among the main topics of its copy, and it developed the genre of beauty contest on the basis of photographs. It was a heavily visual production, so much so that at its inception it was described, in the advertising press, as a “photomagazine”. It was a formula which succeeded for some years, and the magazine, most unusually, was almost permanently in profit. It was, however, uncompromisingly non-political, (which of course as usual meant that it supported the political status quo). It was described as having “the full approval of the Department of Native Affairs.”<sup>19</sup> This did not mean that it published in African languages, though eventually it was swallowed up by a competitor, *Bona*, which was published exclusively in Sesotho, isiZulu, and isiXhosa.

The main competition for *Zonk!* came initially from *Drum*. Initially, *Drum* had little to distinguish itself from *Zonk!*, until a new owner, Jim Bailey, made a conscious decision to align the magazine with the Black opposition to apartheid. As a result, it became the most famous of the magazines in the country, and has a reputation for the quality of its journalism, general writing, and indeed, in retrospect, for its photography. It was at the forefront of much political agitation, regularly featuring senior members of the ANC, and the court cases in which they were involved. It also reported sport, mainly football, and boxing, and jazz music, and its covers always carried photographs of young women. Though it lost money at an alarming rate – Bailey was the son of a

17 See the correspondence in the National archives, Pretoria, Native Affairs Department, File 125/313 L. I owe this reference to Sophie Feyder.

18 Manoim, *The Black Press*.

19 *Selling*, August 1949, cited in Manoim, *The Black Press*, pp. 68–9.

mining magnate, and could afford it – it soon developed the largest circulation of the various magazines, though was later overtaken by *Bona*.

All three journals, *Drum*, *Bona*, and *Zonk!*, were attempting to plug into what was seen as the establishment of a substantial market among urban African consumers. They were, specifically aimed at the emergent Black middle class, and they could not have existed without it. They needed advertising revenue to survive and in order to acquire this they naturally also needed to demonstrate an extensive readership of people willing to buy what they were propagating. The advertising which took up rather over half of the space in the magazines was clearly aimed at the nascent Black bourgeoisie.

*Drum* did not do domestic stories, preferring to concentrate on the public, and the male, sphere. In contrast to its advertisements, it presented an aura of young masculinity. There were two telling exceptions in the 1950s. In June 1958, Basil Bikitsha and Ian Themba, two of the magazines leading journalists, investigated the problems of the cost of living by investigating three Black households. One was headed by a lorry driver J.D. Radebe and his teacher wife, both of whom earned good wages. This house, in Matemala Street in the Western Township, was the epitome of modest prosperity. There was a nice garden out front, flowers on the table, a modern kitchen, a newspaper, and cigarettes. The children had toys and had been taught how to use a knife and fork. The poor family across the road had only “an odd collection of tables and chairs, and there was never any heat coming from the stove”. In between was “an ordinary middle class family you get in the townships” in this case in White City, Soweto. They had a kitchen and a bedroom, with “ordinary, plain almost” furniture. The wife was at home with her seven-month-old baby and sewed most of the clothing. They spent most of the man’s salary as a rent collector on food, and their only luxury was an old gramophone “and a few popular African jazz records whose repetitive rhythms echo the monotones of their life.”<sup>20</sup>

There was an underlying political message in this, as there also was in the story run two years later on how the wives of Pan Africanist Congress leaders were coping, some months after their husbands had been arrested after the Sharpeville massacre. Particularly revealing is a photograph of the house of Rose Ndziba showing their evening meal with the table replete with a tablecloth, knives, forks, plates, a salt cellar, and what looks like a bottle of tomato ketchup.<sup>21</sup>

Also, it was in the course of the 1950s that the possibilities of the African market reached the advertising and marketing industry. They were persuading

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20 *Drum*, June 1958.

21 *Drum*, June 1960.

their clients to place their advertisements in the paper which targeted the African middle class, among other places. They might be somewhat economical with the truth of what they were saying. Thus, in August 1955, the trade journal, *South African Sales Promotion and Packaging*, published an account of what it described as a “typical middle class” Black household in Soweto.

John Mokwena and his wife and four children live in a municipal house in the Orlando district of Johannesburg. Their house consists of a living room, dining room, bedroom and kitchen and is furnished with a small lounge suite, carpets, occasional tables and fern stands. They have a dining-room suite, a radio and radio diffusion set, a bed settee, bedroom suite, coal stove, paraffin refrigerator, kitchen dresser and chairs. Working for an international travel agency in the city, John Mokwena earns £29 a month, a salary which he augments by £30 a month as manager of a stable of professional boxers. Against this gross income of about £60 a month, the Mokwenas have to meet relatively high living expenses ... The following products were in the house at the time of the investigation: Brasso, Joko tea, Kolynos toothpaste, Royal Baking powder, Laurel paraffin, Aspro, Karoo nerve powder, Zebo stove cleaner, Gillettes Javel, Sunbeam floor polish.

With the exception of coffee, mealie meal, jam and tomato sauce, Mrs. Mokwena orders by brand name. For example, although not quite sure why, she insisted on Royal baking powder, not just baking powder. ... John Mokwena ... dresses well: hats by Battersby, underwear by Jockey, President shoes, Ensign suit, Invincible shirts. All branded advertised lines ... The majority of branded goods in the house featured in advertising in the African's national magazines and newspapers.

The Mokwenas' way of life is not unduly cramped or in any sense raw. Their use of tablecloths, cutlery, adequate crockery, all demonstrate that their standard of living does not differ materially from many Europeans – and their tastes as consumers are largely identical.

The Mokwenas and people like them form a tremendous market which ... has not been properly explored.

It is very difficult to imagine just how this family, who can also be described as leading Soweto socialites, can be seen as “typical middle class”.<sup>22</sup> It may,

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22 *South African Sales Promotion and Packaging*, August 1955, cited in Manoim, *The Black Press*, pp. 35–6.

however, have served as an exemplar, a reference point, for Sowetans, just as the house of Dr Xuma in Sophiatown had been for the inhabitants of that suburb before it was cleared.<sup>23</sup>

At the other end of the country, the advertisers and their clients sponsored the Bantu Trade and Advertising Fair, which for the course of the 1950s was the high point of the social year. Held in early summer, it took over Rubusana Park in front of the East Bank location in East London for a week. It was used as a place to try out new products. As it was remembered:

All the companies that dealt with black people were there. Lever Brothers. Stork Margarine, Glenryck's Lucky Star Pilchards, United Tobacco, Zonk, SA Breweries. They would have stalls and promote their products, run competitions, give prizes, try and make you take and use their products.

Every evening the park and its great marquees were full with young men and women promenading and enjoying the music, the entertainment, the gambling, the beer garden, and the swell of people. At the weekends there were rugby tournaments, music competitions. But at the heart of the carnivalesque occasion was the dialectical relationship between the producers and the advertisers wanting to create a Black commercial culture, on the one hand, and, on the other, at least some of the Black inhabitants of East London, craving the innovations of the consumer society they saw in the White suburbs and implicitly demanding that they be given the chance to be inducted into it. As in many places, consumption was a political act.<sup>24</sup>

### 3 Consumption and Apartheid

This analytic premise was not something which was in the minds of the delegation of the Confederation of Advertisers when they met in Durban as they did every September from 1958 to 1962. Much of their discussions were about the ways in which American and European advertising insights could be imported into South Africa, for the benefit of greater effectiveness in the South African European market. But, on the other hand, there were also many

23 Goodhew, *Respectability and Resistance*, xv, citing Bloke Modisane, *Blame me on History*, p. 33.

24 See a series of articles by Gary Minkley, Leslie Bank, Mcebisi Qamarwana, & Landiswa Maqasho in the *Daily Dispatch*, for March and April 2001; see also H.C. Woodhouse (Ed.), *Planning for the Bantu Market*, p. 29.

who were attempting to canalize African spending in directions which they saw as favourable. In the first place, there were questions of the wages paid to Africans, and consequently their buying power. In general, the argument was that higher wages could only increase productivity, though it was also commented that in globally comparative terms the position of Africans in South Africa was not low. They were believed to be better than those in Asia, the rest of Africa, or behind the Iron Curtain (though probably the cost of living and the necessity of relatively expensive transport offset much of this.)

The 1959 convention also listened to two important speeches on the development of the African Market. The first was prepared for Dr W.W. M. Eiselen, the head of the Native Affairs Department, although actually delivered in his absence by the Chief Commissioner for Bantu Affairs in Natal. As has been mentioned already, Eiselen extolled the growth of African purchasing power over the previous decades. Eiselen, who, it will be remembered, was one of the most notable intellectual and administrative architects of apartheid, stressed that this development would continue within the “Bantu areas”, not within the White towns. This was to prove illusory. Nevertheless, he was not hoping for the African areas to develop in some “tribal” way. Rather he foresaw the incorporation into African life of European style consumer goods. He was proud to comment that his departmental survey had shown that 10.9% of African households in towns possessed radios, 17.7% gramophones, 44.7% sewing machines, and 84.4% stoves, primarily the table top primus type of stove rather than the full Welcome Dover cast iron version that was to be much used later. Thus, even the ideologues of apartheid were glad to see the development of a Black consumer society, so long as it was to take place outside the White sphere. Verwoerd’s famous comment that there would be no place for the African above a certain level of unskilled labour was, it is as well to remember, suffixed by the comment “in the European community”. He, or at any rate his friend and fellow thinker Eiselen, was quite prepared for there to be commercial and other forms of development in the African areas, and at least Eiselen was to encourage White investors to exploit the possibilities of such growth.<sup>25</sup> This had to be done, though, within the parameters imposed by apartheid policy. He therefore stressed the importance of fairly static, and distinctive, African cultures, called for the use of the country’s vernacular languages in journalism and advertising – an argument which ran against the conventional wisdom of the advertisers that Africans would not be fobbed off with what they suspected of being inferior goods aimed specifically at them – and was determined that

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<sup>25</sup> Eiselen “Elasticity”, pp. 100–106.

African advancement should occur exclusively within what came to be known as the Bantustans. None of these propositions was to be proved true over the next decades, nor were the policies which derived from them.

The other notable address to the convention was given by Nimrod Mkele, who had been a student at the University of Fort Hare where he had participated in anthropological research together with Livingstone Mqotsi under Monica Wilson.<sup>26</sup> Having dropped out of his first University studies, he had later acquired an MA in psychology, and worked developing intelligence and aptitude tests for African labourers in the gold mines, before being recruited by the major advertising and market research company J. Walter Thompson. He was thus in a position to give an insider’s account of “the African middle class”, while having the academic and professional training to view it as it were from the outside. Mkele described one group of the African Middle Class as “those people who, like myself, make it their job to interpret the African – his hopes and aspirations – to the white man”, which he further used as an excuse, or at least a reason, for a moderate political stance in relation to apartheid.<sup>27</sup> His basic argument differed greatly from Eiselen’s, since he did not envisage the full segregation which the plans of Grand Apartheid entailed. He made the point that Africans were fully welcome at most shops. The exceptions were “personal service establishments” such as hotels, restaurants, hairdressers, and beauty salons. He could also have added to that list government institutions such as post offices and the railways. In other commercial establishments, Africans no longer had to be served at separate counters or through a hole in the wall. This was because shopkeepers could not exist without African customers, a fact driven home to those in Johannesburg during the 1957 Alexandra bus boycott.<sup>28</sup> Their turnover had dropped exceedingly fast during this period.

Mkele described which brands were the most favoured and which strategies advertisers might want to employ. First, he commented that African consumers

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26 Leslie J. Bank, “Witchcraft and the Academy: Livingstone Mqotsi, Monica Wilson and the Middledrift Healers, 1945–1957”, in Bank & Bank, *Inside African Anthropology*, pp. 222–3; see also Livingstone Mqotsi & Nimrod Mkele, “A separatist Church: iBandla lika-Krestu”, *African Studies*, 5(2), pp. 106–125.

27 Nimrod Mkele, “The African Middle Class”, lecture delivered under the auspices of the Institute for the Study of Man in Africa, Johannesburg, November 1961, pp. 16–17; Mkele remained more of an observer than an activist. He was also involved in the second edition of *From Protest to Challenge: Volume 4 Political Profiles, 1882–1990*, edited by Gail Gerhart, and published by Jacana in Johannesburg in 2017; by the time of the publication, he was long dead.

28 Philip Bonner & Noor Nieftegodien, *Alexandra: A History*, Johannesburg, Wits UP, 2008, 143–6; Tom Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945*, pp. 155–171.

had created for themselves very strong brand images, for instance, for a particular brand of tea, Joko, which could be endangered if the brand merely changed the colour of its packaging. Other examples included the loyalty which Africans demonstrated towards Vaseline, to the exclusion of cheaper brands of petroleum jelly (which indeed both Africans and Europeans described as “vaselines”). Equally notable was the unexpected success achieved by Gilbey’s Gin in the up-market shebeens of the Witwatersrand, despite the fact that the slogan “Don’t just say Gin, Say Gilbey’s” could not be used in the Black press since Africans were officially not allowed to drink spirituous liquors.

These preferences could have a political undertone. Mkele pointed out that the antipathy which most Africans had to the apartheid government meant that they took a heavy dislike to any product which was sold as associated with Afrikaner values. By the same token, he claimed that advertisements in Bantu languages, as opposed to English, would not be well received by those to whom they were addressed, not just because it was difficult to find isiZulu words for “face powder” or “homogenized”, for example. The point was that, in Mkele’s view, the most progressive, and thus richest and commercially most interesting portion of the population generally considered African languages to be primitive, or at least were tainted with backwardness. Eiselen, if he had been there to hear this speech, would not have been impressed.

African consumer behaviour was being driven, Mkele believed, by the modelling of African men on the American world as they perceived it through the media, especially the films, while the women were in general orientated towards Paris. This was in general done selectively, but nevertheless it was easy enough to identify with, “English, American and especially the upper class values of the whites”. This expressed itself above all in a change in the African ideal of beauty, particularly feminine beauty. As Laura Longmore had pointed out, and as the covers of *Drum* and *Zonk!* confirmed: “A beautiful woman in urban African society is one who has a slim figure, lovely large eyes and a beautiful set of teeth. Her hips must not be too thick but must be inviting. The urban African’s idea of beauty has become almost identical with that of the European.”<sup>29</sup>

Mkele cited these comments by Longmore, and then continued as it behoved a man employed by an advertising agency. This desirable female exterior was something which was, at least in part, to be nurtured through the use of the right commodities. Mkele therefore continued:

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29 Laura Longmore, *The Dispossessed: a study of the sex-life of Bantu women in and around Johannesburg*, p. 23, cited by Nimrod Mkele, “Advertising to the Bantu”, *Second Advertising Convention in South Africa*, p. 127.

