1   Introduction

In December 1979 I was working in the Cape Archives. Together with a
number of other researchers, I would often drink coffee at about 10.30, not
in the Gardens Cafe, then the usual resort of Cape historians, but in a small
coffee bar in a nearby arcade. I suppose that, in the heart of summer, it was
cooler than under the trees in the open air.[1] Now, before their move to the
old Roeland Street gaol, the Cape Archives were in the centre of the city,
very close not only to the South African Parliament but also to the law
courts. One day, as we came out of the cafe, we passed a group of about five
people. Leading them was a tall, fairly elderly man who was walking, slowly,
upright and sedately. The others were all shorter than he was, or at least they
made themselves appear so. They were all dressed in the robes of barristers,
and I suppose that if I had been sufficiently attuned to the niceties of legal
dress, I might have noticed the details which distinguish the chief from the
acolytes. But I did not need to have such additional signs to recognise the
hierarchy within that little group, as they walked through the passage after
having come down from the advocates' chambers higher in the building to
the court. The four lesser mortals were walking with short, somewhat
hurried strides at least half a pace behind their leader, hanging onto his
words, and when they entered the conversation they did so with evident
deference. Obviously, I did not hear their conversations but from their body
language it was quite clear what the relationship between them was.

This incident has stuck in my mind for a number of reasons. The first
relates to their complexions. The man at the front had a light yellow-brown
face and his hair, though greying, had obviously been dark black and some-
what curly. The others' hair was in various shades of brown and off-black
and their skin was what has been called pinko-grey. In Cape Town, in 1979,

[1] William Beinart, who was also working in the Cape Archives at the time, is unsure whether
we went to the cafe in the arcade because it was cheaper than the Gardens or because there
was some sort of informal boycott of the Gardens as a segregated public amenity. Personal
communication, 23 July 1987. This confusion between the dictates of economy and the
symbolism of racial and political struggle might be seen as a (somewhat trivial) metonym
for South African history and historiography as a whole, provided that the 'ecological'
explanation that I have given is not entirely forgotten.

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as before and since, it was most exceptional to see the racial hierarchy, which confined those considered to be so-called 'coloureds' to a position below the erroneously so-called 'whites', so evidently reversed.

The second reason is that I recognised the barrister. He was Benny Kies, an inspirational teacher at Trafalgar High School on the edge of Cape Town's District Six (he had taught a number of my friends) and political leader, who had turned to the law after a banning order from the South African Government had made it impossible for him to continue as an educator. It was the first time that I had seen him, and it was to be the last. He was then engaged on a political trial of temporary notoriety – there were so many – and was to collapse and die in court a few days later. This perhaps fixed the incident in my mind.

Nevertheless, it is on the first reason that I wish to dwell. Body language largely is outside the vision of historians, at least of those of us who deal with the world before the invention of the movie camera.[2] This is an unfortunate fact of life, because our physical postures are perhaps the clearest way in which in our normal life we express our position relative to those other people with whom we interact. Any foreigner who has ever seen South Africans in a documentary film or watched a black South African actor portraying a downtrodden fellow countryman or woman will have noticed the attitudes they strike, as expressive as anything they say. But there are many other ways, in terms of rituals, language, dress, spatial arrangements, religion, even food, by which we express or mark our status. These can be reclaimed historically, if with difficulty. In this book, I wish to investigate some of these, with reference to the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

This book has been long in the writing. There have been a number of reasons for this. Aside from the normal (and not always convincing) excuses of an academic – pressure of teaching, administration and so forth –, a variety of other projects, all with relation to the Cape, but not specifically to this book, have diverted me from this piece of writing. Subliminally, however, they were closely connected to it, particularly the work which I have done, especially in collaboration with Elizabeth Elbourne, on the history of mission Christianity at the Cape. At the same time, the recent burgeoning of historical work on the colonial history of the Cape, particularly in the nineteenth century, has allowed me to proceed with more confidence than I otherwise would have had.[3] Equally, I have absorbed

[2] For an attempt, see Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg (eds.), *A Cultural History of Gender*, Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 1991.

