

**NO FIXED ABODE: THE POOREST OF THE POOR  
AND ELUSIVE IDENTITIES IN RURAL SOUTH AFRICA**

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**Abstract**

The itinerant sheep-shearing Karretjie (donkey cart) People of the arid Great Karoo of South Africa are of the poorest of the poor and represent a rural underclass. Although they trace descent from both the early Khoekhoen and San, there is no historical continuity between the present-day impoverished foragers and their precolonial nomadic forebears. The structural position of the Karretjie People, particularly their asymmetrical relationship with the wider community, was largely shaped by historical events and their wandering lifestyle was a response to the expansion of commercial agriculture, especially the production of wool, in the region.

Although several factors have started a trend toward sedentarism, most Karretjie People are still confined to their temporary shelters on the verges of the country roads and they have no land, or even free access to any space or place. Although they have for generations rendered an important service to the agricultural economy of the sheep-farming Karoo, they have at best, largely remained socio-economically 'invisible' to the local population, or at worst, strangers in their own land. The recognition that they have received locally has often come in pejorative terms, *Boesman* (Bushman) or *Hotnot* (Hottentot). 'Recognition' nationally, came with their being arbitrarily categorised 'coloured' within the apartheid system, but acknowledgement in terms of poverty relief initiatives from successive governments, were either not forthcoming or have still to impact significantly on their lives.

The Karretjie People are not untouched by coloured and Khoesan identity politics. Opportunistically 'discovered' as citizens by the main political parties for the 1994 election, they have become increasingly sensitised to the realities of disempowerment and political manoeuvring. They have however, not yet asserted themselves and although they are aware of their Khoesan roots, their self-perception is still ill-defined and their autochthonous status not explicitly articulated.

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<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to acknowledge the insightful contributions to this article by John Sharp and the helpful suggestions of two anonymous readers.

## Introduction

Poverty in South Africa is layered, and the extent of poverty is in inverse relationship to its visibility. Shack-dwellers in urban informal settlements are more visible than the rural poor, and even though numerous studies have shown that they are better off than many inhabitants of rural areas, most of the state's efforts at alleviating poverty are aimed at them. Less attention is given to people who reside in the former 'homeland' areas and on commercial, and for the most part still white-owned, farms. Urban informal residents are potential beneficiaries of land reform and restitution measures as well as programmes aimed at the provision of housing and services. Housing provision is not aimed to the same extent at people living in the ex-homelands or on farms, but they are also potential beneficiaries of measures aimed at tenure reform and, in some cases, of the programme of land redistribution.

My purpose is not to call into question, or diminish, the appalling hardships that the poor in urban areas or on farms or in the former homelands experience, or to make light of the enormous challenges the state faces in its efforts to address the issue of poverty in these several areas. In this article I want to point to the existence of a category of even greater poverty than one finds in either urban informal settlements or on farms and in former homelands. The people who make up this category have limited access to cities or towns, and to any of the infrastructure, however attenuated, one finds in urban environments. They do not have access to land, under more or less precarious terms of tenure, or to the other facilities on white-owned farms. Nor has there ever been a place for them in any reserve or homeland, so that they have no access to the tenuous common property land regimes one finds in these areas. In short these people have no legitimate access to any place at all in South Africa, not even the post-agrarian settlements of the common property areas.

The people I discuss in this article are contemporary rural foragers – the modern nomads of the Great Karoo. The Great Karoo is the vast area of arid scrubland and flat-topped mountains that covers a great deal of South Africa's central plateau, and makes up a considerable proportion of the Northern Cape Province. These people who wander across the plains of the Great Karoo identify themselves by reference to their mode of transport. They call themselves the *Karretjiemense* – the (donkey) cart people – and this is also the term by which they are known by others in the districts in which they live. My fieldwork amongst the Karretjie People in the mid-to late-1990s was located in the districts of Colesberg and Victoria West, where there are several hundred of these people, grouped into close on 50 Karretjie families. They are also to be found in many other districts, including Beaufort West, Carnarvon, Cradock, Loxton, Middelburg, Prieska, Steynsburg and Strydenburg. Their peripatetic lifestyle makes accurate enumeration of the Karretjie People difficult, but extrapolating from my own material as well as Redlinghuis's information,<sup>2</sup> it is clear that they number in the thousands, and at a stage their total number was increasing, and their distribution spreading. In the mid-1990s there would seem to have been more than 5 000 Karretjie People spread throughout much of the length and breadth of the Great Karoo.

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<sup>2</sup> A. Redlinghuis, *Mense op Trek na Nêrens - 'n Studie van Swerfarbeiders in die Karoo* (Belville, Institute for Social Development 1987).

The underlying issue here is that the young South African democracy has thus far failed to deliver the full benefits of citizenship to large numbers of people, but conspicuously to local communities in the rural areas. If the rights and duties of a citizen are assumed to revolve around the conventionally accepted obligations and privileges of owing allegiance to the state and being entitled to its protection, then the dire circumstances and the general vulnerability of such communities are crying out for more serious attention, and effective action, from local, provincial and national government and from non-governmental organizations alike.

The circumstances of the poor in the rural areas, and in the particular case study under consideration here, are worsening in absolute and relative terms because of a legacy of unequal access, control and distribution of resources. This is being perpetuated because they continue to be marginalised in terms of development priorities, because democratisation has resulted in closer integration into the global economy and, perhaps even more importantly, because of a local and regional conditioned mindset which maintains the status quo of inequity and which flies in the face of recent statutory and constitutional changes. The result and the reality for communities like the Karoo Karretjie People are that they are virtual strangers in their own land.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Many Faces of South African Poverty**

In 1996 already, a discussion document emanating from the Ministry in the Office of the then President identified rural people, and rural women in particular, as bearing the largest burden of poverty in South Africa. Particularly pertinent was that the key to a transformation strategy was seen to be the democratisation of rural, local and district government, the deployment of community development facilitators to these levels of government, and more direct access to (the then) Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP) and other government funding. It was also repeatedly stressed that rural people themselves must become fully involved in their region's transformation.<sup>4</sup>

Given the fact that for decades South Africa had neglected the needs of millions of people living in rural areas, the publication of a draft document by government was to be welcomed. At the same time criticism from various quarters was justified. Thus Ann Bernstein<sup>5</sup> regarded the document as a disappointment and points to a number of key issues. The document was a kind of 'wish list' which failed to capture the factual information which is available on rural South Africa; it did not identify the key policy choices facing government in developing a new approach; it did not provide a practical and achievable national strategy; and it did not recognise that South Africa's rural areas are complex areas. This document was followed in 1998 by the first government report

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<sup>3</sup> M. de Jongh 'Strangers in Their Own Land - Strategies, Social Resources and Domestic Fluidity of the Peripatetic Karretjie People of the South African Karoo' in A. Rao & J. Berland (eds). **Quintessential Strangers: Peripatetic Peoples in Cross-cultural Perspective** (New York, in press).

<sup>4</sup> **The Star** 1996.01.16 'Mandela Suggests Strategies for Jobs for All' p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> **Business Day** 1996.03.06 'Government Must Go Back to Drawing Board on its Rural Strategy' p. 18.

on poverty and was released by the Deputy President's office. But even before its release it too drew criticism. Ann Githuku of the United Nations Development Programme, which had helped fund the report felt it was mainly philosophical in that the researchers did not necessarily have a strong grounding in the issues, not having lived or worked in poor communities. The document was a useful reference, but civil society organisations did not participate in the process. Despite the criticism the Deputy President's (then Thabo Mbeki) economic advisor, Goolam Abu-Baker felt that it tried to look at the extent of poverty, who the poor are and where they live. It examined various poverty alleviation programmes and drew some conclusions. Although poverty was already "extensively documented" in South Africa, the 300-page report "generated valuable information and insights and may influence government responses to poverty".<sup>6</sup>

Ann Githuku, as was mentioned, criticised this report and, again with the backing of the United Nations Development Programme, became involved in an independent initiative. Three human rights groupings, with the cooperation of most government departments launched a three-month commission to each province as part of their "war on poverty", staffed by six to eight commissioners. A summit on poverty followed the hearings and the general promise was to get closer to the reality of human suffering in the rural areas. Referring to the government's initiatives vis a vis the commission's activities, Githuku suggested that there was a major vacuum concerning poverty in this country. "We tried to analyse where poverty eradication is on the government agenda - there is lip service, but it needs to be clear what the real issues are and what people can do. South Africa has dealt with all the issues of rights, but not the right to development".<sup>7</sup>

These and other initiatives have thus far failed to deliver, mainly because the required sensitivity and understanding of the problems of rural poverty can only be developed through case- and context-specific data which stem from participatory research. Sound macro policies can only be designed by development organisations and different levels of government if such recent and detailed data of the different 'geographies of poverty' in South Africa are utilised. One such geography of poverty in rural South Africa is the Great Karoo, a region characterised by its sheep farming economy. More attention will be given to this subsequently and particularly to one face of such poverty in South Africa, that of the itinerant sheep-shearing Karretjie People who have yet to be touched by the outcome of any of these or other initiatives.

