I

Eyewitness Engagements (Highveld political discourse at the start of the 1800s)

Over the centuries, in the middle of what eventually became South Africa, hundreds of thousands of people lived and labored. They were farmers and livestock-keepers, warriors and poets. They spoke the same language, or incrementally distinguishable dialects of it; they moved about among themselves, married one another, and ranked their princely houses together.

Their is a history of settlement on verdant hills, of men and women building a world of ranked communities with cross-cutting loyalties and long-range connections to the Limpopo basin to the north, and the foothills of the Drakensberg range and the grasslands to the east. As the highveld’s agrarian towns expanded, they brought together into their midst households, and sometimes whole communities, from the wider world. Most professional travelers could make themselves understood with little effort. Prestigious healers and specialists in rituals, rain-makers, militia-scouts, and cattle-herders covered great distances; women often married away from home, sometimes far away. As a result, authority and culture were disposed across the highveld and its enclosed river valleys in a widely comprehensible tradition, shading up even onto the Zimbabwean highlands on the northern side of the Limpopo Valley. Within this context developed multiethnic chiefships and chiefly partnerships.

Most accounts of South Africa’s past summon up a different picture from this, however: a world of tribes. Tribes may be designated ethnic groups, or peoples, but the treatment is the same. In its purest form, the tribe constitutes the claim that popular mobilizations among African people were apolitical, customs-determined phenomena. Each tribe has its own heritage, dating back to its split with its parental branch, or to its own unique seed.

“Bantu-speakers,” separate from “the Khoisan,” are hypothesized as having invaded the subcontinent three or six hundred years ago as proto-tribes, “the Hurutshe-Kwena” and “the Kgatla-Rolong,” or another such grouping. One also finds “the Tlokwa,” “the Sia,” “the Phuthing,” “Konî,” “baThalerwa,” “BaPhalane,” “Phogole,” more and more of them the further back one goes.¹

¹ Beyond the variations on the inclusion of the definite article, note the preferred orthographies’ variants re ba- / Ba- etc. or not – ba meaning “people of.”
The tendency to tribalize South Africa’s past runs deep. It is there, in the very earliest written records from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which constitute the source material for this chapter of this book. It is still there in the ongoing effort to restore land-rights to South Africans by projecting recent ethnic belonging into the distant past. Here it will be argued that agrarian South Africa before the mid-nineteenth century was built not by tribes, but by active pioneers and state-makers. A history of their activities and mobilizations must, however, also chart the development of the tribal idea and its eventual epistemological triumph. The story of the tribe must be understood in the context of the history of the actual political assertions of the people.

Whether the interpretation advanced here is entirely correct, the aim has been to push toward a necessary reorientation begun by other historians but not yet nearly completed. Who is the political actor in South Africa’s history? At the beginning of the nineteenth century, European South Africans still commanded only a beachhead or two on the ancient African southern sub-continent. Who should be the South African political “we,” if not the actual inhabitants of the country, the ancestors of black and brown complected people who constitute the greatest part of its citizenry today? What then can be recovered of their political praxis?

**Borderlands**

Below we approach the highveld from the Cape’s flat stretches and bands of hilltops, drifting up to it in the early 1800s, in a reconsideration of key texts generated at the interface of important early encounters. We might begin however by placing all southern Africa in its widest context. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were tumultuous times. People threw off their ancien régimes, rallied in the streets, raised up dictators, enslaved foreigners, and industrialized their cities. The Cape of Good Hope was a part of this world, standing astride global commerce east and west, hosting the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the English in its harbors, changing hands thrice because of the Napoleonic Wars.

The European Cape settlement lay at the margins of the lives of most South Africans. For continental Europeans, similarly, South Africa was the

---

1 For this chapter and Chapter 3, I draw on books and papers of many missionaries and some travelers, including William C. Willoughby, E. W. Smith, Roger Price, John Mackenzie, Eugene Casalis, Prosper Lemue, John Edwards, Samuel Rolland, D. F. Ellenberger, Andrew Smith, William Shaw, Thomas Arbousset, Robert Hully, W. J. Burchell, John Shrewsbury, James Stuart, William Colenso, Daniel Lindley, Henry Callaway and others, and especially on John Campbell, Samuel Broadbent, T. L. Hodgson, Anne Hodgson, Robert Moffat, James Archbell, and John Cameron. Citations to these and other primary sources have been minimized but of course not eliminated.