Today with the demand by African women for more sophisticated grooming, there has been a diversification in the cosmetic products they use. Vanishing creams, cleansing creams, bleach creams, rouge, eyebrow pencil, lipstick and many other products which not so many years ago formed no part of beauty care, are now a must for the sophisticated African girl. African women are straightening their hair and wearing it in various styles and wigs seem to be coming into fashion too. In short, the paraphernalia of beauty care are invading the African woman's handbag.

In confirmation of this, Mkele had recently counted twenty-three separate products on the dressing table of a domestic servant in one of Johannesburg's suburbs.

These changes and attitudes were spearheaded by the African middle class, who had acquired their prestige on the basis of their education, their income, and, sometimes, their hereditary position. This made them most uneasy about the direction “Bantu education” was taking, since they feared that the government was closing the only door to acceptance by western civilization, and would render their own efforts on behalf of their children valueless.

The external symbols of the good standard of living of the middle class can be seen in the long, sleek, two-tone American cars which many of them own [this was 1959, after all] and in the well-furnished homes in which they live. They spend considerable sums of money on improvements to their houses or build their own. They are avid readers of the press and dress well – for to Africans the successful man or woman must be smartly turned out.

It is from this class that leaders of African opinion have appeared. ... They are accepted as the models towards which to aspire and exercise an influence out of all proportion to their numbers in the African body politic. The few market research studies that have been undertaken show that this class does set the pace for the African market; they lead in the buying of most consumer goods – whether it be radios, soaps, tooth-pastes, baby food, clothes, cosmetics and so on.<sup>30</sup>

Later in his speech, Mkele further restricted the group. He commented that “the biggest users of most products are the younger people. Whether you take radios, furniture, toothpaste, readership of newspapers and magazines, beauty

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<sup>30</sup> Mkele, “Advertising”, p. 126.

preparations and toilet soaps, you will always find young people in the lead." It was all part of the continual struggle to "keep up with the Joneses, or should I say with the Kumalos?"<sup>31</sup>

The leaders of this group, the emergent Black bourgeoisie, were the lawyers and the doctors, as might be expected, but there were also Black retailers with very substantial turnovers, teachers, nurses, and perhaps policemen and social workers. There was also a small, but increasingly important group, to whom Mkele himself belonged, who owed their position precisely to the phenomenon that he was describing. As the African market began to increase, and more importantly began to be recognized as increasing, those firms who worked in this field began to need individuals who had skills, "not *in spite* of but *because* of their being Africans". They were needed to advise on sales techniques to demonstrate and promote new products, in the kitchen and the house. As Brandel-Syrier noted: "The wife of one of the leading reef socialites was head of the African sales department in a large European furniture firm and an ex-nursing sister was in charge of the African branch of a well-known European soft-goods dealer". There were also those who worked on the radio and, most famously, in journalism. In other words, there were people taking the benefit of the increase in Black spending power, and, as is the way with economics, contributing to it at the same time.

Nevertheless, as Mkele commented in another place, the sale of goods to Blacks was almost entirely in White hands. Africans tended to make any substantial purchases in the towns, not in African locations where the retail outlets were almost all within the food sector; he mentions "groceries, butcheries, fruit and vegetable dealers, cafés and dairies." In contrast:

there are no furniture dealers or outfitters, hardly any dry cleaners, cinemas or household appliances', and crockery and other types of dealers in [the townships] mainly because the African customer finds it convenient to obtain his requirements in town where he works, and also because of the heavy capital outlay required for these types of retail outlets. Wholesalers, except in agricultural produce, are non-existent because of lack of finance capital.<sup>32</sup>

Furniture and other dealers could prosper on the African market. They were, however, inevitably outsiders to the African communities they served. There

<sup>31</sup> Mkele, "Advertising", p. 129.

<sup>32</sup> Nimrod Mkele, "The emergent African Middle Class", *Optima*, December 1960.

might be Blacks working in these emporia, and thereby perhaps entering the ranks of the Black middle class, loosely defined, but not as the owners of such enterprises. That route to respectability and affluence was cut off.

Mkele's intuitive comments can be confirmed by a survey of African traders in what was then the Transvaal, carried out by J. Walter Thompson's major competitor, African Amalgamated Advertising (Afamal). The information they supplied shows interesting patterns. Almost everywhere, a majority of the commercial outlets in the African townships were made up of general dealers, often in combination with some form of food selling, and occasionally haberdashery, traders in the food sector (butchers, dairies, sellers of “fresh produce”, fish fryers, cafes, and restaurants) and wood and coal merchants. In the towns of the Witwatersrand, excluding Johannesburg, these made up 77% of the stores, and in the two districts of Soweto for which information is given, Meadowlands and Diepkloof – both fairly recently constructed and among the poorer of the townships – 75%. In contrast the older townships, with a broader economic base, had more specialised small firms. The equivalent figure for the Vaal triangle was 62%, for Atteridgeville and Vlaktefontein, in Pretoria, 59% and for Alexandra on the northern fringe of Johannesburg as low as 55%. There, Afamal records, in addition to 313 general dealers, 377 food sellers, and 57 wood and coal dealers, there were 122 tailors, 82 cobblers, 51 dry cleaners, 49 carpenters, 29 hairdressers, 28 “cartage contractors”, 18 plumbers, and 12 photographers, and then 97 unspecified others. It is difficult to believe that many of these businesses lead to significant wealth, particularly as the outfitters and the furniture stores remained in the White town, and remained White-owned. There was only one exception; T. Moela had set himself up as an “office furniture dealer” in Atteridgeville.<sup>33</sup>

#### 4 Role Models

The African middle class were those to whom the mass of the population looked, in part as role models, but also in part with uncertainty. Some were known as “the Situations” or the “Scuse me please”, because of their exaggerated, if not always sincere, politeness and closeness towards the Whites of South Africa.<sup>34</sup> This had two distinct consequences. First, the members of

33 Marketing Division, Afamal Transvaal Limited, *The African Market in the Transvaal, 1962 edition*, Johannesburg, African Amalgamated Advertising Ltd, 1962. It may be that there were other furniture dealers, or outfitters, among the “others” in Alexandra, or in the portions of Soweto not covered by the survey.

34 Mkele, “Advertising”, p. 126.

the African elite were continually concerned that they were behaving in the “proper” way, that is to say in the same way as the richer inhabitants of the White suburbs, above all perhaps those of north Johannesburg. Mia Brandel-Syrier, in her ethnography of the elite in what she described as Reeftown – in fact Katshele, the township attached to Germiston – noted that “only two subjects could draw full attendance” to the meetings of the “cultural club”, namely “etiquette and politics, in that order.”<sup>35</sup> The result can be seen, for example, in the wonderfully observed tea ritual described by Njabulu Ndebele in *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, officially a novel but probably even more accurate as a result. One of his main characters, Delisiwe Dulcie S’khosana, was the daughter of mission school graduates who had brought “modernity” into their home. Delisiwe was to turn “the rituals of tea-making and tea-drinking ... into a science of etiquette.” She would bake scones and serve tea made with great care. The preparations for the tea party, moreover, entailed, first “retriev[ing] your most valuable tea set from where you keep it safely on top of your bedroom wardrobe, or underneath it”. Then she would:

lay out the occasional table in the middle of the room; well-starched tablecloth and starched matching serviettes, table mats, cups and saucers, side plates for scones; bowls in the middle of the table (sugar, apricot jam, and butter); knives for spreading the butter and peach or apricot jam. Everything arranged according to some plan to reveal care and the desire to please.

This would then be covered by a net, to await the arrival of the guests. This vision of colonial refinement was perhaps becoming an old-fashioned version of modernity by the 1990s, the period in which the novel is set, but it was certainly long a goal to be striven for.<sup>36</sup>

Secondly, African purchasers were regularly described as being particularly discriminating, as buying only from the top of the range (particularly with regard to men’s clothing), however difficult this may have been for them financially, and as having a very definite brand loyalty. This was of course a political act. In 1965, a conference on *Planning for the Bantu Market* was held, in part at the suggestion of the Bantu Wage and Productivity Association, a group of manufacturers and retailers who were pressing for a rise in Black wages across

35 Brandel-Syrier, *Reeftown Elite*, p. 51.

36 Njabulu Ndebele, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, Cape Town, David Philip, 2003, 40–43; see further Erika Rappaport, *A Thirst for Empire: How tea shaped the modern world*, pp. 290–301.

the board in order to develop a better market for their products. At the meeting, the Director of Non-European Affairs of Benoni, J.E. Mathewson, gave a talk on “The Habits, Characteristics and Aspirations of the Bantu”, as if he was describing the behaviour of the local eagles. For all his othering of his subject matter, he probably, if inadvertently, described a phenomenon that was very widespread. He wrote:

The Bantu accepts, and subsequently insists upon, the same yardsticks as the European. He feels his only guarantee against sharp practice is to buy the same brand, label or model which the European buys. By way of an example it has been experienced in the liquor trade that if a Bantu wishes, shall we say, to purchase a bottle of gin, he insists that he be served with a bottle taken from the same shelf from which the European is supplied. Should the supply of the particular brand requested be out of stock on the shelves, he is not happy to be served with a bottle from the storeroom or from under the counter and would rather buy another brand from the shelf which is visible to him. Likewise we have had the instance in urban townships where it has not been possible to sell to the Bantu a perfectly good article after they had heard that it had been manufactured specifically with the Bantu consumer in mind.<sup>37</sup>

One of the possible results was that some manufacturers claimed that they only needed to advertise to Europeans, as “the Bantu” would emulate “White purchasing habits”.<sup>38</sup>

Even in 1965, more or less the high point of apartheid, there were those who saw the possibilities for Black advancement. Dr W. Langschmidt made a calculation based on the possession of a number of major goods and services. With the proportion of Black households which possessed them included in brackets, these were electricity in the house (11%), running water (27%), a car (4%), a refrigerator (1%), a radio (26%), and employing a servant (1%).<sup>39</sup> Further,

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37 *Bantu Market*, p. 17, c.f. W. Langschmidt, “The Identifying Characteristics of the Bantu Market”, In H.C. Woodhouse (Ed.), *Planning for the Bantu Market*, Durban, National Development and Management Foundation of South Africa, 1965*n*, p. 60. Langschmidt was the Managing Director of the Johannesburg firm, Market Research Africa. I would like to thank Danelle van Zyl-Hermann for sending me a copy of one of the few extant examples of this work, held in the library of the University of the Free State.

38 *Planning for the Bantu Market*, 90.

39 *Planning for the Bantu Market*, 62. I have excluded the possession of a telephone, as, in those days of segregation and land lines, the African townships did not have any access to this appliance.

he pointed out how living in cities made it much more likely that Africans would cook on a stove – 87% of them did so, as opposed to 13 % of those who lived in the countryside. As with many of those who worked in commerce, Langschmidt hoped that Black wages would rise, until the “white-level” proportion of the population was three times what it actually was. Sellers did not, in general, approve of apartheid, though they did little to combat it.

One of the things that the apartheid state had done was to build houses. Forced removals, entailed that those who were thrown out of, say, Sophiatown, had to be housed somewhere, in this case almost entirely in Soweto. The houses that were built were in the wrong place, they were very small, famously described as “matchboxes”, and they were delivered with bare walls and roofs. Nevertheless, the new tenants often saw their new house as an improvement on the property in which they had previously lived. Certainly, they were prepared to improve it, and turn it into what they needed themselves. On the basis of a number of interviews with the first generation of Sowetan residents, Rebecca Ginsburg has shown how the upgrading of their houses was generally concentrated on the interiors, plastering walls and putting in internal doors, and so forth, so as to make it possible for the inhabitants to maintain a well-cleaned and tidy household, rather than one which would demonstrate wealth from the outside. The satisfaction women derived from being able to meet the aspirations and house pride which they had learnt from their mothers in rural Southern Africa.<sup>40</sup>

Another consequence of the removals, and the building of the townships, was that those who moved to the new houses had to furnish them. A furniture dealer reckoned that a fifth of sales of “household durables” in the country were made to people living in these areas. Generally, the first major purchase was a large cast iron stove, fuelled by coal, paraffin, or, increasingly, gas. These not only made it possible to cook inside – though not on the old-style three-legged pot – while providing a lot of warmth for the house, no luxury in a Highveld winter. From there on, customers proceeded to buy furniture – tables, chairs, a sofa, and so forth – and where possible, sewing machines and a radio or radio-gram. Again, in the eyes of the sellers, Africans were afraid of being fobbed off with inferior goods, and invariably demanded goods from the same brands, and at the same price, as was sold to South Africa’s Whites. As many of the customers had previously worked as domestic servants – and maybe still did – the

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40 Rebecca Ginsburg, “Now I Stay in a House’: Renovating the Matchbox in Apartheid-era Soweto”, *African Studies*, 55: 2, 1996 127–139.

store owners considered that they knew what they wanted to buy, and had a very clear idea of the current styles and colours.

Inevitably, furniture, and so forth was bought under some form of hire purchase. The investigations into the expenditure patterns of urban Africans, on which Raedel based his comments on the growing incomes of Black town-dwellers, show clearly that those African households which had sufficient income were prepared to spend considerable sums on their hire purchase arrangements. In the survey made in the townships of Pretoria in 1959, on average 3.7% of household income went on “hire purchase instalments”. Naturally enough, the higher the income, the larger the proportion of income that could be used for furniture and so forth, as Engel’s law would predict.<sup>41</sup> Those households which earned 60 Rand or more a month, approximately a quarter of the total (which was estimated at 15,600 Black households for the whole of the city), spent around 5% of their income on their hire purchase agreements, and the top earners, those with an income of over 100 Rand a month, about 2.5% of households, or around 400 in total, used 7.2% of their income on such expenditures.<sup>42</sup> Something similar could be observed in Benoni, at the heart of the industrialising East Rand, which was among the most prosperous Black areas in the country. There the mean income per household was R5.85 (or 12.6%) higher than among Pretoria’s households, and the proportion with an income of R100 or above, at 7.1% was nearly triple that of Pretoria. Nevertheless, the total proportion of income spent on hire purchase was more or less the same as in Pretoria, at 3.8%, that of households earning over R60 also 5.4%, and that of households with more than R100 at 7.4%.<sup>43</sup> Finally, in Soweto, the equivalent figures were 5% for the population as a whole, 6% for those earning over R 60 and 8.7% for those earning over R100. This last group was significantly larger than in either Pretoria or Benoni, making up 9.4% of households, and it was also substantially richer, though it is difficult to be certain just how much so. It is however worth noting that the Report of the Bureau of Market Research provided a table setting out the distribution of those households in Soweto with an income above R100, which they did not do for the other cities, even though they always stressed the need for comparability of the results (and no

41 In the mid nineteenth century Ernst Engel, a German economist and statistician, noted that as income rose, the *proportion* of a family’s income spent on foodstuffs tended to decline, even though the total expenditure on food might well rise.

