



# BLACK FARMERS IN NATAL

MYTH AND REALITY - A LOOK AT HISTORY



PACSA FACTSHEET

8

## COMMON VIEW OF AFRICAN FARMERS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The popular view among white South Africans today is that African farming techniques are "backward" and "inefficient", and that black farmers are incapable of adapting to better methods and of participating in a wider market economy.

Such views are held not only by government officials but also by the ordinary man and woman in the street, and have been supported in the recent past by leading historians and economists.

Recent research by southern African historians has however begun to reveal a different picture of black agriculture as it was in the nineteenth century.

## COMMENTS ON AFRICAN FARMERS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The following quotations are only two out of many:

Perhaps the most striking feature in the Kafir character is his energy and industry as a farmer. Wherever he has lived beside a farmer who is industrious and has shown how, by use of the plough, he can raise large quantities of produce, and that he can find a market for them, the Kafir has eagerly imitated him, has bought a plough and wagon, and has discovered that he also can obtain a large return in this way. The thousands of acres that have been ploughed up by Kafirs, and the hundreds of wagons they possess, are conclusive proof of their readiness and fitness to become agriculturalists.

(David Buchanan, ed. of *Natal Witness*, 1870)

(The labour supply) has year by year become more inadequate as the Natives become richer, and yearly cultivate a large acreage with the plough, besides engaging in transport riding on their own account.

(Umgeni Magistrate, 1880)

What happened between the late nineteenth century and the present to bring about such a radically different view of black agriculturalists?

## THE RISE OF A BLACK PEASANTRY

The immigration of nearly 5 000 British settlers to Natal in 1849-51 was the main impetus for the emergence of a black peasantry (i.e. farmers who used their families for labour and who produced enough to feed their family and to sell on the market). The British settlers failed to establish themselves as farmers and most flocked to the towns to seek work. This created a greater demand for food.

There were very few white farmers in Natal in the mid-nineteenth century as most of the Trekboers had left when Natal became a British colony. The only people in a position to supply the markets were the African farmers, whether they lived in the reserves, on mission stations or state land, on vacant white-owned land, or on their own privately-owned land (as in the case of the people of Edendale). White farming on the other hand remained stagnant until the 1880s. As we have seen from the comments quoted above, the Africans became highly successful and efficient producers of grain and meat. By 1894 maize produced by blacks was being *exported* to the Cape.

**PACSA**

PIETERMARITZBURG AGENCY FOR CHRISTIAN SOCIAL AWARENESS  
P.O. BOX 2338, 3200 / 170 BERG STREET, PIETERMARITZBURG  
TELEPHONE: 20052

White farmers in Natal complained bitterly about the growing wealth of Africans, their competitiveness in farming, and the fact that they had no need to work for whites to make a living and pay their taxes. If the white colonists had had their way, the reserves would have been broken up, the African farmers destroyed and thereby forced into wage-labour. Under British colonial rule however, the necessity of maintaining cheap and peaceful administration protected the emerging black peasantry. Large land speculators supported this policy as the only profit they could make on their non-commercial farms was by renting them to African farmers.

## THE DECLINE OF THE AFRICAN PEASANTRY

- \* By the 1880s the reserves were overcrowded, but white opinion would not permit their expansion.
- \* Some white farmers had accumulated enough capital by the 1880s to start working their farms intensively. This meant increasing competition for the Africans and many of them were thereby pushed off rented land.
- \* The discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand in 1886 was the beginning of the end for the black peasantry. The mines created an enormous market, and suddenly farming was commercially viable. Now that the land speculators could sell their land, more blacks were pushed back into the already overcrowded reserves. Increasing numbers were forced to become wage-labourers and migrant workers.
- \* In 1893 Natal was granted "responsible" government. This meant that white farming interests dominated the government: in 1891 state loans were started for white farmers but not for black farmers; in 1904 the sale of Crown land to blacks was prohibited; and in 1905 a heavy poll tax on all adult male Africans was imposed, thus increasing an already heavy tax burden. All these measures served to force the black peasantry off the land and into poor wage-labour and rural poverty.
- \* Successive natural disasters also played a role: drought in the early 1890s; rinderpest in 1897; more drought in the 1900s; East Coast cattle fever in 1904. All farmers suffered but because of state loans white farmers were able to recover fairly quickly. The poorer black farmers were destroyed.
- \* With Union in 1910, wide powers were put into the hands of white commercial farming interests and the result was the Natives Land Act, 1913. This stopped the sale of land outside the reserves to blacks and discouraged black tenants on white farms.

## CONCLUSION

Nineteenth century African farmers proved themselves adaptable and capable. What destroyed them was a deliberate racial policy of economic and political repression which was begun in the late nineteenth century and which continues to this day.

(source: J.Wright "The Emergence and Decline of a Natal Peasantry c.1850-c.1910" (1978))

## CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

This factsheet is for *Information*. If Christians spread the word, it may help prevent unhelpful criticism and condemnation from white people. Matthew 7:3-5, "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother: Let me take the speck out of your eye when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? First take the plank out of your own eye, then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."