Introduction

South Africa is a single country. At one level this may seem to be an extremely banal statement, but at another it is highly contested. For many years, the government of the country denied it. Even now, South Africans have to struggle to recognise it as correct. The African National Congress (ANC), which sees itself as the embodiment of the nation's unity, campaigned under the slogan 'One Nation, Many Cultures'. Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes of 'The Rainbow People of God'. The country has eleven recognised official languages. Its divisions are so great that, within South Africa, calling the country single is more of a routine statement, or a pious hope, than a statement of fact.

The view from outside South Africa, where this book is written, is different. After all, all countries are divided by the cultural background ('race' or 'ethnicity') of their citizens, by religion, by economic differentials, by gender. In South Africa, these splits may be sharper than, but are not different in kind from, those found elsewhere. Indeed, however much South Africans may emphasise the distinctions between themselves, they are immediately recognisable as South Africans, no matter from where in the country, socially and geographically, they originate.

This book is an attempt to show how South Africa became a single, though not uniform, country. That it has become so should not be a matter for dispute. Take, for instance, the country's economy. Throughout the twentieth century, and indeed beginning much earlier, there was a steady incorporation of previously more or less independent units into a single interdependent totality. There can now not be any household in South Africa which is not tied, in all sorts of ways, into the national (and thus international) economy. South Africa no longer has any exclusively

subsistence peasants. Culturally, no process of homogenisation has taken place. South African society is probably as diverse as ever, and possibly more so. Nevertheless, the cultures that have developed are only local when, as is the case with certain of South Africa's ethnicities, they have been created in almost conscious rejection of values which, within the confines of South Africa, are otherwise accepted. Far more generally, the developing cultural forms, for instance as expressed in religion or in music, are geographically limited only in inessentials. Certainly, people in all the major urban centres, in differing proportions, find the same sorts of way of understanding and giving meaning to the uncertainties in their lives. In the countryside, too, the experience of a century of migrant labour has drastically affected the ways in which society is organised and the values that are held. There are uniformities across the country in this, and also many influences from the towns where, after all, many country dwellers spend much of their lives. Politically, the domination of the central state, which has steadily increased ever since Union (1910), has created a single area in which the various conceptions of how South African society should be ordered compete. The long exclusion of the great majority of South Africa's adult population from formal participation in the political life of the country in fact only accelerated the general realisation that local conflicts, played out, as they were, according to rules set by the central government, formed part of the countrywide political disputes. And, of course, the events of the 1900s conclusively demonstrated the sham that the Balkanisation of the country through the creation of Bantustans always was. Nevertheless, these Bantustans were always proof of the great reach of central government.

Beyond these considerations, what matters is the sort of country that South Africa has become and continues to become. The rate of social and political change is now greater than ever before. Nevertheless, South Africans of the early twenty-first century are having to work within, and to cope with, the heritage of their past, both recent and distant. In very broad terms, that past has created a country with the following characteristics. It is an African country, and the social structures and, as important, modes of thought of pre-colonial African societies continue to shape its present. Modern family structures and ideas about governance and the reasons for misfortune, for instance, still owe much to a pre-colonial past. It is an ex-colonial country. Its very shape has been

determined by the limits of colonial conquest at the end of the nineteenth century. Indeed, uniquely, it has been at once a colony of white settlement, a colony of slave labour and a colony of rule over a large indigenous population. In this sense, it was a colonial country in more than one way. It is a capitalist country, or at least a country whose economic development has been dominated by capitalist organisations. Colonial South Africa was founded by the premier capitalist corporation of the seventeenth century, the Dutch East India Company, and was taken over by the British at the height of Britain's industrial revolution. Later, from the last quarter of the nineteenth century, South Africa was transformed, as a result of the discovery and, more importantly, the exploitation of its massive mineral deposits, notably of diamonds and gold. The particular forms of labour organisation that these mines developed did much to shape the social structure of the country, and on their back secondary industry and the tertiary sector have developed to a degree unexceeded on the African continent. In consequence of this, South Africa is an urban, or at least an urbanising, country. By 1996, about 55 per cent of South Africa's population lived in towns. However, the policies of apartheid had kept the proportion of urban Africans relatively low, at two-fifths of the African population. With the abolition of the laws that kept many of the Africans in the countryside, this percentage is increasing rapidly. Finally, South Africa is a Christian country, though not exclusively. Approximately three-quarters of all South Africans now claim to be members of a Christian church, either of a worldwide denomination or one of the many created in South Africa itself.

