

The Enigma of the Namaqualand Trekboer

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Introduction

Recent studies of Namaqualand focus almost exclusively on communal areas and concentrate on the ecological impact, downplaying the local social arrangements that make such subsistence possible. They also largely ignore work written in Afrikaans. As a result, one such scholar whose work is worthy of re-evaluation is PJ van der Merwe (1912–1979), a student of Johan Huizinga – one of the founders of cultural history and the author of seminal texts such as *The Waning of the Middle Ages* and *Homo Ludens*. His dissertation, *Die Noordwaartse Beweging van die Boere voor die Groot Trek (1770–1842)* [reprinted 1988] was published in 1937. Unlike mainstream historians who focused on major political events, van der Merwe displayed Huizinga-esque proclivities by examining the more mundane everyday business of living, with a particular focus on mobility. Appointed a lecturer at Stellenbosch in 1938, in the same year he published *Die Trekboer in die Geskiedenis van die Kaapkolonie, 1657–1942*, which was later translated and introduced by Roger Beck as *The Migrant Farmer in the History of the Cape Colony, 1657–1842* (1995).

During university vacations from 1938 to the early fifties he travelled to the north-western Cape, a region of problematic definition encompassing Namaqualand and Bushmanland to the borders of Gordonia. It was here where he believed that he found the ‘last remnants of a pioneer population’ practicing itinerant livestock farming. Established farmers still practiced Winter transhumance, while there were also landless farmers who trekked around and hired grazing. Nomadism, more accurately transhumance, survived here because of the unique geographical features which provided both Summer and Winter rainfall in different parts of the region, supplementing each other. While the region was one of the oldest colonial settlement areas, its aridity and terrain resulted in a low population density and official land tenure practices discouraged settlement in the Summer rainfall areas, while Government laxity in allocating land encouraged squatters. Namaqualand remained largely forgotten by authorities until the copper mining boom in the latter half of the 19th Century.

Van der Merwe covered over 15,000 miles interviewing hundreds of farmers, clergymen, teachers, school-inspectors, stock-inspectors, businessmen, police-agents and officials of the magistrates’ offices, divisional council and schoolboards, chronicling their

struggle against the twin tyrants of thirst and loneliness and praising their initiative and perseverance in a popular book *Pioniers van die Dorsland* (1941, reprinted in 1945, 1947 & 1949). It laid the groundwork for his classic *Trek: Studies oor die Mobiliteit van die Pioniersbevolking aan die Kaap* (1944) [Trek: Studies Concerning the Mobility of the Pioneer Population in the Cape] which utilised archival, oral history and first-hand observations. He was also a prolific feature writer contributing some 200 items to Afrikaans newspapers and magazines.¹

While Namaqualand was the richest region of the Cape Province, because of its mines, it also housed the poorest whites and it was these people that van der Merwe sought to dignify.² To challenge the common stereotype of them being 'backward' country bumpkins, he instead celebrated their resilience and remarkable ingenuity in dealing with a harsh landscape. This was in sharp contrast to the views of W.C. Scully, the former Namaqualand Magistrate and author, who was awarded an honorary doctorate at Stellenbosch for being 'an Irish-born friend of the Afrikaner'. Scully described these trekboers as:

a being sui generis. He is usually ignorant to a degree unknown among men called civilised. He is untruthful, prejudiced, superstitious, cunning, lazy, and dirty. On the other hand, he is extremely hospitable. Simple as a child in many things, and as trusting where his confidence has once been given, he cannot be known without being loved, for all his peculiarities. The desert life, which has filled the Arab with poetry and a sense of the higher mysteries, has sapped the last remnant of idealism from the Trek-Boer's nature, and left him without an aspiration or a dream. The usual lack of fresh meat and the absence of green vegetables as an item in his diet, has reacted upon his physique and made him listless and slouching in gait and deportment, as well as anaemic and prone to disease. This is especially true of his womankind, who, besides being extremely short-lived have, as a rule, lost nearly all pretensions to beauty of face or form.³

Highly regarded for his meticulous research by liberal and Marxian South African historians,⁴ van der Merwe's work on mobility received accolades from the eminent Australian historian Sir Keith Hancock and is now being translated into English to make it more accessible.⁵

There are, however, a number of shortcomings within his work. Despite his self-image of being a scientific historian who presented complete, rounded accounts, might his avowed nationalist fervour have clouded his judgement?⁶ He inexplicably ignores the in-

1 His daughter, Margaretha Schäfer has recently compiled and translated these in *Reports from the Dorsland and other pioneering regions*, which features these popular articles.

