TRAVELS IN TRIBALISM

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"We can modernise the tribal system", said Chief Frank Maserumule's son, a graduate of Witwatersrand University. He was a well-tailored, quick-witted young man, who had obviously made a deep impression on the Bantu Administration officials. Long before we had met him they had kept telling us about him, emphasizing his education. Now we began to see why.

'We' were a party of South African journalists, who sat listening attentively in the neat little dung-smeared courtyard of the Chief's house. Behind us the massive grey boulder, presiding over the mud-walled compounds, was turning pale gold in the late lowveld sun. Before us the massive grey head of the most impressive chief we had yet met nodded approvingly at his son's solution. He had, he confessed earlier, been extremely nervous of us, thinking we were some official party come to demand God-knows-what of him—but now he was simply a splendid old man, proud of his boy. The ragged band of his councillors, sitting respectfully to one side like poor relations, rustled with something like applause.

None of us quite realised at the time that we had been present at the birth of another one of those phrases that so hauntingly reveal South Africa's split personality. Everything on our journey through the embryo Bantustans had tended to this delivery. Later we were to hear it repeated by others, mainly officials. But here it came out clearly, explicitly, for the first time. In a land of "Bantu Education", "foreign natives", "third-generation temporary sojourners" and the rest, "modernised tribalism" had now arrived to join the growing family of etymological crazy mixed-up kids.

This was the moment of truth in our long trek trailing clouds of dust and Information Officers. If we had not been so affected by the placidity of the afternoon and the nearby sounds of women setting out the calabashes of beer, we would have jumped up. We would have cried out, "That's it! That's what keeps worrying us!"

All the way up from East London, as we zig-zagged through the areas scheduled by Dr. Verwoerd to become, one day, "independent Bantu homelands", these two conflicting concepts had kept troubling us, nagging at us—this "modernisation"

and this emphasis on "tribalism". They rode with us across the Transkei's 400 miles of hut-pimpled, wimpling grasslands, over the ant-bitten or cane-bristling hills of Zululand, past the lakes and spreading new forests of Northern Maputaland, through the alternating thorn-scrub and paw-paw groves of the lowveld Reserves, and among the trees and streams of Vendaland's lovely mountains.

Everywhere we had seen the continuations or beginnings of dedicated though desperately understaffed attempts to turn the African tribesman into a modern farmer or forester. New crops, advanced methods, irrigation schemes, inland fisheries, proper use and control of such small plots as they have, better techniques of meat-raising and dairy farming, the organisation of sales and shows, all these things were being demonstrated to, urged upon the Xhosa, Zulu, Shangaan, and so on. It was not that this effort to stimulate change was massive or even adequate, but that it was stretched so far and into such unlikely places—a thin, sunburnt line of technical officers struggling to hold the front of a life-time's work for modernisation. Like so many Davids they faced the Goliath task of having to set up two million tribesmen on "economic units" of land, and shifting two million others off the land into non-existent Reserve industries and "rural villages". With a dogged, surprisingly hopeful persistence, they battled on to end the old fidgeting systems of tribal agriculture and the collector's passion for scrub cattle that characterizes tribal ranching.

All around them swarmed the new starry-eyed Information Officers and administrative men—babbling of chiefs, ancient and colourful ethnic ways, and battles long ago. For the task of these officials was to shore up a tribal society that had long been in decay, and revive the traditional authority of chiefs fading slowly but ineluctably into history.

From the start we encountered startling juxtapositions of modernity and tribalism. In the big Zwelisha rayon factory on the borders of the Ciskei, Xhosa workers handled looms as well as the average Lancashire worker; in the modern housing scheme on the opposite hill, a doctor and a bus-owner had built themselves £6,000 houses. But this hardly interested our white guide and Information Officer—he lectured us on Kwashu Ceremony under Peddie's big milkwood tree, on the 17 different ways the Xhosa have of making porridge, and recited songs sung by youths at the Abakweta or initiation ceremonies. We had a

full-scale press interview with Chief Botha Sigcau, the new "Prime Minister of the Transkei", and then walked outside to watch his chief Mbongo, his head Councillor, and an enthusiastic commoner crawl in the dust to kiss his boots. We visited a mission hospital and found an initiation hut in the grounds—a woman doctor hygenically snipped off the foreskins and then the youths, attended by African male nurses, sat out their time on the hospital precincts.

