Environment, Power, and Injustice

A South African History

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Cover illustration: Sophie Tshekoeng near Ncweng, 1998. (Photograph courtesy of Peter Heywood.)

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Approaching Kuruman

ONCE, outsiders considered Kuruman* in the Kalahari thornveld an interesting place, but today its popular allure is gone. In the early nineteenth century, the area just north of the Orange River (Figure 1-1) was a remote and exotic destination for visitors from the Cape, but its dusty and bleached-out landscape could not long distract explorers from the lush allure of the interior. Thus, it was "left to wither on the vine," on a "bygone road to Africa."[1] Once, historians found that this southern Tswana region provided good evidence about a process that interested them – imperial annexation in the nineteenth century – and wrote about the area including Kuruman. Eventually, however, the interests of Africanist historians changed from imperial annexation to colonial struggles and negotiations. While twentieth-century South Africa was a dynamic scene of political contest and cultural innovation, observers have perceived this region as an underpopulated and quiescent backwater. In short, in earlier times some visitors and historians found the place interesting, but few have found anything in its more recent past worth dwelling upon.

This book returns to Kuruman to construct its socio-environmental history. My project has been to comb rich sources about this place for evidence of people interacting with the environment and, through their environmental relations, with each other. By looking at different groups of people and their relations with the nonhuman world around them, I have united the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in one extended narrative and found a historical dynamic behind the quiescence. This book is about power, social difference, and the biophysical realm. It is about how people related to the environment as they interacted with each other.

* Kuruman is both a town and an administrative district. By "Kuruman," I usually mean the district as defined before 1949, but sometimes I refer to the town. This study focuses on the black people in that district.

Figure 1-1 South Africa. Based on information in the public domain.

A recent episode illustrates these interactions dramatically. The donkey, often viewed as a comical beast of burden, articulated relations between poor people, the environment, and the colonial economy. Donkeys are not indigenous to South Africa, but after 1900 blacks in Kuruman acquired them. They were better adapted to the semi-arid and diseased environment than cattle were and became very useful to people without much cash. During the twentieth century, racial segregation excluded blacks from citizenship in the modern state, even as the state appropriated the right to intervene in their food production and settlement patterns. Donkeys became, in the official construction, an environmental menace, and by the mid-twentieth century state programs curtailed their numbers. Furthermore, unlike cattle, donkeys had no market value and therefore did not contribute to the "development" visions of economic planners. The policy of Separate Development, the infamous form of segregation in South Africa in the 1960s and 1970s, had a powerful impact on donkeys in Kuruman. Separate Development dictated the establishment of an "independent" Tswana state called Bophuthatswana. In Bophuthatswana, the concerns of the well-connected dominated rural governance, and elite cattle ranchers benefited from state assistance. A crisis came with the terrible drought of 1983. Cattle died at higher rates than donkeys, and the Bophuthatswana government blamed the donkeys for wasting grazing resources that would be better reserved for cattle. The police and army descended on villages, and in a chaotic and brutal operation, they shot over 10,000 donkeys, approximately half of those living in this area. Donkey owners were not consulted and were threatened when they protested. For many people, the gunfire, suffering, and intimidation made this the most traumatic experience of Apartheid, and today many still resent the oppressive state and rich people who obstructed their humble ways of subsisting in this environment.

The donkey massacre is the most dramatic episode in this book, and fresh memories make it a powerful story. The environmental character of power is also evident before Separate Development. In earlier periods, too, those with more power arrogated the most advantageous relations to themselves. Very often, power was divided along racial lines. Under segregation in the mid-twentieth century, many black people had been forced from long-occupied river valleys into the southern Kalahari. Whites took over more of the river valleys, and blacks on the dry veld found it impossible to farm as they had. Working backwards from that point, we see that in the early part of that century, Kuruman, the new white town upstream from black villages, drew precious water from the small Kuruman River, parching the black community downstream. The loss of water echoed land alienation during colonial annexation in the late nineteenth century, when Tswana people lost much of their land and the ability to own it as whites did, thus becoming impoverished. Yet the precedent for environmental

oppression even predated segregation and colonial rule. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Tswana chiefs arrogated to themselves rights over cattle. Cattle owners were secure, while common men served as their clients. Barred from cattle ownership, women cultivated and poor people foraged.

