Jean Comaroff is the Bernard E. and Ellen C. Sunny Distinguished Service Professor of Anthropology and the chair of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chicago. She is the author of *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance*. John L. Comaroff is the Harold H. Swift Distinguished Service Professor of Anthropology at the University of Chicago, and also a Senior Research Fellow at the American Bar Foundation. He is a co-author of *Rules and Processes*, and the editor of *The Meaning of Marriage Payments* and *The Boer War Diary of Sol T. Plaatje*. They have co-edited *Modernity and Its Malcontents* and co-authored *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination*.

The University of Chicago Press, Chicago
The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London

© 1997 by The University of Chicago
All rights reserved. Published 1997
Printed in the United States of America
06 05 04 03 02 01 00 99 98 97 1 2 3 4 5
ISBN: 0-226-11443-0 (cloth)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
The Library of Congress catalogued the first volume as follows:
Comaroff, Jean.  
Of revelation and revolution: Christianity, colonialism, and consciousness in South Africa / Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff.  
p. cm.  
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.  
DT1058.T78C66 1991  
303.48'241'09575-dc20  
90-40733 CIP

The ISBNs for the second volume (subtitled *The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier*) are 0-226-11443-0 (cloth) and 0-226-11444-9 (paper).

that Africans only saw efficacy in medicine if they could feel its effects, the stronger the better? Dr. Molema was referred to, affectionately, in Afrikaans, as "Die Doktor van die Groot Bottel," the "Doctor of the Large Bottle." When he died, in the mid-1960s, his practice was taken over by Dr. David Tsatsi, a highly respected physician and the eldest child of one of the most widely reputed ngakas in Southern Tswana territory. Dr. Tsatsi inherited many of S. M. Molema's white clientele (and acquired more of his own)—several of whom visited both father and son on a regular basis.

Second, and even more striking, is the entry of "traditional" practice into South African popular culture. In the late 1960s, many whites who lived along the perimeters of Rolong, Thaping, and Tlharo communities admitted to being intrigued by Tswana divination. They saw it as an unusually, almost eerily, potent technique of fortune-telling, water dowsing, mineral prospecting, and the like. Some consulted backyard bone throwers—recruited, ironically, with the help of their employees. It became clear, from questioning both practitioners and clients, that this had been going on for decades throughout the region. A number of the clients, moreover, set great store by Setswana herbal remedies, some of which they purchased directly from healers; the rest were bought from tiny, unkempt shops, usually situated in those gray areas of small towns where "European" trade gave way to commerce of legally indeterminate color.

This fascination with indigenous medicine has imploded in the "new" South Africa, ss, too, in Zimbabwe, where it is now possible to buy a mass-produced Shona "hakata [oracular] package," styled as "a fascinating parlour game based on the time-honoured principles of African divination" (van Binsbergen 1995:131-32). Vernacular doctors—both the Sotho-Tswana ngaka and the Nguni-speaking sangoma—have become familiar figures of popular culture. Newspapers and magazines now advertise "Dial-a-Sangoma" and "Dial-a-Ngaka," phone-in divination services aimed at both white and black. 73 (Note that the terms are no longer italicized. They have entered into the super-lingo of the multilingual nation, a lexicon that occurs in all tongues.) The media frequently carry stories about well-known black "witch doctors" and their multiracial clientele. And now the final denouement: the emergence of the full-service white ngaka and/or sangoma. Several of these healers have become well enough known, and been successful enough, to have had feature articles written about them in both the local and overseas press. By many accounts, they have growing, lucrative practices. For some white South Africans, it seems, "traditional" medicine—deracinated and culturally appropriated—has become one of the possibilities of their postcolonial modernity; "part," as van Binsbergen (1995:132) puts it, speaking of divination, "of the generalised, trans-ethnic contemporary culture of . . . Southern Africa."

