

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS



JCB-4
Transkei: Land of
Pain and Promise

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29 Bay View Avenue
Tamboer's Kloof
Cape Town, South Africa

Mr. Richard Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

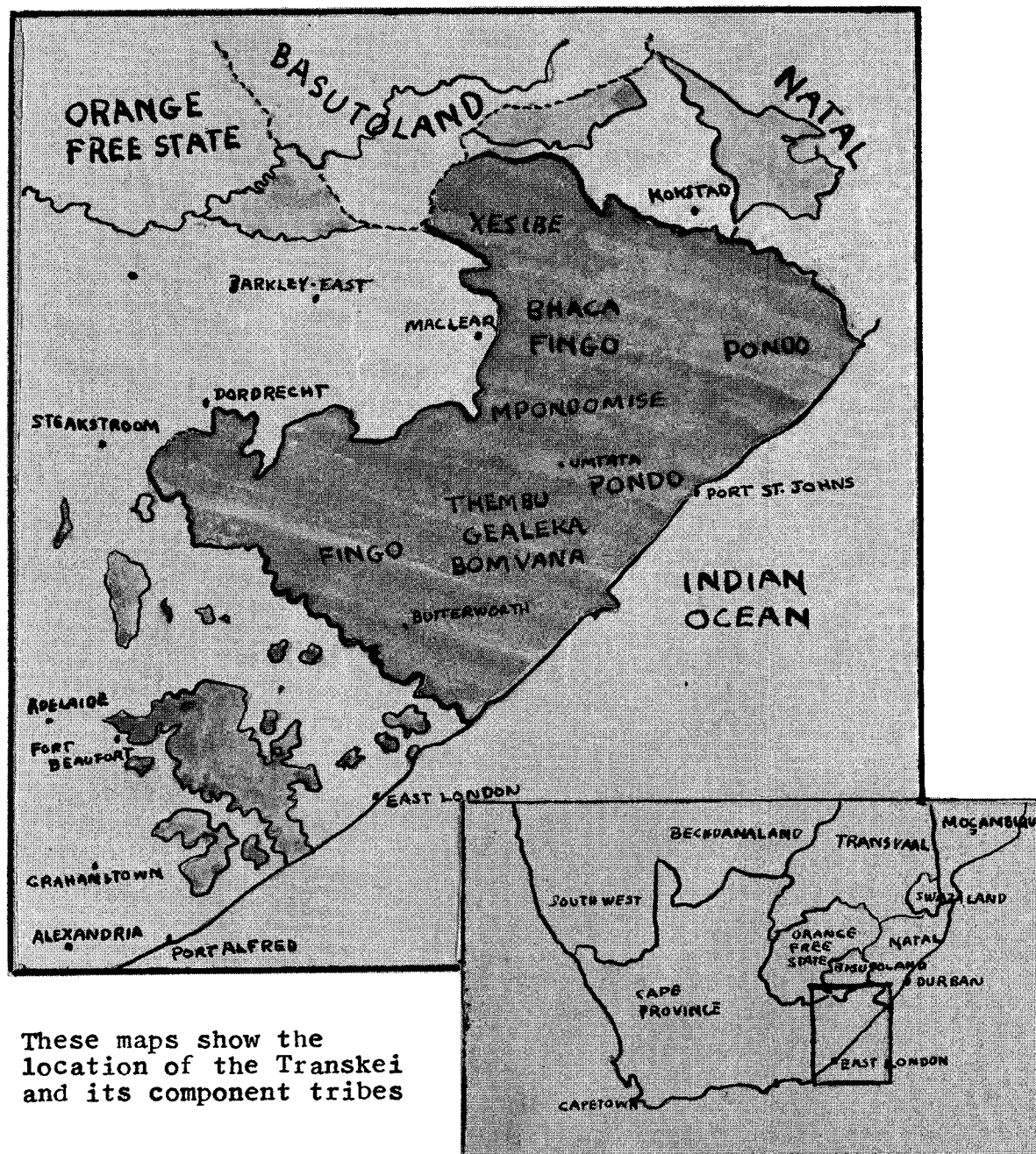
Dear Mr. Nolte:

No area in South Africa offers the Government a better opportunity for proving to the world the benefits of apartheid than the Transkei (United Transkeian Territories). Of all 8 projected Bantu areas (Bantustans),¹ the Transkei is the only one united geographically, and already endowed with a long tradition of semi-self-government.