42 C. de Coning, *Income and expenditure patterns of urban Bantu households: Pretoria survey*, Pretoria, Bureau of Market Research, 1961, esp p. 54 and table 73.

43 C. de Coning, *Income and expenditure patterns of urban Bantu households: Benoni survey*, Pretoria, Bureau of Market Research, 1962, esp. p. 57 & Table 32.

doubt had standardised computer programmes to run through the data.) More than anywhere else, Soweto had the purchasing power that could interest the sellers of domestic furniture.<sup>44</sup>

The vast majority of African purchasers of furniture had to purchase their goods through some sort of credit scheme. Though it might be difficult ascertaining the credit rating of the customers, this was no deterrent for furniture salesmen. It is often claimed that furniture businesses in South Africa make their money primarily on the basis of the credit agreement, to the extent that it is virtually impossible to persuade them to sell their goods for cash. The representative of the furniture trade at the 1965 conference, H. Goldberg, the chairman of Ellis and Co., would obviously not admit this. Rather he made the comment that his salesman had to be carefully trained to avoid “over-selling”, and management had to be on its guard not to accept sales where the sums to be paid were more than the customer could reasonably pay. Experience, and the use of such information, on income, work, and renting status, as was generally available, allowed the process to proceed with some degree of confidence, and many of the Africans, even those on very low wages, were scrupulous in making their repayments. These salesmen and a number of the female cashiers were part of an entirely separate department set up to cater for African customers. All the employees in this department, below the level of management, were Africans. These were the people who interacted with those who came into the shop, and were also responsible for drawing up, and explaining the hire purchase agreements. It had been learnt that the European staff were not sensitive enough to carry this through successfully.<sup>45</sup>

Clearly the men who worked in Ellis & Co.’s stores were earning well (though probably substantially less than the Whites who did more or less the same job). It was probably not enough to put them into the category of the township elite. None of sixty men who made up the “Reeftown elite” studied by Mia Brandel-Syrier worked in European-owned stores. This may merely reflect the fact that Katlehong, the true name of Brandel-Syrier’s “Reeftown”, was too far from the commercial centre of downtown Johannesburg to allow successful shop-assistants and purveyors of credit to live there. Rather, most of the members of her study population were government officials or self-employed members of the professions. Their concerns, and those of their wives, as to how they should live provided Brandel-Syrier with many opportunities to do her

44 Fritz E. Raedel, *Income and expenditure patterns of urban Bantu households: South-western townships, Johannesburg*, Pretoria, Bureau of Market Research, 1963, esp. tables 16, 17, & 27.

45 H. Goldberg, “Case Example: furniture and appliances”, in *Planning for the Bantu Market*, 87–8.

anthropological fieldwork, if in a somewhat unorthodox fashion. The neutrality of the observer, influencing what is going on as little as possible would certainly seem to be compromised by her admission that her field-work methods included giving a course on interior decoration. The women of the Katlehong elite were continually asking her how they should behave at social gatherings. They clearly wanted to emulate the Whites of Johannesburg’s northern suburbs in both immaterial and material ways.

Brandel-Syrier provides a full account of the ways in which the elite she studied appropriated and naturalised the houses they either built themselves or took over from the municipality, and began to adjust to their own requirements and aspirations. They had the opportunity to do this because Katlehong had been founded after World War II to take in those who were being expelled from the townships in Germiston and who were given compensation for what they had lost. The rich were thus able to build as they wanted. In terms of architectural fashion, they were well behind White Johannesburg. Initially, in the early 1950s the first houses which were disparagingly described as “cheap little houses of drab-coloured brick, their *stoeps* supported by debased classical, or precast concrete columns”. By the end of the 1950s, the elite had moved on to yellow face-brick houses with “wrought-iron gates [which] swung between yellow face-brick garden posts”, a style which had been “current in the white areas around the thirties.” At the same time these houses made use of “gimmicks” which had become fashionable in the Afrikaner suburbs of the Witwatersrand, namely:

the display of as many different building materials as possible, the mixing in one house of different coloured and textured plasters, different colours and textures of brickwork, combinations of plaster with slasto,<sup>46</sup> timber ornamental grilles, chimneys, boxed windows and all kinds of embellishments.<sup>47</sup>

All in all, it was reckoned that the inhabitants of Katlehong had spent two million Rand on their house improvements in the course of the 1950s.<sup>48</sup>

One leading Johannesburg architect, who was brought to Katlehong by Mia Brandel-Syrier to give his opinion on the architecture, commented, slightly wistfully, that “there was a disappointing lack of indigenous decoration on the external walls of these houses – of the multi-coloured abstract patterns of the

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46 A slate-like shale used for flooring and tiling.

47 Brandel-Syrier, *Reeftown Elite*, p. 102.

48 Brandel-Syrier, *Reeftown Elite*, p. 57.

Sotho, the Ndebele and the Zulu.”<sup>49</sup> But this would have been giving the wrong signal. The rich Blacks of the Witwatersrand had no wish to remind those who came to stare at their houses of a rural, “tribal”, background (which given the possibility of forced relocation was too close anyway.) Rather they needed to show their affiliation to the modern, which in South Africa all too often meant the White.

The house was entered after pushing a “ding-dong” bell by the front door, the sign of entry into the world of the rich. Once inside, the interiors of the houses were also the sites of considerable ostentation and contention. The Katlehong elite, male and female, would not invite their neighbours until their decoration was completely finished: one woman commented how she would not let one of her neighbours into the house for fear that she would go to her best friend with the deadly comment: “and you wouldn’t believe it, but she hasn’t even pelmets yet”.<sup>50</sup> It was not always agreed what furniture should be acquired. There were sharp arguments on the relative merits of large wardrobes, which came with the bedroom suite, as opposed to built-in cupboards for hanging clothes, a dispute which seemed to be being won by the latter faction. There were distinctions to be made between the houses of the very rich – by Katlehong standards – and those whose houses had cost a lot less. In the former, there was:

an L-shaped lounge and adjoining dining-room, a so-called “master-bedroom” leading into the bathroom with a built-in bath, fully tiled in at least two contrasting colours – favourites being green and pink. For the children there was a separate washroom or shower cubicle and a separate w.c. There was always a fully tiled and appointed so-called “American kitchen” with stainless-steel sinks, built-in cupboards, a refrigerator and an electric stove. [The houses of the less rich] had coloured and polished cement floors instead of the parquet of the best houses. They had linoleum on the kitchen and bathroom floors, whereas the better houses had plastic tiles. Although they did have a *stoep*, it was of simpler construction. Whereas the best houses invariably had large and elaborate Slasto-decorated fire-places in the lounge, with built in jetmasters, the medium type houses had simpler heating arrangements. Also, their kitchens were simpler, but there was always a panelyte-topped chromium legged

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49 Brandel-Syrier, *Reeftown Elite*, p. 103.

50 Brandel-Syrier, *Reeftown Elite*, p. 57.

kitchen table and matching chairs, and a kitchen cupboard resembling a juke box.<sup>51</sup>

Despite this apparently successful display, there were still sensitivities. Brandel-Syrier was forced to abort a project to have her research assistant compile inventories of the houses because of “growing resistance and animosity.” The linen was undoubtedly clean, ironed, and stored neatly in drawers, but it was not to be counted by outsiders.

The people among whom Brandel-Syrier worked, the elite of Katlehong, was a small minority of the town’s population, and an even smaller one of the Africans on the Witwatersrand as a whole. Its members did not always behave according to the tenets of respectability. The most respected man in the area, the local doctor, was known to be an adulterous drunk. Nevertheless, they represented the cream of African society, the group most of the town’s other residents looked up to and aspired to join.

In one respect, they were rather less role models for the rest of the inhabitants of Katlehong or for the Witwatersrand in general. The elite of Katlehong was, with certain exceptions, politically rather quiescent. They did not take much part in the school boycotts of 1956, nor in the campaigns against rental increases at about the same time, although they may well have been involved in organising a force to combat the ANC civic guards in the same year.<sup>52</sup> The point was that many of them had acquired their position on the basis of their association with the state, and many still worked for it. Even if they did not, the sort of position they held was not conducive to concerted political action. Nevertheless, there were others in high positions who were politically active and had a great influence on the development of politics during the turbulent 1950s. To give two examples of individuals in elite positions who were particularly committed politicians, the leading Black law firm in Johannesburg was headed by Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo, both of whom were eventually to lead the African National Congress, while their competition in the Pan Africanist Congress were led by a university lecturer, Robert Sobukwe.

51 Brandel-Syrier, *Reeftown Elite*, p. 89. Panelyte is a form of decorative laminate, used for kitchen tops and so forth.

52 This was organised by “Advisory board member Moshoeshoe”; see Philip Bonner & Noor Nieftagodien with Sello Mathabatha, *Ekurhuleni: The Making of an Urban Region*, p. 107. Brandel-Syrier writes of one member of the elite who bore “an illustrious Bantu name”; there can be none more illustrious than that of the founding monarch of the Kingdom of Lesotho.

There was of course every reason for the modernising, westernising Africans to be politically active. These were after all people who had most often passed through the mission schools. They felt the attack on the educational standards under the introduction of Bantu education. The teacher's security of tenure was declining and their status was becoming little higher than that of the labourer. The chance that their advantages would be passed on to the next generation was seen to declining, and this gave great uncertainty.<sup>53</sup> They might work as employees in White firms and earn reasonable salaries compared to their fellow Africans, if not to the Whites in the same firm. However, this did not mean that they could reach the highest positions within those firms. There were, in 1960, no Africans in the finance departments of major companies for instance. Nor were these people able to establish their own businesses in the city. Even those who had stores in the African townships were expected to transfer their businesses to the Bantustans when the towns there became large enough to warrant it. The apartheid state was doing what it could to restrict the advance of the African middle class, both to protect White business, and out of an instinctive understanding that this group, ultimately, presented the greatest political threat to White rule. By restricting their opportunities, the government hope that they would hold the African middle class in place, and bolster the elites of the new Bantustans sufficiently to provide a serious counterweight. It was a struggle against the facts and doomed to failure, but it nevertheless only increased the bitterness of the nascent, consumerist, Black middle class.

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53 Peter Kallaway (Ed.), *Apartheid and Education: The Education of Black South Africans*; Jonathan Hyslop, *The Classroom Struggle: Policy and Resistance in South Africa, 1940–1990*. In the event the declining standard of education under apartheid rule was to a degree offset by its enormous numerical expansion, certainly in the universities.

# High Apartheid and the Completion of the Transformation

## 1 Introduction

The decade and a half between the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 and the Soweto uprising in 1976 saw the high point of the apartheid regime. It was a period when the repression of the African population was sharpest, and only sporadically met by serious African resistance. The subsequent eighteen years, from the Soweto uprising to the first free elections in 1994, can, in contrast, be categorised as one of intermittent low-level civil war, in which some places and communities were hit more intensely than others. Nevertheless, it was precisely in this period that the hegemony of “modern” material culture became total. Certainly by 1994, and arguably some decades earlier, there were no significant groups of South Africans for whom this did not apply. For much of the period, there were restrictions on the mobility of Africans, and, hence, by impeding the bargaining power of the African employees, on their prosperity. As a result, a major, if rarely articulated, motive for the struggle against the apartheid regime was the desire to be able to acquire goods to a degree which was as yet denied them. Africans, of course, were very well aware of White living standards, much more than were Whites, generally, of those of their Black fellow inhabitants of the country’s towns and cities. It was only to be expected that envy and anger at the restrictions to their advancement were widespread emotions.

## 2 The Macro-economics of Respectability

There were political restrictions on the establishment of an African middle class able to purchase the goods necessary to maintain the status to which they aspired. In addition, the emergence of such a class required that the economy of South Africa would allow it. From the end of World War II (and indeed earlier) to 1973, there was a steady growth in South Africa’s GDP, not only absolutely but also *per capita*. It was, however, a long boom still based on the extraction of primary products, notably gold and agricultural commodities. These industries required, or at least had come to rely on, substantial

quantities of cheap unskilled labourers, many of whom came to the mines as temporary migrants. This was favoured by the apartheid government, which did not wish to see a growing and increasingly prosperous Black community in the towns (except of course in those areas set aside for African occupation, the so-called Bantustans.) There was little incentive for many employers to invest in its African workforce and to improve productivity. And given the low incomes of the mass of Africans, the opportunities for their fellows in commercial and other service sectors were slight.

In the early 1970s, the South African economy suffered a series of severe shocks. The oil crisis of 1973 emphasised the country's vulnerability to the vicissitudes of the world economy. It further exacerbated the consequences of South Africa's reliance on the primary sector, notably mining (especially for gold, but increasingly coal, uranium, and platinum) and agriculture. This was at the expense of the manufacturing and service sectors. In the former particularly, productivity remained low, to the extent that it drove up the price of goods to levels that made them seriously uncompetitive in the world market. The consequences of the shortfall of investment in Black education, and the resultant stunting of a more skilled and more highly motivated labour force – themselves the result of apartheid policies – became steadily more apparent. This could not be remedied by foreign investment, as a result both of the inherent unattractiveness of a relatively high cost, low productivity economy and of political campaigns to impose sanctions upon the country. In the medium term, the stagnation and indeed negative growth rate of the economy would be primarily responsible for the decisions of the White elite to abandon the long-cherished policies of apartheid and White supremacy, and risk the unknown world of universal adult suffrage and its corollary, the dominance of Africans in the country's political life.<sup>1</sup>

The effects of apartheid on African incomes were complicated. On the one hand, per capita income continued to grow from the mid-1940s to the mid-1970s, in real terms (2331 in 1946 – 4289 in 1975, in constant 2000 Rands, that is just over 2% p.a.). Thereafter, it declined during the South African depression of the 1980s, losing 9% between 1975 and 1987, slightly more in percentage terms (though of course a lot less in absolute terms) than White incomes. On the other hand, this increase did not change the relationship between the incomes of the racial groups in South Africa. Historically, average African incomes had hovered around 8% of average White incomes through much of

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1 This paragraph based on Charles H. Feinstein, *An Economic History of South Africa: Conquest, Discrimination and Development*, Cambridge, CUP, 2005, esp. Ch. 9 & 10.

the twentieth century, increasing slightly to 8.9% as a result of the industrialisation boom in the economy as a whole in the early 1940s, and decreasing to a low of 6.8% in 1970, as apartheid measures hit hardest. Thereafter, the ratio began to rise, though slowly. By 1993, it had only reached 10.9%, and even this gain was primarily realised during the “interregnum” after the release of Nelson Mandela from gaol, the unbanning of the ANC and other political parties, and the opening of the formal negotiations which were to lead to majority rule.<sup>2</sup>

Famously, the levels of income inequality within South Africa, as measured by the Gini coefficient, are among the highest for any country in the world (and even approach those of the world as a whole.) This goes back to at least 1970; the data are not good enough to make reasonable estimates before then. Since then, however, the bases of that inequality have been changing slowly. There has been a decrease in the inequality between the racial groups, and an increase in inequality within them. In other words, from at least the early 1970s, the number of Africans whose incomes were well above the average for the African population as a whole has been rising, though the number who have remained in abject poverty has remained very high.<sup>3</sup>

### 3 In the Eyes of the Anthropologists

The tensions deriving from the macro-economic divisions were well documented by Thomas Nyquist, an American social scientist who did research in Makhanda (Grahamstown) in 1966–7 and 1975, among those whom he described as the “African middle class elite”, or rather, to give the isiXhosa designation, the *abaphakamileyo*, or “high ones”. This was how they were represented in the relatively small Eastern Cape university city, where they formed an intermediate reference group for the generally impoverished African community in their struggle for self-improvement: the ultimate reference group were the White inhabitants of the city and elsewhere. For Nyquist, urban Africans in general increasingly rejected “traditional African culture” and sought to live as Europeans, “particularly to enjoy European material benefits”. The result was that the contest for prestige in Makhanda was waged on the

2 M. Leibbrandt et al. (2010), “Trends in South African Income Distribution and Poverty since the Fall of Apartheid”, OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers, No. 101, OECD Publishing, Paris.

