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978-0-521-10140-0 - Afrikaners of the Kalahari: White Minority in a Black State

Margo and Martin Russell

Excerpt

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The mundane Kalahari: an introduction

In the public imagination the Kalahari is associated with Bushmen, and rightly so, since not only are they its majority group, but it is the only place where their hunting and gathering life style survives. It is the Bushmen who draw anthropologists and linguists by the score into the Kalahari.¹ This book, however, is about another Kalahari people, white Afrikaans-speaking cattle pastoralists who for three generations have occupied the limestone ridge in the western Kalahari that stretches from Gobabis in Namibia to the Kwebe Hills below Lake Ngami in Botswana.

Although these Afrikaners feature in the anthropological texts, they tend to be confined to the small type of footnotes or acknowledgements, shadowy subsidiaries, supplying petrol, acting as guides, interpreters and drivers, cited by name and occupation rather than collectively, since they spoil the stereotype of Afrikaners as the Bushman enemy and exploiter.² Perhaps they spoil the anthropological idyll. The anthropologists like to reserve to themselves the monopoly of intimacy with this anachronistic stone-age culture. The reality of the Kalahari is less romantic but in many ways more interesting.

Besides the Bushmen and the Afrikaners there are the various pastoral people who have been attracted to the remote empty grasslands: Coloured settlers from the northern Cape, Kgalagari from the south and west, Herero fleeing east from German rule in Namibia, and Barolong moving westwards to escape British colonial taxation. Then there are exotic individuals of all kinds: Hambukushu and Makuba from the northern swamps, Baster, Reheboth and Nama from the south, besides Bakwena, Bangwaketse and Bamangwato from the east and Americans, Danes and other European temporary sojourners, seconded to the administration under various aid and development programmes.

The administrative headquarters of this part of the Kalahari is known as Ghanzi Camp, a barren sun-blasted commonage on the limestone ridge. Seen from the ground the ridge is a very subtle topographical feature. It is true that the treacherously sandy tracks, which have splayed

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Fig. 2. An Afrikaner and his wife: farmer, transport rider, guide and interpreter for American anthropological expeditions to the Bushman

confusingly yet monotonously for 650 kilometres through the flat Kalahari, rise and fall and rise again as one approaches the Camp, but the undulations are slight and one has little sense of having arrived at last on firm high ground, save for the litter of white limestone strewn beside the road now suddenly reassuringly hard and corrugated. The Kalahari vegetation persists – low, grey, brittle bushes, occasional tall trees with bright lime-green leaves, shiny brown or white seed pods, and delicate white thorns. The noticeable contrast is in the grass: the tall, blanched clusters, so frequent in the Kalahari and preserved on most of the cattle ranches that stretch for more than eighty kilometres on either side of the Camp, disappear, giving way to hoof-pocked, wind-blown, fine dry sand between stunted, colourless bushes, stripped by goats and the winter season of all foliage.

Here are the post office, the police station, the court house, the veteri-

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nary offices and the District Commissioner's office of the Republic of Botswana, which in 1966 became independent of the British protection it had been afforded for the previous eighty years. On wooden benches on the office verandah people sit, waiting to ask official permission to dig wells, to graze cattle on the commonage, to move cattle out of the district, and other matters of bureaucratic concern. As they sit they look out over the tidy squares of brittle lawn, carefully edged with stones, to the sandy road along which pass occasional grinding, high-wheeled cattle trucks and donkeys and mules, in teams pulling carts, or singly bearing serious adult travellers or laughing, racing children. This is the main road from Namibia to Ngamiland.

The constant flux of people testifies that this is indeed the capital of the area. The senior officials from eastern Botswana who step out of small chartered aircraft onto the rough landing strip behind the offices have an air of authority and a casual, self-conscious sophistication. This is their territory, yet they are outsiders; a term of duty in Ghanzi is a term of exile from the east, from one's own kind; it is to be plunged into a curious rural cosmopolitanism, administering the affairs of a host of Botswana's ethnic and cultural minorities. Locally recruited Kgalagari clerks wander between offices clutching files symbolising their status, and shouting amicably to one another and to friends passing by.