This hilly and sometimes mountainous land, extending eastward from the Great Kei River to the border of Natal, and falling irregularly in ridges and deep river valleys from the Drakensberge and Basutoland, its neighbor to the north, to the Indian Ocean, is the home of one and a half million Xhosa-speaking Africans concentrated densely over 16,000 square miles. It is a beautiful, over-crowded, economically-poor and agriculturally-retarded country. The Xhosas, a primitive pastoral people who have been sheltered somewhat from the full onslaught of Western civilization, are now caught in a dreadful transition between the old and the new.

Apartheid policies, which have denied them representation in the South African Government, have held out the promise of a future independence, when and if they are ready. Some of their leaders have raised the demand for early independence, and their demand has finally been answered. The Prime Minister announced just a few days ago in Parliament a five-year independence plan for the Transkei, beginning no

1. The 8 national units recognized by the Government are: North-Sotho, South Sotho, Tswana, Zulu, Swazi, Xhosa, Tsonga and Venda.



These maps show the location of the Transkei and its component tribes

later than 1963, and based on a constitution embodying Western democratic principles.

This independent state, no matter how ardently sought by both sides, could well be disastrous for both the Transkei and South Africa as a whole. Neither the land nor the people are adequately prepared to exist totally on their own, and many of the urban Xhosas would prefer full rights as citizens of

South Africa rather than be given citizenship in this poor, small state.

The Transkei's unfitness for independent statehood is not entirely the fault of apartheid, although it must now accept the major blame. People who by nature are conservative are having to give up old values and customs in order to grow up politically, economically and educationally in an industrial age. They have been reluctant to change, and the change has been made all the more difficult because of the lack of proper educational and economic aid. Church missions, for almost 150 years have carried the load of education, medical help and social welfare. "The previous governments," said an African friend, "did nothing. This one (the Nationalists) are doing something, but it is the wrong thing."

According to the philosophy of separate development, as previously articulated by the Government, the African should be encouraged to develop in line with his own traditions in his own area. (There is a question of how much this will now be emphasized since the proposed Transkeian Constitution supposedly will not be based on tribal but on democratic principles.) Although many of the old African ways still dominate, many of them have been condemned as un-Christian, or un-healthy, or blocks to the necessary development of the land and barriers to the educational and political growth of the people. While the Government has philosophized on the need to return to the tribal ways, they have found it necessary to modify and adjust tribal patterns in almost every area.

Traditions have become so weakened by direct attack and by the indirect influence of European life that they can no longer be expected to give any stable pattern to the Xhosa's future development.