Probably the most charming, yet curiously heart-rending, scene we saw in this conflict was during a visit to a very modernly equipped and designed T.B. hospital just outside Umtata. There we found the four-year-old son of a chief sitting up in bed among other solemn and bright-eyed black infants. At the coaxing of an official, he sang out all the traditional praises of his father as a rain-begetter and an intermediary with the ancestral spirits.

Thus against a background of gathering change we listened to this nagging, almost desperate insistence on tribal ways and traditions. It induced odd hallucinations in us. We began to suspect that the Government must consist of distant ethnologists with a vested academic interest in keeping the Reserves as cultural museums, in closing up the whole tribal system in glass cases as we have done with the Bushmen in Cape Town. There seemed something more in all this than simply a political stratagem carried to extraordinary lengths and bizarre manifestations. The ethnological note, the nostalgia to preserve fully the elder ways and customs of the Bantu, rose to something like a dominant theme rather than a theme of domination. It reached heights even of artiness in the zig-zag screens of African design, the abstract tribal symbols, and the circular 'lapas' that were to become the junior common-rooms of the new, hastily built Bantu Universities. But strangest of all was to stand where old William Shaw, where so many fine Christian missionaries had first announced the revolutionary truths of their religion to the tribes of Southern Africa, and now hear a queer new evangelical fervour. For there was a curiously dedicated, missionary tone about many of our official informants.

Indeed, two of our Information Officers were ex-missionaries. One was nick-named 'Swazi' and the other 'Muruti' because of their special backgrounds. They represented the great seriousness and sincerity that the Government taps in its ethnic approach to African affairs. 'Swazi' was an intense fellow with a little

goatee, a dreamer, perhaps a poet, who sang us Xhosa roundelays and talked almost rhapsodically about the rustic joys of unspoiled tribal life. His spiel might have been even more charming if it had not been so obviously intended to demonstrate that the Africans were utterly different, remote from ourselves as human beings. 'Muruti' was a bustling, insensitively honest, muscular Christian type, always urging us onward to fresh ethnic discovery with rousing cries and imperious fanfares on motor-hooters. His most ardent statement to us was: "I have spoken to Bantu doctors and professors and A.N.C. leaders and headmasters—but I have spoken to the real élite of the Bantu in the kraals. They are the men of great wisdom and immersed in the ways of their people".

I do not give this quotation to draw the unspoken inference that advanced education necessarily makes for wisdom among the Africans, any more than it does among the Europeans. No doubt there are aged councillors among the illiterate tribesmen, who become sagacious beyond their generation. But the emphasis of both 'Swazi' and 'Muruti' was that modern education was dilution of the rich fund of traditional lore, a poor, reedy, artificial substitute for it. The source of all wisdom for the African, they seemed to indicate, was in tribal immersion. "They've got to go through a process of evolution, and that begins with the tribe", we were constantly told. To such thinkers it seemed that there had been an erroneous revolution, whose effects had to be undone. Way back, busybody liberals, over-civilised administrators and over-zealous missionaries had crashed in among and wrecked social subtleties they wotted not of. Africans had to be led back to the scene of the accident, to the point of the wrong turning taken under the sudden pressures of the great European intrusion.

'Muruti', for instance, gave us a lecture on the simple sense of justice in every African. The Europeans would put an African in gaol for stealing a cow. That was futile. Gaol, to the African, was like a rather rigorous holiday in a free hostel. A chief, in the old days, would fine the man's family or village—one cow for recompense, one cow to feed the court, and one cow for his own services. The next time the man stole a cow he would probably get a thrashing from the chief in addition to the fine. If the man committed the crime a third time, he might even disappear, pushed off a mountain-top, or something equally abrupt.

"Are you suggesting a return to these methods?" we asked.

"No, no," said 'Muruti', "I'm simply saying that they have a different outlook on dealing with crime".

But there was a slightly wistful note about this denial.

More daring than 'Muruti' was yet another Information Officer—an engaging young Pretoria University graduate with an R.A.F. moustache. He spent some time explaining to some of us in the back of a bus how tribalism should be taken to its logical modern conclusion. Each tribe should develop its own brand of Christianity. Thus each tribe would be able to make the Christian ethic part of its ethnic own. (We listened to this proposition in respectful silence. All forebore to point out that the African needed no encouragement to start his own particular brands of Christianity. There were already more than 2,000 of them in South Africa. Whether they were advancing respect for the Christian ethic as a result was debatable.)