In a country blighted by widespread physical and criminal violence, there is no violence more severe, unrelenting and pervasive than structural violence and it manifests itself in South Africa in millions of poverty-stricken people. Although poverty is not exclusive to South Africa, a number of interrelated factors have given it a unique quality. History left an indelible mark on the processes which shaped the impoverishment of the majority of South Africans. Both conquest and slavery came with the settlement of Europeans at the Cape and with their subsequent movement into the interior. The black inhabitants in most parts of the country were eventually affected, but the Khoesan people of the interior, and particularly the rural area under consideration here, bore the full early brunt of the onset on their land, grazing and freedom. Selective and eventually, legislated

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<sup>6</sup> **Mail and Guardian** 1998.01.23/29 'Making Poverty a Priority' p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> **Mail and Guardian** 'Making Poverty a Priority' p. 26.

discrimination was to follow and had decisive consequences for the industrial labour movement, formalised discrimination on grounds of skin colour and preferential allocation of power. Elements of these factors may be discerned in the histories of many other countries, but nowhere else was a migrant labour system and a system of differential allocation of resources spawned, which in nature, duration or extent may be likened to that in South Africa.

Poverty is of course a matter of sufficiency, access and security,<sup>8</sup> where sufficiency is having, or not having enough food, income and essential services, as well as non-material needs such as safety and opportunities. Access entails actually being able or unable to acquire sufficient food, income and services, and security is having or not having secure and sustainable access to essential commodities and services. Lack of security accentuates the vulnerability of the poor. It is not so much a case of the limited amount of food they have but rather the fact that they don't know whether they will be able to feed their children tomorrow or the next week. Again these three concepts apply to the impoverished everywhere, but in South Africa the deprivation has been exacerbated and reinforced by deliberate legislation which not only created an inequality greater than that of most countries in the world but it also assailed the very humanity of millions of people. '... (A)ny analysis of the causes of poverty cannot ignore the consequences of a systematic and prolonged bias favouring one particular group in the allocation of public expenditure. In South Africa this bias has been apparent in many areas, notably education, housing, health, agriculture, job-creation, and energy'.<sup>9</sup>

The Living Standards Survey undertaken by the Project for Statistics on Living Standards and Development (PLSLD) provides one set of data which confirms the discrepancies in the allocation of resources. Using expenditure data for a statistically valid sample of 4259 black respondents (i.e. including people previously classified as African, Coloured and Asian), rural households in South Africa are shown to have an extremely unequal distribution of income.<sup>10</sup> The poorest decile of the population, of whom 77% are blacks living in rural areas, control just over 1% of households and adult equivalent expenditure. This is contrasted with the wealthiest 10% who control 40% of expenditure. *Within* African and Coloured households, income distribution is furthermore, the most unequal of all.<sup>11</sup>

A "Living Standards Development Survey" commissioned by the RDP office in 1996 and undertaken jointly by the World Bank and the Southern African Labour Development

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<sup>8</sup> J. May, M. Carter & D. Posel, **The Composition and Persistence of Poverty in Rural South Africa. An Entitlements Approach to Poverty** (Johannesburg, The Land and Agriculture Policy Centre 1995).

<sup>9</sup> F. Wilson & M. Ramphela, **Uprooting Poverty. The South African Challenge** (New York, WW Norton & Company 1995), p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> May, **The Composition and Persistence of Poverty in Rural South Africa. An Entitlements Approach to Poverty** pp. 1, 18-19.

<sup>11</sup> Central Statistics, **Earning and Spending in South Africa. Selected Findings of the 1995 Income and Expenditure Survey** (Pretoria, R. Hirschowitz 1997).

Research Unit, revealed similar statistical patterns i.e. South Africa had of the highest income inequality rates in the world and poverty in this country has strong racial, regional, rural, age and gender dimensions e.g. the average total monthly wage was R281.00 (currently: \$1.00 = ± R9.30 and £1.00 = ± R13.80) a month among the 'poorest of the poor' in black households and over R5 000.00 a month in white households. The report defines poor people as those whose cut-off expenditure level is below R301.00 per month per 'adult equivalent' and for the poorest, R178.00 per month. Despite the fact that the total rural population accounts for only 53% of the country's population, 75 % of the poor are to be found in these areas. Children and women are clearly disproportionately affected by poverty in South Africa. Almost half of the country's women live in poor households and 61% of all South African children live in poverty. Furthermore, unemployment among the poorest households was found to be around 53% and unemployment in rural areas is nearly twice as high as in metropolitan areas. This unemployment finds expression in the fact that 47% of these people rely mainly on social pensions and remittances for their income, rather than regular wages. Poverty is furthermore manifested in lack of access to services. Of the nearly 2,5 million poor rural households, more than two million, representing about 12 million people, have no access to piped water, modern sanitation or electricity. Of these, 10 million rely on wood as their main source of fuel. This lack of access to electricity and piped water means that the vast majority of rural women spend the equivalent of one day a week fetching water and collecting firewood. The poor are further disadvantaged by the fact that they have never had proper access to education and 50% of the poor have no education at all or only rudimentary primary education. Access to health care for the poor is also severely restricted and is evident from the higher prevalence of diseases of poverty among lower income groups, including tuberculosis, diarrhoea and fever. Poor children in particular are most severely affected. Their development is retarded because of the burden that comes along with susceptibility to disease, low access to health services as well as undernutrition - one indicator of chronic undernutrition being stunting i.e. insufficient height for age.<sup>12</sup>

In terms of what I have called the geography of poverty, South Africa may be regarded as consisting of three types of poverty areas: the urban areas and their squatter sprawl, the *platteland* (rural South Africa) with its small towns and the almost exclusively white-owned farming land, and the erstwhile 'homelands' (reserves or Bantustans) originally set aside for occupation by different black ethnic groups. "This racial geography of poverty as it is found in southern Africa is a fact fundamental to any understanding of vulnerability and causation, yet there still seem to be many influential urban-dwellers who are unaware of the extent of black poverty or who believe that such poverty as exists is concentrated in the urban, not in the rural areas".<sup>13</sup> The *platteland* and homelands furthermore consist of a number of sectors, black tenants on white farms; small towns and 'dorps'; resettlement areas in homelands; towns in homelands; commercial farming areas; areas close to cities; areas far away from cities; areas in high rainfall zones and areas in low rainfall regions.