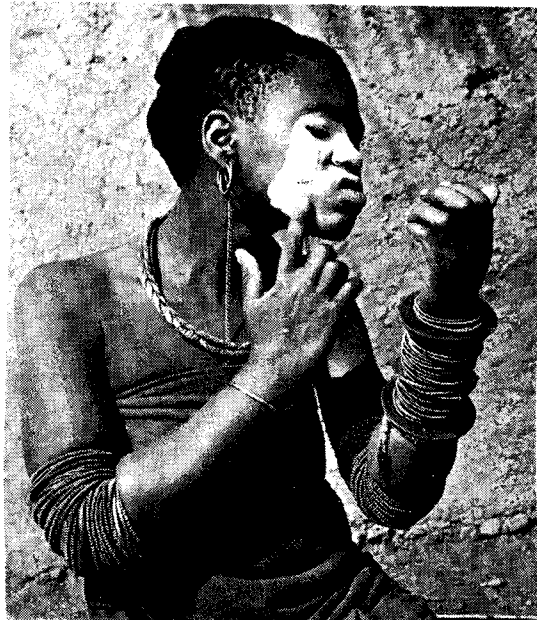
How Traditional Ways Have Broken Down

The Xhosas have been a polygamous and patriarchial tribal people to whom children and the family have been very important. Their lives and their livelihood have always been based on cattle: only as the land became more populated and they more fixed in their homes did they begin crop farming; and just as they were entering this agricultural state, their encounters with the White man arrested any further development. They have a strong attachment to the land, but as stock farmers, not tillers of the soil, and their values are rooted in that kind of life.

Their homes have been oval mud-brick huts with conical thatched roofs, furnished with grass mats, wooden spoons and plates, and perhaps a clothes box, a mud bench and a wooden pillow. And almost always, the most-important

beer strainer.²

Their clothes have also been simple. Before the first trading stores, appropriately-placed patches (with animal skins for winter) sufficed. Blankets later came into use, and today, in Pondoland, the South-eastern sector of the Transkei, the people dye their blankets red, and the women use red clay on their faces as a cosmetic, thus earning the name "the red blanket people".



Young Xhosa woman

They are an easy-going people, to whom time has never had specific meaning. I was told that if a Xhosa says he will meet you tomorrow, he really means he will probably see you next week. If he says next week, next month is what he means, and next month is translated as next year. Such an attitude, suggests a medical missionary, may be one of the reasons why the Xhosas have very little heart trouble.

Women have traditionally been the workers. They have not only been the child-bearers, supply-bearers, food and beer-preparers, but also the garden-tenders. There has been but one thing she has not been allowed to do. She must not have anything to do with the livestock, thus no ploughing or shepherding. This was the man's prerogative, as women were considered ritually unclean and therefore could contaminate the cattle by their contact. For this reason, women also had to stay clear of the cattle kraal which has been a traditional male meeting place, as well as the spiritual home of the ancestors. Bodies are buried in the kraal.

2. One of the most important age-old social recreations has been the "beer-drink". This has centered around their traditional drink, "kaffir-beer", made from "kaffir-corn" (sorghum). Tasting like baker's yeast, this concoction is not simply a drink but a sustaining food, and is used in almost all rituals and festivals. It has been said that the harvest thanksgiving takes the form of a National Beer-Drink, at which time an offering of beer is made to the ancestors of the Chief.

Cattle have always been the Xhosa's most prized possession. They have had religious value (being the means through which contact with ancestral spirits could be maintained) as well as social significance. According to the important "lobola" custom, they have been the means by which a man was able to get a wife. "Lobola" was the gift or compensation price a bridegroom had to pay to satisfy his bride's parents. Without this the marriage would have no status, and the wife no standing in her husband's family.

Animal sacrifices (at the birth of a child, at the conclusion of puberty rites, etc) for the benefit of ancestral spirits, were common. Superstition, belief in magical potions, medicine men and witchcraft have been strong forces in tribal life.

The Xhosas believed the influence of an important person, the family head or the tribal chief, continues after his death and must be respected. Such ancestor worship, by relating the tribe and family to common ancestors, served as a cohesive force in the Xhosa's life. In this tradition, the Chief was the head priest of the tribe, as the father was of his family.

The Chief was not only the tribe's leader, but also its final authority. His position was hereditary, passing through the tribe's senior family to the first son born of the wife who had been elected as the Chief's "great wife".

These were the ways of the people, and are today, with some disturbing modifications.