[3] I am thinking in particular of the researches of Andrew Bank, Henry Bredekamp, Clifton Crais, Wayne Dooling, Elizabeth Elbourne, Katherine Elks, Natasha Erlank, Martin Hall, Alan Lester, Kirsten McKenzie, Antonia Malan, Candy Malherbe, John Mason, Susan

through a process of osmosis,[4] if at all, those changes in international intellectual fashions which have probably made the choices of material to be presented rather easier.

In retrospect, the serious problem I had was in deciding what I actually wanted to say. I had a subject, or at least a field. To those who I expected could expand such shorthand, I described this book as 'a semiotic history of the Cape', or more prosaically and less pretentiously, as a history of the markers of status. I also thought of it as being located within the semantic fields covered by two Dutch words, both of which have wider, or at least more varied, meanings than any English equivalent. The first of these is 'etiquette', which means the same in Dutch as it does in English, but has also retained its original meaning of 'label'.[5] The relationship between codes of behaviour and the assignment to categories which exists within the Dutch word is a fruitful source of reflection.[6] The second is 'voorstellen/voorstelling', a pair of words with such a wide set of references that the tidy-minded would do well to avoid them. 'Voorstellen' can mean to introduce (someone to someone else), to propose (that something be done[7]), or to imagine something as being possible. 'Voorstelling' can mean an idea of how things are and thus a way of seeing things in the mind's eye or a performance (of a play, for instance). The closest English word to at least these last two meanings might be 'interpretation'. Obviously, again, the connections which are set up within a single set of words can potentially increase understanding. To try to reduce them to concepts which can be 'used', on the other hand, would probably nullify the effect.

Newton-King, Pam Scully, Rob Shell, Patricia van der Spuy, Russel Viljoen, Kerry Ward and, last alphabetically, but properly first as he has taught and inspired many of the others, Nigel Worden. In many cases, I have been privileged to make use of their work while it is as yet unpublished, or indeed incomplete. For this, many thanks.

[4] And therefore do not feel competent, or inclined, to give a full theoretical exposé of what lies at the back of my work in this sense. Anyway, I have been warned off by many examples of a tenuous relationship between the exposition of fashionable ideas, to prove that the author is aware of the latest trends, and the main body of the work.

[5] In its original meaning, this word was indeed absorbed into English from French, but in the process transmuted into the 'ticket'. Apart from professional etymologists, there can be few English-speakers who appreciate the historical identity of the two words.

[6] This collaboration was made easier for me by a long association with Dik van Arkel, one of whose most fruitful concepts for the analysis of racial behaviour has been 'labelled interaction', or in Dutch, 'geëtikketeerde interactie'. In this book, as it happens, I do not use this concept, although the insights it offers are great. See Dik van Arkel, 'The Growth of the Anti-Jewish Stereotype: An Attempt at a Hypothetical Deductive Method of Historical Research', *International Review of Social History*, 30, 1985, 270–307 and Chris Quispel, *Dienaar en Bruut: Studies over laat-negentiende-eeuws racisme, in het bijzonder in het Zuiden van de Vereenigde Staten*, Leiden, Centrum voor Moderne Geschiedenis, 1995, 191.

[7] *Not* 'to propose to do something'. This is the word-for-word translation of the Dutch construction, a source of considerable and damaging confusion.

4   Status and respectability in the Cape Colony

This is all very well, or perhaps not, but a subject is not a plot, and authors need plots, in order to select what material to use, and in what order. It was only slowly that I came to realise what the basic arguments of this book should be, and how they could be used to provide limits to what might otherwise be a virtually boundless enterprise. I must admit, though, to allowing myself on occasion to include material which I feel to illuminate the history of Cape society, even if it is not strictly relevant to those central plot-lines. Such indulgences aside, this book is now about (in two senses of that word) the following propositions:

1 During the eighteenth century, the Cape colonial society knew a wide range of interconnected, and not always consistent, statuses, which were proclaimed in a wide variety of ways.