The South African Karoo in many ways typifies the second (*'platteland'*) of the three

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<sup>12</sup> **The New Nation** 1995.06.02/08 'Raw Deal for Rural Women' p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Wilson & Ramphela, **Uprooting Poverty. The South African Challenge** pp. 23-24, 174.

types of geographical areas and a number of the different sectors. The large sheep farms are owned by whites and farm labourers still generally have no share in the agricultural economy of the area. The landowners are in fact 'lords of the manor' who not only dictate the presence and activities of people on their property but also direct much of the pattern of life in the area at large. As has been indicated, the Great Karoo in large part falls within the Northern Cape Province, which in area is the largest province, covering a vast 30% of South Africa's land mass, but in terms of population size, is the smallest in the country, since it has only 2% of all the people. The majority of people are Coloured (57%) while 29% are black. The people in the province tend to be clustered in small towns or villages: 71% live in areas defined as urban, and large parts of the province are either uninhabited or sparsely inhabited. With the exception of the Free State, black and Coloured households in this province have the lowest average incomes in the country and a large proportion of these people work on white-owned commercial farms. When looking at the income distribution for the various provinces, arranged in five quintiles from top to bottom, it is clear that almost half of all households (47%) in the Northern Cape are in the lowest two quintiles. Non-urban, female-headed households are furthermore the poorest in the province, with four in every ten (38%) falling into the bottom income category.<sup>14</sup>

### The Making of the Karretjie People

It is against this background that the context and circumstances of the Karretjie People are projected. Their structural position, particularly their asymmetrical relationship with the wider community, was largely shaped by historical events over a period of some 300 years and this diachronic dimension provides illuminating perspectives on contemporary events.

Karretjie People can accurately be described as a rural underclass. They are not only amongst the poorest of the poor in South Africa, they are also virtually unknown and socially invisible to other South Africans. They are certainly invisible to people who do not live in the Great Karoo, and they are hardly visible to those, particularly the large land-owners, who live in it. Other residents of the region know of the Karretjie People's existence of course, since the sight of their carts being pulled across the plains by their donkeys is as common as the *karobossie*<sup>15</sup> and mimosa through which they trek. But the settled residents of the Great Karoo generally know little or nothing of them as people. Even some of the landowners who employ them as seasonal sheep-shearers often relate to them in distant and impersonal ways.

By an ironic historical twist, the Karretjie People are back, in many ways, where their forebears were in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and before, but under far more stringent constraints than those that obtained at that time. Their forebears were the Khoekhoen and /Xam-speaking San who roamed the Great Karoo as pastoralists and foragers, and sought to maintain control over their lives and livelihood in the face of colonial intrusion and

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<sup>14</sup> Central Statistics, **Earning and Spending in South Africa. Selected Findings of the 1995 Income and Expenditure Survey** pp. 11,12, 22, 24.

<sup>15</sup> *Karobossie* (*Bergankerkaroo - Helichrysum dregeanum*) is a hardy small bush characteristic of the Great Karoo.

settlement. Present-day Karretjie People have little by way of livestock, but they too engage in a form of foraging that requires a series of opportunistic relationships with the settled population in order to sustain their itinerant existence. Yet there is, of course, no direct historical continuity between the one group of foragers and the other. As I will show below, the contemporary foragers are a product of the modern era in the Great Karoo.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century was the period of colonial exploration, occupation and conquest of the Great Karoo. The region had been home to the Khoekhoen and San for centuries, but the entry of the first colonial hunters and farmers in the 1700s brought about a fierce competition for resources. The Khoekhoen and San did not cede their territory easily. The intrusion of the colonists precipitated a series of attacks and raids on their persons and property that endured for decades. Moreover at the end of the century, when the number of settler farmers had increased beyond the capacity of the indigenous inhabitants to expel them by piecemeal attacks, many Khoekhoen and San in the Great Karoo became party to rebellion that flared throughout much of the colony.<sup>16</sup>

Despite this prolonged resistance, most Khoekhoen and San were drawn into the colonial agricultural economy in the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. By the late 1700s there was hardly a farm in the Great Karoo without its complement of so-called 'tame Bushmen'. Many of these people had been captured as children by the colonists' commandos during their punitive expeditions.<sup>17</sup> Adult women were also brought back from these expeditions to the farms, but the males were often shot during the raids or they fled into the mountains. The farmers' aim was for the women and children to become servants and apprentices.<sup>18</sup>

Once the Khoesan rebellion was suppressed, the colonists' goals were to secure the land they had usurped under colonial title, and to ensure that the indigenous inhabitants were transformed into a stable labour force on this land. Systematic issuing of formal titles to the large sheep farms in the Great Karoo commenced in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century under the British colonial authorities, which also proclaimed a series of pass and vagrancy laws to limit the mobility of the Khoekhoen and San and tie them to the employ of the new landowners. In the early decades of the British administration the authorities attempted to avert the prospect of further Khoesan rebellion, as well as the possibility that rebellious Khoesan might seek common cause with the as-yet-unconquered Xhosa polities to the east, by experimenting with the notion of selective land grants to mission institutions. The intention was to create a safety valve whereby some Khoekhoen and San could find a place to live, under conditions of missionary tutelage and communal land tenure, away from the direct control of settler farmers. Mission institutions such as

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<sup>16</sup> C. Sampson, 'Bushman (Oesjwana) Survival and Acculturation on the Northeast Frontier 1770-1890: Some Archaeological Implications', **South African Association of Archeologists Biennial Conference**, University of Cape Town, (1992).

<sup>17</sup> P. van der Merwe, *Die Noordwaartse Beweging van die Boere Voor die Groot Trek (1770-1842)* (The Hague 1937) and M. de Jongh & R. Steyn, 'Itinerancy as a Way of Life: the Nomadic Sheep-shearers of the South African Karoo' **Development Southern Africa**, 11, 2 (1994), p. 21.

<sup>18</sup> N. Penn, **The Northern Frontier Zone, 1700-1815**. D.Phil. (University of Cape Town 1995).

Toverberg and Hephzibah in the Colesberg district were begun in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>19</sup> But, like many others, these two institutions eventually collapsed in the face of hostility from farmers, who regarded the missions as havens for 'spoilt' and troublesome 'Bushmen'. Their collapse meant that the indigenous inhabitants were dispossessed entirely, and that all the land in the Great Karoo was brought under a single form of colonial tenure.

The consolidation of the settler farmers' hold on the land and the indigenous inhabitants of the Great Karoo was essentially completed during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Once this consolidation had been achieved, the stage was set for a rapid expansion of commercial agriculture, and the associated growth of regional villages and towns, in the second half of the century. Improvement to the means of transport and access to world markets meant that there was a significant increase in the demand for wool – the Great Karoo's chief agricultural product – in the closing decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover this increase in demand was accompanied by the spread of a technological innovation – wire fencing – throughout the region.

Growth in demand for wool and the spread of wire fencing combined to alter the labour requirements on the large sheep farms of the Great Karoo. Farmers in need of labour had railed against the nomadic tendencies of the colonial Khoesan throughout much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Farmers coined the pejorative term *los Hotnot* (loose Hottentot) to condemn those Khoesan who refused to become tied down and continued to trek from one farm to another in search of intermittent employment. But the erection of fencing served to lessen the farmers' need for full-time shepherds who tended the flocks in the open expanses of the vast farms. At the same time, moreover, the demand for wool increased the need for workers who were available, in numbers, at a particular point in the agricultural cycle – the shearing season. These changes in the pattern of labour demand reconciled the farmers, at least to some degree, to the existence of a floating labour force of workers whom they could employ during the peak shearing season but did not have to support for the rest of the year. The much-maligned category of *los Hotnots* was rehabilitated to the extent that even settled workers who left, or were forced to leave, farms were able to sustain themselves - at a very low level - by means of itinerant sheep-shearing.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the itinerant sheep-shearers moved between farms on foot, with their few possessions on pack animals. Within a few decades, however, they had adopted the donkey cart as preferred mode of transport, fashioning their carts from materials salvaged from derelict horse carriages and motor cars. The term *Karretjiemense* came into use in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The main theme of agricultural development in the Great Karoo in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been the concentration of land ownership. This development has produced economic winners and losers in all categories of the region's population. In the Colesberg district, for instance, there were several hundred farmers at the start of the century, but by the 1990s their numbers had declined to just over a hundred, who now have much larger land-holdings. The depression years, in particular, were a time of considerable hardship

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<sup>19</sup> K. Schoeman, 'Die Londense Sendinggenootskap en die San: Die Stasies Toornberg en Hephzibah, 1814-1818', *South African Historical Journal*, 28 (1993).

for landowners in the Great Karoo, many of whom were forced to leave the land against their will. Yet many of the farmers who left the land during the 20<sup>th</sup> century had capital - from the sale of their properties - and social capital - based on their status as whites in South Africa's racial order - to make their way into the urban working and middle classes.