The jealousy with which the authorities protect these tribal possessions from prying eyes was several times demonstrated for us. Once our Pretoria University guide took us off the road to show us some white-painted Abakweta youths recovering from their initiation in front of their hut. An American tourist, a member of the Byram caravan trek, joined the straggle of journalists down the hill-side and raised his camera with the rest.

"Are you one of these American tourists?" demanded our Information Officer sharply.

"Yeah . . . I . . ."

"Don't you know you are not allowed to leave the road in this territory without permission?"

The American disregarded this greeting and took his photographs.

If Abakweta initiates are officially difficult to encounter, the chiefs are even more so. None stay alongside the road, but reside on their farms mostly tucked many miles off the beaten track behind hills and red-tape. When we asked to see one particularly outspoken chief, great difficulties immediately arose. But there were other, bigger chiefs towards whom we were wafted on dust-clouds of official approval. For these men demonstrated the progress of the great tribal revival. They stood at the summit of the achievement, on the pinnacle of the Government's most recent statistical triumph.

The beginning of the new orientation is the acceptance of a 'Bantu Authority'. This system removes the white magistrate

to the outer orbit of the tribal system, although he is still the final authority. The chief or headman is promoted to a more active role at the centre of the group's affairs, and is advised by a mixture of hand-picked and government-nominated councillors. Where permitted by the commissioner or magistrate, he collects taxes and levies for administration revenue and specific projects—new schools, clinics, offices and so on. ("I'm letting my chiefs collect the dog-tax this year", said one Commissioner. "Next year maybe they can bring in the personal tax".) The system of authority is pyramidal and starts from just above the grass-roots level—the grass-roots themselves have a kind of power-vacuum interposed between them and the base of the pyramid. The authorities rise from district to regional to territorial. Aided by his council, the chief is supposed to give the sense of the popular feeling in his determinations. Thus "the chief's decision is final"—unless, of course, he happens to contradict a Government decision.

Recently the Government announced that already 80 per cent. of the Reserve tribes—nearly 4,000,000 people—have accepted Bantu Authorities. What is even more astonishing is that there is not one demurring tribe in the Transkei, long regarded as politically the most sophisticated of all the Reserves. Not one of the 123 districts of the area have held out against the new system. They have made the first grand-slam territorial acceptance of apartheid.

This reversion to Bantu Authorities in the Transkei is certainly notable. For more than 60 years, the Xhosa-speaking peoples have been toying with more representative forms of government than the tribal system. There the commissioners and the chiefs have had to deal with councils on which the majorities represented the taxpayers. The summit of the council system was the Bunga, a debating club in which at least half the members were taxpayer representatives. Many Bunga members could therefore speak directly for the people. In the new Transkei Territorial General Council, however, this elected element almost disappears.

The puzzling fact is that the old Bunga members in 1951 passed a resolution asking that nothing so primitive as the Bantu Authorities system be applied to the Transkei. Yet by 1955 the Bunga members had accepted the system. We asked a leading administrator, one who was believed to have invented Bantu Authorities, why there had been such a rapid change of mind. "Probably they got news of how well the Bantu Authorities were

working in the Transvaal,'' he said.

This must have been detected by remarkable powers of anticipation amounting practically to second-sight. When we arrived in the Transvaal, we found the most successful of the Bantu Authorities there only seemed to have got going tentatively by 1957, two years after the Bunga switch. Of course, teams of Bantu Affairs Department Information Officers might simply have brought forecasts of how well things were going to go in certain selected areas of the Transvaal. Mr. Chris Prinsloo, Chief B.A.D. Information Officer, is often mentioned in background reports as having been present at meetings where a Bantu Authority was accepted—after preliminary difficulties. The difficulties themselves were often great. Shootings, burnings and strong police retaliation took place in Zeerust and Sekhukhuneland, a Government-appointed chief was shot dead in the Ciskei, and so on. There was, and still may be, much unpleasantness in Tembuland. Even after the chiefs had accepted the Bantu Authority system for the Transkei, they had to make a request to the Government for arms to protect their persons.

We asked a senior official in the Transkei whether it would not have been possible, instead of reimposing the tribal system in its ethnic purity, simply to have made the councils more representative and given them greater local powers. He shook his head. ''An old councillor once confessed to me that in the 30 years he had worked with it he had never once understood how the Bunga operated'', he explained. Then he added, ''the trouble with the old council system was that it was too Western, too foreign to Bantu tradition''.