2 During the course of the nineteenth century, these were overlaid, and in most cases came to be dominated, by the power of ideas of the social order deriving from Great Britain, and by a considerable stress on English ethnicity.

3 These ideas entailed the imposition of British ideas of respectability onto the Colony, which was particularly apparent in matters of gender.

4 This gave those outside the inner core of society the opportunity to make a bid for acceptance, by adopting the behaviour and the outward signs of respectable society.

5 Ultimately, the acceptance of such bids was conditional and partial. It relied on the denial of identity politics, and on the individualisation of society which was at the heart of Cape liberalism. However, such individualisation ran counter to the ethnicisation of political life, initially based on feelings of English superiority and then taken over by what was to become Afrikaner nationalism. In such a context, claims for acceptance could only be made by groups of people, defined on some criteria other than that of their individual respectability and in practice that which came to be seen as race. This process was exacerbated by the fact that many claims were negated, at least temporarily, by an ethnic exclusiveness hardening into racism.

6 These matters came to a climax in the mid-century political crisis. This intertwined the uprising of the disappointed, known somewhat erroneously as the Kat River rebellion, with the revulsion of many of the whites against colonial oligarchy. In this crisis, the deep politics of gender and respectability came together with the high politics of constitutional change. Out of it came the liberal constitution of 1853, one of the most 'democratic' in the world at the time, which recognised the achievement of respectability within its theory, at the cost of maintaining the ex-slaves and Khoi in a subordinate position.

7 There is a further argument which is implicit in all this. Respectability

was the outward manifestation of a specific class ideology. Because it was so successful, it came to be seen widely as part of the natural order of things. In the jargon it had become hegemonic. The result was to defuse class-based conflict within the Colony.[8]

The contours of this plot are specific to South Africa, as might be expected from a colonial society which united in itself so many elements usually only found singly. All the same, in this as in so much else, what went on in South Africa was part of a much wider process. The establishment of respectable society, on terms essentially established in Great Britain, was a global undertaking, an insidious, because totally informal, expression of cultural imperialism.[9] As such, it was the direct precursor of the attempted Americanisation of the world in the later twentieth century.

This drive for respectability had to begin by transforming the society of Great Britain itself. As such, of course, it was far from totally successful. All the same, a large proportion of nineteenth-century British social history has been written in terms of 'the rise of respectable society'. Even those who start from a Marxist point of view, when they are not primarily concerned with labour history, usually end up with much the same concerns.[10]

Just how successful the British were in spreading their ideals globally is a mute point. However, at least throughout the rest of the anglophone world, similar processes can be discerned. Richard L. Bushman has written about *The Refinement of America* in terms which are comparable, *mutatis mutandis*, to what was going on in Britain and South Africa.[11] Indeed the great cleavage of American history in the nineteenth century, which led to the Civil War, was in part the North's attempt to impose not merely its economic but also its cultural values on the South, and after emancipation (and indeed before it) many of the freed slaves came to embrace at least some parts of the northern ideology, much to the chagrin of their erstwhile masters. Something very similar can be discerned in the British Caribbean, notably in Jamaica. There the post-emancipation conflicts which culminated in the Morant Bay rebellion had many causes. The planters attempted to maintain the economic system they had dominated in as

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8 Many of these ideas were at least implicitly present in my first book, *Adam Kok's Griquas: A Study in the Development of Stratification in South Africa*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976. It is thus perhaps surprising that I took so long to realise how applicable they were to what I was now attempting.

9 One of its early, and most explicit, statements was in the Report of the (British) Parliamentary Select Committee on Aborigines, BPP 638 of 1837.