2 This effort must be seen within the context of a resurgent Afrikaner nationalism epitomised by the massive emotional celebration of the centennial of the Great Trek.

3 Scully 1898: pp. 8–12

4 Beck 1995: pp. ix-x

5 Beck 1995; Beck (forthcoming); van der Merwe 2019; 2020.

6 Displaying his Nationalist credentials by writing exclusively in Afrikaans, he was a popular Day of Covenant speaker and *Ossewabrandwag* aficionado, an anti-British pro-German Afrikaner organisation which opposed South Africa's entry into the Second World War.

digenous or non-White population despite Schapera's now classic *Khoisan Peoples of South Africa* (1930) which presents extensive Namaqualand material, and also crucially overlooks the trekboer role in eradicating Bushmen from Bushmanland. More puzzlingly, he fails to acknowledge, let alone engage with contemporaneous research done by colleagues at Stellenbosch. This includes the 1942 doctorate by P.W. Kotzé titled *Namakwaland: 'n Sosiologiese studie van 'n geïsoleerde gemeenskap*, a study based on a survey of some 5,310 whites living in Namaqualand conducted between March 1938 and July 1940, as well as another doctoral study presented in the same year by K.A. Heese on the history of education in Namaqualand. Heese taught at Springbok High School from 1938 to 1942, and while their conclusions are different, they appear to have used many of the same informants. In contrast to van der Merwe, Kotzé found the Namaqualanders to be lacking initiative and displaying a serious dependency syndrome. Is it possible to reconcile these diametrically opposed conclusions? A possible compromise is suggested in this essay.

The major shortcoming in van der Merwe's trekboer studies is that he largely ignores a critical part of their social environment, namely those who later became known as 'Non-Whites', despite the fact that in 1921 'coloureds' already constituted 70% of the population in Namaqualand and whites only 29%.⁷ They contributed immeasurably to the survival of trekboers providing succour and service. Indeed, the trekboers vaunted resilience would have been impossible without being part of what Rosengarten in chapter 1 calls their entanglement with established Khoi and emerging 'Baster' networks.

Given the gradual, relatively benign infiltration by small numbers of trekboers, there was no attempt to check their migration as Khoi and Coloureds, then referred to as Basters, relied on trekboer part-time traders for commodities such as tea, coffee and brandy. In the fifties, Basters proudly proclaimed that they had pioneered Namaqualand by driving out the wild Bushmen and animals and built churches and schools thus making it safe for Boers.⁸ The arrival of trekboers intensified conflict with Bushmen, so much so that in 1861 Civil Commissioner for Namaqualand Louis Anthing was forced to undertake a special mission to Bushmanland to investigate locally organised militias known as commandos and consisting of collaborating Basters, Boers and their Khoi servants. These first took place in the late 1840s and continued until the 1880s.⁹

While there was much Trekboer-Baster co-operation, it was distinctly hierarchical. Early trekboers did not hesitate to mix with Nama and San. Indeed, many trekboers were fluent in Nama and !Xam.¹⁰ Given the isolated population, loneliness was a serious problem and domestic servants provided companionship, especially to women and children. In his survey of 617 farmers Kotzé found that 77.5% employed domestic and farmworkers, while 25% of *bywoners* (client squatters), living on farms but not farming, had servants. Servants were generally paid a low wage, given rations and limited grazing rights, and their womenfolk were expected to assist in household chores and, on occasion, serve as

7 Heese 1942: p. 14

8 Carstens 1966: p. 42

9 de Predo-Samper 2012; Strydom 1929. The remnants of these !Xam were later to be found as itinerant sheep shearers or Karretjies People at a rang below 'coloureds' in the social hierarchy (Sangiro 1954: p.25).