19<sup>th</sup> Century legislation made it theoretically possible for San and Khoekhoen to acquire land under colonial tenure. But in practice, of course, none were able to do so. In the Great Karoo most of them became farm labourers, more or less tied to particular farms. At certain points, notably at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some were able to leave these farms. Numbers of these people became *Karretjiemense*, an auxiliary labour force that was summoned to the farms in times of need, while others settled in the villages and towns that grew in the wake of agricultural expansion. By the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the indigenous inhabitants of the area were incorporated into a working class that was fragmented into a large segment of settled farm workers, a smaller - but growing - urban segment, and a floating segment of Karretjie People.

Evidence gathered in the Colesberg and Victoria West districts suggests that Karretjie People were relatively few in number during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It appears that most people who left the farms in this period moved to the region's villages and towns, where there was a steady demand for unskilled labour in the commercial and public sectors. Seasonal sheep-shearing was a niche livelihood, and a rough balance seems to have been maintained between the demand for these shearers and the number of ex-farm workers who chose to embark on the itinerant life of the Karretjie People.

But this balance was lost in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, resulting in a substantial increase in the number of Karretjie People in the Great Karoo. In the past few decades, moreover, the rate of growth in the number of Karretjie People has outstripped the demand for their services as sheep-shearers. Two factors seem to have played a crucial role in this. One has been the quickening process of land concentration in this period. Despite the aggregation of farms in the first half of the century, there were still 216 farming units in Colesberg in 1959. This number declined to 165 in 1984, and - as mentioned above - to just over a hundred in the mid-1990s. Well over half the Karretjie families I interviewed claimed that they had been forced to leave the land because their employers had sold their farms, and the new owners had needed a lesser number of workers for the newly consolidated property than the total employed on the originally separate farms.

The second factor in the untoward increase of the Karretjie People has been the economic stagnation in the small towns and villages of the Great Karoo. The details of why this stagnation should have occurred, particularly since the 1960s, are beyond the scope of this article, but it is clear that the process has had much to do with improved systems of transport that have rendered many of the smaller service centres redundant. These centres were necessary under 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century conditions, but are now bypassed by all the main traffic routes. Unemployment and poverty have grown amongst members of the working class already in these villages and towns, making the latter virtually inaccessible to the new wave of surplus labour from the farms.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> S. Archer, 'Poverty and Production in a Rural Microcosm' *Africa*, 60, 4 (1990), pp. 471-495.

## Foraging Today

Today's Karretjie People are, arguably, the real losers in the long-term processes of economic growth and transformation in the Great Karoo. They have no place on the land, and none of the resources necessary to make a successful transition to living in even the nearest villages or towns, let alone the distant cities.

In addition they must engage in ever fiercer competition to secure sheep-shearing contracts. Seasonal sheep-shearing is the life blood of the Karretjie People and the increase in the number of Karretjie People means that they compete amongst themselves for contracts. But in recent years there has also been growth in competition from outside the Great Karoo. Some farmers have taken to employing seasonal, organised sheep-shearing teams from the Ciskei and Transkei areas of the Eastern Cape. From the landowners' point of view this is the latest in a logical sequence of steps that began with the emergence of the Karretjie People at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As indicated above, the Karretjie People were a response to a need for seasonal labour. But they were still, nonetheless, locals who were a constant presence in the region. Over time they managed to build relationships with some landowners that went beyond the impersonal. Shearing teams that returned to the same farms season after season were in a position to request better terms of employment, as well as loans to tide them over periods of difficulty. Farmers also extended assistance in times of illness, taking sick family members to the doctor or hospital in the nearest village, and, recently, in some instances took an interest in the education of Karretjie children.

These kinds of relationship have not died out entirely, but, according to the Karretjie People, they have certainly begun to wither. The advent of sheep-shearers from beyond the region, who return to distant homes when the season is over, serves to undermine the bonds of familiarity between local shearers and farmers. In recent years more and more landowners have refused even to allow Karretjie families to set up temporary camp on their land while engaged on a shearing contract. Sometimes the shearers are required to leave their wives, children and other dependents in camps in the corridors of land between the public roads and their employers' boundary fences. In other instances, farmers have taken to fetching the teams of shearers every morning from distant outspans.

These outspans are where the Karretjie People spend their time between shearing contracts. They are situated on public land, often close to the back roads of the Great Karoo. Like the corridor camps, they are, strictly, against the law, because the relevant road ordinance prohibits camping at the roadside for more than 24 hours. With the assistance of the police, local authorities and farmers sometimes instruct Karretjie People to keep moving, at other times they turn a blind eye to their presence.

However long they stay in one place, Karretjie People's dwellings are made out of materials they carry on their carts. These dwellings – made from a few sheets of corrugated iron, hessian, and sheets of plastic - are rarely high enough to stand up in, and barely long and wide enough for adults to lie down. Karretjie People have no furniture beyond a few wooden squatting stools, mattresses, and the tin *trommels* (trunks) in which they store their most precious possessions, such as their shears, tools and, those who recently obtained them for the first time, identity documents.

Usually shearing in teams of 6 to 10 men from the same outspan, the core of which comprises of kin, the shearers might be working on a particular farm from one to several weeks. Both the size of the team and the duration of the assignment depend on the size of the flock the farmer wants shorn. The shearers are paid from 90c to R1.20 (R1.00 = \$0.16c and £0.08p) per sheep shorn, the amount depending on the particular farmer and is not negotiable. The team also receives one sheep to slaughter for every 1 000 shorn. For the rest shearers have to provide their own food as well as sheep-shears (the 'black' one costing R45.03 and the better 'red' one R53.87, and according to the shearers even the red one lasts only for 'two or three farms'). They buy food 'on the book' at the farmer's store and the eventual total is subtracted from the amount the shearer has earned by the end of the assignment. The 'food' that they buy at any rate mainly consists of mealie-meal, sugar, coffee and tobacco. The staple fare of the Karretjie diet is *krummelpap* (crumbly-thick-porridge), that is when times are 'good', like during a shearing assignment. At other times, the 'not-so-good' or 'in-between-shearing' times, the *krummelpap* becomes *slappap* (soft porridge) and as the supplies run out *dunpap* (thin or watery porridge). Found on the fringe of the gravel road, the occasional trampled carcass of a rabbit is a welcome addition to the usually depleted Karretjie menu. Snares are surreptitiously set in the veld for rabbits, steenbok or duiker. The young boys go bird-hunting with their *ketties* (catapults) and also set traps and try to entice birds into them by sprinkling a trail of porridge crumbs.

On a good day, when the sheep are readily available in the shearing pen and there are no unexpected interruptions like unseasonal rain, the shearers each manage to shear on average 25-30 sheep per day, thus theoretically earning R125.00 to R150.00 per week. Even with the possible additional income of some of the women and even the children who may be employed on a temporary basis in the shearing shed or in and around the farmhouse (at anything from R2.00 to R8.00 per day), a shearer's family, after deductions for shears and food and other purchases, often walk away with a net payment of only R40.00 to R80.00. The Karretjie People are hardly assured of shearing assignments for half of the months of the year which puts the monthly average income for a *karretjie* unit at never more than around R300.00 This translates to an adult equivalent of less than R100.00 per month which is put into perspective by the figure of R178.00 per month which the Living Standards Development Survey identified some *five* years ago as the adult equivalent cut-off expenditure for the poorest of all in South Africa. The *current* average monthly income of R300.00 per *karretjie* unit is further put into perspective when measured against the minimum income level or poverty line which was already R723.05 *six years* ago (according to the Household Subsistence Level calculated by the Institute for Planning Research at the University of Port Elizabeth) and which is required by a family of two adults and four children to satisfy its basic needs in rural areas.<sup>21</sup>

As itinerant sheep-shearers, the Karretjie People of the area are even more vulnerable than conventional farm labourers. Shearing is a seasonal activity and although seasonality cannot be regarded as determinative in their lives, it does create a context within which they have to operate and which transforms poverty into periodic crises. In fact '(it) provides conditions which enable other forces which create and sustain poverty

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<sup>21</sup> May et.al., **The Composition and Persistence of Poverty in Rural South Africa. An Entitlements Approach to Poverty** p. 7.

to act more powerfully'.<sup>22</sup> The near perpetual spatial mobility of the Karretjie People adds to the peculiarity of their situation because both their 'home base' and workplace are temporary and changeable, not only in terms of locality but also in terms of social environment and available resources. For sheep-shearers like the Karretjie People, seasons in the Great Karoo can thus become powerful variables. Unusually dry seasons impact negatively on sheep-farming and unseasonal rain can disrupt a shearing assignment. The shearing season in itself results in commuting or itinerancy for individuals and families.