A hundred metres down the road is the local hotel, the Kalahari Arms, where administrators, cattle speculators and local farmers, black and white, sit on the cool verandah to drink and deal and speculate. Below them, at the hotel gate, Bushman children wait patiently with bundles of bows and arrows to sell to the occasional truck-load of tourists on safari. Until 1964 the verandah, bar and lounge had been the preserve of whites only, and on Saturday nights British officials and farmers had danced till the proprietor had banged the piano down and ordered them home. Independence has changed all that. The Saturday night dance at the hotel is not in the idiom of the new black administrators or their earnest overseas assistants as it was of the last of the British. Nor is the sale of liquor now restricted to the elite as in Protectorate days. Bushmen and Kgalagari flow in a ceaseless stream to the off-licence. Though the drink is new, the traditional drinking patterns and partners are preferred to the polyglot company of the hotel bar.

From the hotel verandah you can see the health clinic which, with its one doctor first appointed in 1973, and several nurses, a pharmacist and others, represents the official medical service to the district. The Ghanzi response to Western medicine displays all the caution due to an ill-trying innovation. Kgalagari and Bushmen retain their faith in the longer-established Bushman healing trance, choosing to spend as much as a month's cash wages on the divination services of a reputable Bushman

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healer rather than the statutory sixty cents for treatment at the clinic. The Afrikaners too have developed an attitude to the treatment of ill health which cannot depend on the Western expert. 'In the old days, if you were sick and set out for a doctor, by the time you got there you were either better or dead.'³ Each family has its medicine box stocked with a range of traditional herbal and chemical cures, most of them now patented, pre-packed in little glass bottles with cork stoppers, marketed from South Africa. Nowadays penicillin enters the boer repertoire along with bitter aloes, *rooipoeier* and *Hoffmansdruppels*.⁴ Self-reliant in the treatment of most disorders, they are intensely interested in medicines and remedies and their comparative effectiveness. The word *dokter* is a verb rather than a noun among them. 'I know how to doctor', a woman will say. 'My mother taught me. She was very clever at it. All the people used to come to her.'

Opposite the clinic is a small settlement of hastily contrived temporary huts of sticks, newspapers, cardboard and flattened tins. Here Herero outpatients and their supporters ingeniously provide their own accommodation during treatment. On the sand between the makeshift huts the Herero women move like butterflies, their frilled and tiered brightly coloured cotton dresses sweeping the dun sand majestically. The dress, with distinctive headdress and small apron, is a nineteenth-century Finnish missionary legacy. Each takes fifteen yards of fabric, and the Herero customer is fastidious about quality. 'Only the best will do for them', says the Afrikaans woman who owns one of the three Camp trading stores. 'They're very good customers.'

The stores are treasure troves of every commodity for which there is black demand. From their rafters hang storm lanterns, strings of shoes, buckets, plastic bottles and horse saddles. On the shelves are blankets, shirts, trousers, dress materials, crockery, cutlery, patent medicines, sweets, tobacco and tinned foods. Once a week on Fridays great dusty trucks thunder in from across the Kalahari to replenish the stock and to bring a little fresh produce – bread, fruit, vegetables – demanded by the small dependent community of resident officials. Longer-established residents secure their own stocks of fresh food. The Afrikaans cattle ranchers bypass the trading stores altogether, buying in bulk directly, and supplying the transport upon which the stores rely. Nevertheless the store is for them too a focus of social life. Since the proprietors or managers are kinsmen, people passing by call in to lean on the counter and drink incessant cups of tea, amidst the babble of Nharo, Makoko, G/wi,⁵ Herero, Kgalagari and Tswana customers. Extensive credit is extended to all through a system of mental account keeping. For despite its polyethnic character this is a small and intimate community and there are few people who are not known by face or name to most.

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Fig. 3. The Oasis Cash Store. One of the three trading stores in Ghanzi Camp

Behind the administrative buildings is the compound of officials' houses, whitewashed concrete slabs shaded by cultivated trees planted years before by colonial officials. Here too is the Tswana medium primary school. It has not been open long. For years the building stood disused after the withdrawal of the Afrikaner pupils and teachers from the school following the abrupt British switch to racially integrated education in 1964.

On a windy day the fine sand blows off the roads and the veld, stinging the legs and obscuring in a thick pink haze the scattered houses of the Kgalagari and Bushman townsmen on the commonage. Bushman houses, even in the town, are frail affairs of sticks and dried grass, roofless in winter to facilitate large fires. Compared to the elaborate mud and clay architecture of the east, Kgalagari houses also are slight, slipshod and impermanent. The careful tight thatching of the east gives way to casual untidy bunches of grass loosely tied to the rafters, giving the dwellings a surprised air like the tousled hair of children suddenly awoken from sleep. The sudden whirlwinds that come spinning across the sand send the hens scuttling, set children shouting and make the old women suck their teeth in mild irritation. There is a noise like the crackle of fire as the dried leaves of past summer are flung against the dry branches of the bushes, and the loose thatch, empty cans and bits of cardboard are momentarily

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funnelled into the vortex. The whites' houses also show a casual disregard for the niceties of structure and insulation which a harsher climate might demand. An unexpected wind in 1972 took off six roofs.