10 van Vuuren 2017: p. 79

wet nurses to Boer children.¹¹ Coloured workers or *handlangers* (factotums) were simply treated as part of the normal background.¹² In one of his rare references to Basters, van der Merwe observes that in trekking to Bushmanland, trekkers complained that apart from the brackish water ‘there were always more or less Basters there whom they had to sometimes greet with a handshake for the sake of having access to water’.¹³ Trekboers could also use the government to advance their interests, thus the Rehoboth Basters were forced to move to Namibia because the Land Beacon Act 1868 caused them to lose access to grazing lands.¹⁴ Passing through Namaqualand in 1903, Leonard Schultze described how the trekboers despised the ‘Coloured Races’, calling them *skepsels* – non-human creatures – or ‘yellow creatures’. The custom of child indenture, euphemised as ‘*Groot-maak*’ [to make big or grown-up] while less profitable than in the past, was still practiced. Trekboers held the power of life and death over their menials (serfs) and would even shoot them for disobedience or desertion.¹⁵

While Boers publicly ostracised interracial intercourse, its results were obvious to even the most casual observer. Afrikaners visiting the coloured Reserves would be shocked at how ‘white’ the inhabitants were and how almost all had Afrikaans surnames, Heese observed.¹⁶ In the fifties there were still some descendants of trekboers living in Steinkopf Reserve and married to local women. In the first two years of enforcing the Immorality Amendment Act (1950) the police in Steinkopf, hardly a bustling metropolis, investigated 134 immorality cases mostly concerning white males from Vioolsdrift,¹⁷ a short-lived ‘poor white’ resettlement scheme.¹⁸

Many of the pioneering achievements and activities lauded by van der Merwe and attributed to the trekboers were derived from the Khoi. This includes seasonal transhumance – as the Khoi were reported as early as 1785 as practicing it from the so-called Binneveld to the coast or inland¹⁹ – and the use of *gorries* (sand holes to collect water) and skin bags for carrying water or used as rucksacks. On the domestic front, Khoi women often served as midwives and healing practices like Khoi leechcraft and magic remained an important part in their daily lives into the fifties.²⁰ Another Khoi preference favoured by trekboers, despite Government discouragement, was for goats over sheep, while the most visible, and certainly most iconic, was the use of oval shaped reed-mat huts. Estimates ranged from 5% to 19% of Whites using them in the twenties and thirties.²¹

11 Sangiro 1954: p. 37

12 Kotzé 1942: p. 351

13 van der Merwe 1944: p. 188

14 Carstens 1983: pp. 138–9

15 Schultze 1907: p. 329

16 Heese 1942: p. 78

17 Carstens 1966: p.135.

18 Sangiro 1954 : pp. 67–68

19 Levaillant 1796 : p. 223

20 Carstens 1966 : p.16

21 van der Merwe 1944: p.174; Kotzé 1942: p.86.

Origins

Because of its harsh environment, Namaqualand was historically not seen as a priority to the Government and treated as a marginal area, a de facto 'refuge area', or what Scott terms a 'shatterzone' and only formally incorporated into the Cape Colony in 1847.²² As such, it attracted people escaping or driven out of the colony who were defined as 'lesser', including slaves, freebooters, adventurers and deserters who integrated into the local Khoi populace, and later was supplemented by trekboers. Widely regarded as the most inhospitable area in South Africa, it had the lowest population density namely: 1.47 per sq.mi. compared to 12.74 for the Cape Province as a whole prior to the Second World War.²³ The terrain and incessant drought made travel challenging in the region, resulting in a highly dispersed, mobile and isolated population with considerable autonomy. The first Civil Commissioner/Magistrate was appointed in 1858 and had oversight of some 440,000 sq. km. Gradually and irrevocably this inaccessibility was eroded by the persistent use of state- and market-led 'distance demolishing technologies' such as roads, railways, dams, and telephones.²⁴

The Trekboer institution emerged from interconnected developments: farmers had large families and their offspring believed the alternative to farming, artisanal work, was 'slave work'. Additionally, inheritance law meant farms were sub-divided among the heirs, reducing their viability. Since offspring already owned livestock allotted to them on the farm, they simply trekked into the hinterland. Many Boers also objected, or could not afford, to make payments in accordance with the quitrent farm system, so they acquired pasturage simply by trekking around or squatting on unoccupied Crown land, or else by being a *bywoner*²⁵ on a relative or friend's land. In Namaqualand, for example, in the 1860s there were 678 white farmers. However, only 134 farms had been surveyed suggesting that 544 farmers were trekboers.²⁶ It took little to survive as an independent trekboer. This livelihood was not initially profit-oriented as the markets were too distant – cash was relatively unknown before the Namaqualand copper mines opened. Instead, household necessities were obtained from hawkers through the barter of livestock, hides and grain, even though these of generally poor quality.²⁷

By the mid-19th Century, a distinction between the more affluent and less affluent farmers was apparent and, over, the course of time, the gap was to increase leading to the inevitable conclusion that this mode of farming required large-scale capital investment.