10 See e.g. F. M. L. Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society: A Social History of Victorian Britain*, London, Fontana, 1987; Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850*, London, Hutchinson, 1987 and, in general, Miles Taylor, 'The Beginnings of Modern British Social History?', *History Workshop Journal*, 43, 1997, 1–76.

11 *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1992.

unchanged a form as possible. Ex-slaves took empowerment from religious
movements, whether the reconstructed African faith known as Myalism or
the forms of Christianity which, in a later South African context, would be
described as independent churches. As important were the attempts of
those – in a West Indian context mainly of mixed descent – who took the
claims of imperial ideology as proclaimed at emancipation and by the first
post-emancipation governors at face value, but who were blocked in their
aspirations by the retained power of the planter class.[12] And, in a different
key, it was the ideology of respectability which turned Pakeha New Zealand
and, to a lesser extent, white Australia into more faithful copies of Great
Britain than the original ever was.[13]

This, then, is in summary the argument which this book attempts to
present. As an aid to understanding, though, it is probably necessary that
a certain basic narrative of Cape history be presented, as this provides the
context against which the rest of this book is set.[14]

The Cape Colony was founded in 1652 by the Dutch East India
Company (VOC) as a refreshment station for its ships on the long haul
between the Netherlands and the East. Initially, it consisted of little more
than a fort on the shores of Table Bay, where Cape Town would later arise.
From the 1680s onwards, the Colony began to expand, first into the
immediate hinterland of Cape Town, where wine and grain farms were
established, and then across the mountain ranges of the South-West Cape.
In the interior, cattle and sheep farms were begun at a considerable rate, so
that by the end of the eighteenth century the boundaries of white settlement
were to be found on the Orange and Fish Rivers.

This expansion did not take place in a human vacuum, nor could it be
achieved without labour. The latter was arranged by the import of slaves
from all coasts of the Indian Ocean, probably somewhat over 60,000 in the
course of a century and a half.[15] At the same time, the indigenous inhabi-

[12] E.g. Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and
Britain, 1832–1938*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992; Gad
Heuman, *The Killing Time: The Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica*, London and
Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1994. A full-scale comparison of the Morant Bay and Kat River
rebellions would illuminate both episodes but is beyond the scope of this book.
[13] E.g, James Belich, *Making Peoples: A History of the New Zealanders from Polynesian
Settlement to the End of the Nineteenth Century*, Harmondsworth, Allen Lane for the
Penguin Press, 1996, esp. pp. 278ff.
[14] For an extended discussion of this, and much more, see Richard Elphick and Hermann
Giliomee (eds.), *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652–1840*, 2nd edn, Cape Town,
Maskew Miller Longman, 1989; also Timothy Keegan, *Colonial South Africa and the
Origins of the Racial Order*, Cape Town and Johannesburg, David Philip, 1996.
[15] Robert C.-H. Shell, *Children of Bondage: A Social History of the Slave Society at the Cape
of Good Hope*, Hanover, NH and London, Wesleyan University Press, 1994, 40.

tants of the Cape, the Khoisan,[16] pastoralists and hunter-gatherers who
had lived at low population densities throughout the region, were deprived
of their lands and pasturage and reduced to labourers for the whites, in a
position little different from, and often in fact worse than, that of the slaves.
This did not go on without a struggle, and until the early nineteenth century
there were continual low intensity wars between colonists and Khoisan,
and right at the end of the eighteenth century a full-scale rebellion in the
Eastern Cape, primarily driven by those who had been labourers on the
farms. At the same time the incorporation of the Khoisan, both culturally
and genetically, proceeded apace. This resulted in the creation of a group of
people known as Bastards, the offspring of European or slave men and
Khoisan women,[17] or at least those of Khoisan descent who adopted
European mores.

