Class, Culture and Consciousness: The African Experience
1870-1920

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It is a great delight to be with you this afternoon, especially as I remember the generosity and warmth of your response to a seminar I did at RAU two or three years ago, when I tried out the Raleigh lecture which I was about to give or had just given on a South African audience. This afternoon also I am trying out a lecture first given to an audience of historians in London, most of whom knew little about South Africa and its past. I was therefore anxious in this lecture to confront the usual stereotypes about a static, ‘tribal’ Africa, isolated from the rest of the world which are held even by sympathetic outsiders, and to convey instead a far more dynamic picture of the black experience in South Africa and to suggest their experience of class, culture and consciousness was and is part of a universal story of the impact of capitalist modernity on pre-industrial societies the world over: not the same story exactly, but every where the refurbishing if not the dissolution of old bonds and older ways of seeing and doing.

The genealogy of my title perhaps requires some explanation: no need here to remind you that over the past thirty years South African historiography has been transformed from an account of the doings of great white men to a far greater concern with wider swathes of the country’s populace – the white under-classes as well as Africans, Coloureds and Indians, collectively known as ‘black’ (in preference to the older rather negative term, ‘non-white’) and women of all races and classes. Starting with what I consider was a necessary rethinking of South Africa’s political economy in the 1970s, it has more recently shared the international post-modern and post-colonial turn to culture and post-structuralism. The changing titles of the various courses I have taught on the history of South Africa have in some ways shared in the changing preoccupations of this changing historiography. I began my career and devoted much of my teaching in London University's School of History to a ‘Special subject' entitled ‘African people and European rule in South Africa, 1890-1924'. Indeed Peter was one of the students on that course more years ago than either of us would like to remember. ‘African people and European Rule' was matched some ten years later with a Masters course on ‘Conflict and interdependence in southern Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries' and transformed some years later into an Optional subject entitled 'Colour, class and capital in South Africa, 1870 -1924'. My title for this lecture is manifestly part of this evolving genealogy.

When I first began teaching the special subject in the early days of African history, there was very little historical literature on African people or even on European rule over African people in South Africa, and even less sense of African class or agency. Since then, the literature on what was then rather quaintly termed European rule' has grown dramatically. With the remarkable expansion of research on South African history, the mineral discoveries which launched South Africa's industrial revolution between the 1870s and 1920s have come to be seen as a critical moment - if not the critical moment - in the shaping of modern South Africa, and the peculiarities of its social order. Much of the new research at that time on the social consequences of the mineral revolution in the last third of the nineteenth century for the peoples of southern Africa was embodied in a

Part of the manifesto for that volume - and perhaps more widely for South African historiography - was our desire to look at the transformations in culture and consciousness that followed on the crucial political and economic changes of that extraordinary era. Framed by wars of conquest in the 1870s and early 1880s at its beginning, and the First World War at its end, it was punctuated as James Campbell remarks by 'a botched coup, civil war, a series of short, sharp depressions, and a sweeping political and economic reconstruction' known as the unification of South Africa.¹ To this one might add the last armed resistance to Africans to colonial rule until the 1960s, and rinderpest and locusts, small pox and influenza. Together they add up to the proverbial ten plagues.

As we wrote then:

Before 1870, the majority of Africans in southern Africa lived in independent chiefdoms, though few were untouched by the coming of the merchant, missionary and settler. Even the growing number of Africans being incorporated into the settler-dominated world of the Afrikaner republics or British colonies retained for the most part their access to land and control over their labour power. Less than fifty years later ... African chiefdom, British colony and Afrikaner republic had been swept aside; south of the Limpopo, all had been meshed into a single capitalist state dominated by whites.

... Yet [we continued] we know remarkably little of what these dramatic events meant for black South Africans, whether in terms of the changes wrought in their material conditions, or how these changes were shaped by, and in turn reshaped, their culture and consciousness. We are beginning to understand the political economy of industrial South Africa, yet we have little knowledge of how, in this hostile environment, Africans survived as autonomous human beings with a culture of their own within the white man's world [we used the terms `white' and `men' advisedly]; and how in the final analysis these processes entailed the making of an African working class.²

The past twenty years since we published the collection which we rightly described as a preliminary attempt to grapple with some aspects of the African experience of South Africa's industrialisation, there has been an historiographical revolution, which has in a modest way has accompanied South Africa's political revolution, and which has gone some way to addressing these questions of popular and political consciousness. Paradoxically, one of the consequences is that in some ways it is far more difficult now to write with quite such self-confidence of the making of an African working class: as we shall see, both the singular article and the verb are problematic. If culture is 'the encompassing framework from within which human beings apprehend reality and attempt their life projects,' consciousness is far more fractured, situational, and inflected by other identities, of race, of gender, of ethnicity.³ Especially when one turns to the textured complexities of individual lives earlier abstractions become fuzzy, the firm contours of political and economy and class formation destabilised, consciousness complex and
contradictory. As David Cannadine has remarked of the changing understandings of class in Britain since the late 1970s, so in South Africa, 'a massive amount of detailed empirical research' has 'progressively undermined ... earlier confident, but often highly speculative generalisations.'