22 Scott 2009.

23 Those classified as Europeans constituted a scrawny .45! Kotzé 1942: p.118.

24 Scott 2009: p. 40

25 A landless white tenant-farmer, generally viewed by settlers as a socially inferior, dispossessed or dependent person, who was often appointed as foreman to oversee Black or Coloured workers.

26 Smalberger 1969: p. 107

27 Kotzé 1942: p. 45

Livelihood strategies

There are three discernible ecological zones in Namaqualand. A sandy, dry, water scarce area on the coast called the Sandveld is located in the intermediate zone of Winter and Summer rainfall – with water scarcity being an issue. While regarded as the most unattractive grazing area – in Winter moisture and dew resulted in less reliance on water and so it would attract graziers from the Binneveld – the best farming land and where most of the population was found. This is a mountainous central area rich in minerals and with a volatile Winter rainfall. To the east of this zone is a large plateau-like area known as Bushmanland, with low and erratic Summer rainfall and lacking open water, but containing a large variety of nutritious perennial plants and relatively free of stock diseases. This was the favoured destination for transhumance from the Binneveld after ploughing at the first rains in May and return in Summer.²⁸ Later farmers would trek with their families to the outposts on their farms. This was not some ‘inborn Trek-spirit’ but practical, as such moves allowed the pasture near the homestead to recover and kept livestock away from the croplands. Such treks were seen as a vacation, breaking the monotony of life. Moreover, family-labour was needed for lambing, especially as farmers increasingly switched from sheep to goats.

Pasture management through camping was rare before the Second World War and given seasonal differences in the carrying capacity of the zones, most large livestock-owners saw transhumance as a necessity. The Binneveld became unhealthy towards September and October with *krimpsiekte* (cardiac glycosides), and trekkers believed a change in grazing led to improved health – especially in reducing gall and digestive diseases. The Trekveld is seen as ‘fresh’ and plants there provide sodium and phosphates since trekboers did not feed their livestock salt or bonemeal.²⁹ There was also pleasure in trekking: trekkers would congregate at water sources and socialise, enjoy an opportunity to hunt, make biltong and prepare leather. In these halcyon days trekkers would follow the rain to the nearest vlei with temporary water, even if it was on a farm, as everyone was believed to have equal rights to usage. Farmers tolerated this because of the uncertainties of the region, and the realisation that they might require assistance themselves one day.

There was thus no regular pattern or established migratory cycle. While the ideal involved regular seasonal routes between Winter and Summer grazing areas and later farms, sometimes during the trek season herders would simply wander around. There were also incidental treks which were unexpected or unorganised, largely due to drought, locusts, stock disease or game movements. Sometimes trekboers simply had no fixed address. Later, the more affluent engaged in Uitlê, a practice of moving to outer grazing on large farms in the Winter and Spring months.

28 Movement north across the !Garib was initially largely limited to hunting, raiding and livestock trading although a few hardy trekboers did engage in transhumance and settlement – ecology and local resistance being prime inhibitors. Stals 2009: pp. 1–43.

29 van der Merwe 1944: p. 213

Fig. 1: Namaqualand Transhumance (according to Heese 1942).



Transhumance was a regular seasonal event in the late 19th Century, before declining. Nevertheless, van der Merwe claimed that more than half of the Namaqua farmers still trekked, albeit sporadically and increasingly restricted to farmers who owned second farms in Bushmanland.³⁰ The ideal destination still remained Crown land where it was illegal to construct anything permanent and trekkers relieved their boredom by hunting or collecting *veldkos* (food gathered from the land) which was an integral part of their diet as it saved them from slaughtering their own stock.³¹

Transhumance waned as expansion was limited by deserts in the west and east. While the Stellenbosch scholarly triumvirate ignored expansion north beyond the Cape border, the number of Boers in Great Namaqualand, that is in the Keetmanshoop and Gibeon districts, increased from 74 in 1,893 to 1,506 in 1902, but declined to 1,154 the following

30 van der Merwe 1944: p. 205

31 van der Merwe 1944: p. 243

year, an indicator surely of itinerancy. They were attracted by cheap land, a dislike of the 'English taxation system' and an alleged lack of government sympathy and assistance in coping with continuous droughts which beset Namaqualand and Bushmanland.³² Moreover, annual grazing licences in the Cape became more restrictive and expensive. Claiming 'temporary' grazing made it easy to avoid payment as magistrates rarely visited the Trekveld. Less than half the graziers obtained licences and when police were introduced, they were never strict, usually only issuing warnings. Moreover, police never intervened when graziers were trekking so many trekboers simply claimed their camps were temporary.³³