Chief Botha Sigcau, head of the Transkeian Teritorial Authority, is a very large man with an impassive face. I would almost call him poker-faced. He reminded me, as he sat before us in his natty executive's suit, of the head of a big car sales firm of my acquaintance. As his three chief councillors crept about him, bobbing obsequiously and uttering muted cries of 'Bayete!', the impression grew stronger.

We had entered his court-room by way of his office. On the mantlepiece of this ante-room stood two life-size, eye-catching portraits of Dr. Verwoerd and Mr. de Wet Nel, the Minister for Bantu Administration. Hanging shyly about in the far background was a much smaller signed photograph of the British Royal Family. Whether the Chief normally kept the pictures

of the Cabinet Ministers so well to the fore, or whether he simply placed them there for official visits, I do not know. Perhaps he follows some new version of Bantu tradition, and keeps them permanently there to ward off ill-luck and sudden visitations.

"The Government", said the Chief, "is our Father".

There was not a word he uttered about Bantu Authorities that would not have drawn enthusiastic applause from the next room had Dr. Verwoerd and Mr. Nel been there in the flesh.

We asked if there were any African National Congress activities in his area. The chief passed the question over to his head councillor, rather as an ancient monarch would hand over a suspicious dish to his taster.

"We do not know the A.N.C. here", said the head councillor.

"What if A.N.C. members get sent back here when the chief's subjects from Johannesburg are returned to his country?"

"We shall ask the Government to deport them—as in the past", said the councillor promptly. It seemed that another good old tribal tradition was building up.

"You mean you cannot have two bulls in one kraal?" asked one of us, remembering a favourite analogy used by Mr. de Wet Nel.

"Yes, yes, that is it! We cannot have two bulls".

In the Transvaal we asked Chief Frank Maserumule's son whether he did not foresee African people wanting some more representative system.

"The tribal system *is* representative", he said. "All views and interests are taken into account".

"Would you allow the A.N.C. to organise here?"

"No, the A.N.C. is too one-sided".

"But why do so many of the better educated Africans join the A.N.C.?"

"They are misled".

"Before your representation in Parliament was abolished this year, why did you consistently return people to the Senate and House who agreed with much of what the A.N.C. said?"

"We were misled".

"Do you intend with all these new developments in Africa to maintain the tribal system as it is, then?"

"No, we can modernise the tribal system", said Chief Maserumule's son.

The technical officers believed that the restored tribalism

was going to be of some assistance to them. "Dealing with a crumbling society is like trying to pin down quick-silver", said one. "Now we have officially definite groups to work with, and at least one man, an effective chief, through whom to transmit plans". Whether or not it was lastingly good to restore a social system which had so long before begun to decay, the technical officers were too busy to consider. In any case it seemed to them a temporary expedient. One, looking ahead to that distant time when his plans had produced numbers of good peasant farmers on 'economic units' or even bigger ones, remarked, "Of course, they'll be the first to throw off the authority of the chiefs".

We heard many annoyed or despairing references to the people's indifference to instruction, precept, prescription. Many stories were told us of how all sorts of efforts to impart wisdom or stimulate change had drained away into a desert of popular listlessness. Administrators told us that this was due to the old system of "spoon-feeding", and now the Government was putting everything onto a do-it-yourself basis. The restoration of the tribal system was in itself an attempt to prime the pumps of popular initiative. It seemed to the authorities a healthier way of organising popular dynamism than through the A.N.C. which the Africans themselves had begun to develop. Yet we discovered in the course of our journey that ex-Chief Albert Luthuli, now exiled head of the A.N.C., was one of the best organisers of modernisation in his region and had built up a really viable cane-growers co-operative.

As we went along through the Reserves we began to form a strange impression. The people were somehow absent from the scene. Of course, there were thousands of Africans about us. We met chiefs, African agricultural demonstrators, clerks, teachers, even a radio announcer. But the people seemed remote from us, always at a distance. They never thrust themselves into our attention, possibly because the most thrusting part of the population, 70 per cent. of the men between 18 and 40, is always away earning a supplementary living among the 6,000,000 Africans working on the white farms and in the cities. Also, few of us could speak their language. They always appeared politely dissociated from us, busy in their languid way about other business. Chiefs, councillors, interpreters were eloquently articulate, but we were surrounded by the silence of the common man. The silence was eloquent too.