**SEVEN**

**EIGHT**

**NEW PERSONS, OLD SUBJECTS**

*Rights, Identities, Moral Communities*

I am in deep distress. The Government and the Administrator have taken away my rights and those of my children and my people, when they took away the farms . . . which I had, and my children had, and my people have, when they took away the farms . . . Is it according to law to deprive people who are without strength of their inheritance? Why should there be a difference so that the white people shall get their farms, but I and my . . . people do not get theirs? Is this right in the sight of God?

Chief Montshiwa, March 1886

It has become commonplace to note the centrality of law in the colonisation of the non-European world: commonplace to assert "ics" rule in the making of new Eurocentric hegemonies, in the creation of colonial subjects, in the rise of various forms of resistance. In all this, the subject of rights, and the rights of subjects, has been a recurrent theme. The reasons are not hard to find, as we have been told repeatedly by historians of modernity. They have to do with the forging of the nation-state, conceived as a moral community, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; specifically, with its reliance on a culture of legality—built on rights of person and property, of constitutionality and contract—in imagining the body politic. At its core was the question of the modernist individual whose very condition of possibility was the nation-state itself.

Given its salience at home, the figure of the modernist subject was obvi-
custom, and the concomitant erasure of rights, was "hugely convenient" for the colonial state (Chanock 1991:66; cf. also Moore 1986).

The general argument, which has struck a resonant chord with many anthropologists and historians, echoes more than just a persistent tendency to regard colonialism as, first and foremost, a matter of political economy; to identify its prime agents as states and statesmen, capitalists and corporations; to view other players on the imperial stage as members of its supporting caste(s), important perhaps but always secondary. It also reflects a continuing propensity to treat the colonial encounter itself as a linear, coherent, coercive process involving two clearly defined protagonists, an expansive metropolitan society and a subordinate local population; to locate its essence in the technologies by which the former imposed its axioms, ideologies, and aesthetics on the latter through a series of (relatively) calculated, never more than partially resisted, actions; and, once more, to hold that law, broadly conceived, was a vital part of this process.

These generalities have been questioned, amended, and modulated. Still, they evince remarkable tenacity in the face of increasing counterevidence: patiently, the way in which legal sensibilities and practices entered into colonizing processes, into their dramatic gestures and prosaic theaters, was a good deal more ambiguous, less audible, murkier, than has typically been allowed. What is more, there has long been an unremarked rupture in the received narrative of the connection between colonialism and law in Africa. On the one hand, we are told how, over the long run, European overseas administrations denied Africans the right to contract during the colonial state (Chanock 1991:66; cf. also Moore 1986). The general argument, which has struck a resonant chord with many anthropologists and historians, echoes more than just a persistent tendency to regard colonialism as, first and foremost, a matter of political economy; to identify its prime agents as states and statesmen, capitalists and corporations; to view other players on the imperial stage as members of its supporting caste(s), important perhaps but always secondary. It also reflects a continuing propensity to treat the colonial encounter itself as a linear, coherent, coercive process involving two clearly defined protagonists, an expansive metropolitan society and a subordinate local population; to locate its essence in the technologies by which the former imposed its axioms, ideologies, and aesthetics on the latter through a series of (relatively) calculated, never more than partially resisted, actions; and, once more, to hold that law, broadly conceived, was a vital part of this process.

These generalities have been questioned, amended, and modulated. Still, they evince remarkable tenacity in the face of increasing counterevidence: patiently, the way in which legal sensibilities and practices entered into colonizing processes, into their dramatic gestures and prosaic theaters, was a good deal more ambiguous, less audible, murkier, than has typically been allowed. What is more, there has long been an unremarked rupture in the received narrative of the connection between colonialism and law in Africa. On the one hand, we are told how, over the long run, European overseas administrations denied Africans the right to contract during the colonial state (Chanock 1991:66; cf. also Moore 1986). The general argument, which has struck a resonant chord with many anthropologists and historians, echoes more than just a persistent tendency to regard colonialism as, first and foremost, a matter of political economy; to identify its prime agents as states and statesmen, capitalists and corporations; to view other players on the imperial stage as members of its supporting caste(s), important perhaps but always secondary. It also reflects a continuing propensity to treat the colonial encounter itself as a linear, coherent, coercive process involving two clearly defined protagonists, an expansive metropolitan society and a subordinate local population; to locate its essence in the technologies by which the former imposed its axioms, ideologies, and aesthetics on the latter through a series of (relatively) calculated, never more than partially resisted, actions; and, once more, to hold that law, broadly conceived, was a vital part of this process.