Crown land also became scarcer. Most of Bushmanland and Namaqualand had been surveyed and was available for permanent settlement on very favourable quitrent terms by 1907. Many however did not want to 'become a slave to land'. Van der Merwe found a farmer who had received an 'application farm' in 1932, but who in six years had spent less than six months on the farm because of a lack of water, arguing that it was not worth making payments if one had to trek in search of water and grazing.³⁴

The key impediment to settling in Bushmanland was a lack of water and digging wells was labour-intensive. Van der Merwe found that only one out of every four or five wells dug delivered water. Later the Government provided subsidised drilling, but even this remained expensive. Farmers delayed erecting permanent housing since they did not know where water would be found, and many farmers had only one water source for every 20,000 to 30,000 hectares.

Under the loan farm system crownlands could be leased for up to 21 years at public auction. This was seen as problematic as it was impossible to anticipate which areas would have rain. Farmers would then finesse the Government by forming a 'loan company', agreeing to have one person acquire several farms and to not raise the bidding. Each one would then receive a Trek-letter from the leaser. While sub-letting was illegal, the State tolerated it.³⁵

However, the coils of land ownership were tightening. The number of Namaqualand farms increased from 203 in 1916 to 670 in 1938, while – in an attempt to control the recently discovered diamond fields in the Sandveld – the State bought up 127,461.75 ha.³⁶ This soon shattered the practice of mutual aid as farmers started demanding compensation or refusing access in an effort to save grazing for their own livestock. Progressive farmers started resenting people 'who lived off other people's backs.' Legally, trekkers were allowed to graze at no cost within 400 yards of a proclaimed road, but they began to engage in much chicanery: moving at a very leisurely pace, engaging in night grazing, deliberately confusing trek trails with proclaimed roads and taking wrong roads on

32 Trümpelmann 1948: pp. 63–84

33 van der Merwe 1944: p. 272

34 van der Merwe 1944: p. 52. Most resistance came from the less affluent who had some capital but who believed in avoiding large debts and moreover who, having large families, realised that inheritance made such farms unsustainable in the longer term. 'Application farms' were designed to promote farming by poor whites by providing generous terms.

35 van der Merwe 1944: pp. 273–4

36 Heese 1942: p. 440

purpose. When confronted they became threatening and impounding their livestock was impractical.³⁷

Additional grazing regulations served to further throttle trekking. Mange and scab regulations were an added impediment as trekkers had to pay for dipping prior to trekking, and then in 1937 a trekker required the permission of a stock inspector – with such permits only being valid for thirty days along the shortest stipulated route.

Increasing inequality also contributed to the decline of trekking. The more Boers invested in their farms the less the desire and need to trek. These farms generally became smaller (due to inheritance practices of all children getting an equal share) and thus reduced carrying capacity. Affluent farmers could afford drilling and erected windmills – reducing the need for finding open water – while fencing was also important. This served as the death knell for the permanent trekboer, who initially had been kindly received by farmers if grazing was plentiful and human company scarce. There was a complex logic in being a permanent trekboer. While many could not afford to purchase a farm, some were wealthy and saw trekking as a way of avoiding taxes. However, when land was available and inexpensive, they did not want it, but when they had problems and needed it, land was expensive and they could not afford it.

Increasing impoverishment led to many trekboers being unable to trek, leading to massive state intervention.³⁸ An important factor here was that those who owned farms could use their farms as collateral or credit to purchase or, more usually, barter necessities from local traders. In such cases, credit might be extended for a few years and possibly result in foreclosure. Kotzé found 36 farms owned by absentee owners who were, in all likelihood, storekeepers.³⁹

Ecologically these trekboer practices led to a downward spiral. Farmers rarely conserved the veld by limiting the number of livestock. They simply moved on. Spot rains resulted in the congregation of farmers at pans or vleis and thus denuded the grazing. At the same time, farms became smaller due to inheritance practices. Overgrazing increased in the key trek areas of the Sandveld and Bushmanland and increased their vulnerability to drought too. As carrying capacity declined, farmers switched to goats and donkeys. The number of donkeys increased from 100 in 1865 to 221,687 in 1930 while goats increased from 143,359 in 1926 to 221,687 ten years later. Being browsers, goats and donkeys were more resistant to drought conditions, but were ecologically more destructive. Similarly, grain production declined as the soil became more brackish, aggravated by the decrease in transhumance, which resulted in fields not being able to recuperate and the results were seen in the increasingly mediocre quality of the grain.⁴⁰