In each of these dispensations, people differentiated by race, class, and gender had different access to power and relations with the environment. The powerful always drew strength from relating to the environment in particular ways and retained their positions by manipulating against others' beneficial uses of it. However, throughout all these events, even as the powerful appropriated the best ways of using the environment to themselves, the disinherited found some way of mitigating their circumstances through their relations with it. Even when people seemed quiescent, they acted with creativity and deliberation in their relations with the environment.

The environment has been more than a backdrop in these power struggles. It has shaped outcomes, both as a prize and a player. People negotiated its characteristics by particular ways of living and farming, and new social relations resulted. Capitalism, Christianity, colonialism, and segregation manifested themselves at the level of hoeing, plowing, tending animals, and working local asbestos deposits. In fact, relations with the environment have filtered the impact of the major social forces in South African history. The semi-arid thornveld and its river valleys constituted the *immediate* environment of Kuruman people, and whatever their other concerns, rain, crops, stock, access to land the costs and yields of production, and rights to produce food ranked high among their preoccupations.

Thus, an environmental approach brings an added authenticity to our understandings of the way people once lived and reveals unrecognized forces for change. The socio-environmental approach shows new aspects of power, its sources and motives for exercising it. Essentially, the issue is one of environmental justice, which is often viewed as the concern of contemporary activists in industrialized societies who seek cleaner, healthier environments for marginalized people. Yet environmental injustice – structured inequalities in the ways people related to the biophysical world – has existed in nonindustrial societies and in earlier times. Seen from this angle, Kuruman's past is eventful and its present is fraught.

THE KALAHARI THORNVELD TODAY: A TOUR

On the edge of the Kalahari is a dry savanna known as the thornveld, and from whatever direction you approach, to reach Kuruman you must cross much of

it. The thornveld is named for the thorny acacias that dominate the landscape. In some places near Kuruman, a two-storied savanna of tall acacia and grass prevails, but the typical scene is scragglier than the ideal captured in African nature photography. The soil is stony, thin, and patchy, leaving exposed rock in places. There are not many large trees and not much tall grass. Rather, bushes of the intermediate story define the profile, and their small, hard leaves testify that rain is not abundant here. On the edge of the Kalahari you do not take rain for granted. The Tswana word for rain, "*pula*," is a salutation at public meetings, and Botswana has even given the name to its currency. However, pula, being so erratic, might not merit this esteem. Drought is so familiar here that H. C. Bosman chose Kuruman for a send-up of small town gossip in his short story, "The Homecoming." An abandoned wife weeps over news from her husband, but claims the letter was from "her sister in Kuruman, who wrote about the drought there . . . 'It seemed to be a pretty long drought,' " an observer comments, " 'judging from the number of pages.' "[2]

There were indeed long droughts and many of them. The thornveld is a sub-tropical region; hence, it receives rainfall mostly in the summer months of October to March through the seasonal movements of the inter-tropical convergence zone (ITCZ), the low-pressure tropical weather system (see Figure 1-2). However, because it is south of the Tropic of Capricorn and close to the high-pressure zone over the Namib and Kalahari, the ITCZ brings little rain to this area. The average annual rainfall measured between 1932 and 1992 at the meteorological station in Kuruman town was 416 millimeters. Such low precipitation has had great impact on land use. Even sorghum cultivation fails in dry years, although periodic years of good rains and good harvests tease farmers into believing the possibilities of maize cultivation. The question is: do good and bad years occur in cycles or has there been a long-term desiccation trend? This is a critical question for historians, because people suffer through and adapt to difficult years, but long-term desiccation can undermine a society, independent of any human factors. As discussed in Chapter 9, people who live in Kuruman hold the latter interpretation. The conventional wisdom is that there is less rainfall than there used to be. This theory dates back to the early nineteenth century – not just for Kuruman, but for the country as a whole. However, if rainfall has indeed been declining for nearly 200 years, it is a wonder that any at all falls today.