Nevertheless, I think it is important to hold onto the notion of class, and indeed class formation in South Africa. After all, however one understands it, new classes, and in particular a new industrial working class, was in the making in South Africa in this period. This is true both in the objective sense as a result of the rise of new property relations and new relations of exploitation, and in the sense of 'new imagined communities', as we shall see. It is no coincidence - as Jon Hyslop has recently brilliantly demonstrated - that Robert Tressel's classic of British socialism, *A Ragged Trousered Philanthropist*, was 'written by an Irishman who had spent his entire early adult working life in Southern Africa', and who had been 'drawn into labour organization and socialist politics' in Johannesburg and Cape Town of the 1890s and not Hastings, the ostensible setting of the story. 'For someone of Robert's sensitivities' Hyslop concludes, 'Johannesburg could not but be a lesson in the effects of the untrammelled pursuit of profit.'

Tressel was, of course writing of a white working class - there are no black people in his account: I on the contrary will be talking about the experiences of black South Africans, who often came away from Kimberley and Johannesburg having derived even stronger, if perhaps also somewhat different, lessons about the 'untrammelled pursuit of profit' in the towns and mines of southern Africa. Yet the experience of South Africa's majority African population cannot be divorced from that of its white as well as its Indian and 'Coloured' minorities. Particularly in view of the increasing salience of race as a category in the consciousness of all South Africans at that time, and the centrality of the class experiences and understandings of white workers in this period, and the influence of these understandings on African class organisations especially in the period of white labour turbulence and socialist organisation in the early decades of the last century, such a separation is both artificial and unfortunate. There is, however, a limit to what can be said in the space of fifty minutes.

To assert that processes of class formation were at work in South Africa is not to assert a linear teleology from class formation to class conflict to the triumph of a revolutionary working class. We have of necessity become more sensitive in the last decade to the extent to which classes have not only been made but have also been unmade in Africa - and indeed elsewhere. The struggles on the Witwatersrand in the 1990s vividly showed that we cannot assume a linear progression from migrancy to permanent urbanization, or that simply the removal of obstacles to urban settlement would mean its embrace. As James Ferguson has remarked of analogous but not identical processes on the Copperbelt in Zambia:

... the way to get beyond the limitations of linear and teleological accounts is to give full weight to the wealth of coexisting variation at any given moment of the historical process. "Labour migration" is not a thing, later to be replaced by a thing called
"permanent urbanization". The central reality is rather a complex range of actual strategies followed ... over a period of time.5

Let me start, therefore, with a picture of some of the rather complex range of actual strategies followed, and the unlikely figure of the African-American son of slave parents and graduate of the Hampton Institute, Virginia, Orpheus M. McAdoo and his Virginia Jubilee singers who spent nearly six years in South Africa successful visits in the 1890s.6 Audiences in their thousands flocked to hear them in towns and villages across South Africa. Singing an eclectic mix of African-American spirituals like ‘Go Down Moses’ and ‘The Gospel Train’, popular minstrel songs, Scottish ballads and even grand opera, McAdoo's singers were an instant hit. The African newspaper, Imvo Zabatsundu, called them ‘the most magnificent vocal singers who ever visited this quarter of the globe’, while white newspapers were no less flattering.7 President Kruger himself, not known for his interest in matters musical, was persuaded to attend a performance in Pretoria and is reported to have been in tears when they sang ‘Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen’.8 McAdoo was probably the first and only black man whose hand Kruger had ever shaken, an achievement doubtless made possible by the special status of African Americans at the time as honorary whites.

McAdoo came at a particularly turbulent moment in a country that has never been short of turbulent moments. The world he entered with his Jubilee Singers was crowded with actors ready to appropriate, interpret and refashion the messages they brought within the framework of their own understandings of reality and their own life projects. These life projects and understandings were in turn inflected by gender, race and ethnicity, but also by a hefty ‘admixture’ of what the anthropologist David Coplan has termed, the ‘contingent determinants of history, experience, value and personal agency’.9

While McAdoo and his singers entertained large white audiences, they found their warmest response among the black aspirant bourgeoisie in South Africa's towns, nowhere more so than in Kimberley, home in the 1890s to a vigorous aspirant petty bourgeoisie and independent artisanry: the ‘emergent class of African teachers, interpreters, clerks, ministers of religion, tradesmen and others who stood between a largely unskilled proletariat on the one hand and a propertyed bourgeoisie on the other’ - whose lives are perhaps epitomised by Solomon Plaatje, African nationalist, court interpreter (he was Baden Powell’s secretary during the South African War) and translator of Shakespeare into Setswana.10 All of them Christian, they were remarkable alike for the diversity of their origins, and their rich social life, with its all-male social associations and sporting societies - the South Africans Improvement Association, the Come Again Lawn Tennis Club, the Duke of Wellington's Cricket Club and the John Bull Debating Society. The one social arena in which women played some role was in its many musical performances: and as the musical anthropologist Veit Erlmann has remarked, music was almost the group's defining characteristic.11

Even before the Jubilee Singers had left the country, they had imitators most notably in Kimberley, where a churchman ‘with some musical talent’ was inspired to create his own African choir. This in turn provided the original nucleus of the so-called Native African
Choir taken to England by two white musical entrepreneurs. There they performed with aplomb both before great public audiences and in private concerts for Lord Knutsford, Baroness Coutts-Burdett and Queen Victoria herself, and were received with great enthusiasm.