The first week it came from one side and took off half the roof, and a week later it came from the other side; we hung onto the roof that night. For twelve hours we hung onto the beams and when the wind began to drop we got wire and fastened it down onto the lintels. I told my husband if he ever builds another house he must put walls on the roof to keep it down.

In 1972 there were 265 households, or a thousand people, living on the fifteen square kilometres of Ghanzi Camp.⁶ A few of these were white Afrikaner traders, mechanics and their families. A substantial 43 per cent were the households of civil servants living in government houses. The civil service is mainly Tswana. An interesting index of the Africanisation of the civil service is the fact that in 1972 a third of Ghanzi officials owned cattle. Apart from a few Hereros and Coloureds, the remaining households were Kgalagari and Bushman, most of whom owned no cattle, nor received cash wages from any source. How they subsist remains obscure in the congested barren Camp, though in broad outline the pattern of no cattle, no cash is typical of most of Botswana, where seasonal crop cultivation and the use of borrowed cattle provide a subsistence base.⁷

TABLE 1. *Income of households living in Ghanzi Camp, 1972*

| Source of cash income | Without cattle | | With cattle | | Total | |
|--------------------------------|----------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|------------|------------|
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| In government service | 79 | 30 | 35 | 13 | 114 | 43 |
| Non-government paid employment | 37 | 14 | 8 | 3 | 45 | 17 |
| No cash wage | 83 | 31 | 23 | 9 | 106 | 40 |
| TOTAL | 199 | 75 | 66 | 25 | 265 | 100 |

Source: Ghanzi Commonage Survey (1972)

In some years the Camp fills with Bushmen, pressing in during the dry, barren winter months to find water. There are several boreholes in the Camp where water is found at eight metres. The galvanised iron wind-pumps dominate the skyline, and on a windy day careless disregard to disconnect the pump can rapidly result in water being splashed and spilled in the sand. Such a pump was seen by a poor white visitor from the northern Cape in 1952. 'I said to myself, if it's the kind of place you can waste water like that, it's the place for me.'

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It seems paradoxical that anybody should have been attracted to Ghanzi by abundant water. To the outsider, Ghanzi appears to be more of a desert than the rest of the Kalahari. Yet this very barrenness has been brought about by the water which allows people and stock to congregate, in turn rapidly reducing the veld to sandy waste. It was the availability of water on the limestone ridge which first attracted the white Afrikaner settlement there in 1898, when forty-one families were allocated 5000 morgen each⁸ under the patronage of Cecil Rhodes. Eighty years later the Afrikaans community is still less than fifty families strong, but their farms stretch for more than a hundred and fifty kilometres along the ridge.

The intervening years have seen a number of changes in the size and strength of the Afrikaner community and its economic and political circumstances, but none more dramatic than their encapsulation into the independent state of Botswana in 1966 when the British relinquished their Protectorate in Bechuanaland.

All our preconceptions of Afrikaner political and racial attitudes sensitised us to the potential impact of the advent of black majority rule for the white community of Ghanzi. In their reaction we hoped to find portents for the process of change in southern Africa as well as grist for the mills of sociological theories of race relations.

Most studies of blacks and whites have been of rich whites and poor blacks, or powerful whites and powerless blacks. This is the colonial heritage. It is particularly true of Africa. Even where whites have been deprived of political power they have generally retained sufficient economic influence to make formal loss of political power unimportant, at least in the short run. The Afrikaans settlement in the western Kalahari represents a white group who have been neither a colonial nor an economic power. Politically, socially and economically unimportant, they have also been isolated from fellow Afrikaners and the events which have given Afrikanerdom much of its distinctive cast.

These people now find themselves part of an independent yet democratic state, in which the numerically preponderant Tswana naturally hold nearly all high political office, and dominate the civil service. It is a state committed to non-racialism. Economically still very dependent on racially structured South Africa, it nevertheless constantly affirms its ideological independence by this policy. In so doing it finds itself marginally out of step with independent states to the north whose Africanisation programmes give preferential consideration to indigenous black inhabitants.⁹ The parallel Botswana programme is one of localisation, the replacement of expatriates by citizens, irrespective of race.