Since the early twentieth century, South Africa has kept regular records of rainfall at stations throughout the country. Climatologists have analyzed these data, and P. D. Tyson has delivered a decisive rebuttal to the conventional wisdom: "The earlier hypothesis that South Africa has undergone progressive

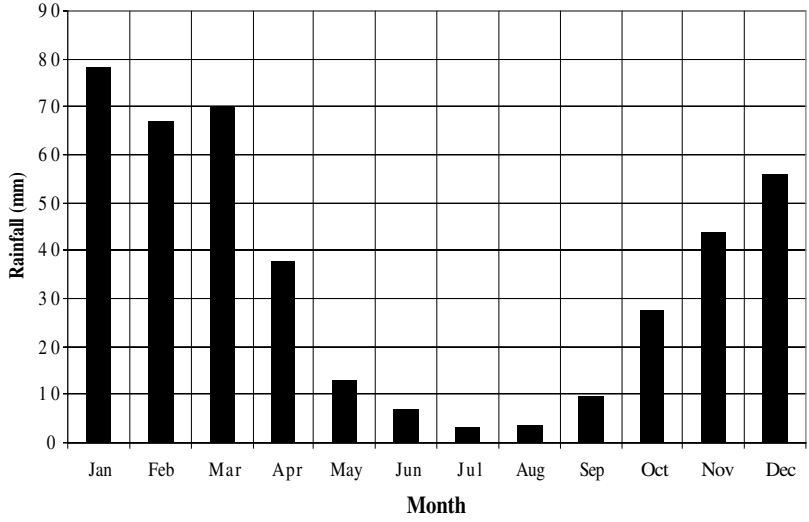

Figure 1-2 Kuruman District mean monthly rainfall, 1931–97.

desiccation consequently must be rejected as untenable." Instead, Tyson proposed a theory of cyclical variation, the strongest being a cycle of around eighteen to twenty-two years.[3] In Kuruman, the South African Weather Bureau has kept monthly statistics since 1932. I contracted a meteorologist, Mark Majodina, to analyze the data for rainfall variability, and he performed regression analyses on the data from the months of maximum rainfall (January, February, and March from 1932–92).[4] He found no trend in the data, although variability did increase in the second half of the study, with the largest fluctuations in the 1970s and 1980s. The data did reveal cycles, the dominant one being twenty years, which fall within Tyson's model. Also present were episodic events related to a global weather phenomenon – the El Niño/Southern Oscillation event affecting weather and precipitation over much of the tropics and subtropics.* If the recent intensification of El Niño is creating a global climate change, it will have repercussions on farming and herding in the future. For most of the recorded history of Kuruman, however, change in climate patterns is not a sufficient explanation for environmental and economic change. Therefore, the history that follows examines droughts as episodes and does not hypothesize a desiccation trend. Lack of rainfall is a serious difficulty, but long-term changes have been in the effects of drought, not the amount of rain.

* The Southern Oscillation involves pressure changes over the southeastern Pacific Ocean and Indonesia. El Niño involves a warming of the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Peru.

Figures 1-3 and 1-4* show annual rainfall broken down by season from 1932–97. The figures illustrate the unpredictability of rainfall by year and season and help us take the empathetic leap toward understanding what it was like to live in this environment in those years. Picture yourself as a farmer who wants to plant sorghum or maize. Every October you would begin to watch the sky and begin to calculate when enough rain had fallen to justify sowing. Imagine the anxiety of predicting whether this year would bring enough rain to sustain a crop. Imagine the disappointment of a year like 1943 with excellent spring rains, but marginal summer ones, or the surprise of a year like 1991 when summer rain far surpassed any expectations set by the poor spring performance. Consider your astonishment in 1974 when unprecedented flooding and several years of high rainfall followed the drought of 1973. Feel the helpless frustration during the prolonged dry spell in the 1980s as you watched your stock die from lack of grass.