Were it not for sporadic odd-jobs, the fortuitous benevolence of individual farmers and even passers-by, the Karretjie People would find it even harder to endure. Those few individuals who have finally managed to successfully negotiate the obdurance of bureaucracy and obtained disability or old-age pensions, (now around R380.00 per month), are an absolute boon, not only to their *karretjie* unit, but also to all the other kin-connected units at an outspan.<sup>23</sup>

The endemic poor quality of education in most rural areas of South Africa applies to the Karoo region as well, and particularly to farm labourers, but the epitome again must be the Karretjie People who, until recently<sup>24</sup> had no education at all. When fieldwork commenced in this area in 1992 almost all these people were illiterate having never had the benefit of schooling or even access to a school. Since then some of the children have started attending farm schools and a few, while their parents camped on the outskirts of one of the towns, were enrolled at the local primary school in the Coloured township. The farmers or farmers' wives who run the farm schools, fetch the children at the outspans, provide board and lodging for them by means of government subsidy and return them to their *karretjie* homes on Friday afternoons or, depending on the particular school, only for school holidays. The extensive literature on farm schools need not be invoked here, suffice it to mention that despite some dedicated and enthusiastic teachers the standard of education and facilities at these schools, and in fact with but a few exceptions, in the area in general, leave much to be desired.

Although a culture of learning has as yet to be established amongst the Karretjie People, the attitude of the parents has started to change. Where at first it was presumed that a young boy for example would follow in his father's footsteps and become a shearer there are now more parents anxious for their children to attend school, particularly for the skills of reading and writing so that they can get a *sit* job (sitting down - clerical work) instead of a *staan* job (standing up - shearing). Compounding the problem of the paucity and poor standard of educational facilities, is the fact that Karretjie children are severely discriminated against and ostracised by the other children at school, few parents can afford even the R7.00 per term that it costs to attend a farm school and their very

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<sup>22</sup> R. Chambers, R. Longhurst & A. Pace, **Seasonal Dimensions to Rural Poverty** (London, Frances Publishers Limited 1981).

<sup>23</sup> M. de Jongh & R. Steyn 'The Karretjie People' in T. Gall (ed). **Encyclopaedia of World Cultures and Daily Life** (Pepper Pike 1998).

<sup>24</sup> M. de Jongh, 'Peripatetics and Praxis: Data and Dilemmas of Development', Paper Presented at the Annual Conference of the Pan African Anthropological Association, Nairobi, Kenya (1995).

itinerant lifestyle of course rebels against the predictability and sedentarism that effective schooling requires.

Mobile clinics, which rural communities are heavily dependent on for their health care needs, are supposed to reach a certain area at least once a week, but their roster is inconsistent or they simply do not reach such communities.<sup>25</sup> Even now that health authorities have been made aware of their plight, the itinerancy of the Karretjie People does not synchronise easily with the sporadic but set pattern of the mobile clinics. Like thousands of other families in the more remote areas of South Africa, those of the Karretjie People, were it not for the compassion of a few farmers, sometimes go without medical care for months. The women and children hence usually do not enjoy the benefit of free medical care which the government makes available to pregnant women and children under the age of six. Many have no access to hospitals because of the distances to be travelled, lack of money (some are often hard put to come up with the R2.00 for an ordinary consultation) and responsibilities for the household. A significant number of babies are still born at 'home', which in the case of the Karretjie People, means in a shack next to the road. Many babies do not make it through their first year because of poor ante-natal care coupled with the conditions created by poverty.

As is the case for people in the broader context of the Karoo and other rural areas, poverty for the Karretjie People is experienced by all the members of the family but some individuals bear more of the brunt of it than others. Privation, particularly at certain times, is especially experienced by women, and children may be neglected during times when either or both parents are absent or exert themselves to gain unpredictable access to resources. *Karretjie* units which travel alone, without the benefit of the supportive network of other units in a caravan on the road or as a small community at an outspan, small families in general and single-parent households, are even more vulnerable. The absence of the shearers, the timing (or lack thereof) of pregnancy and birth, and child care arrangements in seasons of stress, all stretch resourcefulness to the limits.<sup>26</sup> Given the arid Karoo environment and the sparse vegetation, obtaining water and wood for fuel is a constant struggle. Depending on the location of an outspan and disposition of possible neighbouring farmers or town dwellers, women and children for example spend an inordinate amount of time collecting wood and fetching water. Most of the rest of the day is taken up by domestic responsibilities, those at the outspan often having to stand in for absentee members of other *karretjie* units. Only when, during an assignment, the shearers and other casual workers return to the outspan by sundown, is some time spent eating and socialising around the cooking fires.

The inbetween-shearing outspans are the sites of sociability for Karretjie People. Here is where a number of Karretjie families come together, so that the burden of loneliness, which falls acutely on women, is relieved. The family units that meet up at the outspans are often related by kinship, and there is a great deal of sharing of the dwindling resources of cash and provisions amongst the people who make camp together. The opportunity of meeting up, of relaxation, and of socialising round the camp fires at night is looked forward to. This is because people briefly have a few rands left of their

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<sup>25</sup> **The New Nation** 1995.06.02/8 'Raw Deal for Rural Women' p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> Chambers, et.al., **Seasonal Dimensions to Rural Poverty** pp. 231-233.

shearing wages – after they have paid off their debt at the farm shop. A general air of optimism and good humour pervades the outspans. Yet within a short time this optimism begins to wane, as the reality of shortage and hardship and hunger, and the necessity of trekking on and on over the emptiness of the Great Karoo, reassert themselves.

Although, in going about their daily activities the Karretjie People are cheerful, humorous and ostensibly even optimistic, they are realistically aware of the hardships of their way of life and only too mindful of how little the future seems to hold for them. As marginal people they not only occupy the lowest rung of the socio-economic ladder, but in a wider community of divisions and opposition, the particular socio-cultural, political and economic niche that they find themselves in is precarious and vulnerable in the extreme. The hardship and uncertainty tends to translate into feelings of helplessness and frustration which regularly manifest in week-end long bouts of drinking and fighting which, not infrequently, have resulted in the deaths of family members and friends.<sup>27</sup>

### **No Fixed Abode**

The cumulative effect of changes in the agricultural sector of the Great Karoo (consolidation of land, conversion from sheep to game farming, what farmers regard as punitive changes in labour legislation, drastic increases in overhead expenses etc.) has produced the main factor that led to the proliferation of Karretjie People in recent decades i.e. the growth of a surplus population on the land in the Great Karoo. But this process has not been confined to this region by any means. Across the face of South Africa hundreds of thousands of people resident and working on white-owned farms have also been expelled from the land in consequence of growing mechanisation, the increasing productivity of farm labour, and land concentration. But because these people were blacks ('natives' in the terminology of the past), they had somewhere to go, however humble and appalling the conditions to which they went. The fate of surplus rural blacks in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was to be despatched to the homelands, apartheid's name for the areas of communal tenure that had been left to the 'natives' in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

This is what has been missing in the case of the coloured farmworkers of the Great Karoo. When they were ejected from the farms in this period they had nowhere to go, and nothing to do other than embark on a new foraging existence.