The Ghanzi situation gains piquancy from the fact that Afrikaners have a reputation for racialism second to none, and although the impetus for this reputation derives from contemporary political practice in South

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Africa, most textbooks stress that it has been an integral aspect of Afrikanerdom from the very early days of Dutch settlement at the Cape.

In selecting the Afrikaners of Ghanzi we were selecting what we took to be a traditionally race-conscious and reputedly racist group who had, under seventy years of British rule, achieved some kind of *modus vivendi* with other ethnic groups in the vicinity, and who had with Independence become incorporated into a non-racial black state. We were interested in the history of their settlement as it demonstrated the relationships established between them and the British authorities; between them and the hunting and gathering Bushmen; between them and the Kgalagari who have been widely dispersed in the Kalahari for some centuries; between them and the powerful Batawana to the north, sometime overlords of the Ghanzi veld, from whom the concession to settle whites had been wrested by Rhodes in the late nineteenth century (Tlou 1972); between them and members of various other ethnic groups, Herero, Tswana and Coloured who came to farm, to work, and, more recently, to administer the district.

In the three months before we left England for the Kalahari, as we planned the project, the myths about Ghanzi Afrikaners began to accumulate.

Don't forget to go into their family system. They are all in-bred; you'll find incest, the lot.

Their cattle are so wild that they have to hunt them with guns.

One of them didn't like the dances at the hotel so he shot the piano to bits.

One of them took off all his clothes to run naked up a sand dune at midnight.

A local expatriate official to whom we wrote for advice was explicitly discouraging. 'Think again . . . I've been here for two years and I've not yet even found all their houses.'

Their houses are indeed widely dispersed, often thirty kilometres apart, reached by a network of sandy truck ruts in which the inexperienced driver is certain to get incessantly bogged down until he learns to drive with half inflated tyres and an essential resignation to delays. But the people were mundane enough when we eventually reached their simply furnished self-built houses. They responded with initial caution to our interest in them, their life style, and their world view, but they warmed to our central research technique, the recording of their oral history. Over the six-month fieldwork period they extended to us a tolerant hospitality which exceeded our expectations.

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In telling us their history they told us who they were, who their ancestors had been, and how and why they lived in relative isolation from the technological devices and comforts which most whites take for granted. But they told us more. Perhaps unwittingly they told us about how they saw the other people round about and the kinds of relationships they had established with them. They talked about the independence of Botswana and contrasted the political turmoil of the rest of southern Africa with the orderly transfer of power in Botswana.

We remained outsiders. If what we received from these people was an edited version of their world view then we must credit them with a sophistication and flexibility which augurs well for their adaptation in the future. But first we look to their past.

2

Boers, trekboers and *bywoners*: 1898–1930

I

The early history of the Ghanzi region of the Kalahari is not clearly known, but it seems that until comparatively recently it was the almost exclusive territory of hunting and gathering Bushmen as it had been for 20 000 years. The steady southward movement of the Bantu had taken place beyond the periphery of the desert and it was not until the nineteenth century that population expansion, political change and the immense movements of peoples then taking place in southern Africa began to bring significant and increasing change into the Kalahari itself.¹

The Kwebe–Gobabis limestone ridge rises slightly out of the endless sandveld of the Kalahari, a great shallow depression across the centre of southern Africa. Here alone on the ridge the spasmodic desert rains are cupped in rock and replenished by springs in the limestone. A good rainfall can maintain springs here for as long as seven years. There are seasons in the sandveld after rain when the pans fill with water and the Kalahari vegetation burgeons with a vivid greenness, but such seasons are rare and brief and water quickly evaporates. In the past the more reliable water supply at Ghanzi brought immense quantities of game there, both large and small. Passarge in 1907 considered that it was at Ghanzi alone that a reliable food supply had enabled Bushmen to establish a more elaborate economic and political structure than elsewhere (1907:114–24). The climatic and ecological advantages explain both the Batawana claim to suzerainty over the Ghanzi veld as far south as Okwa and as far east as Rietfontein, and the selection of this area as a centre for settlement by whites.

The first white man to settle on the Ghanzi ridge was Hendrik van Zyl. Little is known about him but extravagant myths are still told in Ghanzi of his double-storeyed house at Ghanzi Pan in the 1870s, filled with French period furniture and a hundred Bushman concubines, and of his great