When McAdoo first arrived in South African in 1890 he could have had little idea of the impact of his tour. According to Erlmann, his visits 'marked a turning point in black South African musical history and became ... deeply ingrained in black popular consciousness.' As Erlmann shows in the essay from which I have drawn extensively in the above account, the McAdoo visit not only led to the development of new musical forms among the African Christian intelligentsia - or amakholwa, believers, as they were known in Natal - in South Africa's burgeoning towns. It also contributed significantly to the competitive song and dance performed by four-part Zulu male choirs known as isicathamiya, which was at the heart of the social practice of migrant workers on the Rand. Contemporary Isicathamiya will doubtless be familiar to many of you as to millions of listeners worldwide through the performances and recordings of the Ladysmith Black Mambaza.

As Erlmann shows, McAdoo's remarkably varied programme resonated with different prior musical experiences in different parts of South Africa: whether the minstrelsy of the self-parodic 'Coon Carnival' in Cape Town, or the reworking of the Christian hymnody by John Knox Bokwe, one of the earliest Xhosa composers.12 Around World War I, this new hymnody, known as ukwaya, but also the minstrel songs (known as 'ukunzi') and spirituals brought by McAdoo, had been taken up by mission choirs, nowhere more enthusiastically than at John Dube's Zulu Industrial School at Ohlange. There the head of music, Reuben Caluza, one of South Africa's outstanding popular composers, was reinterpreting and animating American 'ragtime'. Moreover, by the 1910s all these genres had begun to influence indigenous song and dance traditions in the South African countryside, whence, according to Erlmann, they were taken by Zulu migrants to the mines, to create the new performance genre known as isicathamiya.

McAdoo's Jubilee Singers are not simply of interest to musical anthropologists, however. Through a chain of unconnected and sometimes bizarre circumstances - the visit of McAdoo's choir also led to the merger of the Reverend Mangena M Mokone's significantly named and recently formed Ethiopian Church, with the well-established African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States. This in turn was to profoundly affect the relationship between African-American and black South African political and intellectual culture, as James Campbell has shown in his luminous account of the AME Church in both countries. As Campbell observes, 'For much of the 20th century black America would remain a symbol of urbanity and sophistication among black South Africans, especially [but not only] in cities.'13

To deal first with the unconnected and sometimes bizarre circumstances: here we need to trace the history of two remarkable sisters, Charlotte and Katie Manye, members of the African choir visiting Britain in 1891-2.14 Of the two Katie, who clearly had the more exceptional musical talent, shunned the limelight, and ultimately found her vocation as a
nurse and right-hand to the medical missionary, Dr Jim McCord. Charlotte, however, was ambitious, adventurous and able, and joined the second tour of the choir to North America, partly inspired by McAdoo’s encouragement of black South Africans to study in the USA. Left stranded by its white organisers in Cleveland, Ohio, the choir was rescued by the AMEC; and with its assistance Charlotte entered Wilberforce College, also in Ohio; through a chance letter to Katie, news of the AMEC and its educational endeavours reached a kinsman, the Rev. Mokone, one of the leading independent churchmen of his day; this in turn led Mokone to write to the AMEC’s Bishop Turner and by 1896 Mokone had affiliated his significantly named Ethiopian Church with the AMEC in the States, taking with him the some dozen African ordained ministers and their congregations who had left the mission churches to join him. With its proto-nationalist vision of black unity, its emphasis on - and very considerable provision of - educational resources, and its stress on black independence, the AMEC attracted Africans all over southern Africa. By 1899 its membership was estimated at 11,000; by 1910 it had risen to 40,000: a figure which haunted the imaginations of administrators and missionaries all over southern Africa, for whom the threat of what was somewhat loosely termed ‘Ethiopianism’ was as potent as their fear of Communism in the 1920s and 30s.

There is far more to say about Charlotte Manye, or as she was known after her marriage, Manye-Maxeke, who was not only midwife of the merger of the Ethiopian Church with the AMEC, but also played a significant role in its expansion in South Africa. South Africa's first black woman graduate, she was the most outstanding black woman of her day, eminent in the church, welfare and politics, and in the struggle for women's rights. Alas, her story must await another occasion. Here we need to look at why such apparently fortuitous, or, as the AMEC doubtless saw it, providential, events could have such dramatic effects.

To understand this, we need to return to nineteenth-century southern Africa, where even before the mineral discoveries greatly accelerated processes of change, the lives of large numbers of Africans had already been inexorably altered by the alternative big C's of South African history: colonialism, commerce and Christianity, not least in matters of gender and generation. By the 1870s, colonial labour markets had begun to transform the lives of many who as yet lived beyond the reach of settler expansion or colonial taxation.

These changes were most evident among, but were not confined to, the minority of Africans who were actually converted by the Christian missionaries who had fanned out across the subcontinent in increasing numbers from the end of the eighteenth century. Thanks to the work of Jean and John Comaroff we now have a far richer and multi-layered conception of the ways missionaries attempted a total transformation of African life. Nothing was too mundane - or indeed too ambitious - for their transformative gaze. Campbell summarizes it well:

Religious belief was only part of the package .... At the most quotidian level, conversion implied a host of changes in Africans' daily round: converts wore Western dress, lived in square houses rather than round huts, and cultivated with ploughs. More broadly,
conversion involved the transplantation of a whole "universe of signs and practices" from the West - new orders of knowledge, new styles of argumentation and demonstration, new conceptions of subjectivity itself. Implicit in missionary invocations of "progress", for example, were radically new conceptions of time, individuality and community.