These generalities have been questioned, amended, and modulated. Still, they evince remarkable tenacity in the face of increasing counterevidence: patiently, the way in which legal sensibilities and practices entered into colonizing processes, into their dramatic gestures and prosaic theaters, was a good deal more ambiguous, less audible, murkier, than has typically been allowed. What is more, there has long been an unremarked rupture in the received narrative of the connection between colonialism and law in Africa. On the one hand, we are told how, over the long run, European overseas administrations denied Africans the right to contract during the colonial state (Chanock 1991:66; cf. also Moore 1986).
gelists set about, simultaneously, (re)making two quite antithetical forms of African person—one a modernist citizen, the other an ethnic subject—each endowed with different generic characteristics—and species of rights. This, we shall argue, was not a trivial hiccup in the imperial project, a superficial tear in its otherwise seamless fabric. To the contrary: it reveals many of the inherent contradictions of colonialism; many of the indeterminacies with which it was shot through; many of the disturbances that were to play into the formation of modern Africa, its structures of ethnicity and nation, gender and generation. It also says much about the process of building new identities, individual and communal, of navigating newly imagined worlds of possibility and political reality, in those complex force fields found at any colonial frontier.

In short, the campaign of the Nonconformist mission to refashion modern African personhood, and to insert itself into the struggle over individual and collective rights, is a study in ambiguity, contradiction, and the sheer perversity of the unintended in history. It also provides apt illustration of the way in which colonizing gestures might, and often did, escape the control of colonizers—and might, and often did, have a profound impact on colonized peoples even while being disregarded and resisted by them. In interrogating these processes, we fill in the final pieces of our narrative, drawing together the themes set out in the Introduction and reaching the conclusions toward which we have steadily been moving. We begin, once more, by returning to Great Britain in the early nineteenth century. Let us look briefly at the culture of legality and the conception of right(s) which the evangelists took with them to Africa.

FROM SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY TO SECULAR LEGALITY

To employ all the faculties which He had given them, particularly their understanding and liberty, He gave them a law, a complete model of all truth.

John Wesley (1985:6)

The early Nonconformists were born of a world preoccupied with the nature and the uses of the law, both sacred and secular. The collapse of ecclesiastical dominion in the 1640s had begun a long decline of spiritual sovereignty which, among other things, promoted a growing separation of lex Dei and lex naturae (RRL 76f). Within the Protestant tradition, the breakdown of doctrinal hegemony manifested itself in a series of ardent theological controversies. One, exacerbated by the Revival, pitted legalism against antinomianism: the first posited the moralistic view that salvation depended on doing good works and being law-abiding; the second held Christian faith to exist apart from, indeed to supersede and “void the law.” Many influential preachers, not least Whitefield and Wesley, attempted to maintain a balance between the two positions, even where they differed on other issues (Davies 1961:152; Outler 1985:1). But, as a practical matter, evangelical ethics were drawn to legalism: “One in a thousand may have been awakened by the gospel,” Wesley (1985:22) declared, yet “[t]he ordinary method of God is to convict sinners by the law, and that only.” This view was widely endorsed by South African Nonconformists, whose mission was to convert by evoking, at once, the social, legal, and ethical sensibility of each potential believer. Dedicated to extending His Kingdom, these emissaries of the Lord labored to bring about the “moral revolution” that, they believed, had to precede the redemption of the individual savage (J. Philip 1828:2:370).