3 Leibbrandt et al.; the point is also made that the proportion of Whites in the South African population as a whole has declined from 17% in 1970 to 9% now, which has obvious consequences for the statistical measures.

level of European material culture which each household could achieve. The *abaphakamileyo* measured success by such criteria as “higher education, comfortable homes, expensive clothing, ownership of cars, a wide variety of leisure activities (golf, tennis, travel, reading etc.) professional occupations, higher salaries and organisational leadership.” But these aspirations were blocked off by the actions of the apartheid state and by the individual prejudice of South African Whites.<sup>4</sup>

Nyquist backs up his claims, among other ways, by describing the house of one of the leading members of the Grahamstown African elite, a retired school principal. It was a bungalow, with two small bedrooms and “moderate size” living and dining rooms, and a kitchen.

The living room is clean and neat. On the floor is linoleum laid over wood. The room has two comfortable chairs and a sofa, the latter covered by plastic to protect the surface. Near the sofa is a coffee table. The room has an outdated floor-model radio and a stand in one corner with a telephone on it. All the furniture is solid but undistinguished. Pictures on the walls are largely of relatives, but there is one large wedding picture of the owner and his wife fitted into an oval frame and covered by glass. The windows have curtains of cotton netting.

The dining room has linoleum as well. In the centre is a large table covered by an embroidered tablecloth, Included are six chairs. Set against one wall is a sideboard, old, but in good condition ... Near the entrance to the kitchen is a vintage paraffin refrigerator ... The room also has a sewing machine, a floor model much more elaborate than the small portable models that many people have.

The master bedroom is small and crowded ... [with] a floor-to-ceiling wardrobe built along one wall by an African carpenter ... The room also contains a large bed which sags perceptibly, and a dressing table. The other bedroom is almost devoid of furniture.

The least modern parts of the house were the kitchen and bathroom. The house had no running water, so the bathroom contained merely a washbasin, and the kitchen an “old black wood-stove”, a dilapidated cabinet, and a simple table. At the back of the yard was an outhouse. There was, however, some electricity, mainly used for lighting.<sup>5</sup>

4 Thomas E. Nyquist, *African Middle Class Elite*, p. 3.

5 Nyquist, *African Middle Class Elite*, pp. 49–50.

This does not seem to have been a well-appointed house, certainly by the standards of White South Africa in the early 1970s. Grahamstown, it should be pointed out, was not significantly poorer (or richer) than other cities of approximately its size. The owner of this house was considered to be one of the leaders of Black society in the city, and his house was described by Nyquist's research assistants as "a somewhat better than average upper stratum house." It was, in other words, typical of those houses inhabited by the richer and more respectable members of Makhanda's Black society. This can be seen from a survey, which Nyquist carried out, of 52 families from among the *abaphakamileyo* and another 59 drawn on a random basis from the inhabitants of the locations. It was concerned with the ownership of fairly large (and no doubt expensive) things. The only such object which was common to most households was linoleum for the floor, owned by 94% of the elite and 73% of the community at large. Wirelasses were also fairly widely found (77% and 41%), respectively, while sewing machines were in two-thirds of the elite households, but, somewhat surprisingly, in only 17% in the community at large. Other goods were clearly very much an elite privilege, with fifteen houses having a "kitchen scheme", consisting of a dresser or china cupboard, table and chairs, and fourteen having electricity in the house. Further there were four with a telephone, three with a piano, three with a refrigerator, and one with an incomplete bathroom with "only a modern basin". These were occasionally present in the other houses but even less commonly.

Nyquist also described an "average" house in some detail. This was also a bungalow, with four small rooms, concrete walls and floor, and an asbestos roof. The sitting room had been painted red and blue but was covered in dirt. The windows were covered with a cotton muslin cloth. The floor covering was aged and dirty linoleum. The furniture consisted of "a small, but modern, dining table with six chairs, leaving little space to move around". The head of the family slept in one of the two other rooms, with his wife. This was tiny. "It has a double bed with a mattress, but there are no sheets, just a somewhat ragged blanket. The only other piece of furniture is a scarred chest of drawers. Clothes are piled up about the room as there are no facilities for hanging them up." The kitchen had a wood stove, a wash-stand, a table without chairs and an aged dresser. Utensils lay scattered about.<sup>6</sup>

There is a great contrast between the African community of Makhanda and the top of Soweto society, as described by Susan Middleton Keirn at more or less the same time. Keirn's research project was aimed at analysing

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<sup>6</sup> Nyquist, *African Middle Class Elite*, pp. 52–3.

intra-African stratification in this, the largest of South Africa's townships. In doing so, she ended up concentrating on the Sowetan elite. The individuals and couples for whom she gives extended profiles included four medical doctors, a sales and marketing representative married to a highly qualified nurse, a woman who worked in an advertising agency, the owners of a large supermarket, and another independent businesswoman. These were all positions which were not to be found in Makhanda: it was not a place which attracted African doctors, for instance, whose rarity value meant that they could find positions in the metropolises of the country.

These individuals had homes to match their status in Sowetan society. Some of them were among the few inhabitants of Soweto who had been able to build their own houses; others had altered, or were in the process of altering, one of the small four-roomed municipal houses, which entailed plastering the house both inside and out, adding ceilings, and then building on the additional rooms that they desired. The additions that were made included electric heaters and an anthracite fuelled stove, in one house;<sup>7</sup> a kitchen with vinyl-tile flooring, ceramic tiles behind the sink, colourful curtains, an electric stove, and a refrigerator together with a sideboard to hold drinks, in another; a room which served as a music centre and bar as big as a room in a normal house, in a third; an "American-style" kitchen with built in cupboards and a huge double garage, in a fourth; and new bathroom, in a fifth.<sup>8</sup> In general, the homes of the Sowetan elite in the early 1970s had:

interior toilet and bath facilities, and the current fashion seems to be moving away from the pastel fixtures to those in brown, deep orange, or white. Patterned ceramic tiles, of the type imported from Italy, is used in coordinated colors for flooring and walls, while the ordinary solid-color smaller tiles are popular for use on the walls of kitchens ... Kitchen facilities include built-in cabinets for storage, countertops often color coordinated with the rest of the kitchen décor, plus stove, sink and refrigerator.<sup>9</sup>

These houses were furnished with care and in a coordinated style. Some owners attempted to match the contemporary *avant-garde*, but most used:

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7 No luxury in a Johannesburg winter, as anyone pampered by northern European central heating can testify when in a country which believes it has continual summer.

8 Susan Middleton Keirn, *Scuttling: the social mosaic of Urban Black South Africans*, pp. 79–102.

9 Keirn, *Scuttling*, p. 284.

a more conservative style of décor, some being furnished in a classic style with, for example, velvet sofas and matching chairs, and marble-top individual tables or coffee tables. Lighting in these homes is provided by floor or table lamps, or formal chandeliers, rather than the hanging paper globes of the most contemporary homes. Some owners have used a French provincial style of décor with brocade-upholstered furnishings and heavy window treatments of tied-back full-length drapes over sheer open weave casement fabric. Still other homes use the fashionable massive imitation-leather loose-cushion sofas and matching chairs with exposed wooden arms. These may be complemented with chrome and glass-top tables. Several homes have wood panelling on two walls on either side of the fireplace and built in bookcases which hold, not only books, but stereo components as well.<sup>10</sup>

These sorts of rooms could no doubt have been found in many countries of the world, as was undoubtedly the intention of their owners. In one respect, however, they did recognise their nationality. Several houses, Keirn comments, included “items of African material culture.” What is notable about this is that in no case were they used in their “traditional” function, except that a few women wore beadwork as accessories “for special occasions.” Thus, a clay beer pot was used to house a pot plant. Shields, spoons, and baskets were hung on the wall. Winnowing baskets might be used to hold magazines or newspapers, and larger grain-storage baskets to store miscellaneous pieces of stuff and so forth. Cowhide drums did service as small tables, or again as low stools. These men and women did not deny their African ancestry. They no doubt spoke isiZulu or Setswana among themselves, and could probably have coped well enough in several Bantu languages. The baskets hung from the walls were there to stress a South African identity but at the same time to emphasise the distance of these families from their rural, “traditional”, roots. As Nimrod Mkele commented:

The middle-class man made middle-class friends and married inside the middle class. Some individuals have even denied their parents rather than face the social embarrassment of having to admit to a working class parentage.<sup>11</sup>

10 Keirn, *Scuttling*, p. 287.

11 In *Natal Daily News*, 16.11.1961, as cited by Leo Kuper, *An African Bourgeoisie: Race, Class, and Politics in South Africa*, p. 99. Mkele undoubtedly included the great mass of South Africa's Black rural dwellers among the working class.

At least as to the first part of this statement, he could speak from his own experience. In February 1962, *Drum* published a long account by Nat Nakasa of Mkele's marriage to Edith Hlatshwayo.<sup>12</sup> It was described as a marriage between two members of the elite. Mkele held an MA in Psychology, Edith a BA, which at this stage was rare enough for Nakasa to comment that such a wedding was always going to attract much interest.<sup>13</sup> Mkele had wanted to drive the lobola cattle through the streets of Ermelo, a substantial town about 200 kilometres east of Johannesburg, where Hlatshwayo's parents were presumably living, but, in the end, he paid cash. The ceremony took place in the congregational church of Yeoville, a White suburb of Johannesburg, and the reception was in the Bantu Men's Social Centre.<sup>14</sup> One of Edith's bridesmaids was a White woman, Barbara Howells. The main gifts the couple received were glasses for drinking whisky and other liquors.<sup>15</sup> Nimrod and Edith had clearly designed their wedding to demonstrate their sophistication and their equality with Johannesburg's White middle class, for all that such a claim flew against the hardening political realities.

#### 4 Spending and Shopping

Both the longer-term trends in terms of income and the shorter-term conjunctural problems of the economy in the 1970s and 1980s had their effect on the material culture of South Africans. For the first time, it is possible to trace this more or less systematically and statistically. In and around 1960, the Bureau for Market Research of the University of South Africa conducted budget surveys among the African households of most of the largest conurbations of the country. These showed that around a tenth of African's income was spent on furniture and other household goods, a higher proportion than on any other category of goods except food (around 40%) and clothing (from 11% in Gqeberha to 16% in Cape Town.). This was marginally more than was spent on rent, and substantially more than on any other category, including fuel and

12 Nat Nakasa, "When VIP weds VIP", *Drum*, February 1962. Mkele may have had Nakasa in mind as a denier of his working-class background.

13 According to the surveys in J.J.A. Steenekamp, *Inkomste en besteedingspatrone van stedelike meervoudige huishoudens in die Republiek van Suid-Afrika*, which collates information from a large number of BMR reports, less than 0.2% of the African population of the major cities held a degree around 1960.

14 On the BMSC, see Tim Couzens, "The Social Ethos of Black Writing in South Africa, 1920–50", in Christopher Heywood (Ed.), *Aspects of South African Literature*, pp. 66–81.

15 At least these were the ones that Nakasa noted.

light, medical services, and education. About half of the money was spent on furniture, largely suites for the bedroom, the living room, the dining room, or the kitchen (with surprisingly much more going to kitchen suites in the Gauteng cities as opposed to those on the coast, perhaps a function of availability or advertising, though not particularly of income). There was a clear preference for buying suites of furniture rather than single items, though it is possible that this resulted from pressure applied by the retailers, a significant proportion of whose profits derived from the provision of hire purchase agreements and the subsequent collection of usurious interest. The rest of the purchases in the wider category were above all for household linen, for musical instruments, and for non-electric appliances, with electrically-powered goods making up a very small proportion (well under 1% of total income), as was to be expected given the levels of electrification in the townships.<sup>16</sup>

Alongside the collection of numbers, the Bureau of Market Research had begun to produce analyses of African buying patterns. This was done on the basis of the information the researchers gathered while supervising the collection of budget studies, but also by interviewing the owners and managers of the shops where Africans did much of their purchasing. The most notable of these was a survey done in central Pretoria, which was published, unfortunately enough, as “Motivational factors in Bantu Buying Behaviour”. The researcher, Alice van der Reis, interviewed the owners and managers of forty-five shops in the area around Church Square, all of which had African customers, even if the top of the range furniture and jewellery outlets only had one or two a month. Even in the capital of apartheid, shops were never segregated. In some ways, obviously, Van der Reis was recording White stereotypes about Africans, but, on the other hand, these merchants must have learnt by experience what would sell, and what would not, as otherwise they would have long gone out of business.