Often separated from their non-Christian compatriots both geographically on mission stations and by their sense of "respectability", the amakolwa were surely the first, fully self-conscious `class' to be formed. 17

Yet for many of those who had responded most enthusiastically, the last third of the 19th century was also to see a subversion of the optimistic missionary message. They found their faith in "progress" and "improvement", and their associated belief in the liberal, colour-blind (if class-and gender-based) institutions of the Cape Colony and their dreams of incorporation into a single South African society most bitterly betrayed. Thus, although some were to find, in the new and burgeoning towns, new opportunities, this was also a period that saw the consolidation of settler society, and a sharpened racism from which even the missionaries were not immune. Social Darwinism, in particular, eroded an earlier liberal faith in the educability of all humans and therefore their capacity for redemption.18

At the same time, they were to experience an increasing devaluation of their skills in the face of the insatiable appetite of the mines for cheap unskilled labour. Paradoxically, Kimberley, which gave educated Africans their greatest opportunity, was also the harbinger of their marginalization.19 If industrialisation meant the formation of class, it also represented, then as now, its de-formation. The path into the middle class was neither linear nor ever onward. For many who found themselves in this situation the AMEC provided, in South Africa, as it had in the United States, `a foundation for political action as well as an arsenal of ideas and images'.20

James Campbell puts it starkly when he remarks on the `astonishing' rapidity of the change in the position of the amakholwa in the last twenty-five years of the 19th century:

As late as 1875 an ordained African minister represented the pinnacle of missionary achievement, a flesh and blood vindication of evangelical enterprise and of Africans' innate potential. A quarter century later, the same figure was a changeling, whose very existence menaced social order. Even more astonishing was the apparent ease with which missionaries adapted to the new circumstances.

This may be too stark. One of the puzzles about class formation in this period is that while this aspirant petty bourgeoisie was made, unmade and remade in many times and places, a core remains of the exuberantly self-confident and well-educated elite who retained a certain enduring optimism about the possibilities of a single society in South Africa well beyond our period. (No-one epitomises this better perhaps than former President Nelson Mandela.)
Nevertheless the wars of the 1870s and 1880s, most of them waged by British imperial troops with minimal colonial assistance, undoubtedly marked a key moment in the disillusion: for many Christians all over South Africa, the wars constituted crucial moment of choice. Many of the most westernised and assimilated found the very foundations of their world shaken. Liberal imperialism may always have been something of a myth - but as James Ferguson has observed in the not totally dissimilar case of development in contemporary Africa this does not make ‘the abrupt withdrawal of the promises any easier to take, or any less of a tragedy for those whose hopes and legitimate expectations have been shattered ...’ For Campbell, ‘The roots of much of twentieth century South African politics are here, in African Christians' bitterness at a world that preached progress and incorporation while practising restriction and exclusion.’ Ironically, with their language of universalism, moreover, the missionaries had provided their converts with a measuring stick for their own performance.

It was in this context that the African intelligentsia of the Eastern Cape sought to defend their position through a host of new initiatives, including the establishment of western-type political organisations to defend their interests, the creation of African newspapers and the founding of independent African churches by some of South Africa's most respected African pastors. The diaspora of this intelligentsia to the mushrooming Kimberley and Johannesburg, but also as missionaries to rural South Africa in the last decades of the nineteenth century, carried these political and religious innovations with them. This, indeed, accounts in part for tenacity of the elite belief in an older liberal imperialism long after its disappearance from the Cape. This was particularly so in the Transvaal where another major moment in the recurrent disillusion of the black intelligentsia came in the aftermath of the South African War. There, despite British wartime rhetoric, Africans soon found that there was little except increased efficiency at the job to distinguish British from Boer repression.

Campbell shows in brilliant detail the impact of the AMEC and black America more generally on this world, at once buoyant and betrayed. The American connection brought a new racial populism to the sedate milieu of Eastern Cape liberal politics, and to the accommodationist environment of the wealthy black landowners of Natal. All over South Africa a myriad of small 'vigilance associations', political unions, and 'native congresses' emerged in the 1900s to demand African rights. And there can be little doubt that members of the AMC, played an important role in all these organisations, which were brought together in the formation of the South African Native Congress in Bloemfontein 1912. It is therefore not entirely surprising that almost a dozen of its founders ‘had been touched by the AME Church and by the broader traffic with black America which the church facilitated.’ Although Campbell suggests that the racial populism of the AMEC was not ‘the stuff of early African nationalism,’ in fact there has always existed within the very broad church of the ANC a strand of Africanism and a radical, racial populism. It derived from its members lived experience and these wider contacts with black America, which surfaced in different ways and at different times.

It is tempting to dwell on the politics of this intelligentsia: it is where the light is good. Articulate and literate in English, with a characteristic sense of their individual agency,
they have left a written record. But the class constituency of the AMEC and early nationalist politics was far wider, if regionally inflected: in the OFS and southwestern Transvaal, which long remained politically militant, it was the very considerable class of 'aspirant petty bourgeoisie,' which was most responsive. Enterprising and industrious, from a heady mix of ethnic backgrounds and with some education, these men and women had moved in equal number into the small towns and villages of the region in response to the rural disasters of the 1890s and the devastation of the South African War. They were soon to find themselves battling against a host of bureaucratic obstacles barring their way to the very 'progress' and 'improvement' which were their hallmark.