This revolution, as we have seen, was complicated by the fact that salvation, and subjection to divine law, had become fused with the imperatives of “civilization.” And “civilization” had been suffused by, and inscribed in, an impersonal legal system in which people were defined as citizens of a secular, liberal nation-state. Its ethical touchstone, far from being theocentric, drew on the temporal model of the unfettered economy, a model that presumed the protection of the right to enter into contract and to engage in enterprise by free individuals (chapter 4). “Right” in the sense of “good” was elided into “rights” in “goods,” the “properties” of subjects into the subject of property. That is why property rights were the prototype on which other human rights, conceived as private possessions, were founded. The eighteenth-century expansion of trade and industry, of the circulation of commodities and their paper equivalents, had generated a raft of statutes concerned with the unencumbered ownership, transfer, and protection of objects. Closely related to this is the fact, noted by Hay (1973:291), that criminal law eclipsed religious authority as the dominant sanctioning force in England in the 1700s; in so doing, its rituals, judgments, and “secular sermons” took on the “righteous accents” of divine decree. Reciprocally, Christian metaphors of justice began to invoke the courtroom ever more frequently. Sin was increasingly cast as crime by clergy who delivered homilies on the management of money and the making of wills. In the process, Christian and secular legalism merged into one another to make for a powerfully law-centered worldview.

It is not surprising, then, that, in the effort to recast Southern Tswana personhood—and to introduce their preferred forms of subjectivity and identity, citizenship and moral community—the Nonconformists would tune their teaching to the language of legalism and rights. On the face of it, we might have expected that this would have resonated closely with Tswana sensibilities; after all, they too had explicit notions of citizenship, moral community, personal entitlement, contract, and constraint (RRL:chap. 4; also below). But the story was to turn out more complicated: the whole issue of rights and legalities was to feature contradictorily in the civilizing mission, and in the colonial encounter at large. For it played itself out simultaneously, polyrhythmically, in two antithetical registers. One may be dubbed the register of radical individualism, the other, the
The first had to do with the construction, by the Europeans, of the modernist African subject and his/her equivocal status as a citizen of South Africa. The second, which defined people by virtue of membership in "customary" political communities, concerned the attribution, again by whites, of "traditional" collective being to "natives." It would express itself in the ascription of primordiality, of an ineffable, essential primitivism, to such ethnic categories as "the" Tswana, "the" Sotho, "the" Xhosa.

The relationship between these registers, indeed why they should have existed at all, will become clear as we proceed. So, too, will the fact that their coexistence had some less than obvious consequences. For one thing, it laid a practical basis for the material and political subordination of black South Africans: while promising to incorporate and enfranchise them, it afforded white colonizers a means to legitimate and naturalize their command over an ever more racially divided world. And yet it also created the various spaces and the diverse terms in which the colonized peoples could refashion themselves, mobilize, and strike back. As this implies, and as we shall show, it is to the dissonances of the colonial discourse of rights, and the struggles to which it gave rise, that we may look for the seeds of contemporary identity politics in South Africa.

Note the patriarchal, familial character of the fantasy (cf. D. Barker 1978:256). Note, too, that the larger this image of a universal, right-bearing Man loomed in the discourses of English modernity (Corrigan and Sayer 1985:183 et passim)—and in the utopian dreams of colonial evangelists—the more unAfrican it became; or rather, the more that African personhood was construed as its opposite. Not only did the premodern monarch have a right to his life, his liberty, his wife, his children, and his property....