These various strands in the country's history are of course not independent of one another. Their interweaving has created modern South Africa. My purpose in this book is to explicate their interconnections and development.

Yet, even if the essential unity of South Africa and the identity of South Africans are beyond dispute, there remains the question of what is, and what is not, South Africa. Who are, and who are not, South Africans? Historically, these matters are by no means clear. Until 1910, there was no such entity as South Africa, except as a geographical expression. Before then, for instance, Moshoeshoe, the founder of the modern independent kingdom of Lesotho, was as much a South African as his contemporary Sekhukhune, whose descendants are now chiefs in the

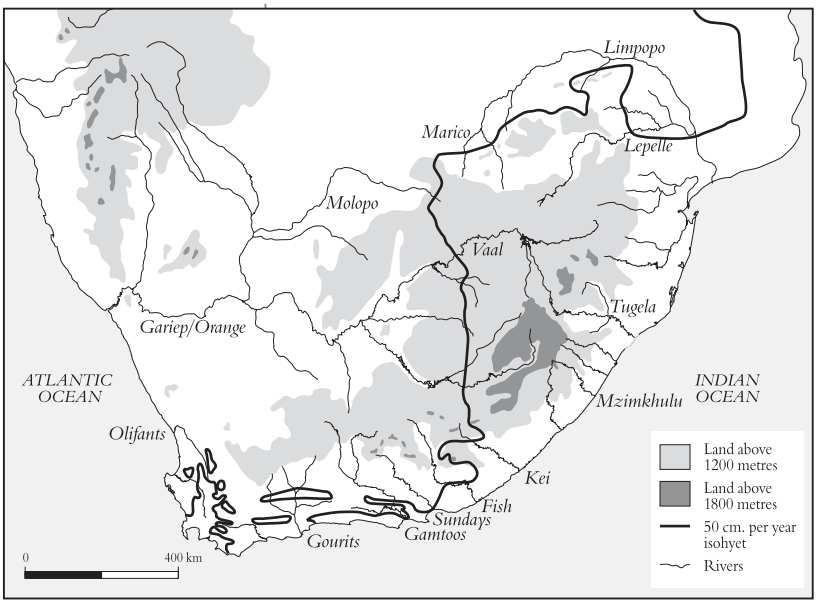
Limpopo Province of the republic. After 1910, at various times, the South African government attempted to incorporate Namibia, which is now an independent country, and to divest itself of large areas of its territory – the Bantustans – together with perhaps half of its population, which are now integral parts of the country once again. Many of the labourers in the country's gold mines have always come from outside the formal borders of South Africa. At times, and for some subjects, it makes sense to write about South Africa in the narrowest sense, that of the modern republic, or indeed that of the South Africa which was under the rule of colonial governments and their successors. At other times, the focus needs to be on the whole region, including at least Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, Namibia and southern Mozambique as well as the republic. I hope that it will be clear from the context what at any given moment I mean by South Africa, and why. However, even more than is the case for most countries, the historical definition of what is South Africa is, in practice, remarkably fuzzy.

1

The settlement of the country

South Africa is at once an old and a new country, and was so long before the New South Africa was called into existence in the 1990s with the imbalance of the Old unredressed. South Africa is old geologically. Only in the far north-west, and in a few isolated pockets, is the land covered by recent deposits, producing the highly permeable, and thus dry, sands of the Kalahari, which cover most of Botswana and much of Namibia. Elsewhere the ancient rocks of Gondwanaland come to the surface. In the southern two-thirds of South Africa these are mainly the sedimentary rocks of the Karoo series, but in the north they are Precambrian or older, often interlaced with igneous irruptions and thus blessed with one of the world's widest assemblages of minerals.