This responsiveness to the 'Ethiopian message' was not simply an urban phenomenon, however: and this is important for the majority of black South Africans still lived and worked on the land, and even the more settled urban population retained rural ties. Across the Free State and southwestern Transvaal sharecroppers and labour tenants on white-owned farms also found a home in the AMEC while even in rural reserves like the Transkei where, to quote Beinart and Bundy's evocative words, 'proletarianisation seeped rather than swept through communities' and 'people clung tenaciously to their rural identities and rural resources', and accepted the authority of their chiefs, the church still attracted numerous adherents. Indeed, in some areas chiefs themselves courted the AMEC: Charlotte and her husband for example were invited to set up school in Tembuland by Chief Dalindyebo.

So - in the eastern Cape countryside, too, the political and economic balance had begun to shift, as an older class of relatively prosperous peasants began to find themselves under economic pressure, older ideas of incorporation increasingly marginalised and older loyalties no longer rewarded. And although Great Britain and Queen Victoria retained some of their old iconic status in the Cape Colony (and Natal), increasingly the black American experience presented an alternative vision. As the Cape colonial state's priorities shifted from its support for a progressive class of peasant farmers, to the regular supply of migrants to the mines, many families found they had little choice but to send a male migrant to the mines. According to Beinart and Bundy, 'It was in these communities that the impulses of radical separatist Christianity and Africanist thought took root and grew; their leaders sought to bridge the gap with traditionalists through populist politics and the use of a common language of protest.'

No wonder then that the AMEC grew apace - and that beyond it were a myriad of other independent churches whose members made little division between a politics and a religion of redemption. Within them and beyond them, there was, moreover, an even more vulnerable section of the population, who operated in a kind of no-man's land and everyman's land between the older African elite of chiefs and headmen, and the new elite of teachers and preachers, lawyers and clerks, nurses and social workers on the one hand and migrant workers on the mines and railways, farms and municipal services on the other. This was where the host of 'inbetween people', excommunicants and apostates, displaced minor chiefs and indigenous healers, prophets and visionaries, rebels and police spies, entertainers and confidence tricksters, gangsters and shebeen queens, and the aspirant and desperate of all ranks and fortunes have lived their lives. Close-up, it is a
world as the Comaroffs put it, of `diverse voices and complex subjectivities, ... kaleidoscopic incoherences and ... fragmentary realities.' These were the people who bothered the colonial officials most because they seemed beyond category and control. For the same reason, perhaps, they are a source of worry to historians who can't package them neatly into their class box.

As this account has I hope begun to reveal, older notions of a black working class consisting largely of migrant mine workers, has to be inflected in a host of different ways. It was both far more varied and had far greater chronological depth. Keletso Atkins has shown, for example, the existence of African wage-earners in Natal's towns from the mid-nineteenth century. Many of them were togt or daily workers, in domestic employ, which paid more than monthly paid workers received and gave them more choice of employers; there were 7000 such togt labourers in Durban in 1889. Others were independent artisans, many of them modifying indigenous craft skills to meet the needs of the colonial labour market. Thus, for forty years, an association of African washermen or Amawasha as they were known in Zulu, established a monopoly over a trade in which they could deploy known skills of artisans who specialised in hide or skin dressing: yet another form of translation. Ousted by Indian dhobies and commercial laundries in the 1890s, many then made their way to the Rand, where they served the domestic needs of the thousands of single white miners for clean clothes.

Not only were there small numbers of settled workers in the colonial towns of the nineteenth century; we now know that labour migrancy long predated the mineral revolution, or even the establishment of colonial rule. 'Tramping' to find work in colonial labour markets was a not unfamiliar experience. Indeed the career of Charlotte Manye's father, - revealingly I only know him as 'Pa' - is almost paradigmatic of this earlier phase of class formation in South Africa. Born near Pietersburg in the northern Transvaal, the young Manye was sent by his chief to the Cape Colony in order to earn a gun to defend his polity against the Boers. He was one of the thousands of young men sent to work on the railways and harbours and roads which were being constructed in the Cape Colony in the wake of the diamond discoveries.

The geographical mobility of South Africa's black workers in the nineteenth century before modern modes of transport and the building of roads and railways, is staggering: they covered literally hundreds of miles by foot in search of economic opportunities. As Patrick Harries has shown, for Mozambiquan migrants, perhaps the earliest of Southern Africa's proletarianized workers, 'geographical movement was embedded within a network of cultural strategies. The practice of moving in search of a better livelihood ... was nothing new', as numerous precolonial folktales and proverbs linking wealth and travel reveal. By the 1870s as the pressures on African lands and labour grew, it was also commonplace for chiefs to send their young men to work for guns.

The story of 'Pa' Manye's religious conversion in the Eastern Cape is also paradigmatic: like many a migrant it was in the colony that he encountered and was converted to Christianity. Christianity was spread all over South Africa by migrants who returned from colonial labour markets to spread the word in their rural homes, often well before
the appearance of European missionaries. In Mr Manye's Sotho language, the word for a believer, with more than a touch of double entendre, also means "a person who lives in a foreign place for a long time".  