The main items purchased in these shops were “soft goods” (mainly material and bedding), pharmaceuticals (mainly face cream, soap, toothpaste, and deodorant), and clothing, for both men and women. The most patronised stores were those known as “bazaars” which sold these goods at the bottom of the market. Nevertheless, the most salient comments in this study related to the elite end of the market. The conventional wisdom of the shopkeepers was that Africans would, whenever possible, buy the best quality of goods that they could afford, particularly when it came to clothing. If they could not afford

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16 The figures are conveniently brought together in Steenkamp, *Inkomste en besteedingspatrone*. On electrification, see Renfrew Christie, *Electricity, Industry and Class in South Africa*.

the best, then, as far as possible, they saved their money until they could. The reasons for this were threefold. First, they were said to have realised that it was more expensive in the long term to buy shoddy goods, which would soon disintegrate, as opposed to the high-level products. Secondly, they wanted to buy in the same shops as the Whites, to make sure they were not cheated. Goods directed exclusively at the African market had no chance of becoming popular. Thirdly, status in the African community, so the Whites saw it, derived from the possession and wearing of expensive goods. The Africans, so it was argued, did not discriminate on the basis of quality but only of price; however, in general goods of lesser quality were also cheaper, as might be expected.<sup>17</sup> There was, however, a distinct difference between the type of purchases made by men and women. In general, the women bought in the “bazaars” and the department stores, while the men went to the specialist shops for their purchases. In part this was because they were buying different things. The women used the stores of central Pretoria to acquire clothing for themselves and their children, and accessories for themselves. They often had only enough money to get what they needed from the bazaars, and if they went to the department stores, then they had a choice across the full price range. The men, in contrast, were fully concerned with the quality, and the prestige value, of what they were buying, and found that their desires were to be fulfilled where they could receive specialist advice. There was, however, a steady trend towards the acquisition of better clothes by African women, and thus a move on their part towards the specialist shops. When a couple had come to the conclusion that their budget would run to such expenditures, the husband was much more likely to accompany his wife in her visits to the high-class outlets. Prestige was, if not an exclusively male concern, was something a man felt obliged to ensure was maintained.<sup>18</sup>

Van der Reis obviously had to explain the patterns of purchasing behaviour which she observed. To a large degree, the shoppers bought what they did for reasons which in fact relate to any form of retail activity. Their purchases were meant to promote the health of the shopper's family, and to make life more convenient, enjoyable, and easy, and so forth. These are the blessings of a consumer society, and the rewards for acquiring the pecuniary wherewithal to permit purchases. It was also clear that many of the purchases were made in order to claim, or to consolidate, status within the African community. But, how was this achieved? Van der Reis, in her comments on advertising directed

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17 Alice P. van der Reis, *Motivational Factors in Bantu Buying Behaviour*.

18 Van der Reis, *Motivational Factors*, pp. 12–21.

at Africans, and, it would appear, many of the shopkeepers implicated “the desire to identify with the ‘Western way of life’”. This was something which was stressed particularly with regard to pharmaceutical products, of which by far the greatest proportion were skin lighteners,<sup>19</sup> and also the better sort of clothing, especially as worn by men. The use of these products, in the eyes of the Whites at any rate, “involves the status gained in the eyes of his [sic] own people by identifying with prestige groups outside his own racial group.”<sup>20</sup> One of the most sophisticated examination of the tensions involved in this came from Christo de Coning, a professor at the Bureau of Market Research of UNISA, and a man with a long experience in organising and conducting the Bureau’s budget studies in the African communities of what was to become Gauteng. He pointed out that, as late as the 1960s, there were Africans in the South African cities whose level of acceptance of “Western” ways varied from the minimal to individuals who were “developed, completely detribalized (even ‘Westernised’)”. As Philip Mayer commented, “In local language this is called being more ‘civilized.’”<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, for the Africans, “Western amenities and facilities made available by the White man – and sometimes forced upon him – tend to remind him of his inferior position.” De Coning continued:

In our social structure the overt difference between the economic and political *powers that be* and their *subordinates* is one of *colour*, namely the difference between White and non-White. [The African’s] self-assertion and his desire to equal or even excel members of those groups in power may find expression in a deliberate imitation of the consumption and buying habits of the White man.<sup>22</sup>

In other words, various forms of conspicuous consumption were considered to be political acts. In part, the display was directed against the White rulers of apartheid South Africa, but at the same time the well-to-do among the Africans provided the models which those with less money would attempt to emulate. “Ownership of certain durable goods, clothes of a certain quality and

19 On these see, Thomas, *Beneath the Surface*.

20 Van der Reis, *Motivational Factors*, p. 45.

21 Philip Mayer, “Class, Status and Ethnicity as Perceived by Johannesburg Africans” in Leonard Thompson & Jeffrey Butler (Eds.), *Change in Contemporary South Africa*, p. 145; “Language” is not quite the right word to describe the way of speech in Soweto: it should surely be “parlance”.

22 C. de Coning, “The Bantu Consumer in a plural society” in *Planning for the Bantu Market*, pp. 9–10.

style and other ‘typically’ American and European goods” had become a symbol of status within the African community, and also a form of protest against the society within which that community – in fact, of course, numerous and fractured communities – existed.<sup>23</sup>

In Soweto in the early 1970s, the antithesis of “civilization” was “tribalism”. Civilized people were those who followed a “modern” way of life. The accoutrements of the “middle-class life-style” in the fashionable section of Dube – “refrigerators, electric cookers, bathroom hot-rails and other amenities” – went unchallenged as markers of status. Nevertheless, inherent in this acceptance of the things of the European Middle Class, in South Africa as much as in Europe or North America, as the objects of aspiration was a concession to the colonial, and apartheid, belief in the superiority of Western Culture. The Black Consciousness movement, with its stress on the need for “consciousness of our cultural heritage”, was in large part a criticism of the logic of things entailed in such thought. N. Chabani Manganyi summarised the argument against which he was reacting as follows:

The Whites had civilization for centuries before us. Throughout history, Western civilization has been accepted as the correct way of life to lead, and has been responsible for the reduction of brutality and barbarism. The Europeans have brought it to us, and therefore, for historical reasons, they are more advanced than us. They are still superior to us in all fields.<sup>24</sup>

This was seen as inducing a crippling inferiority complex which prevented political action. Black Consciousness, as a movement, rejected the “Empire of Things” entailed in the contest for status of the African townships, or at least declared it irrelevant. Steve Biko, for instance, reiterated James Brown’s great message – “Say it loud! I’m black and I’m proud” – and lauded the culture which was emerging as one of “defiance, self-assertion and group pride and solidarity ... Just as it now finds expression in our music and dress, it will spread to other aspects.” Thus, it was to be the immaterial culture of the continent which became, at least for the intellectuals of Black Consciousness, the yardstick of personal worth.<sup>25</sup>

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23 De Coning, “Bantu Consumer”, p. 9.

24 N. Chabani Manganyi, *Being Black in the World*, p. 10.

25 Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like*, p. 47; c.f. Bernhard Magubane, “A Critical Look at Indices Used in the Study of Social Change in Colonial Africa”, *Current Anthropology*, 12, pp. 419–445; Mayer, “Class, Status and Ethnicity”, pp. 156–7; Daniel R. Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets: Black Consciousness in South Africa, 1968–1977*, p. 46.

## 5 Patterns of Use and Possessions

From the early 1970s, it is possible to trace the consumption patterns of South Africans in a more systematic and statistical fashion. This can be done on the basis of the market research carried out by the South African Advertising [later Audience] Research Foundation. This was set up to provide independent survey information for the advertising industry, on the basis of a 0.5% levy on the turnover of the participating organisations – later raised to 1%.<sup>26</sup> The centrepiece of their work was and remains the *All Media and Products Survey*, which essentially provides the information on the basis of which advertisers and manufacturers can decide in which newspaper, magazine, radio, or television programme they can best place their advertisements. In the great majority of cases, however, the information provided allows statements to be made about the purchasing habits and, to a degree, about the possessions of the population as a whole, and its various “racial” or linguistic components, irrespective of their media preferences.

Any survey is at best as good as the sample on which it is based. So far as can be gathered, this was constructed with considerable care. Initially, only Urban Blacks were included in the sample,<sup>27</sup> 3051 in the first (1973) enquiry. Shortly afterwards, rural Blacks too were included in the frame, and the number interviewed rose to 7025 in 1982. These were distributed around the country strictly on the basis of their presumed numbers. The results of the first survey were delayed because it was discovered that the Black population of Welkom in the Free State was substantially higher than had been originally believed, so that a number of extra interviews had to be carried out in order to make the sample sufficiently representative. Again, there is little or no information as to who the interviewers were, in the first instance. They were all employed by the firms who were contracted to carry out the survey, and not by SAARF itself. It was, however, claimed that they knew the locations in which they worked well, and conducted all interviews in the home language of the interviewee. At least in the first years, SAARF sent the completed interview forms to a firm which organised both the data entry and the computer calculations, so that SAARF only received around fifty sets of computer print-outs, around four large lever files each, which were then distributed to its clients.<sup>28</sup>

26 *A History of the South African Advertising Research Foundation; written to commemorate the 25th Anniversary of SAARF.*

27 Alongside Whites, Coloureds and Asians, from all parts of the country.

28 Information from the staff of SAARF, 2011.

It is difficult to decide which products can best serve as proxies for the total packet of western goods that was taken on board by the mass of the Black population of South Africa, in any event by the later decades of the twentieth century. There are three categories of information in the volumes of the SAARF, namely the products which are regularly purchased, those the respondents “intend buying or replacing in the next twelve months”, and “domestic appliances in the home”. Many of the goods which were surveyed were such that some groups of people would not buy them, however well integrated to “Western” material culture they were. Alcoholic beverages, for instance, would not have been bought by the members of various Christian churches. Men’s and women’s clothing, though worn by everyone, was not necessarily purchased in the period under investigation. Migrant labourers, living in the mining compounds, would not have bought furniture, at least until they were on the verge of returning home. Similar comments could be made about almost all the products on SAARF’s list, including, for instance, pills to combat headaches and indigestion. Household soap, unfortunately, was not on SAARF’s list. Of the products investigated, that which, it seems to me, would be the most universally used by those who had taken on board the norms of the “West” was toothpaste. Moreover, at least according to the most comprehensive compilation of evidence on Black material culture which had not been absorbed by the “West”, there was no indigenous equivalent. There are mentions of fibrous sticks, ashes, and charcoal being used to keep teeth clean, or of grass being employed for the same purpose. In other words, the “Western” methods of mouth hygiene were new to most Africans.<sup>29</sup>

The use of toothpaste was general by the early 1970s. In total, 71.0% of urban Africans described themselves as heavy users, and another 11.7% as light or medium users. Thus only 17.2% admitted to never using toothpaste. As to other notable distinctions, women were fractionally more likely than men to use toothpaste (83.6% as against 82.3%), and there was a steady decline in use as income decreased, with 86.9% of those in households with more than R150 a month having a usage rating of heavy, as opposed to 59.7% for those whose household income was below R50. Two (almost certainly substantially overlapping) categories of people were notably less likely than others to use toothpaste, namely those above the age of fifty, 45.0% of whom never used toothpaste, and the illiterate (41.9%).<sup>30</sup> Four years later, the inclusion of rural

29 Shaw and van Warmelo, “The Material Culture of the Cape Nguni: Part 4”, pp. 707–8; for a frightening picture of a South African community which used sugar but without modern dentistry, see A.H.M. Scholtz, *Vatmaar: ‘n Lewendagge verhaal van ‘n tyd wat nie meer is nie*, p. 3.

30 SAARF, Product data Urban Bantu, 1973.

Africans in the sampling frame changed the balance of the statistics. SAARF assumed that 62.7% of the African population lived in the rural areas, and discovered that only 59.8% of them used toothpaste, as opposed to 73.2% of those living in cities, towns, and villages. Again, it was primarily the elderly, the illiterate, and the poor who found other ways to keep their teeth clean, with only 34.2%, 46.3%, and 43.6%, respectively, never using the contents of the tubes.<sup>31</sup> A decade later, in 1987, the use of toothpaste had become virtually universal among South Africa's Blacks. 89.4% claimed to use toothpaste at least once a week – probably generally once a day – and 30.5% several times a day. As before, it was the elderly (68.0% users for those over 50), the illiterate (67.5%), and the poor (82.2% for those with an income under R400 per month) who depressed the totals.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, in this most intimate of personal activities, “Western” habits had completely taken over.

In addition to the consumables, for which there was a steady, if changing, market, SAARF, the advertisers it served, and behind them the manufacturers, were naturally enough interested in the consumer durables which Africans had in their houses. To a large degree, Africans' choices in this matter was determined by the chance as to whether they were connected to the electricity grid. There were sharp differences in this. In Wattville, a Black suburb of Benoni, built in the early 1950s, every house had electricity, and indeed there was street lighting outside.<sup>33</sup> This was an exception. Soweto, the largest African residential area in the country, which was largely built in the 1950s, was initially very largely off the grid. The chief distribution engineer for the municipal electricity provider, later commented that:

at no point [in the early development of Soweto] was electricity considered, because they [the residents] seldom bathed, and there was therefore little need for hot water. In any case, they could hardly afford food, they were so poor ... and electricity was non-payable. The only things that were provided were those that were payable.<sup>34</sup>

31 SAARF, *Product Profiles Blacks*, 1977.

32 SAARF, *Product data Blacks 1987*; the data do not distinguish between urban and rural dwellers.

33 Feyder, *Portraits of Resilience*, pp. 254–5.

34 Cited in Helen Meintjes, “Washing Machines make Lazy Women’: Domestic appliances and the negotiations of Women’s Property in Soweto” *Journal of Material Culture*, 6, pp. 345–363.

And this despite the fact that one of the main power stations of Greater Johannesburg was at Orlando, surrounded by the electricity-less parts of Soweto.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the technocrats who planned the expansion of urban housing for Blacks in the 1950s saw little advantage in electrifying the houses they planned. D.M. Calderwood, of the National Building Research Institute, commented that “the increasing demands of occupants for built-in fittings and luxury items like electrical appliances ... tend to reduce the size and quality of the building”, presumably by driving up the cost of building above that which was budgeted.<sup>36</sup> Equally, J.E. Mathewson, Director of Non-European Affairs in Benoni, in a book which describes the decisions taken in the establishment of the township of Daveyton, noted that “power points encourage the use of electrical appliances” – apparently not something which was to be encouraged – and a single one was installed for each house, in the kitchen because that was where the ironing was done, and the electric iron was the most commonly used appliance. He did allow, however, for one lighting point in each room.<sup>37</sup> These were decisions made by men who had never wished to listen to the radio and do the ironing simultaneously, indeed who had probably never ironed a shirt in their lives. In Europe, feedback from the women who did have to make these sorts of choices was sufficient to provide enough power points (and power) to change the design of domestic electricity provision;<sup>38</sup> in South Africa, no-one with any influence over such matters listened to the complaints.

The absence of electricity from the mass of even urban Black families is evident in the appliances they had in their houses. By far the most common of the goods they had was a coal stove, probably the Welcome Dover cast iron stoves which kept the house warm as well as providing a range on which to cook. These were owned by 62.6% of the households surveyed. They were significantly more common in what was then the Transvaal and the Orange Free State than in the coastal provinces, as indeed could be expected by anyone who has experienced a High Veld winter.<sup>39</sup>

The stoves themselves had a symbolic function within the homes. In addition to providing heat, in the form of a good fug, they were also seen as the fire

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35 Christie, *Electricity, Industry and Class*, p. 128.