“antipodes,” the “austral” sphere, a place of wilderness. The Cape’s privileged class was, especially in its subordination of laborers, what David Hume was talking about when he condemned “useless luxury.” Dutch settlers bound families of indigenous people to their estates, and long after 1800, Cape Town remained an outpost from the previous century. Many of the Colony’s people lived in desperate circumstances. Captive women had to suffer drunken sailors demanding satisfaction in their own quarters, the slave lodge, a building set at the very center of official colonial Cape Town – its heart. Some of the servants of this evolving racial order got away and survived as well as they could: the so-called Hanglips were the first of many such maroon communities.  

Approaching the nineteenth century, these castoffs, together with the Cape herders often called Khoikhoi, created a widening zone of negotiation and force. In it men hunted elephant ivory and ostrich feathers, bartered, raided for slaves, pillaged, hustled beads, gunpowder and tobacco, and defended their families. Americanist historians have introduced the word “borderlands” to signal this kind of region. A borderlands, unlike a line or a front, as in “frontier,” suggests a space governed by interactive, overlapping, and incomplete authorities. In the borderlands, wildlife dwindled, trade thrived, and customs were violated and renewed. Such a domain grew north and east of Cape Town, toward the Fish and Kei Rivers, over the Karoo, up toward the Orange River, and pressed at the base of highveld farmers’ settlements.


The European officials who first controlled Cape Town knew barely anything about any upcountry people. Governor Jan van Riebeeck in his diary in 1661 spoke of “Brickje,” a term supplied to him by Khoikhoi who traded and grazed up and down the Cape. The word remained in use through the eighteenth century. It meant “goat people” in its literal translation (biri-qua), but in view of the purely bovine ideal of the Cape (Penninsular and Gonaqua) Khoikhoi, goats probably only indicated the domain of arable farmers. Under the same rubric, briqua apparently meant not only highveld chiefdoms but also the ornamented, elaborate chiefships associated with seventeenth-century Zimbabwe-related sites. Essentially briqua were “populous settled farmers,” so far unseen.

The first pioneers from the Cape into the midst of these farmers were more of the European settlement’s escaped servants, joined by outlaws (drosters), European “transfrontiersman,” and last, self-proclaimed racial “bastards.” Here they will be termed “métis.” A man named Classe Kok was an early example of a métis pioneer, reaching inland Khoikhoi, “Giriguriqua” people. His surname, “cook,” tells us what he did in Cape Town and of his subservient status there. From 1713 on, Kok’s progeny grew in number, helping to constitute a major chiefly lineage on the southwestern highveld. Soon enough one found more and more métis men with Khoikhoi; they wore trousers and shirts, and they traveled armed. Many of them undoubtedly saw themselves as colonists rather than indigenes – even when they were forced by circumstance to put up Khoikhoi-style werfs, smoke their meat in the Khoe manner, and marry Khoikhoi wives. But they also had no desire to

---


8 The notion of métis as a core status rather than a marginal attribute draws on Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990), and Jean Loupe Amselle, Metisso Logics (New York: Routledge, 1989); and Thomas Arbousset and Francois Daumas, Narrative of an Exploratory Tour to the Northeast of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope ... In the Months of March, April and May, 1816, trans. John Brown (Cape Town: Struik, 1968 [1846]), who compare South African “Bastaards” with South American “Métis.” As an obviously imposed term, a plural noun, and occasionally an adjective, métis is also suitably vague: herein it entails products of the Cape and highveld borderlands, Khoe-, Dutch, Portuguese, and sometimes Sechuana- (the parent of Sesotho and SePedi and Setswana today) speaking people, intermixed culturally and/or biologically, and oorlemsch, ex-slaves, “Korana,” “Half-Castes,” Bastards (bastaard), Binnelanders,
Eyewitness Engagements

...go to, or return to, the Colony. They knew they would have found life difficult there, scrambling to get by as “brown people” (laborers) if they were not simply jailed.