By the late eighteenth century, the advance of European settlement was
temporarily halted as the farmers reached the ecological boundary which
had marked the western edge of African agro-pastoralism. The Xhosa and
Thembu chiefdoms of what is now the Ciskei in the Eastern Cape proved a
much more formidable military barrier than the Khoisan had ever done.
Further expansion had to be northward, towards and across the Orange
River. This was slow at first, but in the 1830s it led to the rapid expansion
of white settlement into the Free State the Transvaal and Natal, most
dramatically in the Great Trek of Afrikaners to the north and east.

At the same time, the Cape experienced a change of imperial master.
From 1795 (with a short recession to the Dutch Batavian Republic from
1803 to 1806), the Colony was ruled by the British. With the Cape's inclu-
sion in the British Empire, economic growth could proceed, if at an erratic
and somewhat slow pace. Initially British settlement was not large, but in
1820 some 4,000 people were assisted in emigrating to South Africa. Most
of them were settled in Albany district in the Eastern Cape. As there was
also a steady influx of Britons into the Western Cape, notably into Cape
Town, which remained the major city of the Colony and the centre of both
government and social life, the British came to form a substantial minority
of the white population and to dominate political and social life, particu-
larly as the army, with the Governor at its head, was always a major pres-
ence. The British army, indeed, from 1811 onwards, was able to achieve a
narrow military supremacy over the Xhosa, and in a succession of wars the

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[16] This is a portmanteau word, deriving from an early twentieth-century collation of the Khoi,
or Khoe, words for men (often used as Khoikhoi 'men of men') and San, the cattleless poor,
who were outsiders to Khoi society, frequently spoke different languages and were known
to the Europeans as '*bosjesmannen*' or 'Bushmen'.
[17] Since the children of a slave woman remained a slave, no matter who their father may have
been, and since there were few unions between Khoikhoi men and European women,
'Bastards' were of these parentages.

Eastern frontier of the Colony was driven forward, and the Xhosa expelled from much of their land.

A few years before the first British conquest of the Cape, there arrived the first missionaries, who began the steady process of converting and 'civilising' the Khoisan, the slaves and the Xhosa. Initially, the missionaries were members of the Moravian Brotherhood, of German and Dutch extraction, but later British non-conformists were the most important, certainly as regards their public profile and their explicitly formulated ideas as to what constituted Christian society and behaviour. In this they could draw upon the political resources of the Evangelical Revival in Britain, which was at the forefront of the campaigning to end the abuses of British colonial societies throughout the world. Thus it was that in 1807 the slave trade to South Africa was outlawed; in 1828, by Ordinance 50, the civil rights of the Khoikhoi and other free persons of colour were recognised; and in 1834 slavery itself was abolished, although it took another four years of so-called Apprenticeship before the slaves achieved *de facto* freedom.

Despite the transition to British rule, the inhabitants of the Colony, white and coloured, had little formal say over its government. In part this was because the Colonial Office in London did not wish to divest itself of power in favour of slave-holders or, after 1838, those who were thought still to hold the opinions deriving from the era of slavery. Eventually, though, the autocracy of the colonial rulers was recognised to be equally dangerous, and in 1854 a Parliament was instituted in Cape Town, with a franchise based not on race but on wealth. Indeed the threshold for voting was set relatively low. Nevertheless, those of at least partial European descent, whether English- or Dutch-speaking, continued to hold the monopoly over political office.[18] This, and the hesitant expansion of the economy, would continue until, in 1870, the discovery of diamonds in the semi-desert to the north of the Orange River would initiate a massive change in the nature of colonial society in South Africa.

[18] On why this statement is more hedged than might seem appropriate, see below, pp. 173–4.