In Kuruman, the most reliable source of water is not the heavens, but the earth. Today's travelers driving on the major highways from Upington, Kimberley, or Vryburg pass though huge expanses of bushy thornveld, but upon entering the town they suddenly encounter large green lawns informing them that they have arrived at an oasis (see Figure 1-5). The green grass, exotic palms, and cattle egrets inspecting the grass for insects contradict the lesson evident in history: there is not enough water for all who want it. The illusion of plentiful water is possible, because those who own the grass control the water supply. Underground water is a blessing of the Ghaap Plateau, the landform that stretches 150 kilometers from the Harts River valley in the east to the Kuruman hills in the west. Its surface is calcrete, a whitish chalky porous rock formed from alluvial deposits. Bedrock of dolomite, or calcium manganese carbonate, underlies it. Like other dolomite areas, this is "karst" topography, meaning the bedrock is riddled with caves, sinkholes, and underground waterways. At intervals dolerite dikes interrupt the caverns, and the dikes block the underground flow of water, forcing water to surface springs, known in South Africa as "fountains" or often as "eyes."† Unfortunately, there has never been a thorough survey of all springs in the area of study, and the Ghaap Plateau has scores of them, ranging from small trickles to the Eye of Kuruman, which yields approximately 20 million liters of water a day. Some springs are seasonal; larger ones have big catchment areas and are not affected by one year's rainfall; and some have dried up

* Figures 1-3 and 1-4 show rainfall by climatological rather than calendar year. Thus, the column for 1932 represents the season beginning in October 1931. The data were collected at weather stations near Kuruman town.

† The usage of "eye" originates in the Dutch Old Testament in, for example, Deuteronomy 33:28. Personal communication, Alan Butler, January 18, 1994.

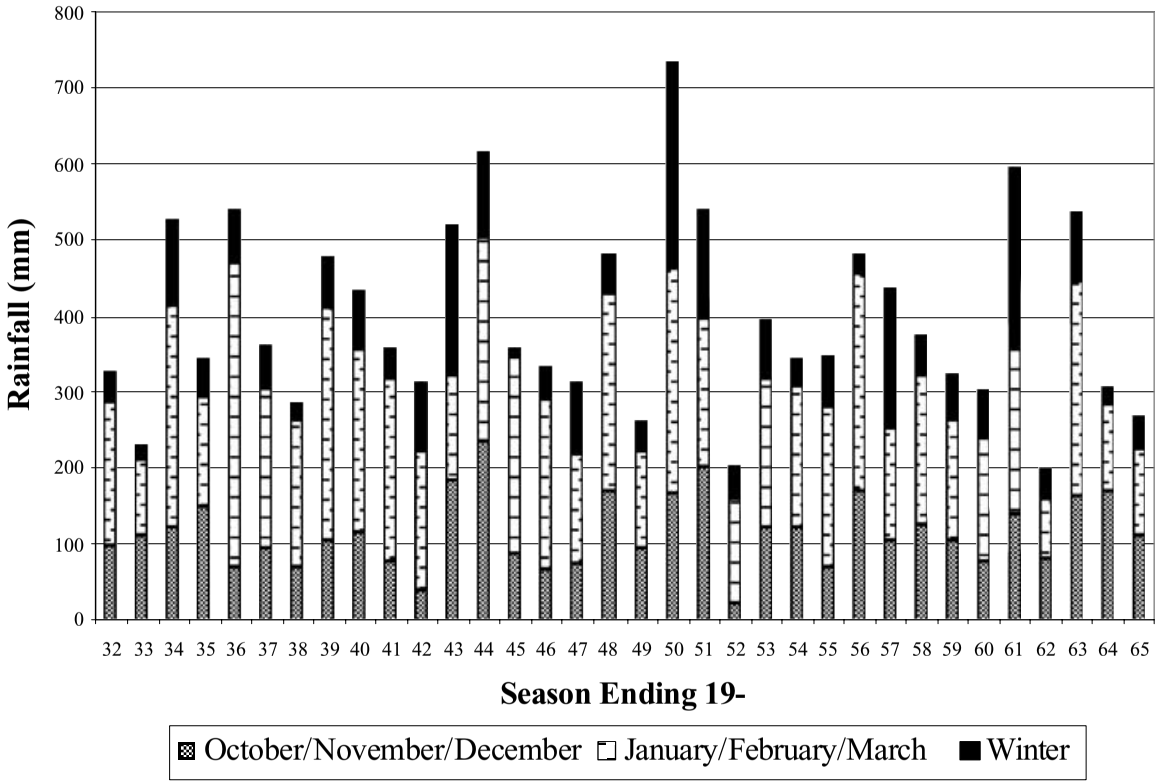

Figure 1-3 Kuruman rainfall, 1932–65.