As the Cape Colony’s area of effective control crept north and east in the tracks of various métis and Khoe-speaking pioneers, and as more and more pastoralists and gatherer-hunters came under commandos’ attacks, more of these people also submitted to colonial magistracies. There were, it was known, briqua further upcountry, large and powerful chiefdoms, at or near 1,000 meters’ elevation or more. The largest agrarian chiefdoms just beyond the touch of the Cape Colony experienced violence in the eighteenth century, and for some of the turmoil, “the Korana” are held responsible. The term (koranner in its earliest contexts) indicated métis and Khoikhoi who raided for cattle, and in other usages all pastoralist people of the Orange River, some of them Nama-speaking. There was a leadership structure on the Orange, apparently comprising a “great” (or “right-hand”) side, and a “little” (or “left hand”) side. The great side was made of the comparative newcomers, herd-ers who pushed up from the south in the 1740s and 1750s. The little side were those who were already on the Orange, reduced to secondary status. Eventually, Great and Little Korana would be understood as ethnic terms.

Heading northeast after the Cape herders and Korana were more métis people, and then, finally, the Dutch and other European Christians together with their métis kin. The Europeans nullified many prior dispensations. In the era of the Dutch East India Company’s uncontested control over the Cape, Classe Kok’s grandson, Adam, received an engraved cane from the Colony’s governor, recognizing the Kok “captaincy,” and the Koks pioneered a farm in the Pieketberg district in 1751. But after only twenty years, Adam had to abandon his land to European farmers, or Boers, to use the term of the day, who took it over as their own. It is no wonder that even the most reputable métis families (Kok, Pienaar, Goeyman, Links, Barends) wished to fend for themselves and avoided both the Dutch East India Company and other Cape Town authorities.

The first available reports from a borderlands area often come to us decades after its emergence. The Orange River, first called the Gariep or Great River, became something like the Rio Grande in the southwestern United States, a “respectable” and non-, and all others whose persons and dispositions reflected the borderlands. It does not always imply a European (or Asian, Malagasy, or any) admixture of blood.

---


gateway to the borderlands. Once métis people crossed to the north side of the Orange and pledged their fealty to a chief, they might survive and even prosper. Writing things down was not common, and our view, via real texts, usually opens up in the midst of ongoing processes. Nonetheless, from fairly early on, we have a few glimpses of the social forms that developed among people in the borderlands, and close to them.

* * * * *

**WIKAR AND GORDON AND THE “TWIN COURTS”**

Northeast of today’s town of Prieska, close to the Orange River, dwelt a town of men and women identifying themselves as “twin-court people.” This name, the apparent meaning of “Gyzikoa” and “Geissiqua,” was recorded in 1778, and still over forty years later, in 1823 (as “Gozakas” and “Goyakas”). After that, the twin-court people disappeared. 11

Hendrik J. Wikar and Robert Jacob Gordon wrote down their impressions of the twin-court people in 1778 and 1779, accounts that have been published. They found them to be something of a puzzle: they were not one thing but a mixture of many things. Colonel Gordon, shouting commands in “Caffre” – in other words, in the language of African farmers living to the east – and listening for responses, judged many of them to be conversant in a similar language. 12 Others among them appeared only to speak a Korana language, the kind with clicks. Their own village was a doublet: two side-by-side kraals or public courts. All of them (they said) were a kind of farmer (briqua), junior to another moiety to the north. They were at war with Khoe-speakers around them, whom they generally “resemble[d].”

At the time, the Dutch-speaking settlers had been sending armed parties to kill and intimidate pastoralists and gatherer-hunter people. The “commando” system, partly responsible to the Dutch East India Company running Cape Town and partly to its factious, aspirant burghers, led to further rebellions and redoubled campaigns. Commandos (the singular, “commando,” refers to a group) eventually extirpated, for instance, the entire population of Sneuuberg Bushmen or San. The commandos came to entail fewer European farmers, fewer Boers, and more of their servants, “Hottentots” – mostly former Cape herdiers. The Cape garrison commander, Colonel Robert Gordon, traveled in the borderlands to tell still-independent pastoralists that no more of these commandos would attack them. Naturally he wished to discover fully responsible entities to so assure. The twin-court people, however, disappointing