In seeking to re-form Southern Tswana personhood, the Nonconformists called upon the full range of "civilizing" techniques and "indirect influences" at their disposal; as we said above, this aspect of their endeavor subsumed all the others. And it rested on a particular vision of being-in-the-world. The terms of this vision are familiar, being part of the modernist European cultural heritage; though, at the time, we stress, they were more contested, less firmly rooted in everyday practice than our collective "memory" often allows (see RRI:60f.). Among them, three themes—ontological principles, really—featured with special clarity. We have encountered them before in different guises. Here, therefore, we deal with them summarily, and only insofar as they impinge on present concerns.
EIGHT

Zulu chiefs? These people [living under "tribal" conditions] would have had no rights except the chief’s will.

Thema replied that Zululand had indeed once been “democratic”—until Shaka “learned . . . militarism” from white men. “And then,” he added, “the history was written by Europeans.”

The modernist ideal of propertied, right-bearing, personhood—the model subject of the civilizing mission—was securely founded on the principle of “reason”; its absence among “savages” being taken as proof of the point. Writing in a philosophical key some fifty years ago, Margaret MacDonald (1949, repr. 1984:29) echoed a view shared by nineteenth-century missionaries: “[O]nly at a certain level of intellectual development do men claim natural rights. Savages do not dream of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. For they do not question what is customary.” Observe, again, the taken for granted antimony between right and custom—and its association with the opposition between civility and savagery. It followed that only self-interested, reasoning human beings might be, in both senses of the term, right-minded. Prewarriors, by contrast, lived in unreflective “thralldom.” Imprisoned, even possessed, by “uncanny” forces, they could be neither disengaged nor self-regulating (Taylor 1989:192). It was not that they were inattentive to their own well-being. To the contrary, Europeans often remarked that Tswana were highly acquisitive, “selfish.” But this, we repeat, was not enlightened, rational self-interest (Molema 1920:116). Just greed. What is more, their concerns read: they did not dignify their own private pursuits by portraying them as the source of a greater commonweal, let alone the wealth of a nation.

As this suggests, the British idea of selfhood demanded a social setting—without which it made limited sense. Indeed, the kind of society in which the autonomous subject ought properly to be situated, and with which individual liberty was most compatible, long remained an issue for Victorian thinkers (Francis and Morrow 1994); but some form of sovereign political community was the presumed answer. Here lies the second theme of salience to the colonial mind us. And it was constituted as a state in the double sense of being both a political order and a condition of mind-and-being (RR1:5). As such, it had become the taken for granted context in which the right-bearing citizen was implanted.

The nation-state, in fact, was seen as the ultimate guarantor of individual rights, the guardian of propertied personhood, the garrisoned space in which modern subjectivities paraded as sovereign subjects. All of this was invoked by the missions when they called on Britain to protect the interests of indigenous peoples—and to underwrite their own (RR1:292f.). Founded on a social contract and codified law rather than on status and custom, it was the model against which other, more “primitive” political orders were measured (e.g., R. Moffat 1842:248; J. Philip 1828,2:132f.). After all, declared Philip (1828,2:317), “the laws and government under which a character of a people depends on . . . the laws and government under which they live.” By this criterion, unsurprisingly, Southern Tswana were said to be lacking: Edward Solomon (1855:46), in specifying what was particular to their “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no ‘government’ in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no ‘government’” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteenth century, offered sadly that they “have no “government” in the mid nineteen...
The Christian campaign to reshape African personhood began, of course, with the “Bechuana” body: the “right-minded” subject was, first and foremost, an embodied, bounded, biological individual. The evangelists were quick to grasp the salience, for pedagogic purposes, of the management of the gendered physical—quick to sense the link, analogical and substantive, between bodily politics and the body politic. It was John Philip (1828,1:386), not Emile Durkheim, who first commented that the “different members of a state [are] beautifully represented by members of the human body.” And Wesley (1985:17) who had described God’s law as a mode of “empowerment” from “our Head into his living members.” Much was to be made of this fortuitous symbolic connection: if the body personal was metonymic of the body politic, the reformation of the second might follow from the refashioning of the first. What is more, this objective, the reworking of bodily practices, was best achieved by intervening in the mundaneities of Tswana life, and so fitted well with the Nonconformist tradition of methodical improvement.