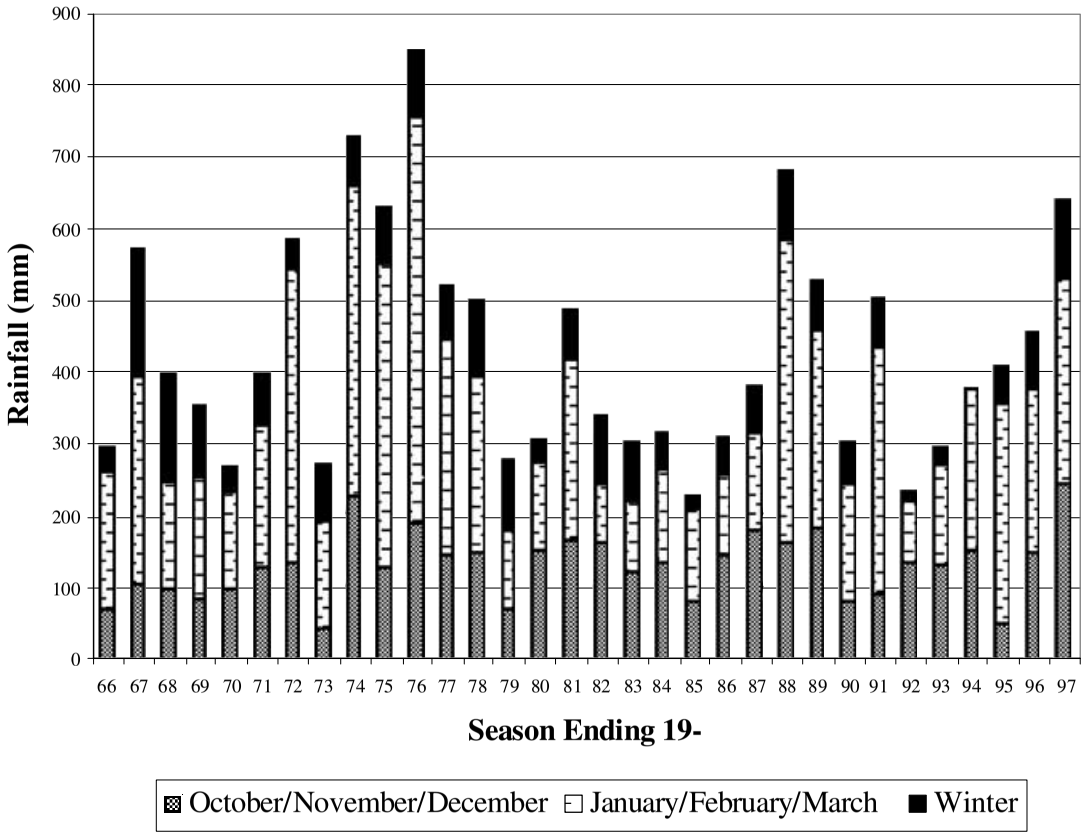

Figure 1-4 Kuruman rainfall, 1966–97.