---

11 School of Oriental and African Studies, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society archives (WMMS), Africa, In-Correspondence (here S.A. corr.), fiche 300, no. 28, Samuel Broadbent, Makwassie, June 8, 1823.
Eyewitness Engagements

the colonel, were not an autonomous tribe. They were a minor partner in a hierarchical alliance with another entity. 13

Right and left, great and little: the “senior twin” north of the Orange that was partnered with the twin-court people (gyzekoa) has never been precisely identified. Wikar and Gordon were keenly interested in them. Whoever they were, the two travelers thought, it would be they – the “true” African people, the multitudes, the farmers they had heard about – who deserved their ultimate attention. They too might be “reassured” and treated with. As the guide, Klaas Barends, told them, upcountry land was full of such farmers (briqua), “strapping” brown men with blackish-brown hair, “like the Madagascan slave.” The hodgepodge of slightly built people on the middle Orange contrasted with this imagined type. Then four solid men, “well-built,” came visiting from the north in 1779 looking for barter, and disconcertingly identified themselves as “Bushmen.” If physique and coloration were not reliable indicators of identity, one turned to material culture. The “true briqua” (Gordon heard it said) crafted the best household items, had the most beads and metal goods – they were the “clever” ones. 14 Most of all, Gordon felt, the briqua were … tobacco smokers.

All South Africa craved tobacco, such that “Tabee!” (“May I have some tobacco?”) meant “Good morning” in Cape Town. Highveld people had been growing and smoking and chewing and curing the American leaf for several generations. Gordon thought that they showed an especial affinity for it. In particular, deeply inhaling tobacco smoke – lying face-down in the dirt, over an opening to a clay tunnel, and falling into a stupor – he felt, typified them: it was the briqua way. Since then, however, the very same style of smoking has become known as the San or Bushman trademark for smoking cannabis. 15

More helpfully, Gordon discovered that the upland farmers among themselves referred to each other as “Bitjoana.” This was, he intuited, the proper


tribal name. Little more was communicated, as his interlocutors, who had been in the borderlands for many decades, naturally sought to limit the flow of information to Colonel Gordon. Neither Gordon nor Wikar understood much of what was said to them in any case. Gordon wrote “Moetjoanaas” and “Bitjoana,” apparently unaware that the second was the plural of the first. As a sole example of highveld farmers’ speech, he supplied, “Masepa Moetjoana Incosi,” which is either a version of the saying, “The chief is a shoulder-bag of manure” – that is, he is as useful as he is made to be – or an indication of the supremacy of Masepa, an ancient highveld ancestor. Among the “tribes” the local people mentioned, Wikar and Gordon listed “Barolo, the Shounarreba Capii, the Bapouru Boucana”: likely barolong, perhaps Shona-something, and conceivably Phalaborwa, an old highveld metals center. Belying the supposed centrality of Bitjoana, Petrus Borcherds, traveling years later, when the town of Dithakong had become known, wrote “Barrowlows” (i.e., Barolo above, barolong) as the parent designation for highveld farmers, not Bitjoana or any of its variants.

Other viable political subsystems across the southern highveld are detectable in the margins of observers’ notes. A chiefdom called tlharo appears in the historical record as matsaroqua, “people of tlaro,” where ma- is prefixed to Tlaro, probably a chief’s name, in the Bantu-language-family manner; but qua is also used, a Khoe-language (Khoikhoi) suffix for “people.” Varieties of belonging did not register as on a four-color map. On the highveld north of the Marico, as far away as Nata, Bushmen (masarwa: cf. morwa above), who were Khoe- (not San-) speaking, were retained by chiefs and top counselors as cattle-post servants. On the Orange River there were numerous impoverished Bantu-speaking men and women, whose households herded cattle for Korana, and they were verbally abused as “Bushmen.” There is also mention of “farm Bootschuana,” distinguished from people who depended more on cattle. Were these “ethnic groups”? What would it mean to say so? Further north, Samuel Broadbent and Thomas Hodgson wrote in 1822 of “Moroas” – probably morua (singular) and barua (plural), -rua connoting autochthones – a “people” they said were “scattered in villages all over the country.” The Moroas spoke the same language as other highveld dwellers and were