It was here, in fact, that the Puritan legacy converged with the bourgeois ethic, just as the former took “ordinary life” to be the major plane of effectual activity in an increasingly man-made universe (above, chapter 1), so the “affirmation of the everyday” (Taylor 1989:214-15) was integral to the modernist idea of the new civility. Thus it was that the evangelists expended great effort, day in and day out, on persuading Southern Tswana to dress in European garb, so that they might close off their bodies from one another (chapter 5), to put their energies to the task of earning their own incomes, so that they might harness their physicality and distinguish themselves through acts of refined consumption (chapter 4); to disseminate “modern” notions of hygiene, health, and illness, so that they might renounce the charms of local healers and free themselves from their faith in intrusive social and spiritual forces (chapter 7). Thus it was, too, that the clergymen spoke to the Africans of the merits of monogamy, so that they might control their sexuality and “unnatural” affections; of the vices of bridewealth, so that they might recognize the freedom of all God’s creatures to enter into contracts of their own free will; of the moral benefits of living in nuclear families, so that females might confine themselves to hearth and home while men did an honest day’s work in the field (chapter 6).

Where more appropriately to address all these concerns at once than in the context of marriage (cf. Snyder 1981)? The documentary record shows that, throughout the nineteenth century, the missionaries tried uneasingly to reform Tswana matrimony, transposing it into the language of legalism and rights. As we shall see, some black Christian literati, like Sol Plaatje (1996), would later object, pointing to the contradictions in this effort, among them that the insistence on lawful wedlock debarred many from the church. But, for the evang-
fixed assets, obtained through enlightened exchange; its gendered aspect; its reliance on achieving its objectives by example and mimesis. We noted in chapter 3 that the gesture was largely unintelligible to Southern Tswana, a fact which Livingstone (1857:21), for one, appreciated. As Schapera (in Moffat and Moffat 1951:110, n. 23) points out and Tlhaping chiefs were later to argue, Motlhi "regarded [these payments] as nothing more than tribute for use of the land" (see below). No matter. Once they had in their possession, the evangelists went about investing themselves in it, a performance intended to dramatize the process of Protestant self-production:

Act I, the forceful conversion of nature into private property;

Act II, the cultivation of a fruitful field by means of material improvements and self-possessed labor;

Act III, the harvesting of wealth to be enjoyed as a just return on capital input and virtuous toil.

The missions also set up holdings for allocation to Christian inquirers who proved themselves worthy by virtue of their monogamous marriages and moral probity (see chapter 3, n. 77). There were, it seems, always candidates to take possession of such irrigated acreages as were available, especially in times of drought and poverty; they were highly fertile and very valuable. But the scale of the operation remained limited. These were not holy haciendas or evangelical estates. Just modest exercises in cultural engineering.

Beyond the compass of the mission stations, where the evangelists did make modest progress,16 neither the privatization of commonage nor rights of ownership gained much purchase. If anything, they still appeared as senseless to Southern Tswana as they had at the time of the very first Nonconformist efforts to buy land. Neither arable fields nor pasture was scarce here. They had no exchange value, and were held and distributed by chiefly favor. Well-watered gardens, it is true, did have the potential to be turned into property; but, given the semi-arid ecology, there was never any prospect of introducing irrigation on a very large scale. Later, toward the end of the century, there would be a move in some quarters to introduce individual title; and wealthy families would try to purchase farms for themselves outside of "tribal" territories. But this was only after settler expansion had transformed the worth of real estate in the interior, after the mineral revolution had reconstructed the regional economy, after over-rule had made the Africans ever more vulnerable to dispossession. By then, though, as we shall see, the very idea of rights to landed property for blacks had become a hotly contested issue throughout colonial South Africa.