36 Calderwood, “Investigation”, p. 24.

37 J. E. Mathewson, *The Establishment of an Urban Bantu Township*, Pretoria, J.L. van Schaik, 1957, pp. 49–52.

38 Frank Trentmann, *Empire of Things: How we became a world of consumers, from the fifteenth century to the twenty-first*, pp. 248–9.

39 The percentages were 40.4% for the Cape, and 44.6% for Natal, as opposed to 72% for the Transvaal and 67.6% for the Free State.



FIGURE 10 Doreen Ngilima on the sofa she bought with her first pay packet  
 NGILIMA COLLECTION, UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, COURTESY  
 OF THE NGILIMA FAMILY

in the house which could provide a link to the ancestors. They thus formed the focus of family life, providing a comforting nostalgia of “traditional” life for those who had been brought up in the countryside and had had to rebuild the meaning of space in an environment in which the social life of the residential group was no longer conducted in the open air.<sup>40</sup> The stove thus formed some sort of compensation for the necessity to cook and to eat secluded, as

40 Important consultations took place in enclosed spaces, such as a Tswana *kgotla*, but these were open to the heavens; houses were used merely to sleep, to make love, or for private discussions between, for instance, a husband and a wife, not for broader political debate or for eating.

it were, from those around them. But there was, however, conflict, when electricity finally arrived in the houses of the Black townships, between the more elderly women, for whom such considerations had weight, and their daughters, daughters-in-law, or grand-daughters, on whom the task of keeping the coal stove clean and functioning devolved. For them, cooking and heating the house with electricity was both cleaner and more modern. In this way, they avoided the daily labour of setting the fire, and ensuring it was ready to cook the evening meal, of scrubbing the stove, to prevent it smoking, and of washing the curtains which inevitably became soiled in an atmosphere dominated by the coal fire. It was one of the many terrains in which the conflict of the generations was played out, although there were also households in which the weekly cleaning of the stove was assigned to the adolescent boys as part of their regular chores.<sup>41</sup>

The other goods to be found in many households were portable radios, which of course ran on batteries, and radiograms, a combination of a radio and a record player, which may have done. These were to be found in 36.2% and 33.5% of households. There was also a sprinkling of households with cassette players, hi-fi sets, or ordinary record players, although their owners may have had a very limited collection of records to play on them.<sup>42</sup> There were also sewing machines, driven either by a foot pedal or a hand wheel, which again were to be found in just under a third of households. Refrigerators, probably mainly fuelled with paraffin, and paraffin heaters were both to be found in about a tenth of the houses. But the electricity driven appliances were very rare. A single brave individual, out of 988 households, owned a deep freeze, eleven owned washing machines, two had vacuum cleaners, one an electric food mixer, and not a single family had a dish washing machine. Nor did anyone have a television set, but that was because television broadcasts were not begun in South Africa until 1974, having been held back by the conservatism of National Party rule.<sup>43</sup>

Fourteen years later, as apartheid approached its end, a very different pattern is evident. In part, this was because SAARF's sampling frame had changed. 55.4% of the 4186 households from which data were collected lived in communities with under 200 inhabitants, thus in the deep countryside (including the

41 Meintjes, "Washing Machines Make Lazy Women", pp. 345–63; Gunner, *Radio Soundings*, p. 122; on the spatial alphabet, see above all, Adam Kuper, *Wives for Cattle: Bridewealth and marriage in Southern Africa*, Ch. 10.

42 *Drum*, June 1958.

43 Rob Nixon, *Homelands, Harlem and Hollywood: South African Culture and the World Beyond*.

Bantustans), and a large number were undoubtedly to be found in the informal settlements which had developed in many parts of the country, most notably on the Cape Flats (Crossroads and so forth) and in the Winterveld to the north of Pretoria. As against this, the electrification of the legal suburbs had increased substantially. As a result of these contrasting developments, the proportion of houses with stoves (of any sort, not just coal fired) had diminished considerably, to 57.9%. This included the paraffin stoves which were thought ideal for the slow cooking required by the main dishes in the standard African diet, namely samp (coarse ground maize porridge) and beans. On the other hand, they were dangerously unstable, and on occasion were thrown across the house in a drunken argument. This led to many fires, particularly in the informal settlements where many houses were crammed into tiny spaces.<sup>44</sup>

The other goods which were widely owned included televisions, to be found in 27.7% of households, though they were much more common in the cities, being found in nearly half (48.2%) of dwellings in places with a population of 100,000 or more, in contrast to a mere 15.8% in the countryside. Radios of various types were much more common, 86.2% in total, but nevertheless marginally more common in the countryside (87.8%) than in the larger towns (84.9%). The total proportion with hi-fi music centres was 31.7%, of which there were relatively more in the cities than in the countryside, but not that much more (34.6% as against 28.9%). The proportion of houses with a refrigerator too had gone up to 24.7%, although these too were much more common in the cities, with 44.1% as against 14.5% in the countryside. Finally, automatized washing machines, whether for dishes or for clothes, and vacuum cleaners were very rare, at 0.6%, 2.1%, and 1.3%, respectively.

To some extent, undoubtedly, the relative lack of washing machines, dish-washers, or vacuum cleaners may have been the result of difficulties with plumbing and electricity provision. However, their absence was much more a consequence of the expected tasks for women within marriages, and society in general. Helen Meintjes, who did anthropological field work in Soweto and other African townships in the early 1990s, recorded that her informants, both men and women, saw hand washing as one of the tasks of a wife. As one of the men said: "Washing machines make lazy women. Our culture does not allow for washing machines." Another man commented that those young girls who want to own and use these "labour-saving" appliances had "'modernized' too

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44 Leslie Bank, "The Social Life of Paraffin", *African Studies*, 56(2) pp. 157–79; idem, "Men with Cookers: Transformations in Migrant Culture, Domesticity and Identity in Duncan Village, East London", *Journal of Southern African Studies* 25(3) pp. 393–416.

much". For once, and at least for a while, "tradition" and "culture" had trumped the urge towards a consumer society.<sup>45</sup>

## 6 Class, Class Consciousness, and the Struggle

This was one of the few fields in which the drive for the acquisition of things was tempered from within the African community. In general, prestige derived from the possession and display of specific objects. But at a deeper level, what was going on in the urban African areas, such as Soweto, was a process of class formation, the tortuous and frequently resisted creation of the African Middle Class, and, as a corollary and much less definitely, that of the mass who had not the wherewithal to gain entry into that Middle Class.

There are theoretical problems with the identification of an African middle class before 1994. Class, as E.P. Thompson famously described it, is a "relationship, and not a thing."<sup>46</sup> So, to whom were the nascent class relating, above all setting themselves off against, as they thought of themselves as such? Certainly, the idea of class was not strange to the inhabitants of the Black townships. By the first decade of the twenty-first century, upwards of 90% of the inhabitants of Soweto, and a similar proportion of Blacks in Cape Town, were able to answer researchers' questions as to their class.<sup>47</sup> This was not a new phenomenon. In the 1960s and 1970s, Philip Mayer's research in Soweto found that the township's inhabitants were consistent in making a distinction between legal

45 Meintjes, "Washing machines make lazy women", pp. 349–51; it is of course possible that if anthropologists had been present at earlier introductions of new goods they would have commented how, at least temporarily, "tradition" trumped "innovation". (I owe this point to Lynn Thomas).

46 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 11. For comments on the use of Thompson in South African historiography, see Jonathan Hyslop, "E.P. Thompson in South Africa: The Practice and Politics of Social History in an Era of Revolt and Transition", *International Review of Social History* 61(1), pp. 95–116; Peter Delius, "E.P. Thompson, 'Social History and South African Historiography, 1970–1990'", *Journal of African History*, 58(1), pp. 3–17; T. Dunbar Moodie (2020) "Using E.P. Thompson to think about South African history: notes on a personal journey", *Social History*, 45(4), pp. 412–426; Clive Glaser, "Thompson on the highveld? Social history and humanist socialism in South Africa in the 1980s and early 1990s", *Social History*, 45(4), pp. 427–439; Stephen Sparks, "The peculiarities of South African history: Thompsonian social history and the limits of colonialism", *Social History*, 45(4), pp. 440–452.

47 Peter Alexander, "Affordability and Action: Introduction and overview", in Peter Alexander et al., *Class in Soweto*, p. 28; also citing Jeremy Seekings, "Perceptions of Class in Post-Apartheid South Africa", *CSSR Working Paper* 198, p.14.

residents in Soweto and those who were not. The former group was then further divided in three groups: first, the “ordinary working people”, mainly unskilled or semi-skilled workers or domestic servants, who nevertheless also thought of themselves as the “middle people”, between those who were not permanent residents and the townships better-off (thus far from any sociologists’ view of the middle class); secondly, the “better-off”, generally also the “better educated”, who included drivers, teachers, policemen, sales representatives, clerks, and indeed some professional people; and, thirdly, the “top people”, mainly living in a prestigious section of Dube, and known as “Dubenheimers”.<sup>48</sup>

Between the late 1950s and sometime in the late 1970s, the apartheid state’s policy towards the urban Africans was one of “class compression”.<sup>49</sup> Since, according to the ruling ideology, Africans were only temporarily in the cities, there was no need to provide better housing for the more prosperous. The divisions that the state made were those of ethnicity, and the various portions, for instance of Soweto, were assigned to one or other of the putative nationalities into which apartheid divided the African population of the country. This had the effect of ensuring that families of substantially different socio-economic status came to live next to each other, all in the similar “Matchbox” houses which were erected across South Africa’s Black townships.<sup>50</sup> The relationships within the African population were thus not those of a class antagonism, despite the general awareness of social status. The distinctions that were made were above all those which derived from the greater income of, in general, the better educated (though the wages of, for instance, a schoolteacher remained very low, certainly in relation to that garnered by Whites doing the same job under easier conditions.) Thus, differentiation came through consumption, and had to be seen as such. As Joyce Siwane explained to an interviewer, class distinction was expressed in the Zulu term *dayazikhona* (“being able to afford”), or in other words:

You could afford to provide for your kids, in terms of food and clothing – you could afford smart clothing for your kids and yourself. In terms of the township fashion sense, you would be better dressed. Remember, because people didn’t have investment opportunities, they used to dress very expensively, because that was the only way of self-expression.<sup>51</sup>

48 Mayer, “Class Status and Ethnicity”; see also Ellen Hellmann, *Soweto: Johannesburg’s African City*.

49 Kim Wale, “Historical introduction to class in Soweto”; Alexander et al., *Class in Soweto*, p. 37.

50 Calderwood, *Investigation*, passim.

51 Cited in Wale, “Historical Introduction”, p. 42.

This, then, makes it clear how the African middle class came to define itself. On the one hand, its main adversary was the South African state, and the White population of whatever socio-economic or political position which was blocking the material advance of educated, “Westernised”, and ambitious Africans. In the high days of apartheid under Verwoerd and Vorster, there was a concerted attack on the position of the Black middle class, however defined, who were to be persuaded to relocate their activities to the Bantustans. This entailed, for instance, the destruction of mission schools, the true foundations of respectable life, and their replacement with the much hated “Bantu education.” It also meant that economic divisions could no longer be expressed in terms of better housing, since almost all those who were legal inhabitants of say, Johannesburg would acquire very similar housing, with little chance of the clear distinction which the richer members of society envisaged. In the aftermath of the Soweto uprising of 1976, the nationalist rulers of South Africa attempted to change track, to turn the Black middle class into allies, or, at the very least, put them in such a position where they had more to lose than to gain from a return to rebellion. There were places where this may have worked, at least in part. The continuation of the Soweto uprising in the 1980s, under the auspices of the United Democratic Front, did not have the same intensity throughout the country.<sup>52</sup> But the means at the disposal of the state were insufficient to buy off the complete middle class, particularly as the South African economy stuttered badly at that time. With hindsight, betting on the Black opposition or, even more, keeping one’s head down and not choosing sides were the smartest options. The Black middle class could in this way come closest to realising its desires, in which the material and the political were inextricably intertwined.

This strategy entailed, on the other hand, eventually creating and emphasising the distance between the middle class and those who thought of themselves as the “middle people.” In the short term, though, the middle class could not be seen to be withholding support from The Struggle. This would have been, in many places, suicidal. Nor was it in their interest to do so, since it was evident to anyone that they would be treated as subordinate to the Whites until the political system was fully changed. Indeed, surveys showed that it was precisely the incipient members of the Black middle class whose commitment

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52 Ineke van Kessel, *Beyond Our Wildest Dreams: The United Democratic Front and the Transformation of South Africa*; Jeremy Seekings, *The UDF: A History of the United Democratic Front in South Africa, 1983–1997*; Tshepo Moloi, *Place of Thorns: black political protest in Kroonstad from 1976*; Tom Lodge, *All, Here, and Now: Black Politics in South Africa in the 1980s*.

to The Struggle was the greatest. On the basis of one such survey, it was concluded that “the [political] culture of the Black educated elite” was one of “militancy, pride, and an assertion of rights to share South Africa equally with Whites.” In another, it was found that “if faced with a choice, between 70 and 80 per cent [of Africans] preferred equality with Whites and lower material gain rather than continued inequality coupled with higher material gain.”<sup>53</sup> This was of course the socially acceptable answer, but nevertheless it was undoubtedly a true reflection of the stance of at least the youth in the African townships. Many of them were school graduates who had been unable to find jobs as a result of the contracting economy. But again, it was the decisions on consumption, deriving from a vision of status, which drove participation in anti-government activities.

The problem with this argument is of course that no-one would directly comment that they were engaged in The Struggle in order to acquire goods or in order to set themselves aside from the rest of the African population – The Struggle was supposed to be about communities – or simply to get rich. It is difficult to strike a balance between the frustration brought about by the (effectively) absolute deprivation of political rights for the populations of the African townships, and their relative deprivation of goods, services, and general comfort, certainly in comparison to the Whites with whom they shared, and did not share, the cities in former, and thus that a political solution should first be sought. However, the behaviour of this group of people after the attainment of political equality strongly suggests that the hope of future enrichment was by no means foreign to the minds of those who participated in political action under the auspices of the United Democratic Front, and thus, by extension, of the African National Congress.

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53 Surveys conducted by Laurence Schlemmer and cited in John D. Brewer, *After Soweto: An unfinished Journey*, pp. 7, 22.