It is a hoary myth that the trekboers were independent. Rather, they were continuously dependent on outside contacts and almost always, except for the fortunate few, hovering on the edge of precarity. In the mid-19th Century for example, Smalberger reports that there was a heated debate about whether to build a railway line to the copper mines – one of the arguments made was the use of Boers as transport riders to alleviate their

37 van der Merwe 1944: p. 276

38 van der Merwe 1944: p. 283

39 Kotzé 1942: p. 212; Heese 1942: p. 430.

40 Heese 1942: pp. 441–443

poverty but they, and their menials, would leave their farms for several months and most of the money earned would be spent on liquor, to the detriment of farming.⁴¹ During the heyday of Trekking in Namaqualand in the late 19th Century, the major source of income – until they were exterminated – was ostrich hunting. Ostriches would be chased down on horses on warm days and then clubbed to death. Because Basters and Nama weighed less, they were used to the ‘hit the birds.’ Each bird was worth between £10 and £15.⁴² Trekboers also engaged in ostrich hunting but, according to van der Merwe, traders were the principal beneficiaries who bought feathers from Basters. The collapse of the feather market during the Great War wiped out this source of income, while conditions surrounding the 1914 Rebellion resulted in most of the wildlife being killed off, forcing Boers to focus on farming amidst diminishing returns.⁴³ Another lucrative, but risky, source of income until 1907 was illegal arms smuggling to Great Namaqualand.⁴⁴ Later, despite generous State support many became part-time farmers, forced to engage in public relief by doing road construction and working on the copper and diamond mines – leaving the running of the farms to their womenfolk and children. In the late thirties 73% of farmers earned less than £100 per annum. Their herds were also insubstantial: 40% of farmers had less than 100 sheep and 47% had less than 100 goats.⁴⁵

Unlike other parts of South Africa, pauperisation did not lead to out-migration. By the late thirties, 93% of the population of the region was born in Namaqualand and most of the rest were born in neighbouring districts.⁴⁶ Therefore, on the contrary, there was a steady population increase which Heese attributes to their isolation: They did not know how to leave.⁴⁷

Conclusion: The Švejk Strategy

In her insightful 1998 thesis on the problems of state enumeration of livestock in the northwestern Cape, Dawn Nell argued that these farmers were not interested in the State’s progressive ‘development’ projects because, from their perspective, it offered very little of benefit to them. One consequence was that the experts dismissed them as ignorant and ‘backward’. Her thesis uncannily foreshadowed Jim Scott’s influential *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009) which persuasively shows that many people in peripheral areas were not ‘backward’ but rather had made a deliberate choice to avoid the state, and that many of their strategies were designed to keep the state at bay. The sparsely populated, inhospitable area subject to frequent droughts created a ‘friction of terrain’, serving as a prophylactic against state infiltration. Their nomadic subsistence only required low labour inputs and generated a minimal, and usually uncertain, surplus.

41 Smalberger 1969: pp.108-10

42 An English £ in 1900 is calculated to be worth £124 in current value, which seems rather excessive, while in 1938 when van der Merwe did research it was worth £68.

43 van der Merwe 1944: p.17

44 Sangiro 1954: pp. 37–38

45 Heese 1942: p. 455

46 Kotzé 1942: p. 113

47 Heese 1942: p. 445

More importantly, this liquid mobility hampered the State's 'legibility' project. The lack of literacy also generated a rich oral culture which aided selective memory and provided flexibility by allowing the trekboers to reinvent their histories and genealogies. Controversially, Scott suggested that 'virtually everything about these people's livelihoods ... can be read as strategic positionings designed to keep the state at arm's length.'⁴⁸

There is merit in this perspective. The anthropologist Peter Carstens, who grew up in Namaqualand and did research in Steinkopf, found that while the 'While White and non-White Namaqualanders drew decidedly differential 'profits' from state programmes, both were inclined to regard the district as an independent country and regard all strangers and immigrants as foreigners'.⁴⁹ Their isolation and extreme hardship had generated a lack of regard for authority 'outside the elementary family, or group of elementary families which trek together'.⁵⁰ Namaqualanders were proud of their strong sense of local identity which was demonstrated by the large number of Namaqualanders who were born there, and their lack of desire to move to better economic opportunities elsewhere, while at the same time there was little in-migration. Observers were impressed that even poverty-stricken farm-owners refused to sell-up, and that many of the farms were still in the hands of the original owners or their descendants. There were also tales of local farmers purchasing farms to prevent those from neighbouring districts from moving in. This *weltanschauung* handicapped governance as farmers were loath to inform on the misdeeds and criminal acts of their neighbours.