It seems strange, on the face of it, to suggest that people expelled from Great Karoo farms were disadvantaged by having no areas of communal land tenure in which they could seek refuge. It is, of course, true that they escaped the inefficient and corrupt bureaucracies associated with the former homeland areas, and that these areas did not provide blacks who were relocated to them with any significant prospect of engaging in agricultural production. Partly as a result of mass population relocation, most rural areas of the former homelands now comprise post-agrarian settlements, in which residents have only small residential stands.

Yet despite the extraordinary hardship and suffering endured by people who were forced to settle in them, these areas of communal tenure have certain features that are not

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<sup>27</sup> De Jongh & Steyn, **Itinerancy as a Way of Life: the Nomadic Sheep-shearers of the South African Karoo.**

available to the Karretjie People. They provide the security of a fixed place of residence; their common lands often provide certain free goods, such as wood for fuel, water, and basic building materials such as wooden poles and mud for bricks; and they provide a sphere of life, however attenuated, in which people can live outside the demands of the market and of state regulation.

These features confer certain material advantages on residents. The availability of certain free goods adds value to civil pensions and wage remittances, enabling them to be stretched further than would otherwise have been possible. Security of residence and free goods give rural people a basis on which to reciprocate assistance from kin in urban areas or still on white-owned farms.

Karretjie People as we have indicated, earn very little. The most fortunate shearers worked perhaps twenty weeks in a year. Even if there was more than one shearer in a Karretjie family, total wages over a year were well below any of the recognised measures of absolute poverty. In itself, of course, this did not make them poorer than many of the inhabitants of the homelands, but the Karretjie People's meagre earnings were compounded by the fact that all the benefits of place eluded them. Free goods of any kind are hard to come by when people spend their lives on roadside verges. Consequently wages and pensions disappear on purchasing the basic necessities of existence. Most significant, perhaps, in the absence of a fixed abode, Karretjie People end up distanced from people in the urban areas and on farms.

This distancing is not a new phenomenon. Descendants of the initial Karretjie People of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century have long formed a largely endogamous grouping. By marrying amongst themselves for several generations they have few close kin in the fixed world of town and farm, and consequently few settled people to whom they can turn. Karretjie youth are, if anything, more sensitive than their elders to the manifestations of contempt on the part of the settled population, largely because they find the attractions of the urban areas alluring. This development marks the beginning of a process of sedentarisation and it is fraught with the tensions resulting from closer proximity to the settled population.

### **Sedentarism**

It has been reported elsewhere,<sup>28</sup> a significant number of Karretjie People sooner or later reach a stage when they contemplate an alternative lifestyle - this in spite of the fact that they regard the philosophy and life of a wanderer as one of their core values. They all have a history of at least temporary sedentarism as labourers living on farms. The duration of their stay on a single farm varies from a brief sojourn (in most cases), to 18 years. The reasons for leaving the employ of a single farmer and their individual histories of moving from farm to farm and eventually to a nomadic existence have been reported on in more detail elsewhere.<sup>29</sup> Although circumstances more often than not compelled

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<sup>28</sup> M. de Jongh, 'Itinerant or Sedentary: Karretjie People, Agency and 'Karoo Culture'', **South African Journal for Ethnology**, 23, 1, (2000), pp. 1-13; M. de Jongh, 'Conventional Strangers: Itinerant Agency, Asymmetry and 'Karoo Culture'', **African Anthropology**, 4, 2, (1997), pp. 103-108.

<sup>29</sup> De Jongh & Steyn, **Itinerancy as a Way of Life: the Nomadic Sheep-shearers of the South**

them to make such changes, the development and exploitation of a peripatetic niche in the agricultural economy of the district was by and large their own doing. They are however realistic about the hardships of an itinerant lifestyle and when the rare opportunity to settle on a farm presents itself they usually seriously contemplate such a possibility.

Kleinjan Arnoster and Jas Maneswil for example, are of the few exceptions who 'graduated' to a life of permanency on a farm. They availed themselves of the opportunity presented by a farmer who needed farm workers. They were familiar with the farmer and his farm having regularly sheared for him for a number of years. He came to know them as skilled and dependable shearers and once they settled on different units of his farm, gave them the opportunity to develop their potential further. Both Kleinjan and Jas consciously broadened and enhanced their farming skills to the point where they are now employed as farm managers. Concomitant changes in their lives and lifestyles and that of their families have followed the transformation of their involvement in the farming activities - not least of which because of the necessary concurrent of a sedentary lifestyle.

The radical change from an itinerant to a sedentary lifestyle often stems from a rational decision on the part of the Karretjie People; decision-making however, only in the context of the limited options which their asymmetrical structural position within the wider community imposes upon them. As Chrisjan Steenbok puts it, "*Ons het nie ons eie reg nie, ons moet maar vat of ons moet maar gaan*" (We don't have our own rights, we must either 'take it' or we must go). As was mentioned earlier, until the introduction of a skills and literacy development programme,<sup>30</sup> the Karretjie People were totally illiterate and possessed a limited range of skills and even if the regional system had allowed them access to a wider purview of alternatives and employment, they would have been ill-equipped to take advantage of this.

An extract from a case study of Goeiman Klein and his family gives a further indication of the marginality of the Karretjie People and contextualises some of the trends and variables which play into their lives:<sup>31</sup>

"Just a few weeks before writing these passages I went to visit Goeiman and his family at their regular outspan next to the Seekoei River bridge. But his *karretjie*, shack and donkeys were gone, in fact so were all the donkeys, carts and about half the shacks of the other eight or nine families who normally frequent this outspan. This was not unusual and I soon traced them to the farm where they had a limited shearing assignment - because of the relatively short duration of the assignment some of them had not gone to the trouble of dismantling their shacks at the outspan. However, Goeiman, their *voorman* or spokesperson and informal leader, was not amongst them. Apparently after half a lifetime as

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African Karoo p. 225.

<sup>30</sup> De Jongh, **Peripatetics and Praxis: Data and Dilemmas of Development**.

<sup>31</sup> De Jongh, **Itinerant or Sedentary: Karretjie People, Agency and 'Karoo Culture'**, pp. 5-6.

itinerant, during eight years of which he had been operating from the Seekoei River outspan, Goeiman had decided to move to town. It was only then that I remembered noticing a solitary, but vaguely familiar, *karretjie* and shack as I drove past a vacant stretch of veld on the outskirts of town.

I found neither Goeiman nor his wife Siedie at home in their new location on that day. According to their two daughters, Sara (7) and Bella (14), Goeiman had been fetched by a farmer in his truck to shear for him and Siedie was working for a woman in nearby Lowryville, the 'coloured township'. Their brother Kerneels (11), more commonly known as Takkies, was back at the farm school he had previously attended. It eventually became clear that an unusual set of circumstances prompted Goeiman's decision to move to town. 'J.B.' Joubert, young owner of the farm Mondeor and immediate 'neighbour' of the Karretjie People at the Seekoei River bridge outspan, had discovered that one of his sheep had been slaughtered in the grazing-paddock bordering on this outspan. He immediately accosted and accused the outspan people of killing his sheep and also reported the matter to the police. The local constabulary put the blame on all the Karretjie People at the outspan and also threatened them with expulsion. Contrary to the conventional 'we' versus 'they' united front, Vytjie, one of the elderly matriarchs, and a distant affinal relative of Goeiman's, pointed him out as the alleged perpetrator. For some time now the people at the outspan had belonged to two informal 'factions' and the uncomfortableness between them is also reflected in the spatial arrangement of their shacks. Vytjie's actions may possibly be ascribed to her belonging to the 'other' faction. Faced with the ultimatum of either arrest or moving out of the area, Goeiman opted for the latter and for the first time in eight years abandoned his home base outspan and as it turned out, his itinerant lifestyle".