At the turn of the century, then, black mine workers were part of a far wider and more heterogeneous working-class constituency. An individual's wage-earning trajectory may well have taken him into and then out of migrancy to the railways and harbours of industrialising South Africa or to the mines, then back to the countryside or, increasingly, into more lucrative forms of urban employment, only to find him (and it was mostly though not only him in this period) back at his home base after retirement. It may have taken her from a mission school to teaching or nursing - or even into domestic service as both the Manye sisters found; or, for the less advantaged, from hoeing and harvesting in the countryside to laundering and domestic labour, or even to selling illegal liquor or prostitution in one of the municipal 'locations' growing around South Africa's towns. It also left an increasing number of families permanently settled in segregated zones of the so-called 'white man's towns.' This was a harsh world in which life chances were structured by race and gender and class, even if the stark antinomies of the earlier literature can no longer be sustained. It was also a vibrant and creative world which segregation hoped to control and apartheid aimed to destroy.

Nevertheless, it is important to return to the issue of migrant mineworkers, not least because of their numerical and strategic importance: by the 1910s some 200,000 black workers made their way to the gold mines each year. It is no accident that they provided the model for much of the early revisionist writing on the making of the black working class, and for the wholly segregated permanently migratory African male labour force apartheid set out to create. Here again it is important that the designs of apartheid social engineers are not mistaken for an unchanging reality, however. If an earlier generation of revisionist scholars writing in the heyday of apartheid saw black migrants as powerless and rightless, criminalised and controlled, by a grid of labour repressive laws and institutions, we now have a far more nuanced and subtle picture through the work of a number of scholars on the deep rural roots of migrant culture, and the patterns of organisation, the social networks, and the forms of identity created by black mine-workers on the mines.  

As Harries has shown in the late nineteenth century miners both in Kimberley and on the Rand were frequently able to oblige management to enter into daily negotiations and compromises. Keith Breckenridge makes a similar argument for the 1910s and 20s. Both suggest that the years of British domination and the importation of Chinese labour marked a hiatus: a moment when the bargaining capacity of black miners - like that of the black middle-class - was dramatically curtailed. Nevertheless, even from the vantage point of Kimberley and the Rand, where South Africa's industrial evolution was at its most disruptive, the notion that the Randlords exerted a kind of Foucauldian total control can no longer be sustained, although Charles Ngelewane was not the only mineworker to feel it came pretty close: as he wrote to his chief in 1905,
In reference to our treatment here it is altogether very bad. We are just like convicts convicted in the prison. ... the white men who worked in the company are beating and thrashing us with sjamboks, then sir, we do not know as whether this must be the law or the mine regulations.

At the same time, the recent work has recognised that as Erlmann puts it, 'Every established order, including the most repressive system of minority rule, tends to naturalize its own arbitrariness. But such orders also frequently exhibit willing complicity on the part of the powerless.' Nowhere was this more marked than in the collusion between the South African state and the mining industry with African chiefs and induna or headmen in entrenching a male-centred gender and power hierarchy; but it was also true of the hierarchies within the mines. Migrants arrived on the mines from all over southern Africa with the 'values, signs and rituals of authority' they had learnt at home, and which were renewed through the oscillating nature of the migrant labour system itself, even as in return they were to carry the commodities and conventions of the white man's world. It is hardly surprising that their cultural baggage should have provided the framework for both the disciplinary order established within the mines and the strategies of survival of the miners themselves. Or that, as Harries records, the ancestors, their cattle, and home, a deep fear of witchcraft and recourse to protective folk medicines, remained as central to their lives as comradeship and the dignity of work, and the consciousness of the brutality and exploitation of their lives.

As for migrants the world over, 'home-boy associations' and burial societies were crucial sources of support and security and ensured continued contact with home. Ethnicity provided a new self-conscious identity in the urban workplace. It was strengthened by the missionary reduction of vernacular oral culture to writing that, in South Africa as elsewhere, greatly facilitated the creation of 'imagined communities'. And by the appreciation of mine magnates and the state that rural structures of authority and older notions of communal identity could be 'battened onto, reinforced' and manipulated to 'provide workers with a sense of belonging and self-control that would prevent their "degeneration" into a proletariat in need of rights.' The Natal sugar-planter and politician, Heaton Nicholls, put it succinctly in 1930: 'The answer to Bantu communism' he averred, 'is Bantu communalism.'

The world of the mineworker was an 'astonishingly' male world, which celebrated male camaraderie, prowess and bravery. It was also an intensely violent and patriarchal world: literally as the rule of fathers, for the divisions were both of gender and generation. If we cannot afford to ignore the gender divisions among the settled petty bourgeoisie in Kimberley, nowhere were these more marked than in the mining industry. As we have seen, more than 200,000 men came to work on the Rand each year leaving their wives behind them. Female agricultural labour still provided a crucial subsidy to a wage that was inadequate to reproduce the family, and constituted a form of insurance that their patrimony would be there when the men returned home.

It is no accident that in the compounds more experienced and older men exercised sexual (and other) power over their juniors through the metaphor of gender, or that the term,
ukuhlonipa, used by black miners to express their deference to white miners - and their unequal power - was precisely the term used to express the deference wives were supposed to show their husbands and in-laws. And partly linked to the absence of women was the ubiquity of violence underground. Breckenridge suggests that violence

... was accepted and resented depending on circumstances. It was an essential part of the definition of racial identities, and the practical force of racist hierarchy underground. But it was also a celebrated, and defining, ideal of masculinity for both white and black men. ...

And while the hierarchy and discipline of the mines held some of these explosive tensions at bay, already early in the last century, African Christians mothers, African chiefs, missionaries and government officials were all concerned about the impact of migrant labour on the 'purity' of young girls who were subjected to intolerable pressures as the young men returned home, especially in a context in which older forms of sex education and contraception had broken down under the missionary onslaught. By the 1940s in many areas masculine identity, masculine identity, sexuality and violence had become fatally linked.