In the meantime, and in spite of the benign bafflement that greeted their efforts and explanations, the missionaries did not give up. As the years passed, they continued, both by example and by "kind conversation," to encourage Southern Tswana to enclose their fields, to invest in and improve them, to build houses alongside them, and to regard them as freehold farms. They also took their campaign to the colonial state, especially after the discovery of diamonds, when "native" landholding arrangements became embroiled in struggles over territory across the interior. The most tenacious among them was undoubtedly John Mackenzie, who worked tirelessly to make Bechuanaland into a Wordsworthian17 paradise of enlightened, property yeomen (RRI:294; chapter 3).

He and his brethren wrote innumerable letters, and made repeated appeals, in pursuit of their objective—which was to put in place a tenurial system that might, simultaneously, ward off settler encroachment and facilitate the rise of a property class here. One letter, written in 1878 to the Administrator of Griqualand West about the Tlhaping under Chief Jantje, captures well the style and substance of evangelical rhetoric in this regard (J. Mackenzie 1975:111-12):

If ... people would quietly settle down [on land with long leases] and pay an annual rent for their farms ... the "native question" would be for ever settled. ... A class of native yeomen would arise, which in some cases might merge into that of landowners, for it would be well to put it in their power to buy their farms after they had occupied them and improved them for some years. The less thrifty and capable ... [would be allowed to] sink to [their] own level among the inferior labouring class.

Herein, then, lay the magic of private property. Not only could it alone secure a permanent basis for Christian industry. In so doing, it would also sort out the vexed problem of how black South Africans should be allowed to live in a colonial world in which others sought to appropriate their land and labor. Interestingly, the tripart stratification envisaged by the evangelist was not all that different from the fragmentation of the peasantry we have already observed. Except that his version was offered as a desirable outcome of the introduction of individual property rights.

Mackenzie did not confine his efforts to South Africa. In visits to England and in his Austrafrika, he set out to persuade the British parliament and public that every African, other presumably than the "inferior" laborer, "ought to feel that his house and his cornfield are his own, and not mere 'Government-land'" (1887:1:30). Mackenzie was ... which can be sold at any time over his head" (1887:1:30). Mackenzie was
EIGHT

evidence (1887, 1:76f.), some of which we cited in earlier chapters, to prove that many now saw disadvantages in "traditional" tenurial arrangements; and, con
comitantly, that they showed a willingness and a propensity for more civilized
ways and means. Given the introduction of private holdings, and release from
chiefly command, might not Bechuanaland become a haven of African modernity? Even if they had not all absorbed the lessons of the mission, he added
(1975:20), the proceedings of the Bloemhof Arbitration Commission of 1871
(see chapter 4; RRI:283) had "taught . . . [Tswana] the meaning of land-titles,
and the laws and customs of the white men as to buying and selling land." Bloemhof had been a hard school, of course, and had ended with vast acreages
of "native" land in the hands of others. It had persuaded the Africans that "En-
lish" justice was "warfare" with "papers.

The fact that the colonial frontier was changing so rapidly merely affirmed
the evangelists' belief—understandable at the time—that the salvation of the
Tswana, so to speak, lay in privatization and in land titles officially sanctioned
by the state. The likes of John Mackenzie told this to the chiefs at every oppor-
tunity. And, as they did, the proportions of their message changed. Where be-
fore they had stressed the civilizing capacities of property rights, and had spo-
ken incidentally of protecting the territory from further incursion, their priorities were now reversed: primary emphasis was placed on the need to elicit
the backing of the state against settler avarice, although the subtext—the posi-
tive value of property—remained audible. Take this fragment of a reported
conversation between Mackenzie (1887, 1:7–8) and a Tshaping ruler:

"You should fully face the change that has come and is coming. In the
olden time you had all your gardens and cattle stations, and no one inter-
fected with the one or the other. Now you see the coming wave of white
men . . . Where they find open country they will build and put in the
plough, and will tell you that the unoccupied country is God's and not
yours. But white men respect hard work, and if you improve your houses
and your lands you may depend on it no English officer would dispossess
you. . . . Why not meet together once more as a tribe . . . and introduce a
better custom as to land? Every fountain or farm should be apportioned
to him who cultivates it, and he should have a title to it acknowledged by
the tribe."