Previous South African governments undermined the Chief's authority by establishing district government councils with elected and government-appointed tribal representatives, which limited the Chief's administrative function



A M'pondo witch doctor taking snuff

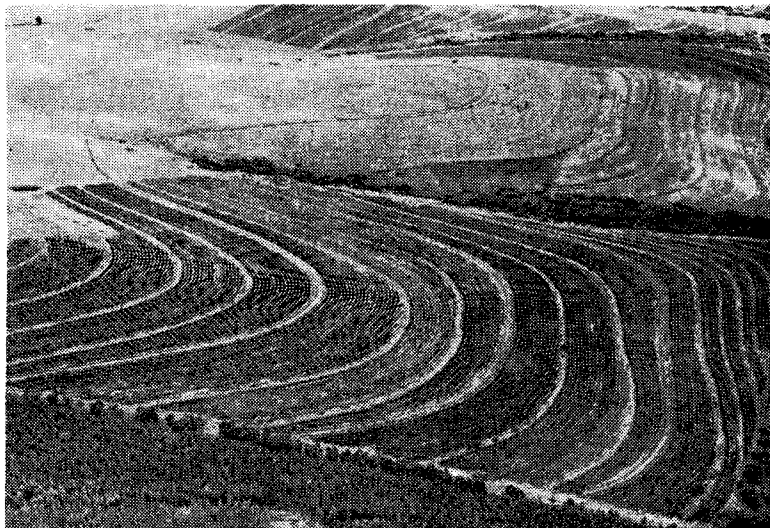
to the carrying out of government orders. The present Government, while emphasizing a restoration of the Chief's old tribal authority, has also weakened it by keeping the powers of appointing and removing a Chief primarily in its own hands. In some instances, when the Government has found a would-be Chief uncooperative, it has ignored tradition by appointing a man who would normally be ineligible. Thus the Chief has become more of a Government tool than the traditional leader of his people.

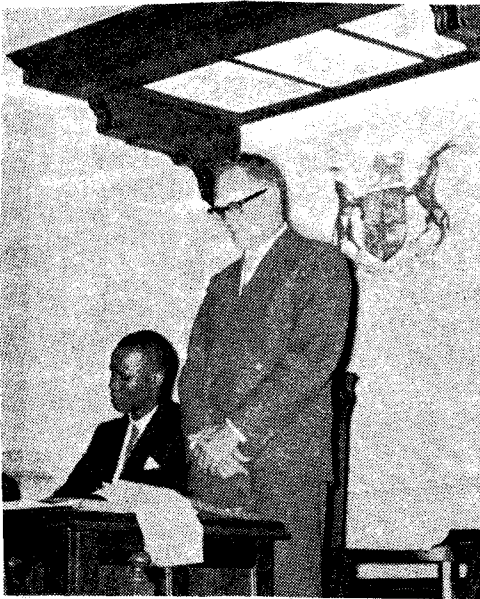
This relationship has affected some chiefs, and made them more autocratic and less concerned about tribal responsibilities. In turn, tribesmen have increasing disrespect for the Chief's position, and some Chiefs have even been attacked.. The educationally-advanced Africans want to be free of tribal authority, preferring something more democratic, such as a tribal council of some kind, elected by the people themselves. It remains to be seen whether this is what will emerge from the forthcoming constitutional talks.

The Government has been concerned about over-stocking and over-grazing which are ruining both the land and the live-stock. It has tried to make the tribesmen aware of the problem. However, the Xhosas, with their whole value system based on cattle, find it difficult to understand the white man's concern. They object generally to the selling of their cattle or the limiting of their herds. To them the issue is not one of accepting a new way of stock-farming, but that of giving up religious and social ideas at the very heart of their lives.

While their land is generally good (parts are among the best farming land in South Africa) and the rainfall adequate, poor use of the soil and wide-spread destruction of woods over the last century has caused serious erosion to one third of the

One of the things which Xhosas in the past have found difficult to understand is the necessity of contour ploughing in the hilly country. This is one of the few Transkei contour projects.