The rocks have weathered to produce a land surface dominated by a plateau 1,500 to 2,000 metres above sea level. This is surrounded by a roughly semi-circular escarpment, which is broken only by two rivers – the Gariep (to give the Khoi name, now taken back into use, for the river generally known as the Orange), which flows into the Atlantic, and the Limpopo, which forms much of the country's northern border before flowing through Mozambique into the Indian Ocean. Neither these rivers nor any of the shorter ones which flow off the escarpment, and are longest in the south of the country, are navigable. The mountains of the escarpment are highest in the east, where they form the Drakensberg chain. These mountains break the rain-bearing weather systems which come in off the Indian Ocean in the summer. As a result the narrow strip between the sea and the mountains in the south-east is well watered and was once covered with woodland or forests.



1 South Africa: physical features.

In the rest of the country the thick savanna of the far north thins out to grassland on what has become known as the High Veld and, further south and west, to the semi-desert of the Karoo and the Kalahari. Only in the far south-west of the country is the pattern different. There, the climate is similar to that of the Mediterranean or California, as rain systems come in off the Atlantic in the winter. Also, there is a small stretch of the southern coastal belt which receives rain throughout the year and is thus forested.

South Africa is also old in terms of human habitation. Many of the fossils of humanity's ancestors have been found in South Africa, as have some of the earliest remains of men and women of the modern type. Over the millennia, these people lived by collecting roots, nuts and other plant food, by gathering shellfish on the coast, by fishing and by hunting the abundant antelope and other game. They fashioned the landscape with fire, and may indeed have created the grasslands of the High Veld in this way, but were not otherwise intrusive into the environment. The first domestication in South Africa began only a couple of thousand years ago, with the introduction into the subcontinent of herding and

agriculture. Relatively speaking, this happened late. Southern Africa was probably the last major region of the Old World where this development occurred, at least before the ecologically disastrous efforts to irrigate the central Asian steppe in the twentieth century.

In the course of this development pastoralism preceded agriculture by some centuries. At some stage in the last half of the first millennium BC, people living in the region where modern Botswana, Zambia and Angola meet acquired sheep and, possibly later, cattle, and began to move south into the highlands of central Namibia and into the High Veld and the Cape. Like their predecessors in the region, they spoke a language containing many clicks, a phonetic feature unique to Southern (and Eastern) Africa, but it was different from those languages used south of the Kalahari up till then. Thus began the process whereby language became a marker for way of life which has characterised Southern Africa ever since. This process was accentuated after the introduction of agriculture south of the Limpopo River in the first half of the first millennium AD. Southern Africa's agriculturalists spoke one of the closely related Bantu languages for as long a time as information is available for, and probably since their arrival, up to the coming of European colonists. (These agriculturalists should probably be described as agro-pastoralists, since cattle were very important in their economies, and more so in the underpinning of their social structures.) These closely related Bantu languages form a branch of the Niger-Congo family, which is the major language group in Africa, with derivatives spoken from Senegal to the Cape. Indeed, the relatively recent settlement of South Africa by speakers of these languages can be gauged from the languages' close linguistic relationship and from the fact that the two major variants are both found over a very wide area. These variants are Nguni (including isiXhosa, isiZulu and siSwati – all three of which were spoken between the escarpment and the Indian Ocean – and isiNdebele) and Sotho-Tswana (spoken largely on the interior plateau). Within the group the variants are more or less inter-intelligible. In addition Tshivenda, closely related to languages across the Limpopo in Zimbabwe, is spoken in the far north, and what was to become crystallised as Xitsonga was and is to be found in the north-east of South Africa, as well as across the border in Mozambique.

In the course of the first millennium, then, there developed in Southern Africa a tripartite division of the population. There were the hunter-

gatherers, later known collectively as 'Bushmen' or 'San', speaking one of the Khoisan 'click' languages; the pastoralists, speaking Khoikhoi (also Khoisan); and the agriculturalists, speaking one of the Bantu languages. The boundaries between the groups were never impermeable. In economic terms, all groups hunted and collected wild plant food, though very few Bantu speakers fished or collected shellfish. All Bantu-speaking groups owned cattle, and indeed the Ovaherero of central Namibia were almost exclusively pastoralist, though they, like certain Khoisan, grew a number of crops, particularly *dagga*, the South African version of marijuana. IsiXhosa, isiZulu and, to a lesser extent, Sesotho accepted clicks into their phonetic repertoire, and physical anthropological studies have shown that considerable numbers of Khoisan at least were incorporated into the Bantu speakers, whose ancestors, migrating from further north, were typically darker in appearance than the Khoisan. However, since people who changed lifestyles also changed languages, the divisions appeared much firmer than they actually were, and where groups lived in the same area contacts between them were continual.