Hunting was not simply a past-time but rationalised as preserving scarce grazing for livestock.⁵¹ Concerned about the slaughter of game during the 1899–1902 War, the Cape got its first game reserve in 1903, when 102,000 ha was set aside for oryx and ostriches in eastern Namaqualand, which in 1909 increased to 141,280 ha. But no funds were provided for it and only five beacons marked its 128 km boundary. Poaching was so rife that only 50 oryx were left when it was de-proclaimed in 1919 and made available for farming.⁵² Sangiro found that much of this poaching was deliberate as neighbouring farmers believed, correctly, that if the area was denuded of the game, it would be made available for grazing.⁵³

What Kotzé called the 'moral decline' of Namaqualanders, he attributed to the discovery of diamonds in 1925 which unleashed a rush by speculators to purchase farms at extravagant prices, which farmers then used to purchase items like automobiles – only to discover a few years later that they were bankrupt. Namaqualanders believed that the diamonds belonged to them and not the state and thus thought it was unjust that they did not benefit from the discovery. While illicit diamond buying was punishable, they did not believe it to be unethical nor a crime as diamonds were viewed as created by God, and

48 Scott 2009: p. x

49 Carstens 1966: p.15

50 Carstens 1966: p.13

51 Sangiro 1954: pp. 26; 61

52 Pringle 1982: p. 69–70

53 Sangiro 1954: p. 61

this was simply a means to obtain what they felt was theirs. These activities were simply referred to as ‘Having some luck’.⁵⁴

All three Stellenbosch scholars claimed that they were hospitably received by Namaqualanders, despite being suspected of ulterior motives. But while the researchers and government officials might have been treated hospitably, their questions still received evasive responses. Kotzé was struck by how vague his informants were about the size of their farms and livestock and how much they paid in taxes, probably, he surmised, because they owed back taxes. Magistrates and stock inspectors frequently reported to their departments that some applicants were dishonest, giving misleading inventories of their possessions, while in other cases applicants would move livestock to a neighbour and upon his application being successful would ‘buy’ them back.⁵⁵ Additionally, repayment of government loans had a high default rate. This attitude had long historical roots according to Heese, going back to the 18th Century when *dwarstrekery* (contrariness) was evident.⁵⁶ Nell shows how from at least 1820, trekboers consistently petitioned against the sale of Crown land that was being used as grazing. Not only did they feel that the prices were prohibitive but, given the aridity and inconsistent and spotty rainfall, large areas were needed simply to survive. Prioritising the need to obtain revenue, the state generally ignored these petitions. Later, projects aimed at improving agriculture, such as promoting merino breeding and measures to prevent scab, crashed on the bedrock of vernacular knowledge and trekboer resistance.⁵⁷

Experts, including the blue-ribbon Carnegie Commission on Poor Whites, saw Namaqualanders as living largely in dire poverty, a situation attributed to their ‘backwardness’, and in dire need of assistance from the state and the private sector, and, largely, the church. The quick fix for ‘backwardness’ was education and certainly in this regard, measured by conventional statistics, the district lagged considerably behind – despite various efforts like having itinerant mobile teachers – to the extent that into the thirties Coloureds on the Reserves were generally better educated than the trekboers. In his survey of farmers, Kotzé found that 29% had never been to school, 36% had some schooling and only 24% had completed six years. Eventually more than 62% of all school-going children were accommodated in no-cost hostels.⁵⁸ But even this was met with resistance, as farmers believed they would lose parental rights and more importantly, child labour. So important was child labour that efforts were made to have schools close during ploughing and harvesting season, and children were removed from school as soon as the rains fell. Evasion was the name of the game: when it was made compulsory to send children to school if they lived within a three-mile radius of the school, parents would hide their children or, if more distant, create pseudo-Bush Schools and claim that they were engaged in ‘home schooling’. Some parents would ‘rent out’ children to affluent farmers in exchange for squatting rights.⁵⁹ When there were more schoolchildren than the hos-

54 Kotzé 1942: pp. 231–233

55 Kotzé 1942: p. 340

56 Heese 1942: pp. 42–48

57 Nell 1998

58 Kotzé 1942: pp. 360–361

59 Heese 1942: pp. 391–417

tels could accommodate, town-folk were paid a subsidy to house them during the school terms.