Even before Goeiman Klein and his family made their trek, a few *karretjie* units from the Seekoei River bridge outspan moved to outspans on the fringes of town in order to be closer to the facilities or the perceived better opportunities to procure odd-jobs or shearing opportunities. One young couple, Abraham Geduld and Mina Konstabel for example, having lost their first child soon after birth, moved to the periphery of town in order to be closer to a medical clinic and the hospital - in the end, and largely because of the conditions under which they live, their second baby was again born in their overnight shelter at the outspan. More often than not these families do not experience a significant improvement in employment opportunities and at the same time the town presents an additional allure to spend what little income they have - not least of which on alcoholic beverages. Almost without exception such *karretjie* units are caught in a vicious downward spiral where short-term strategies including the sale of capital assets such as their *karretjies* and donkeys became the only alternative for survival. They lose their mobility and to all intents and purposes become squatters on the fringes of town. The fundamental change in lifestyle has far-reaching implications and the children progressively become socialised into sedentists' patterns of behaviour.

The incidence of a more drastic and irrevocable decision to forsake the itinerant lifestyle completely in order to settle in town, has recently become increasingly apparent.

Although not always decisive, the procurement, though in many cases belated, of an old age or disability pension or the rare availability of a kinship link in town, may facilitate such a move or it might simply be the final result of an endeavour to escape from the uncertainty and privation of itinerant life. Moos Danster and his wife Mieta Witbooi, also of the Seekoei River outspan, were of the first Karretjie People to effect this radical transformation in their lives. For more than four years Moos had been bemoaning his fate as an itinerant: *Ek wil bitter graag die skeer nou uitgooi.* (I badly want to 'throw the shearing out' now i.e. I want to stop shearing and change my lifestyle.) *Ek wil nie meer hierdie staanwerk doen nie, ek wil nou sitwerk hê.* (I no longer want to do this 'standing-up work' (shearing), I now want a 'sitting-down job' (a desk-type job.)) *Daar is te baie dinge in die dorp, hulle baklei met jou, hulle het alle figure met jou. Maar hier in die gange is dit totaal swaar.* (There are too many 'things' (problems) in town, the people fight with you and have all sorts of 'figures' (bad intentions) with you. But here in the corridors (next to the road and at the outspans) it is totally difficult i.e. it is worse, life is harder.) Finally, during the winter of 1996, after more than fifty years of leading a shifting life Moos and Mieta decided to settle in town. They sold their cart and donkeys and embarked, irrecoverably, on a life of sedentarism.

### **The Consequences of a Racial Identity**

One of the things that traps Karretjie People in their itinerant lifestyle is a lack of resources, as mentioned above. A life on the move, with periodic - and diminishing - employment, is not conducive to building up the savings that are necessary to settle successfully in town or village. Nor do Karretjie People have the skills or education that are essential to finding increasingly scarce urban employment. Few of the adults, even now, can read and write, and since a high proportion of children do not attend school, or attend school regularly, there is no significant improvement in this respect in the younger generations.

But another factor that locks Karretjie People into impoverished itinerancy is the racial identity they acquired in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century working class people living in the rural and urban areas of the Great Karoo were referred to by a variety of names (such as 'Bushmen', 'Hottentots', and even 'Bastards') that preserved some sense of their standing as people indigenous to the region. In so far as they were enumerated for the purpose of official censuses, they were enumerated by reference to the categories specified by these labels. But in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, these forms of official identification and popular reference were changed. The label 'coloured' began, at first relatively informally, to acquire its modern definition, and this definition was applied to these people (along with many others in the Western and Northern Cape).

The modern definition of 'coloured' racial identity was spelled out most comprehensively in the Population Registration Act of 1950, enacted when the new apartheid government saw a need to allocate South Africans unequivocally to one or another of the racial categories it chose to recognise. The Population Registration Act defined coloured people, starkly, as people who were neither white people nor members of 'any aboriginal race or tribe of Africa'. The starkness of this definition notwithstanding, the idea on which it built was not new. In fact, as I intimated above, the roots of the definition, and of its application to people in the Great Karoo, go all the way back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The ill-fated mission institutions at Toverberg and Hephzibah<sup>32</sup> are examples, from the Colesberg district, that marked the last occasion on which any official thought was given to the notion that Khoesan people could occupy land under a form of tenure that differed from the system of individual property rights developed to meet the interests of colonial farmers. Once these and similar mission stations had collapsed, the whole of the Khoesan population in the region was subordinated to the regime of private property, and to a uniform system of colonial law and governance. Thereafter, of course, their position in colonial society diverged markedly from that occupied by the more numerous, and more coherently organised, Xhosa-speakers to the east.

The real contrast, I suggest, was between the colonial experiences of the Khoesan, on the one hand, and all the Bantu-speaking groups, on the other. These experiences led to a situation in which, at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Khoesan not only had none of their land left, but also had no existence independent of the colonial society, into which they had been drawn, progressively throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in an utterly subordinate capacity. The post-Union policy of segregation was built on the foundation of the lands that had been retained by the Bantu-speaking people. These common property lands, together with the evolving controls on labour migration, ensured that the vast majority of these people were permitted merely to sojourn in the 'civilised' world of the European settlers. In contrast, the Khoesan had long been a disparaged and discriminated-against part of that world.

Thus the definition of 'coloured' people in the Population Registration Act contained a kernel of truth, premised on the notion that to be a 'native' of Africa was to be excluded absolutely from colonial (or European, or white) society, to have access to land under a different form of tenure, and to be ruled according to different, and draconian, laws. But the Khoesan were not excluded from this society, even though in practice they acquired the duties of citizens rather than the rights. Their *de facto* rightlessness had, therefore, to be expressed in different form, and the vehicle of this expression was their inclusion in the category of 'coloured' people. From the official point of view, the chief characteristic of coloured people was not who they were, or had been, but who they were not. Thus the internal differences within the category of 'coloured' people – differences of language, culture, religion and origin – were reflected simply in the notion that they were 'mixed'. The fact that they were supposedly (but in the case of most of the inhabitants of the Great Karoo, entirely inaccurately) of 'mixed race' provided a means to explain their exclusion from the category of 'natives' as well as their subordination within 'civilised' society.

The prospect of the democratic election in 1994 and the ensuing political change however, heralded dramatic reassertions of Khoesan identities, and these could now be reclaimed without the stigma attached to it under apartheid.<sup>33</sup> Even before this, in the late eighties and early nineties, there were various incidents of Khoesan reasserting, reclaiming or reinventing their autochthonous identities e.g. in the course of the land

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<sup>32</sup> Schoeman, *Die Londense Sendinggenootskap en die San: Die Stasies Toornberg en Hephzibah, 1814-1818*.

<sup>33</sup> S. Robins, 'Khoisan in the New South Africa: Anthropology, Museums and 'Bushmen'', *African Anthropology*, 5, 1 (1998), pp. 87-89.

struggles in Namaqualand's Coloured Reserves in the Northern Cape, Afrikaans and Nama-speaking coloureds publicly displayed their Nama/Khoekhoen past; the San of the Kagga Kamma nature reserve actively pursued a strategy for survival which included recreating their San identity and submitting a land claim based on their eviction from the Kalahari Gemsbok Park some thirty years before; Baster and Griqua groups reclaiming a Khoekhoen identity and also general cultural and political rights.

Such revisiting of Khoesan identities coincided with the reaffirmation of coloured identity in the Western Cape. Robins<sup>34</sup> outlines some of these trends, particularly as triggered by the election. In March 1996 for example, Chris Nissen, the ANC (African National Congress) leader in the Western Cape, declared that he 'refuses to be called so-called coloured. I am coloured'.<sup>35</sup> Public embrace of coloured identity by an ANC activist would have been unthinkable in the 1980s, when the ANC/UDF (United Democratic Front) ideology of non-racialism regarded ethnicity as a fabrication and manipulation by the architects of apartheid. Denunciation and disavowal of such an ethnic category through the use of the term 'so-called coloured' was in line with the socialist thinking of the ANC, the SACP (South African Communist Party) and the leadership of the trade unions i.e. that it is an expression of false consciousness. It also reflected something of the ideology of the Black Consciousness Movement who strove to categorise 'coloureds' and 'Indians' as 'blacks'. By the 1990s, however, coloured identity was no longer taboo and both the ANC and the National Party were busy scrambling for the crucial 'coloured vote' in the Western Cape. In fact, the then President Mandela intervened to the extent of choosing coloured ANC leaders such as Allan Boesak and Chris Nissen to head the party in the Western Cape.