Mr. V.M.P. Liebbrandt and Presiding Chief Kaizer Matanzima, addressing members of the Transkeian Territorial Authority.

land, and only one fourth can be considered erosion-free today. The land as it is now used cannot produce enough food for the people living there. Various schemes have been put into effect by the Government, from private ownership of land to enforced tribal farming in the hope of improving farming techniques and building up the land. "If this land was properly controlled and farmed," says Mr. V.M.P. Liebbrandt, Chief Bantu Commissioner, Transkeian Territories, "It could be a major farming area of South Africa." But the whole area needs to be fenced and water supplies developed. The land needs to be reapportioned as to use for farming, grazing and housing. Since there is not enough land to give each family an adequate farming area, some families will have to be re-established in towns, where the Government hopes to develop local industry in which the Xhosas can be employed.

The Xhosa objects to such a change in his way of life. Opposition to this change forms a major part of his present dissatisfaction, and it makes changes needed in re-conditioning the land for his benefit all the more difficult.

But these conditions, made more difficult by a steadily increasing population, had forced him to earn money in other ways. In order to buy food which cannot be produced in enough abundance, seed, clothing, stock, and materials for a hut,³ as well as to pay taxes, he must contract for work in the mines on the Rand (in the Transvaal, near Johannesburg) or in some other industry. It is estimated that almost 50% of the men between 15 and 64 years of age are working outside the Transkei at one time, and every man works outside at least once during his lifetime. Under these working conditions, the Xhosa is being forced to be more punctual. His disregard for time, however, is misunderstood by many urban Whites, who feel that because he has little notion of time, he doesn't mind the interminable waits in line for papers, employment and pay.

3. Huts at one time were built with materials at hand, but the timbers for framework are no longer available close by and must now be purchased, as must spoons and bowls, chests, etc. Also, near the towns particularly, "School" Africans furnish their rondavals in the European manner, and European clothing is now quite common, even in the reserves.

Due to the absence of men, the stability of the family is rapidly disintegrating, and women have, through necessity, taken over some of the responsibilities that previously were exclusively male. They have even had to help in the ploughing and in the care of the cattle when there were only children or old men who could help. Always important because of the cattle they would bring to their families through marriage, women are becoming more of a voice in African affairs as they acquire increased responsibility and education.

The church has also helped to change her position by working to abolish polygamy. While over 10% of the husbands still have more than one wife, the expanding influence of Christianity is breaking this pattern.

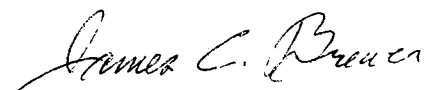
However, in trying to bring the Xhosas a better way of life, the missions have also worked to undermine the old authority. Missionaries, in Christian tribes, as far as the Africans are concerned, have taken the place of the Chief as tribal priest. Most Christians are expected to abandon old customs like the beer-drink, puberty rites, lobola, ancestor worship, ritual animal sacrifices, as well as polygamy, as being in conflict with Christian belief. This does not mean that the Christian Xhosas give these up entirely, for these are often the things which give most meaning, stability and security to their way of life.

Magic still persists, even among Christian Xhosas, for it plays an intimate part in all their every-day activities and occupations, giving them some hope and confidence where there would otherwise be none. For many Africans, Christianity is still too remote from the realities of their particular economic and domestic life to be a substitute for the old ways. And scientific education is not yet widely or deeply enough known to weaken the ideas on which magic is based.

But when these beliefs are challenged, and old ways denounced, by either the Government or the Church, the authority of the past crumbles. Family solidarity and male authority has been disastrously weakened. Children are now brought up with less family discipline, and delinquency is increasing in the reserve as it has been in the urban African locations. A good example of the transition from the past to the present can often be seen in the streets of Johannesburg. In this city, modern as New York, women can often be seen still carrying their goods on their heads, their babies on their backs, and nothing on their breasts. New ways may be added, but old ways are hard to exorcise.

It is to these people in this underdeveloped land that independence is now to be given.

Sincerely yours,



James C. Brewer