Education was an important component of a huge state intervention effort riding fortuitously on the coattails of the discovery of diamonds on the coast, stretching from Alexander Bay to the !Garib. The government proclaimed the area a state digging site in 1928, and used it as a major source of employment, exclusively for 'poor whites' from the Springbok and neighbouring Van Rhynsdorp area.⁶⁰ In addition, between 1924 and 1939 the state spent nearly £200,000 on support and rations for poor whites while another £207,392 went to agricultural subsidies and a further £111,665 on special emergency funding.⁶¹ Initiated in 1924 in the wake of the closing of the copper mines and a devastating drought, relief consisted largely of hiring road construction workers, but following good rains in 1925 many farmers decided it was better to continue doing roadwork and left the farming to their wives and children.⁶² A telling indicator of vulnerability was that during the 1935 drought, one in five household heads in Namaqualand received food rations.⁶³

Emblematic of relief efforts was the Rural Rehabilitation and Housing Scheme, which in the thirties sought to improve the homes of *bywoners* by offering them £50 to purchase corrugated iron. Unfortunately, there were few *bywoners* as most farmers were too poor to host them, and those that were, were mostly relatives.⁶⁴ When the scheme was expanded, farmers rapidly learnt how to manipulate the system by shaping the inventory of their possessions so that it fell within the prescribed limits. So serious did this become that the state was forced to reclaim numerous subsidies. Farmers argued that they did not see why they should contribute to these improvements and reportedly removed their corrugated iron roofs and replaced them with grass or reeds, to qualify for new corrugated roofing which would then be sold or used on outbuildings.⁶⁵

In completing his survey, Kotzé observed that many farmers thought they were completing an application for a government loan and when told that it was not, asked him to submit it to the magistrate as an application anyway. He concluded that Namaqualanders suffered from a huge dependency syndrome: they had been helped so much that they now saw it as a right and demanded that they be assisted if they were suffering. He quoted an old lady: 'if the dear Lord will not provide we can always ask the Magistrate for a little food.' This short-sighted fatalism was especially applicable to farmers who did not plan ahead for the rain season but preferred to wait for the rain before planting, overlooking the obvious fact that given the erratic rainfall, Namaqualanders would see pre-rain planting as a wasteful risk.⁶⁶

Kotzé went further and suggested that the 'spirit of independence' was not encouraged in the school hostels – as children saw that their parents expected the Government

60 Heese 1942: p. 447

61 Heese 1942: p. 456

62 Kotzé 1942: p. 341

63 Kotzé 1942: p. 346

64 Kotzé 1942: p. 179

65 Kotzé 1942: pp. 189–190

66 Kotzé 1942: p. 353

to provide land, livestock, relief work and rations – and that parents were abdicating their responsibilities to their children. Indeed, some parents even wanted the state to subsidise them for feeding their children during school vacations.⁶⁷ All in all, he dismissed the state's poverty alleviation efforts as an uncoordinated patchwork of projects which did nothing but foster dependence. However, if seen from a Namaqualander perspective, which defined outsiders and government as belonging to a different moral universe and ripe for exploitation, this stigma of 'backwardness' carries a certain panache. As Scott would say: Namaqualanders had 'assembled a fairly comprehensive cultural portfolio of techniques for evading state incorporation while availing themselves of the economic and cultural opportunities its proximity presented'.⁶⁸ Their success in exploiting the Government rested upon what I term the *Švejk* Strategy.

In Jaroslav Hašek's classic anti-war novel, *The Good Soldier Švejk*, the anti-hero, Josef Švejk, a 'dealer in second-hand dogs,' decides to do his bit for the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the First World War, but his 'misadventures' due to his incompetence is of such a nature that his superiors are stuck in a limbo of uncertainty: was he genuinely stupid or acting simply to milk the system? The brutal truth seems to be that farming was never really sustainable. Rossouw, a long-term Namaqualander, noted that in 1898 farmers had to seek temporary work on the gold mines and that he had seen prominent farmers forced to undertake demeaning relief roadwork during at least two different droughts.⁶⁹ For all his sympathetic insights this is something van der Merwe overlooked.

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67 Kotzé 1942: p. 377

68 Scott 2009: p. 329

69 Rossouw 1973: p.7. So crippling was the drought of 1895–7, followed by the *Rinderpest* epidemic, that the Dutch Reformed Church started the Kakamas irrigation colony on the !Garib to assist destitute farmers.

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