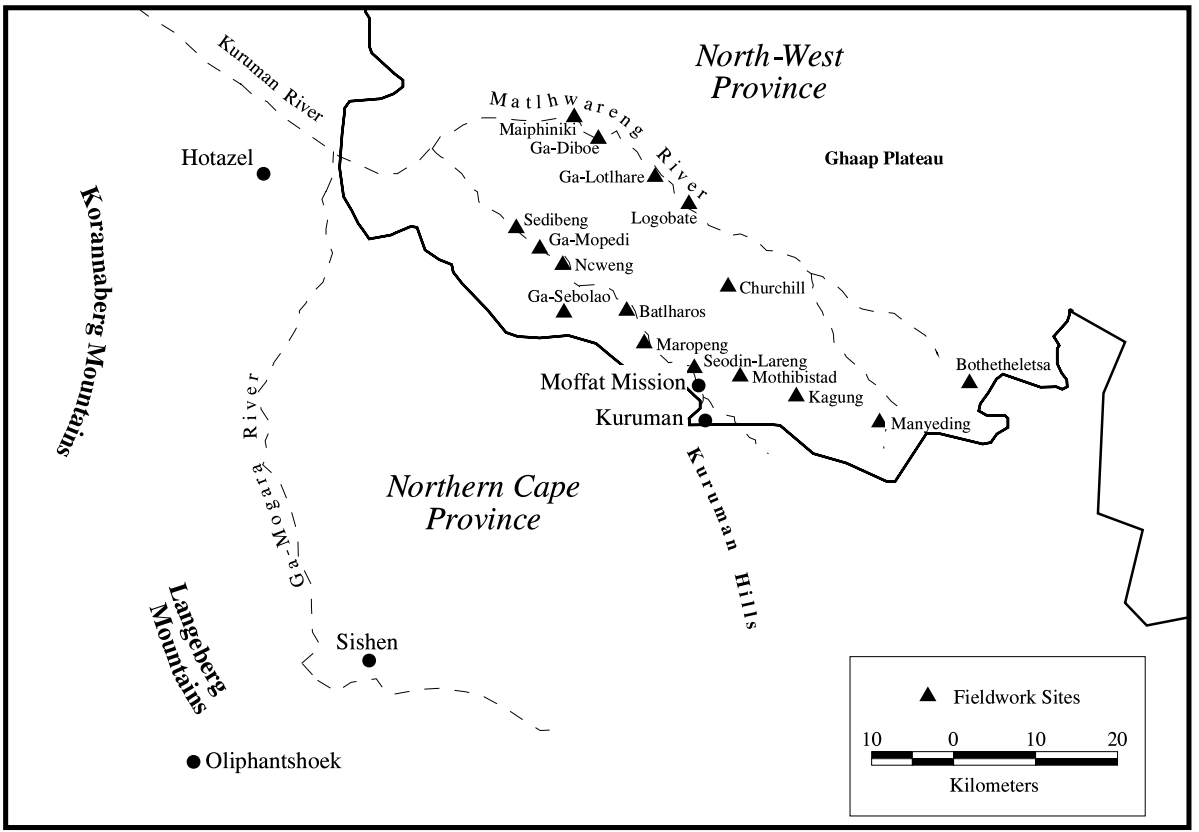

Figure 1-5 The Kuruman area today. Based on 1:250,000 topocadestral sheets 2622 Bray, 2722 Kuruman, 2724 Christiana, 2822 Postmasburg, 3634 Vryburg. From the Chief Directorate of Surveys and Mapping in South Africa. Reproduced under Government Printer's Copyright Authority No. 11012 dated 9 October 2001.

permanently.[5] While the springs are a great resource, the dry surroundings help them appear more prolific than they really are.*

The most famous spring in South Africa is the Eye of Kuruman, a major attraction in the town and often claimed to be the largest spring in the country. Its Tswana name is "Gasegonyane," "little calabash," after the cave that produced the flow. The charming name is no longer appropriate, because in the 1970s planners remodeled the Eye by closing the cave, allowing much of the water to be siphoned off to supply the town. Today, some water is pumped to the top of a rock ledge and allowed to fall into a pond below, a picturesque but manufactured display. Surrounding the Eye is a neatly kept park planted with palms to accentuate the oasis mystique, but the Eye is in contemporary South Africa, not an exotic desert of imagination. When the water flows beneath the high iron fence surrounding the park, it enters a racialized landscape. The Eye is the source for the Kuruman River, which runs northwest, first watering garden plots owned by white families. These plots and the water supplied to them were the object of the first major segregation effort in Kuruman. What little water is left in the stream below these gardens then makes its way into areas where blacks live.