2   Under the VOC

Clothing and display

In 1755, the Government of the Cape was faced with a problem. They had received the new regulations to control the display of pomp which had been issued in Batavia, and which in theory were also applicable in all the factories of the VOC. However, in certain particulars these regulations were not suitable for the circumstances in South Africa, and therefore the Council of Policy issued a *plakkaat* which modified, to some extent, the orders which had been issued for the rest of the Dutch Empire in the East. In so doing they demonstrated very clearly how they conceived the order of society in the Cape to be arranged, in theory if not always in fact.[1]

The High Government in Batavia had itself issued these regulations for a definite ideological purpose. As they wrote in the preamble to this ordinance, despite numerous ordinances to the contrary 'the splendour and pomp (*pracht en praal*) among various Company servants and burghers . . . reached such a peak of scandal' that the *Heren XVII* were forced to order the Government in Batavia to take measures against this. This was necessary

to prevent the ruin of many servants and citizens who, with little or no reflection or ruled by an intolerable puffed up pride, forget themselves and do everything almost to exceed the first ministers of the Dutch Company – in whose territory and rule distinction, according to station (*character*), and subordination are the major pillars on which rests the prosperity of the said Company and that of its servants, burgers and inhabitants – or at least to be equal to them in all externals, so that those few goods which they owned before being possessed by this cancerous and emaciating sickness are lost to them and they are brought by the passage of time into the most miserable circumstances, where they become the objects of derision and finally, withdrawing from the world's gaze, they pass such little time as is left to them.

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[1] These *plakkaten* are to be found in J. A. van der Chijs (ed.), *Nederlandsch-Indisch Plakkaatboek 1602–1811*, 16 vols., Batavia and The Hague, Landsdrukkerij and M. Nijhoff, 1885–97, VI, 773–95, *plakkaat* of 30 Dec. 1754 and S. D. Naudé (ed.), *Kaapse Plakkaatboek,* III, Cape Town, Cape Times, 1949, 12–15, *plakkaat* of 15 July 1755.

In these circumstances, the unabated lust for display was conducive to a
mentality which led 'such persons to lose respect for their betters, and above
all those who, though in a higher and more prominent station than they,
are not possessed of greater means and so must bear the insupportable from
such wastrel Company servants, burgers and other inhabitants'. This denial
of the principles of hierarchy might even lead to 'the disadvantage of both
the Company, and of its true servants and burghers'. Therefore the
Governor and his council decided to issue the *plakkaat* which then fol-
lowed.[2]

The first section of the ordinance was concerned with the display which
was allowed on the carriages and horses of the various ranks of Batavian
society. In the first instance, only the Governor-General and the members
of the Council of India (a body which included the Governor of the Cape)
were allowed to decorate their carriages with gold and silver, and only those
with the rank of Upper Merchant (in the Cape only the chief law officer,
known as the *Fiscaal*, and the *secunde*) were permitted to decorate their car-
riages with their arms, or other personal emblem. The same rules applied
to their wives' sedan chairs and to the small carriages in which children
were transported about the town, although in these cases it was the status
of the husband or father which was determinant. In Batavia it was further
ordained that only the highest ranks were allowed to inspan more than two
horses in their carriages and to employ Europeans to guide their horses, but
at the Cape it was decided that this would be impracticable, given the nature
of the roads and the necessity of bringing agricultural products to market.
However, if Europeans were to be used for such tasks, they were not to be
allowed to wear any form of livery whatsoever. In addition, individuals of
lesser ranks had to give way to the Governor and members of the Council
when they met them on the road.

The clothing of both men and women was subject to equally firm rules.
Only the members of the High Government and the President of the Court
of Justice (at the Cape, therefore, only the Governor), together with their
wives and children, were allowed to wear clothing embroidered with gold
or silver thread, while only those one step lower in the hierarchy were
allowed to wear gold or silver buttons.[3] In addition, only Upper Merchants
were allowed to wear velvet clothes, and only Lower Merchants and their

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[2] Van der Chijs, *Nederlandsch-Indisch Plakkaatboek*, VI, 773–4.
[3] This is to a certain extent remarkable, since such buttons were a generally used method of
storing wealth, even among common sailors. See Robert Ross, *Cape of Torments: Slavery
and Resistance in South Africa*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982, 59; Jan de Vries,
The Dutch Rural Economy in the Golden Age, New Haven and London, Yale University
Press, 1974, 218.