This then was a very different world to that of the urban petty bourgeoisie, who prided themselves on their command of the English language, ethnic diversity and pan-South African if not pan-African identity. Nevertheless, we need to nuance this picture: workers on the mines were not encapsulated in a kind of tribal time warp of the traditional. There were several reasons why I started this lecture with isicathamiya, the Jubilee singers, and the African Methodist Episcopal Church to address my chosen themes of class, culture and consciousness in South Africa in the late nineteenth-early twentieth centuries. Most strikingly, of course, the story demolishes the simple dualisms - urban / rural, traditional/ modern, local/ global which litter the literature but which have little reality in a world where urban and rural, past and present, here and there, have increasingly constituted a single field. At work, men sing of home. Far from being 'men of two worlds', however, suspended between two social and economic systems (the tribal and the modern), Africans throughout Southern Africa have long operated 'within a single comprehensive socio-economic system', a system which is at the same time intensely local, but also regional and global, and which has included women, even if absent, as well as men.

Through recent exceptional work on African performance and poetry, we are also beginning to understand the many ways in which mineworkers were able to reflect on and give meaning to their experience. As Erlmann reminds us these competitive performances of male mine workers provide an entry point into the world of the mineworker, a complex but single world of then and now, of there and here, of home and work.

In our enthusiasm for a subtler understanding of the expressive world the mine workers made, however, we should not forget the forms of collective action which also configured this world, and were themselves configured by rhythms of production, patterns of recruitment and a global market over which workers had little if any control. In the early
days these forms of collective action involved mass desertion, and on occasion mass violence; they also included, as Keith Breckenridge has shown, the creative use of the law and law courts as well as mass marches to demand - and get - mass meetings with management. We do not have to rely only on the evidence of performance. The outrage of mineworkers in the interwar years over inadequate wages, inhuman working conditions and violence underground leaps from the pages of government commissions and enquiries. It also led on occasion to dramatic strike action. In July 1913 during the white miners’ strike, about 9000 blacks stopped work on the deep-level mines clustered on the southern edge of Johannesburg. ‘By demanding a doubling of their wages these men exhibited a new class aggression. The suppression of the strike by the army did little to repress the halting and episodic growth of a class consciousness …’ says Breckenridge. The closing year of our discussion - 1920 - saw the strike of some 71,000 mineworkers in what has been called ’one of the most sustained and complex worker protests in South African history. It is a salutary reminder that, whatever the complexities of worker consciousness, they did not necessarily stand in the way of worker militancy - and that it was frequently the migrant workers who were in its van: evidence that migrants have been involved ’in a conscious struggle over work conditions and the value of labour from the first …’41

At the same time, however, we also need to be careful not to overplay the significance of this militancy and link it too directly to the class militancy in South Africa in the 1970s and 80s. There is nothing predetermined about the continued existence of a class for itself, especially in a condition of migrant labour, where the continuities necessary for struggle have only been intermittent in the twentieth century. It may be experienced fleetingly and then gone, to be reinvented, refashioned and refurbished as new circumstances demand; class consciousness far from being cumulative in this context may be made, unmade and remade; it is moreover shaped by many overlapping, alternating and often contradictory forms of consciousness.42

Nor should we romanticise the world the mine-workers made, or ignore its long-term destructive potential. The hegemony of the mine magnates may not have been uncontested, the capacity of the state far from total, but the power balance was grossly unequal. It may be true, as we remark in Industrialisation and Social Change, that the fact that proletarianisation in South Africa took the form of labour migrancy was related to complex struggles between and within ruling classes over the disposal of the labour power of young men', though we probably underestimated the dreams and desires of many of the young men themselves. It was certainly not the result of a conspiracy between mine-magnates and the state, and carried a price tag for both. The costs for the mineworkers were far higher, however - directly in the violence, accidents and disease which took so a fearful toll of the lives of young men, indirectly in the link between violence and sexuality it spawned.

To end let me return to the isicathamiya music I played at the beginning, not least because it reminds us of the many facets of contemporary South Africa: its exuberant ethnic diversity, its ‘long conversation’ with modernity and global culture, and its equally
long story of brutal exploitation, violence and patriarchy. It remains an inspiring, challenging and often profoundly depressing combination.

Notes:


3 David Coplan, In the Time of the Cannibals. The Word Music of South Africa's Basotho Migrants (Chicago, 1994), p. 24. This Gramscian-derived argument that culture serves social structure by shaping perceptions of experience, and by determining 'the very terms of and standards by which experience is interpreted and judged' lies behind much of the recent South African writing on culture and consciousness, by historians, social and cultural anthropologists.

4 Jonathan Hyslop, 'A Ragged Trousered Philanthropist and the Empire: Robert Tressell in South Africa', History Workshop Journal, issue 51, 2001, pp.66, 81. It is intriguing to note, as Hyslop does, that A Ragged Trousered Philanthropist was used by FOSATU and SAAWU organizers in the early 1980s as educational material in the reviving black labour movement. (pp.82-3)

5 Ferguson, Expectations of Modernity, p.80


13 Songs of Zion, p.

14 I have based the account that follows on Erlmann, African Stars; C. Campbell, Songs of Zion; and McCord, The Calling of Katie Makanya.