Khoesan ancestry is for example, also an important aspect of the history of the Griqua people, but being Griqua is different from being Khoekhoen.<sup>36</sup> The living Griqua, at important centres like Kranshoek and Vredendal in the Western Cape, but importantly also in the Northern Cape, and not only at Griquatown, but throughout the rural areas, represent the dynamic transformation of these people into new entities which occurred in parallel with the urban transformation which produced the apartheid socio-political class 'coloured'. What has made the new entities seductive is that they provide a distinctive 'coloured people's' history and a cultural connection which helps to restore the pride in Khoekhoen origins which were suppressed or lost in the urban areas over the years. The Khoekhoen origins and the 'special' history of the Griqua are now both important. For the Griqua people this history provides a religion and a sense of pride, difference and continuity.<sup>37</sup> Based on this, claims to land and traditional leadership are also being made. Representatives of the Griqua National Conference of South Africa have been to Geneva where they sought to establish an 'unbroken continuum' with the precolonial past and to stress their Khoekhoen antecedents.

<sup>34</sup> Robins, **Khoisan in the New South Africa: Anthropology, Museums and 'Bushmen'**, p. 88.

<sup>35</sup> **Cape Times** 1996.03.18 as cited in Robins, (1998), p. 88.

<sup>36</sup> A. Morris, 'The Griqua and the Khoikhoi: Biology, Ethnicity and the Construction of Identity', **Kronos, Journal of Cape History**, 24 (1997), pp. 117-118.

<sup>37</sup> L. Waldman, 'The Past: Who Owns It and What Should We Do About It', **South African Historical Journal**, 35 (1996), pp. 151-153.

Thus coloured vis a vis Khoekhoen or Griqua status and identity are fluid and a matter of shifting alliances. Under the previous dispensation a coloured or 'less-black' identity and associated political and social lifestyle was more advantageous. Now however, there are more perceived advantages for Khoekhoen and San (Khoesan) peoples to seek an indigenous status. This is not only because of recent socio-political changes in South Africa, but also due to political access to bodies like the United Nations Indigenous People's Forum and the possibility of recognition of autochthonous and first nation status and the opportunity to negotiate land claims, restitution, other economic benefits and political representation.

As descendants of both the early Khoekhoen, particularly Griqua and Korana and the early San, but eventually also to be categorised as 'coloured', recently for census purposes, belated identity documents and to be mobilised as newly-discovered voters for the elections, where does this leave the Karretjie People?

### **Elusive Identities**

The fact that Karretjie People lack so many forms of security, and are exposed to the derision of the settled population, stems indirectly from their having been classified as 'coloured' – as people who were not 'natives of Africa'. Past policies of segregation and apartheid did not involve making communal land available to coloured people. Karretjie People now see this as an injustice, and have come to resent the label 'coloured' precisely because it is commonly understood to mean that they are 'in between' whites and blacks, and therefore part of a category of people who may not be as well-off as the whites, but are supposed to be better-off than the blacks. They wonder in what sense they are better-off than the black sheep-shearers who compete with them for jobs, and return home to the communal lands of the Ciskei and Transkei regions on completion of the season.

They do not deny all validity to the label 'coloured' recognising that it may be appropriate to those people who have managed to achieve security in the towns, and also to some of those who have successfully retained their employment as full-time farmworkers. But this recognition shows that in this part of South Africa the identity 'coloured' has a clear class connotation, and people such as the Karretjie People, who have been excluded from the classes in question, are bound to question its attribution to them.

Opportunistically 'discovered' as citizens of the country by the main political parties in the run-up to the 1994 election, they have become increasingly sensitised to the realities of disempowerment and political manoeuvring. They have however, not yet asserted themselves. They are aware of their Khoekhoen and San roots and in searching for a way of describing themselves consonant with their station, they may eventually and instinctively tend to represent themselves as the indigenous inhabitants of the area. Currently however, their self-perception is still ill-defined and their autochthonous status not explicitly articulated. One woman captured the general mood when, tending the cooking fire at her roadside camp, she remarked '*Ons is te arm om bruin mense te wees. Ons is die geel mense*' (We are too poor to be brown [coloured] people. We are the yellow [San] people).

## Conclusion

This is an interesting development. As I noted above, one can point to the absence of any direct continuity of historical experience between the precolonial and the modern forms of foraging. One can also point to the fact that the Karretjie People are not the only people in the region who could claim descent from the Khoekhoen and the San, as well as to the fact that they, with one or two solitary exceptions, can speak no more of the aboriginal vernaculars than many others in the area - and then mainly in the form of names for indigenous flora and fauna. But these kinds of names have a particular resonance for people who find themselves effectively strangers in the land, confined to the road verges, debarred from private property, subject to insult and humiliation, and forced to trek in search of a meagre sustenance. By means such as these, and by maintaining their relative, or at least symbolic, kind of independence and self-sufficiency they signal not merely that they are strangers in the land, but also their understanding that they are strangers in what should be their *own* land.<sup>38</sup>

At present this perception is fractured and fragmented. Most Karretjie People are still scattered across a vast area, moving in small, family groups. There is as yet little opportunity for the common perception, and few individuals articulate enough, to lead to concerted political action towards shared goals. Their cause is also not enhanced by expedient outsiders who are suddenly sprouting everywhere, claiming to speak on their behalf. But the new tendency towards sedentarisation may play a significant part in fostering joint action in future. This will come about not simply because people will be living for longer periods in close proximity. It will also result from the fact that their sedentary existence, inevitably in squalid shack settlements on the outskirts of increasingly impoverished towns and villages, will thrust their outcast status in their faces, and will make it more difficult to escape into the expanses of the Great Karoo.

Recent analysis of coloured identity politics has focussed on the Western Cape Province and, particularly, on the urban population of the greater Cape Town area. In this context, attempts by leaders to recuperate Khoesan identities have all the appearance of political opportunism, and can easily be bracketed with parallel, and not always distinct, efforts to spell out the terms of coloured exclusivity. In this line of argument, what makes coloured people distinct from the black majority is that they have ostensibly separate racial and ethnic origins. Khoesan origins are therefore interpreted as the marker of fundamental difference from blacks. Such a view may make a certain sense in the context of the city, where middle-class coloured people attempt to defend their hard won status in the face of the emergence of the new black elite, and where poor coloured people often see themselves as being locked in competition with the black poor for urban space, housing and employment.

But the situation in the Great Karoo, in the Northern Cape, is not one in which the poorest coloured people are desperate to defend vestigial privilege against intrusion by blacks. On the contrary, the Karretjie People would envy the security of place that is

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<sup>38</sup> De Jongh, 'Itinerant or Sedentary: Karretjie People, Agency and 'Karoo Culture'', **South African Journal for Ethnology**, 23, 1, pp. 1-13; De Jongh, **Quintessential Strangers: Peripatetic Peoples in Cross-cultural Perspective** & G. Simmel, 'The Stranger' in K. Wolff (editor and translator). **The Sociology of Georg Simmel** (New York, Free Press), pp. 402-408.

available even to those people who were relegated to the homelands. For the Karretjie People the recuperation of Khoekhoen and San identities would, first and foremost be, a cry for access to land, for an option to a fixed place that would spell, if they should so wish, an end to their wandering and help them to reinsert themselves into the regional society, and to reassert themselves in their place and space.

The Karretjie People of the Great Karoo are a stark example of people who are 'too poor to be coloured', but they are by no means alone in this category. Throughout the Northern Cape, and in parts of the Western and Eastern Cape, there are people who are in danger of losing their toehold in rural towns and villages, people whose existence on white-owned farms is under constant threat, and people who have already sought uneasy refuge on land that does not belong to them. No-one knows how many these people are, but any rallying cry that found an audience amongst the Karretjie People would very likely appeal to them as well. It is unwise to interpret the diverse moves to recover and redeem the memory of being Khoekhoen and San solely by reference to the alleged opportunism of middle-class, would-be politicians who are seeking to construct a following. If the latter are opportunists, they at least have a fertile, and rarely noticed, ground on which to plough.