The town of Kuruman grew up around the Eye. Today, it is an undistinguished South African *dorp*.† On the through highway and the town's main streets are branches of the same banks, retailers, and petrol stations present throughout South Africa.[6] The residential areas were restricted to whites by law until 1994, and today only a few black families own houses here. On the north side of town, however, travelers approach the section of town where black people receive services. There are shops with unique names: "No Jokes Fruit and Veg" and "Tlharo Tlhaping Butchery." Near the bus stop and taxi ranks are informal traders and many black pedestrians. Past this, on the northbound highway, the town rapidly gives way to a fringe of bungalows on both sides and another green lawn. The transition from garden back to thornveld is an abrupt one, but the course of the river and the location of the irrigated plots are marked on the east side of the highway with rows of trees, parallel to the road.

Five kilometers downstream is the Moffat Mission Trust, an ecumenical center on the historic grounds of the London Missionary Society station, tracing its roots to nonconformist evangelism among Tswana people in 1816. The mission made Kuruman the anchor on the Road to the North and gave British

* For comparison's sake, it is helpful to note that the Eye of Kuruman is surpassed in output by many springs in the karst regions of Florida, Missouri, and Indiana, which receive much higher rainfall. Richard L. Powell, "A Guide to the Selection of Limestone Caverns and Springs in the United States as National Landmarks," unpublished document, Indiana Geological Survey, 1970. I thank Hank Huffman for this reference.

† "Dorp" is Afrikaans and South African English for a small town.

authorities a reason to locate an administrative center here. Today, it gives tourists a reason to stop in Kuruman. The mission was placed here because the land could be irrigated. Old trees of the former orchard still yield tiny fruit, but the missionaries' garden and wheat field are now a pasture. The mission homes from the 1820s are well tended and the 1838 stone church, seating up to 800 people, is still impressive. It stands empty on Sundays, however. With the implementation of the Group Areas Act of 1950, black parishioners were no longer allowed to attend services at the mission, which was proclaimed to be in a white area. The rejuvenation of the site as a church retreat center and an excellently preserved historical artifact and national monument has occurred since the 1980s. Today, the church is the setting for weddings (local villagers and visiting academics alike exchange vows here) and occasionally for special worship services.

Just downstream from the mission, the river, by now just a ditch nearly narrow enough to jump across at the center of the shallow valley, crosses a border to the area where blacks live. Historically, the valley has been home to members of the Tlhaping and Tlharo chiefdoms. Under colonial rule, the lower valley became a black reserve, and under segregation, it was part of the homeland of Bophuthatswana. Since 1994, the same line divides the Northern Cape and North–West Provinces. Along the Kuruman River are more springs of different sizes and endurance. In Batlharos, the largest village in the lower river valley, there is a wide green vlei (marsh) where animals graze and people find shade on summer afternoons. Another spring in Ga-Mopedi creates a pond in winter (see Figure 1-6). The eyes along the river do not usually provide sustained flow of water for any distance; most times the riverbed is a series of ponds and marshes, which disappear a short distance downstream, varying by season. Summer is the time of rain, but lower evapotranspiration in winter keeps the rivers fuller when it is colder. These ponds and rivers sustain bird life – waterfowl as well as gorgeous lilac-breasted rollers, little bee-eaters, and crimson boubous, anomalous splashes of color in the faded landscape. Queleas, "feathered locusts," also gather in the river valley. Queleas are the cultivators' bane, but they do not find much grain here. Although the river valleys have the dampest soil in the area and are fenced into gardens, most are abandoned.

By the time the Kuruman River reaches the confluence with the Matlhwareng River, both rivers are dry, except under exceptional circumstances. As the riverbed trails off the Ghaap Plateau onto the sandy surface of the Kalahari, there are no springs to refresh it. If sufficient rain allows water to flow this far, it soon sinks into the sand or evaporates into the dry air. The Kuruman River has flowed into the Molopo River, the usually dry river valley on the South Africa/Botswana border, only four or five times in the past 100 years.[7]