## Epilogue: A Consumer Society

In the latter years of the twentieth century, as is well known, South Africa underwent a fundamental political transformation, at least at the level of the constitution and the legislature. For the first time, governments, both national and local, were elected on the basis of universal adult suffrage. The old rules, which under apartheid had ensured the maintenance of White supremacy, were done away with. Blacks could be employed at all levels in all jobs, and there was considerable effort and resources applied to ensuring that, as far as possible, Black economic advance was promoted. As a result, the brakes which had depressed Black consumption were removed. Incomes of at least a significant proportion of Blacks began to rise, though poverty rates have remained shockingly high, and the levels of inequality have if anything changed for the worse. Credit could now be raised with property as a collateral, at least by those who had already gotten a place on the social ladder. The Black middle class, which had been deliberately repressed under apartheid, now began to make itself in all respects. They were the group which benefitted most from the transformation of South Africa's political economy, however partial that may have been, and still is. To a large extent, the growth of South Africa's Gross Domestic Product has been driven by the spending power of this group. South Africa has become, more than ever before, a society of consumers.<sup>1</sup>

There is much about the post-1994 history of South Africa which was not predicted at the moment of political transition in that year. The hopes of that time have not been met in a number of ways, political, social, and economic, although it must also be said that those who feared the total collapse of the country have not had their fears justified. One of the most salient of the continuities since before 1994 has been in terms of income inequality. The country's Gini coefficient in this regard has remained stable, and very high, consistently among the highest in the world. Nevertheless, the nature of that inequality has changed substantially. Before 1994, the level of inequality was driven by the great variance between the various racial groups – Africans, Coloureds, Indians, and Whites – while within each of these groups (except perhaps the Coloureds) there was a greater measure of equality. Above all, apartheid

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1 E.g., Roger Southall, *The New Black Middle Class in South Africa*; Colin Bundy, *Short-Changed? South Africa since Apartheid*; Jeremy Seekings & Nicolai Nattrass, *Policy, Politics and Poverty in South Africa*.

regulations ensured that the number of Africans who became rich was limited, and conversely the number of poverty stricken Whites was relatively small. With the abandonment of the brakes, which apartheid and Afrikaner nationalism placed upon economic stratification, the result has been that the differences between the four racial groups have declined, though clearly they still exist, while the level of inequality among, in particular, the country's Africans, has grown dramatically. These two phenomena have effectively cancelled each other out, so that the final statistical result has remained surprisingly, and disappointingly, stable.

A continued inequality of income did not necessarily mean that the standard of living of the poorest members of South African society remained constant (and horrendous). However, what has improved can generally not be quantified as income. To some extent this has been mitigated by a steadily increasing access in even the poorest communities to piped water, flush toilets, and electricity. By 2011, the proportion of households with such access had risen to 73.4%, 60%, and 85%, respectively.<sup>2</sup> Such matters have made a notable difference to the lives of South Africa's very poor, without necessarily adding one single cent to their income. Furthermore, a generalised increase of income will have had no effect on the Gini coefficient. Both of these factors have been at work in South Africa. This can be most easily seen by using the Lifestyle Measurement indices of the SAARF. These show that the proportion of Black South Africans in the lowest categories has consistently declined over the last twenty years or so. At the same time, a variety of grants from the central government, in the form of Old Age Pensions, child support, and disability grants have provided an income for many rural dwellers, where previously none was available.<sup>3</sup> However, unemployment remains rife. Therefore, the group which had previously been the main earners of African society, and who were expected to be so, namely men between the ages of eighteen and, say, fifty-five, were now those who depended most on their families for a level of support without which they could scarcely survive, let alone bring their children up. It is, for them, a sour state of affairs, and one which is responsible for much of the drunkenness and violence of modern South African society.

In terms of the arguments of this book, this is perhaps irrelevant. The material transformation had been very largely completed before 1994. What has happened since then has been the normal fluctuations of fashion and of taste, and perhaps in some things the development of a specifically South African

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2 Figures from the 2011 census cited in Bundy, *Short-changed? South Africa since Apartheid*, p. 48.

3 James Ferguson, *Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution*.

style. In all essentials, though, South Africa is fully integrated into the global world of consumption.<sup>4</sup> This integration is clearly the work, and the ambition, of those people who have come to be known as the New Black Middle Class.<sup>5</sup> There are many ways to define the categories by which outsiders, or insiders, can judge who should be considered as belonging to the middle class. Some of them are literal, and not very useful, such as the assumption that the “middle class” are those whose income is within a given range of that of the median incomes for household incomes across the country as a whole. This can lead to the absurdity that various members of the middle class, as so defined, are in fact existing at, or scarcely above, the official level of poverty.<sup>6</sup> More useful criteria tend to cluster in two ways. Either the middle class is defined by what they have and use, or by what they do. These two approaches, that based on consumption and that on production, are of course in the first instance diagnostic tools, which also, in the end, lead to the inclusion of very much the same set of people in the category.<sup>7</sup> Of course that category is not homogenous, and the criteria used to classify the middle class, or its sections, end up producing fairly arbitrary boundary points on what is a continuum of wealth, status, and possessions.

One thing, however, is certain. The “rise” of the middle class entails, almost by definition, an increase in the level of stratification within society. The one is the converse of the other. The acquisition of goods sets their possessors off from those who do not have them. As a result, there is much material competition among those who are simultaneously struggling to remain within the ranks of the respectable.

This is one of those terrains where the depth of anthropological enquiry outweighs the breadth of, for instance, market research. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, in the 1990s Helen Meintjes did fieldwork in Soweto (and an informal settlement on the West Rand) into the use made of electrical appliances – fridges, stoves, heaters, televisions (now available in the country), sound systems, as well as the absence of washing machines and other such domestic appliances, including vacuum cleaners and floor polishers. Many of the people with whom she worked found it difficult to keep themselves solvent, and some were seriously in debt. Nevertheless, Meintjes’ informants did all they could to avoid giving the impression that they were poor. For them,

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4 For an understanding of this, see Trentmann, *Empire of Things*.

5 Southall, *New Black Middle Class*.

6 Justin Visagie & Dorrit Posel, “A Reconsideration of what and who is middle class in South Africa”, *Development Southern Africa*, 30(2), pp. 149–167.

7 Southall, *New Black Middle Class*, pp. 41–64.

poverty was “an embarrassment, [a] failure ... improper. It was therefore worth hiding.”<sup>8</sup> One of them, whose kitchen was immaculate, had acquired two fridges, one “an aged giant”, the other a leaving present when she retired. She kept them both running, even though they were hardly ever anything like full. It did come in useful when she filled up her stores at the end of the month. Her explanation, given with a secretive smile, was “It’s decoration! People will come and say ‘Ooh, that Winnie, she’s rich. She’s got two fridges’ ... It’s good to be on top sometimes. It’s good not to look poor.” The demonstration of the right household goods established that their owner was living according to the rules of “propriety”, that which is proper.<sup>9</sup> Those who failed to live according to propriety, for instance by still cooking on a paraffin stove, might suffer damage to their reputation, and indeed their income, in consequence. In consequence, they often kept broken goods, such as televisions, purely for display.<sup>10</sup>

The same desire to impress, and to be considered much richer than one actually is, can be seen, for instance, in the Rotating Credit and Savings Associations (ROSCAs, also known by the Afrikaans appellation *stokvels*). In these groups, at each monthly meeting, each individual member puts a certain amount of money into a common pot, which is then taken by each of the members in turn. For this to function, there must be a considerable level of trust among the members, so that people can be sure that those who have had their “birthdays” continue to contribute for those who come after them. Nevertheless, such associations have become established within months of a particular informal settlement coming into existence. They provide the members of such an association with efficient, and relatively safe, means of saving, so as to allow the purchase of larger items, or alternatively to allow the performance of the expensive rituals required after the death of a close relative. There is nowhere safe to keep money in the shacks of an informal settlement, and the banks have moved slowly to open branches in these areas.<sup>11</sup>

8 Helen Meintjes, *Poverty, Possessions and ‘Proper Living’: Constructing and Contesting Propriety in Soweto and Lusaka City*, p. 48.

9 Meintjes, *Poverty, Possessions and ‘Proper Living’*, pp. 48–50f. While “proper” means something like “right, correct, as it should be” in English, in Dutch and Afrikaans it carries the meaning “tidy, neat, clean, hygienic”. Meintjes does not say if this latter meaning has also crossed over into the Soweto usage, but it would seem likely.

10 In my limited experience, I have noted that it is not uncommon for hosts to turn on the television, even without sound, when guests arrive. This is a matter of politeness, not of rudeness (as it would be in Europe).

11 Erik Bähre, *Money and Violence: Financial Self-Help Groups in a South African Township*; Deborah James, *Money from Nothing: Indebtedness and Aspiration in South Africa*, esp. Ch. 4.

The ROSCAS, of course, do not just perform a valuable financial service, and allow the creation of quasi-kinship bonds on the basis of which new migrants to the city can establish networks of support. They also provide an arena for competition and display between the members. It is a competition based on what a participant can give, not on what she has. However, because the recipient feels obligated to return the gift to an equal extent, over-lavish donations can be highly embarrassing. Erik Bähre, an anthropologist who worked in the informal settlements of Cape Town, shows how the gift of a complete bedroom suite – bed, dressing table, bedside table, mirror, and duvet cover – was the affirmation by the group of women of their acceptance of the recipient. As Bähre commented, “poor African migrant women establish a home, a substantial sense of security, and perhaps even a touch of euphoria, even as they reside in a new and dangerous city. Consumer products and money were pivotal to the creation of such an environment.”<sup>12</sup> As against this, the size of the gift and the obligations it entailed, led to great strains for the recipient, and seems to have triggered what was expressed as a feeling of being bewitched, which might be culturally translated as a severe nervous breakdown.

The ROSCAS, certainly the one that Bähre studied in detail, may allow the development of a system of “fictive kinship” between the participants. The women in question see themselves as mothers, daughters, sisters, and so on, on the basis of the sponsorship which they received on entering the association. In contrast to “non-fictive” kinship, it is possible for a neophyte to choose who will be her “mother”, and indeed if things do not work out, it is possible, if difficult, to change “mothers”. Friendships are thus created and sustained within the grammar which the women brought with them from the Eastern Cape.

Nevertheless, the move to the city did not mean that “real” kinship ties have disappeared. In Erik Bähre’s survey of the perceived trustworthiness of various institutions and categories of individuals, a person’s “own relatives” were considered much safer than members of a ROSCA (and only marginally less so than banks).<sup>13</sup> For those who are fighting their way out of the poverty of township life, this entails solving impossible dilemmas. They need to find an acceptable compromise between the demands of their relatives for support in cash-strapped lives, on the one hand, and, on the other, their own desire to accumulate and to establish households for their own nuclear family, and also, in most cases, to prove themselves in the competition with their peers. The

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12 Bähre, *Money and Violence*, pp. 158–9.

13 Erik Bähre, *Ironies of Solidarity: Insurance and Financialization of Kinship in South Africa*, p. 109.

obligations to relatives, often described as the “Black Tax”,<sup>14</sup> can be unavoidable, particularly those towards parents who have sacrificed much in the hope that their educated offspring will get good jobs, and the expectation, if they do so, that they will fund their seniors’ old age. Certainly, those who have gained upward social mobility by passing exams, and who still have many relatives in considerable poverty, find the pressures very substantial. In her ethnography of debt in South Africa, Deborah James describes one woman who has made the pragmatic choice of funding her younger sisters through university, with the argument that she will be called upon to provide them with money in due course anyway, and that it is therefore best to put her siblings in a position from which they could earn a good income. This was accompanied by a rigorous refusal to engage in the expensive life-style of her fellows with regard to eating out, buying and furnishing a house, running a car, and so forth. Exceptionally, she has not succumbed to the culture of things, and consequently was not in debt.<sup>15</sup>

At the top end of the group described as the middle class, or perhaps those who have risen beyond its bounds, are those known, at least for a time, as the “Black Diamonds”, a small group of individuals and their families, who have gotten exceedingly rich, largely on the basis of their connections with political power (this is not, it should be pointed out, a euphemism for corruption, though it does not exclude such dubiously legal forms of wealth accumulation). These are those who are able to flaunt their wealth, and thus to engage in conspicuous consumption.<sup>16</sup> As Zakes Mda noted in his closely observed novel *Black Diamond*, among the Black rich there has emerged a great attachment not just to the possessions of modernity, but above all to the brands whose ownership enhanced their possessor’s prestige.<sup>17</sup> As with their predecessors in the 1950s, they are not prepared to be fobbed off with anything less than the best.

To some extent, this behaviour has been sanctioned by the “so-called prosperity gospel”, as proclaimed, among others, by a number of Neo-Pentecostal churches. These hold to a number of doctrines which have long been considered heretical within mainstream Christianity – if anything can still be so considered. The basic tenet is that believers should be able to enjoy the material

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14 See Mark Hunter, *Race for Education: Gender, White Tone and Schooling in South Africa*, esp. pp. 196, 209–11.

15 James, *Money from Nothing*, esp. pp. 49–52.

16 Deborah Posel & Ilana van Wyk (Eds.), *Conspicuous Consumption in Africa*.

17 Zakes Mda, *Black Diamond*, p. 151. Realistic fiction can be as useful and accurate as any ethnography.

benefits of God's creation, and that the ability to do so is a sign of God's Grace.<sup>18</sup> It is thus an excuse for shameless accumulation and, in addition, for display in terms of clothing, hospitality, and so forth. But even without such excesses, there has arisen a group of the very rich in South Africa whose lifestyle is at once a shock to, and an object of fascination for, the mass of the South African population. During the presidency of Jacob Zuma, the use of political position for the direct, corrupt accumulation of wealth became rife, primarily because the example from the top did not allow for the disciplining of those lower down the political system. But, even before this, the signs of the untrammelled exercise of power for private gain were all too frequent. Few were as blatant as Smuts Ngonyama, then head of communications for the Presidency, who in 2007 notoriously announced that "I didn't join the struggle to be poor."<sup>19</sup> Thus, even before Zuma took over as South Africa's president, the signs of untrammelled exercise of power for accumulation were all too frequent.