15 She was there at the same time as the famous African American WEB du Bois (A. B. Xuma, Charlotte Manye (Mrs Maxeke) "What an Educated African Girl Can Do" (1930), Foreword by WEB Du Bois). I am grateful to Dr Debby Gaitskell for drawing this invaluable source to my attention. It is surprising that there is as yet no full-scale biography of Charlotte, although her sister Katie's oral memoirs have been published by Margaret McCord in her fascinating The Calling of Katie Makanya (Cape Town, 1995).

16 Charlotte graduated with a B.S in 1901, to become South Africa's first black woman graduate. On her return to South Africa in 1901 she South Africa, she organized the AMEC's Women's Mite Missionary Society, and became active in temperance work; in 1905 with her Wilberforce trained husband, the Reverend Marshall Maxeke to South Africa in 1905, she and her husband were invited to set up a school by the Tembu chief, Dalindyebu, and quite exceptionally, Charlotte spoke in the Chief's Council. By 1905 the Maxekes had returned to the Transvaal to found the African Methodist Episcopal Church's Wilberforce Institute, later one of the leading Transvaal secondary schools for Africans; and Charlotte had embarked on a long and successful career in social welfare; so successful, indeed, that the government created the post of Welfare Worker in the NAD specifically for her in the 1920s. (Xuma, p.19)

17 Harries, Work, Culture and Identity, p. 62.


19 Marks, Ambiguities of Dependence

20 Campbell, Songs of Zion, p.149.

21 Ferguson, p.248. `... the end of "the age of development" for Copperbelt workers (and, I suspect, for many others on the continent) has been experienced not as a liberation but as a betrayal. ... That the development story was a myth, and in some respects a trap, does not make the abrupt withdrawal of its promises any easier to take, or any less of a tragedy for those whose hopes and legitimate expectations have been shattered. If nothing else, "development" put the problem of global inequality on the table and named it as a problem; with the development story now declared "out of date," global inequality increasingly comes to appear not as a problem at all but simply as a naturalized fact.’

22 Campbell, Songs of Zion, p.115.

23 Peter Warwick for example shows how Milner extended the pass department, introduced a system of courts to deal with breaches of masters and servants legislation

24 Campbell, Songs of Zion, p.150.

25 Campbell, Songs of Zion, p.152.


27 Beinart and Bundy, Hidden Struggles, p.10.

28 Ibid, p.11.


30 J.Lambert, Betrayed Trust, p.94.


32 A.B. Xuma, Charlotte Manye, p.10. For the importance of this early migrancy from the northern Transvaal, see Peter Delius, 'Migrant Labour and the Pedi', in Shula Marks and Anthony Atmore, Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa (London, 1980), 293-312. Patrick Harries tells a similar story of Mozambiquan workers in Labour, culture and identity.

33 Harries, Work, Culture and Identity, p.16.

34 I have gleaned the story of Mr Manye from A.B. Xuma's short biography, and from Margaret McCord's rendering of Katie Makanye's oral memoirs. In the Xuma biography, Mr Manye remains unnamed and is described as Sotho; Mrs Manye as 'Mbo', which may mean Mpondo or Mfengu. In The Calling of Katie Makanya, he is called 'Pa', and is described as Tlokwa, which is a little surprising as the story closely resembles that told of the Pedi by Delius. McCord (I think) calls Anna Manye 'Mpondo' but given her location and the depth of her Christian conviction in the 1870s this is unlikely.

35 Ferguson, p.236: 'When the color bar cut across colonial Africa, it fell with a special force upon the "Westernized Africans" - those polished, well-dressed, educated urbanites who blurred the lines between a "civilized", first class white world, and a supposedly "primitive", second-class black one. It was they ... whose uncanny presence destabilized and menaced the racial hierarchy of the colonial social order. And it was they who felt
the sting not just of exclusion but of abjection - of being pushed back across a boundary
that they had been led to believe they might successfully cross ...'

36 For an excellent summary of the recent literature on which this draws, see Patrick
haynes, Work, Culture and Identity. Migrant Labourers in Mozambique and South

37 Cited in Breckenridge, p.51. See also the letter from the Kingwilliamstown:
mineworker, who wrote:

If we complain about wages we are always told to shut up because we are recruited
numbers and have no right to talk at all. When we leave our homes we seem to agree with
our recruiting agents, but when we arrive here we are treated like prisoners. (Ibid. p.79)

38 Cited in Marks, Ambiguities.

39 Keith Breckenridge, 'The Allure of Violence: Men, Race and Masculinity on the
South African Goldmines, 1900-1950', JSAS 24, 4, 1998, p. 670. This is a revised and
shortened version of chapter 3 of his thesis.

40 Ferguson, Expectations of modernity, p.90.

41 Keith Breckenridge, An Age of Consent: Law, discipline and violence on teh South

42 Indeed, as the Comaroffs have pointedly asked:

What is the "historical consciousness at large, and the class consciousness in particular"
of a 'black South African people drawn into the labor market and made to eke out an
existence from a combination of small farming and wage work? Like others, Tshidi [the
Tswana sunjects of their fieldwork] have been steadily impoverished by the rise of the
regional political economy and have become yet another division in its reserve army of
labour. In this respect they are in no doubt that they are "oppressed" ... though they do
not have a straightforward sense of themselves as members of either a class or a
community of workers. Being peasant proletarians, they have long migrated between a
rural "homeland" and the town, their journey articulating the worlds of agricultural
production and wage labor, idealized past and discordant present.'