17 Borchers, An Autobiographical Memoir, 123.


quite wealthy with their own vast herds of sheep and cattle.\textsuperscript{20} And who were the quite separate “Bootschuana Bushmen”? Their men wielded assegais in raids; they were counted as “part of the Bootschuana nation,” and they built highveld-style houses, complete with hedges and adjacent gardens. In the famine of 1823, métis men thought it wise to petition them for Indian corn, as if they were seen as particularly resourceful.\textsuperscript{21}

By the time the borderlands closed and administrative control of the land had been secured, many of these unequal relationships and networks were gone. In the later nineteenth century there would be few high-status Bushmen farmers out on the land, or at least, it would no longer make sense to say so. The ordinary way to depict the highveld soon settled into a simple tripartite framework: there were the Natives, the Bantu-speakers; the Hottentots, wild or laboring Khoe-speakers; and the Bushmen, destitute or dangerous, most useful for dissections in European anatomy classes.

\textbf{Journey to Dithakong: Missionaries, Métis, and Bechuana North of the Orange (“Great”) River}

One constant on the highveld, apparently, was the term “Bitjuana,” or, as it was often written, “Bootschuana,” “Becwana,” “Booshuanna,” before being standardized as “Bechuana.” What did this word mean? It most likely began as they, or we, being “blended together,” or “all mixed,” or “similar.” Being tswana\textsuperscript{22} or tshwana was appropriate for territories abutting a diverse borderlands, with their constant dangers and opportunities. Highveld farming people


\textsuperscript{21} South African Library (SAL), MSC 39/13 Bks. 7 to 12, Thomas Hodson notebook journals, “January 1823,” “September 1823.” And St. Paul’s Church, Thaba Nchu, Baptismal Registers (1840s); farm Bootchuanas: WMMS, S.A. corr., Samuel Broadbent, postmarked August 23, 1823, refers to mid June, 1823.

\textsuperscript{22} Moetjoana and Bitjoana (and Bechuana, soon the common spelling) suggest the conjoining of some lost initial vowel; there are many instances in aspirated form (Bechuana, Bootschuana, Beetshuanna), but never Batshwana. All have the reciprocal \textit{-ana}. “Similar” is simply most likely and “from one another,” “made to copy each other,” etc., are also plausible. See Steven Volz, “European Missionaries and Tswana Identity in the 19th Century,” \textit{Pula: Botswana Journal of African Studies}, 17, 1 (2003), 6, citing Lichtenstein; and John Barrow, \textit{Voyage to Cochinchina, including an Account of a Journey to the Booshuanas} (London: Cadell and Davies, 1807), based on Truter’s manuscript which I have not seen, gives “Booshuana” and differentiates them from Barrolouos (barolong), p. 404; Somerville offers Bootsbooanas or Mooitshooanas, Frank and Edna Bradlow, eds., \textit{William Somerville’s Narrative of His Journeys to the Eastern Cape Frontier and the Lattakoe, 1799 to 1802} (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1979), 122.
Popular Politics in the History of South Africa

were similar; it was most likely the mundane phrase, “yes, we are similar” or “the same” (tsdwana) said to African travelers and Europeans, about themselves and nearby others, that produced what Broadbent called “the Sichuaan” and John William Burchell “the Sichuana language.” That language, wrote Burchell, “being common to all these different tribes, seems to unite them into one great nation; and a change of rulers therefore is, to them, little more than a change of persons.” For Broadbent this “same language,” which he took as an unknown species of Arabic, was spoken in mountain and valley alike. He and John Campbell similarly felt “that language” was used up to the equator and across to “the Indian Ocean.” In defining “Beetjuanas,” the botanist Lichtenstein said, “All these tribes [who] speak the same language, and their modes of life, customs, and manners, vary little from each other, as to the most essential points.”

The Bechuana as a whole were rarely termed a tribe, yet foreign observers increasingly spoke of tribes among them. What did they mean by tribes? Within the larger mixture or similarity, tsdwana, on the highveld, there were chiefdoms and village associations, some that persisted for more than a lifetime, and these were ordinarily called tribes. Especially those who circumcised their youths together, imprinted a recognizable culture among their elites and created a pattern of belonging for their citizens to emulate. Cultural or regional

Differing with Lye and Murray’s view that Sotho meant “south” or “black people,” a small part of their pioneering and excellent Transformations on the Highveld: The Tswana and Southern Sotho (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes and Noble Books, 1980).
