

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

The African e-Journals Project has digitized full text of articles of eleven social science and humanities journals. This item is from the digital archive maintained by Michigan State University Library. Find more at:

<http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/africanjournals/>

Available through a partnership with



Scroll down to read the article.

Margo and Martin Russell. Afrikaners of the Kalahari-White Minority in a Black State

African Trade Series 24, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1979. 167 Pp. P21.00

This book offers an attitude study of the Afrikaner people that have established themselves since 1898 on the Ghanzi ridge in the Western Kalahari of Botswana. In their reaction to their integration into a black majority-ruled state, the authors hope to find "portents for the process of change in Southern Africa as well as grist for the mills of sociological theories of race relations" (p. 7).

The main strength of the book lies in its descriptive quality, often supported by detailed historical, socio-economic research, which is especially evident in the first 4 chapters. Thus in the first chapter a clear and realistic description of Ghanzi Camp with its different population groups is given.

Chapter 2 and 3 give a detailed survey of the historico-economic development of the Ghanzi Block; Chapter 2 explains the motives both of the Afrikaners that trekked to Ghanzi and of the B.A. Company, to make them settle there. In the same chapter their specific trekker-economy, characteristic of their first 40 years in Ghanzi, is described.

In Chapter 3 the gradual introduction of the Afrikaners into the cash economy is followed from the arrival of the first trader with a truck to the final event: the upswing of beef prices coinciding with Independence.

In Chapter 4 the authors introduce the readers into the houses of the Afrikaners and into the way their domestic lives are arranged, with a high degree of adaptation to the environment.

Although descriptive passages and relevant historical data continue to appear in the other chapters, some confusion is caused by a weak theoretical framework.

In Chapter 5 the authors define the identity of the Afrikaners as they found them at the time of their fieldwork in 1973. Their identity is determined by four key criteria: language, physical appearance, biological descent and religion. In addition to these criteria is a residual category of cultural features, which are recognised as transient.

The validity of the non-transitory character of the key-criteria, however, is doubtful because of certain contradictory developments in the past which are described by the authors. In fact the authors confirm this when they say: "It is through their social relationships with non-Afrikaners that the group's sense of identity acquires content as well as form" (p. 75). This means that identity is not something static as originally stated by the authors but that it is governed by social relationships which may change from time to time.

The reader is left with this inconsistency.

The lack of a clear theoretical framework also becomes evident in Chapter 6, which contains a subjective interpretation of the relations between Afrikaners and Bushmen, changing over the years because of political and economic pressure.

The present incorporation of the Bushmen into the cash economy is considered to be a loss for the Bushmen because it reduces the previous clientship relations. It may be true that clientship has been a central feature of inter-ethnic relations in Botswana for at least two centuries, but that on its own does not justify it.

Another weakness appears in Chapter 7 dedicated to the Afrikaner attitudes to sharing their religion with the Bushmen. The authors suggest that a study of the attitudes of the Gereformeerde Afrikaners in Ghanzi in this regard, exemplifies the dilemmas, conflicts and tensions which characterise confrontations between settlers and missionaries.

However, an analysis of the potentially different pattern of reaction of the other protestant denomination in Ghanzi is lacking.

Chapter 8, which describes the pragmatism of the deferential Afrikaner attitude to the administration, be it British or Tswana, and their sensitivity to groups and sub-groups, ends with a rather unseemly generalisation: "It remains to be seen whether the traditional Tswana acknowledgement of loyalty can be broadened to embrace a traditional enemy (p. 134).

The point that the Tswana might consider the Afrikaner from Ghanzi their traditional enemy has not been argued and attributing this attitude to the Tswana indicates a bias on the side of the authors.

Although there is a treasure of historical and economic data in this book, these data are not part of the interpretative

structure of the book. This leads to inconsistencies, which the authors try to overcome by bringing up sociological theories.

In Chapter 9 for example they present P. Van den Berghe's theory on democratic pluralism, in the framework of which they try to force their collected data. The authors thereby overlook the fact that Van de Berghe's theory applies to societies as a whole, and that the data they collected only concern a region of Botswana, which is not typical for Botswana as a whole. The book thus lacks a coherent understanding of the national situation and, by implication, of the Afrikaner attitude and the changes it has undergone.

In summary it can be said that the book contains a great deal of interesting information, vividly presented, but that its theory is rather shaky.

It may be possible to find grist for the mills of sociological theories of race relations in the book, but the book does not achieve its major aim "to find portents for the process of change in Southern Africa".

THEA DE JAGER