The trend towards accumulation and display did not go unchallenged, or unremarked. There were of course the comments in the press, often prurient and on occasion verging on the racist, as if corruption was inevitable in a government run by Africans. This made criticism from outside difficult, as the accusation of racism was easily employed, whether justly or not. But the same criticisms could be made from the highest layers of politics, at least before Zuma's accession to the presidency in 2009. In 2006, the Policy Co-ordination and Advisory Services of the Presidency issued a "discussion document" on "macro-social trends in South Africa." This attacked:

a false 'cosmopolitanism' under the guise of globalisation, which can conceal, though scantily, a paradigm to view Europe, Australia/New Zealand and Northern America as the paragons of civilisation. In the end, this reflects a modernisation of a colonial mindset, a view that South Africa should be an extension of Europe and its historical offshoots "in the free world". Combined with a history in which acceptance or rejection by 'the world' played a crucial role, this can encourage a 'catwalk syndrome' within society: on the one hand with those who seek to retain apartheid privilege using racial kith-and-kin sentiment across the globe to demand conformity with norms of already 'normal' more equitable societies; and

18 Ilana van Wyk, *A Church of Strangers: The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in South Africa*.

19 Deborah Posel, "Races to Consume: revisiting South Africa's history of race, consumption and the struggle for freedom", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 33(3), pp. 157–75.

on the other, those in political office constantly and subconsciously seeking to demonstrate how ‘good and civilised’ they are.<sup>20</sup>

It is, however, difficult to see, at least in terms of material culture, what the alternatives are. And of course, the very rich are a tiny fraction of the Black Middle Class, however defined, unless they should be seen as having risen out of that status altogether. There is a much larger group, described by anthropologists and others, consisting of those who are just about able to get by on what they earn and, to some extent, to meet the living standards for which they would hope, but for whom this is a continual struggle.<sup>21</sup> When class is measured in terms of income (and thus, presumably, of lifestyle), in 2008 approximately one in four of Black South Africans could be considered to belong to the middle class, and one in twenty-five to the upper class.<sup>22</sup> At least for the former, it is not the aim to show to the outside world that they are “good and civilised”; their framework is much rather to show to their neighbours that they are “respectable”, and to build a “decent” life, a life of “propriety” for themselves in the towns and cities of South Africa.

Ronelle Burger and her colleagues in the department of economics at Stellenbosch have distinguished between the emergent and the established Black middle class, in part to understand what is behind the stereotypes of this group as “conspicuous consumers with a taste for expensive cars, designer labels and large houses and a reputation as poor creditors”.<sup>23</sup> In order both to test the validity of these stereotypes and to explain the behaviour behind

20 Policy Co-ordination and Advisory Services, Social Sector, the Presidency, *A Nation in the Making: a discussion document on macro-social trends in South Africa*, Pretoria, the Presidency, 2006, p. 93.

21 See above all, the works of Sophie Chevalier, “Comment partager les mêmes espaces? Les classes moyennes à Durban (Afrique du Sud)”, *Espaces et Sociétés*, 148–9, pp. 129–144; *idem*; “Food, malls and the politics of consumption: South Africa’s new middle class”, *Development South Africa*, 32(1) pp. 118–129; *idem* “The Politics and Moral Economy of Middle Class Consumption in South Africa”, in Posel & van Wyk (Eds.), *Conspicuous Consumption in Africa*, pp. 200–213; Ilana van Wyk, “Jacob Zuma’s Shamelessness: conspicuous consumption, politics and religion”, in Posel & Van Wyk (Eds.) *Conspicuous Consumption in Africa*; pp. 112–132; Peter Alexander et al., *Class in Soweto*; Deborah James, *Money from Nothing: Indebtedness and Aspiration in South Africa*; Erik Bähre, *Ironies of Solidarity: Insurance and Financialization in South Africa*.

22 Ronelle Burger et al., “The emergent middle class in contemporary South Africa: examining and comparing rival approaches”, *Development South Africa*, 32(1), pp. 25–40. The data are primarily based on the National Income Dynamics Survey of 2008.

23 Ronelle Burger, Megan Louw, Brigitte Barbara Isabel de Oliveria Pegado, & Servaas van der Berg, “Understanding consumption patterns of the established and emerging South African Black middle class”, *Development South Africa*, 32(1), pp. 41–56, citation at p. 43.

them, they used the 2010/11 Income and Expenditure survey, together with the 2012 All Media Products Survey of the South African Audience Research Foundation. In the course of this, they constructed an index to allow them to represent a household's assets. The goods they chose clearly represent what is thought to be essential for a member of the middle class. This list includes "televisions, DVD players, refrigerators, stoves, microwaves, washing machines, motor vehicles, computers, cameras, telephones, satellite dishes, [access to] the Internet, furniture and ownership of a brick house."<sup>24</sup> Those members of the middle class who are of the first generation to have such a status, and whose position in the middle class, however defined, is still somewhat vulnerable, and were also by the definition of the study Black, were likely to spend a higher proportion of their income, in what could be described as conspicuous consumption, than either the more established members of the Black middle class or of Whites with approximately the same income. The most obvious explanation is that their recent upward social mobility and their vulnerability led to a feeling of insecurity which could best be assuaged by letting their neighbours know of their successes. But there is another side to this. In general, Black households had fewer of the goods on the list of assets than those Whites with approximately the same income, but in contrast were much more likely to have purchased a washing machine, for instance, in the last year than their counterparts. Indeed, the closer Black households came to possessing the same level of assets as the Whites, the smaller the amount that they expended on what was conceived as conspicuous consumption. In other words, more than anything else, what appears to be waste, or excess, is in fact merely a process of the newly arrived catching up with those who over the course of the generations have set particular standards. It is easy to assume that the Black middle class in some way sees their White counterparts as the example of that to which they should attain. By now, however, it is likely that those members of the Black middle class who are already established form at least as much of a role model to those who are struggling to fulfil the requirements of such status.

The South African government's statistical agency, Stats SA, has taken the analysis further on the basis of the nationally conducted Living Conditions Surveys, taken at varying intervals.<sup>25</sup> This has allowed the agency to track the development of access or ownership of eighteen key assets for the living of

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24 I should perhaps point out that the household of which I am a part contains all of these, barring the satellite dish and the motor vehicle, which are much less necessary in the Netherlands than in South Africa.

25 This section is based on *Inequality Trends in South Africa: a multi-dimensional diagnostic of inequality*, Statistics South Africa, 2019, esp. pp. 46–57.

a modern life.<sup>26</sup> Three of these are public assets: piped water, an electricity connection, and flush toilet facilities; the other fifteen are much the same indicators of prosperity as Burger and her colleagues used.<sup>27</sup> The period covered by their work was from 2009 to 2015. Out of the eighteen goods, only two, ownership of a camera and a radio, declined across the period, while ownership of a HiFi system or a DVD player hardly grew (and were less in 2015 than in 2011, the only intermediary year for which there are figures). In part this may be due to their substitution by “smart” mobile phones, or by MP3 players and iPods, which could replicate most of their functions (though not, by 2015, by computers connected to the internet which were only possessed by a small proportion of the population).<sup>28</sup> In many cases the proportion of households owning a good or service grew substantially, most notably and gratifyingly, piped water from 90.4% to 97.1%, electricity connections from 83.6% to 93.8%, phones or landlines from 84.3% to 94.2%, and flush toilets from 61.7% to 67.6%. The greatest growth was of satellite TV which nearly tripled, from 13.0% to 35.1% in the six years. In gross terms, the multi-assets mode increased over the period from 8 to 9, but this, I believe, somewhat understates the improvement in the ownership of the key products for modern life.

When the results are split by what is euphemistically described as the “population group” of the head of the household, the results were perhaps somewhat predictable. In 2015, Whites possessed on average 14.7 of the possible 18 assets, down from 14.8 six years earlier. In the same period, Indian/Asian households had recorded a growth, from 12.6. to 13.2, Coloureds from 11.0 to 11.8, and Blacks, most considerably, from 7.6 to 9.0. Inequality of possession of the goods had declined for Whites, probably because it was by definition impossible for any household to score more than 18, and the proportion of White households with a score of 17 or 18 must have been high. The same trend, that is, towards a decrease of in-group asset inequality, was observed among both the Indians and the Coloureds. “Unfortunately ... [it] increased among black Africans.” Presumably there were considerable numbers of Black African households which were managing to increase their possessions over the years, but there

26 In common with the source publication, I lump the concepts of “access to” (appropriate for services such as piped water) and ownership into a single category, “ownership”.

27 The full list, in reverse order of frequency of possession, is: camera, internet services, computer, HiFi, motor vehicle, satellite TV, washing machine, radio, DVD player, microwave oven, toilet facility (flush), fridge, television, dwelling (formal) stove, electric connection, phone/landline and piped water. No doubt rental of a formal dwelling counted as “ownership”.

28 22.1% for computers, 11.8% for an internet connection.

were also very many which got left behind at the bottom of the scale. On the other hand, the average scores for rural households rose sharply, from 6.1 to 7.8 over the six years, much more sharply than for those living in towns, who were in general well supplied with the goods in question, with averages rising slowly from 10.1 to 10.8 over the six years. This is consistent with a significant increase in the average asset score for the “poor”, as defined by various poverty datum lines, substantially higher than for the “non-poor”, and this despite the fact that, according to the statistical measures, the proportion of the South African population categorised as “poor” or “very poor” was declining significantly over the period. Evidently, there were numerous households in which the inhabitants could manage to acquire extra goods or services – in the first instance, probably the latter – despite still having a tiny income, although there were many others who could not. As in many other spheres of society, increases in access to goods and services generally led to more significant distinctions between those surviving at the bottom end of South African society.

Those who did become socially mobile, at least upwards, often did so fast, and thus they outstripped their relatives. The stories of those who have achieved good economic positions, while their cousins remain unemployed or employed as domestic workers, resonates across the anthropologies of modern South Africa.<sup>29</sup> One problem which faced all those who were accumulating goods, wealth, and status has been the question of relationships with the extended families to which they belonged. The dilemmas which amaXhosa experienced during the Cattle-Killing are replayed with great regularity in the suburbs of modern South Africa. There are those among the accumulators of the New Black Middle Class who are as the *amagogyta*, the hard, or selfish unbelievers, who did not slaughter their cattle and consume their grain for the good of society as a whole.<sup>30</sup> In order to maintain their position, they have to restrict their contact with kin, and for that matter with neighbours, to a minimum. There is literally no place in their households for those outside the immediate nuclear family, who might claim support on the basis of a more distant connection. The “gated communities” which have sprung up across the country are as much about limiting the access of poorer kinsfolk as they are about defence against criminals, their ostensible purpose. In Durkheimian terms, South African suburbia exhibits all too frequently the contrast between “mechanical” solidarity, in which there was no opportunity to decide with whom to cooperate, and equally with whom not to, and “organic” solidarity, in

29 James, *Money from Nothing*; Hunter, *Race for Education*; Bähre, *Ironies of Solidarity*.

30 J.B. Peires, “‘Soft’ believers and ‘Hard’ unbelievers in the Xhosa Cattle Killing”, *Journal of African History*, 27(3), pp. 443–461.

which there is a freer choice of associates. A new category, that of “friends”, is coming into being. It is with these people that the possessions of the respectable life are being demonstrated, out of sight of those who would appreciate only too well the choices made in their acquisition.<sup>31</sup> It remains to be seen how far the cosmopolitan life of this group is a sufficient protection against the witchcraft of those who had felt themselves excluded from access to the goods of what used to be “White” suburbia.<sup>32</sup> Maybe there are enough who pay the “Black Tax” to their relatives to prevent the tensions becoming endemic, but the pressure which Black university students feel themselves under has seen them on occasion add the abolition of the “Black Tax” to the list of demands encompassed by the movement to decolonise South African universities.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps the very fact of the New Black Middle Class’s success demonstrates, to themselves and to others, that they have the power to resist and defeat such attacks. Without this, the goods among which the South African middle class live would not give the comfort their hosts demand.

This, then, can form a metonym for the processes discussed within this book. In the course of the twentieth century, the interior architecture of South African homes – and also a lot of associated matters, most notably dress – changed dramatically and so far as can now be expected, irreversibly. But who changed it and why? It is too easy to blame the “usual suspects”, missionaries and their fellow agents of cultural imperialism, including the advertising industry. It is even highly disputable whether this is a change for which blame is applicable anyway. The pressure which, for instance, municipal administrations put on their Black tenants to conform was minor in relation to the desire emanating from an increasing proportion of the Black population to themselves take on board the changes in material culture. I have been describing a revolutionary change, in its way, but equally a change that was perhaps initiated by outsiders but which nevertheless was driven by the Black householders themselves, often under conditions which were far from conducive to their success. Indeed, under apartheid, the authorities were in many ways totally opposed to what the Africans hoped to achieve. Black house interiors, and all

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31 Émile Durkheim introduced the contrast between the two forms of solidarity in *The Division of Labour in Society*, which was originally published in French in 1893 as *De la division du travail social: étude sur l'organisation des sociétés supérieures*, Paris Alcan. He later repudiated his own ideas as being too rigid and evolutionary, but used loosely they do have resonance in recent South African social history. Steven Lukes, *Émile Durkheim: his life and work: a historical and critical study*; see also Bähre, *Ironies of Solidarity*.

32 Adam Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa*.

33 Hunter, *Race for Education*, p. 16.

that goes with them, are, and have long been, a consequence of Black agency. They constitute a major part of South Africa's consumer society, which apartheid failed to crush and which has grown enormously since, and because of, the end of apartheid.

There remains the question of the reason behind the shift in the direction of non-indigenous living arrangements. In some circles this had to do with "keeping up with the Kumalos", as Nimrod Mkele expressed it, or fear of the gossip that "she hasn't even pelmets yet", as one of Mia Brandel-Syrier's informants put it.<sup>34</sup> But these sorts of motives and the competition for prestige could only be applicable in specific circumstances. For the great majority of Black South Africans, those struggling to get by, these contests of material goods were beyond their ability to participate at anything but the most essential level. Equally, those who had taken up the White people's religion saw European clothing and house interiors as part of the package which Christianity provided. However, those who left the mainstream churches, as introduced from Europe or North America, and found solace in the so-called Zionist churches, for instance, do not seem to have simultaneously rejected the material aspects of a mainstream Christian life. They may have worshipped in different clothes, but they still cooked on the same stoves.<sup>35</sup>

In the end, the answer to the question inherent in this book has to be somewhat trite, more so, I would contend, than the fact of the transition, which I have attempted to document in this book. In the environment of the new cities as they grew up in South Africa, there was, quite literally, no place for the ways of the countryside. Things which had been done outside, now had to be done within the houses of the townships. In all sorts of ways, the exterior architecture of the cities dictated the interior architecture. Africans took on the new material culture, in part as a protest, but also in large part because it fitted in their new lives, and in the end was more comfortable. To some extent, the transition to European-style house interiors was a thoroughly revolutionary act; it was also a play for a better future for a restricted family. Ideologies notwithstanding, the New South Africa is built on families attempting to be bourgeois.

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34 Mkele, "Advertising", p. 126; Brandel-Syrier, *Reeftown Elite*, p. 47.

35 Joel Cabrita, *Text and Authority in the South African Nazareth Church*; idem, *The People's Zion: Southern Africa, the United States, and a Transatlantic Faith-healing Movement*.

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