Over the centuries, as the subcontinent came to be fully settled, the agro-pastoralists came to dominate all those areas which were ecologically suitable for their way of life, that is to say roughly the eastern half of modern South Africa, the eastern fringe of Botswana and the north of Namibia. Further west, insufficient rain fell to sustain agriculture, or, as in the far south-west, fell at the wrong time of the year for the crops the agro-pastoralists grew. The Khoikhoi lived mainly along the well-watered southern plains, and also along the Gariep River and in the highlands of the western escarpment both south and, especially, north of the river. The Bushmen were increasingly a remnant population, living in contact with the others but in areas where agriculture and pastoralism were unattractive or too risky, particularly in the mountains of the Drakensberg and the Western Cape and in the semi-deserts of the Karoo and the Kalahari.

The various Bushmen groups had a variety of cultural elements in common. They all lived in relatively small bands, which came together around a source of food and water when these were plentiful, and dispersed across the countryside in seasons of scarcity. Equally, a common cosmology was spread across a wide area and was expressed both in mythology and other forms of oral literature and in visual art,

painted onto the walls of shelters in which they lived or inscribed on rock platforms and pebbles. The oldest such art has been dated to 27,000 years ago, but most is much more recent, and was being produced into the nineteenth century.

Primarily, the art is figurative, representing humans, animals and figures which are at once human and beast and are thought to represent the trance experience of Bushman shamans. While most of the game available to the Bushmen was painted somewhere, there is a heavy over-representation of specific species, notably the eland, which occupied a central place in Bushman mythology. While the engravings are generally line drawings, and many of the paintings are effectively monochrome silhouettes, a number, notably in the Drakensberg, are in shaded polychrome. Together, they represent the highest concentration of the genre anywhere in the world, and aesthetically they represent one of the high points of human visual creativity, with an importance which stretches far beyond the bounds of Southern Africa.

1.1 This rock painting, depicting eland, was removed from the farm The Meads in southern Natal to the Natal Museum to prevent further water damage.

Khoikhoi social organisation differed from that of the San largely as a result of the greater size of political unit that herding made possible. Among the Bushmen, every member of the group was thought of as a relative and addressed as such; among the Khoikhoi this was not possible, and far greater stress was laid on relationships in the male line. Bushman life did not allow for the accumulation of property; however, the lucky and skilful Khoikhoi herder could acquire a substantial number of cattle and sheep, which he could both pass on to his sons and use to bind others to him as his clients. Such individuals became political leaders. Khoikhoi society was literally plutocratic: a ruler's authority derived from his wealth and disappeared if that wealth was dissipated or captured by enemies. Nevertheless, in normal times such authority, and thus the tribal groupings, were relatively stable, both along the southern coast and in Namaqualand and Namibia. Its fragility would be evident only after the advent of European colonialism.

Both pastoralism and agriculture were introduced into Southern Africa. A few plants – various melons, some greens, and rooibos tea for instance – have been domesticated in the region, but these do not form the staples on which people rely. Crops were brought into the region at most a century or two later than cattle and sheep, but their spread was much slower. The mixed-farming regime, often known as agro-pastoralism, entailed the steady subjugation of the landscape, but for the first few centuries of such settlement the farmers, naturally enough, concentrated in and on the deep soils of river valleys in KwaZulu-Natal and what used to be the Transvaal. Here they grew sorghum and bulrush and finger millets, together with pumpkins, melons and, no doubt, sundry garden vegetables. Their stock was probably not abundant, except in the far north, and in north-eastern Botswana substantial herds were built up – sufficient to degrade the environment and cause a crisis for the societies based on pastoralism by about 1250 AD.

By this stage, virtually all the eastern half of South Africa had been colonised by the agro-pastoralists, as had northern Namibia, where the cultural traditions were rather different (and thus are not included in this account). In so doing, agro-pastoralists had turned the bush into agricultural land, thus restricting the tsetse fly, which carries the parasites for sleeping sickness in humans and a more deadly cattle disease, to a narrow zone along the Limpopo River. The agro-pastoralists' material