"But would he not sell it?" I was asked at once.

"Fools might sell," I answered, "but the men of the tribe would not."

For "men of the tribe," read "socially responsible individuals," those who com-
bined private interest with the public good.

"But there is great deception about papers,—the agents deceive stupid
people," said one of the men.

Here, over the issue of dispossession, is where the liberal idealism of the mission
ran up against the facts of life on the colonial frontier, up against the brute
realities of reality. And where the Nonconformists found it necessary to modify
the kind of propertied personhood of which they dreamed—or leave their
would-be converts open to the capacity of other colonizers. And so:

"I have thought of all that,"

Mackenzie replied, allowing himself a great deal of prescience.

"You ought to have individual rights and title-deeds, but it ought to be
printed on every one of them, 'Not saleable—not transferable!'"

This was a new idea—individual titles, but unsaleable. It was de-
clared on all hands that this would exactly meet their case . . . [the] idea
of individual right to land beyond the power of the clever agent.

How this form of title differed from existing tenurial arrangements—other than
being committed to paper—is not obvious. It may have consoled the evangelists
by sustaining the fiction of private property. But, notwithstanding the enthusi-
asm put into the mouths of his interlocutors by Mackenzie, it is unclear what
the Africans had to gain from it. Without the intervention of the state, dispos-
session would go on, as indeed it did, with or without title deeds. Many South-
ern Tswana seem to have been quick to grasp this, insisting that it was the very
language of "papers," the transposition of territory into text, that enabled and
legitimized its appropriation by the whites. And true enough, as Mackenzie's
own account shows (1887, 1:78–80), it was through the unscrupulous manipu-
ation of claims to right and title that Africans were being relieved of their land,
often with the connivance of colonial courts and commissions. Against such
forces, the liberal worldview and the good intentions of the mission had little
chance. But more of that later.

Mackenzie's efforts underscore several things about the discourse of rights.
The first is the simple fact that, while the Nonconformists set about remaking
Southern Tswana property and personhood in their own image, they were not
the only Europeans on the colonial stage who sought to do this. Nor were they
fully in control of the physical environment in which they enacted their drama.
Both considerations, as it turned out, diverted the impact of their exertions.
Note our choice of term here: diverted. These factors did not negate the effect
of the civilizing mission on the Southern Tswana world; as we shall see, they
altered and redirected it. As did the actions of the Africans themselves. Second,
although the broad outline of what the evangelists wished to accomplish here
was clearly and repeatedly stated, the actual terms of its realization were left
much more ambiguous. This runs to a general point made by John Stuart Mill
(1965, 2:253):
The very idea of peasant proprietorship was strange to the English mind. Even the forms of language stand in the way: the familiar designation for owners of land being "landlords," a term to which "tenants" is always understood as a correlative.

Mill's observation—that freehold peasant proprietorship was an alien concept to the British bourgeoisie—had echoes at the outposts of empire. Amongst all the visionary calls for a propertied African peasantry, the precise terms of the dream were never really spelled out: How might community life and governance be organized? What labor arrangements should prevail? How was it possible to prevent the alienation of land and still treat it as a privately owned commodity? As a result, the discourse of rights fell silent on many of the issues that counted most. At the same time, rights talk had begun to resound everywhere in the interior. Indeed, it was rapidly becoming the lingua franca of negotiation across the colonial frontier. Much more is yet to be heard of its resonances.

The lessons of radical individualism were not restricted to the domain of landed property; nor did they extend only to marriage and bodily management. As we have already seen, they also occurred in many other places: in the effort to construct a domestic sphere, at "home," founded on the European model of the family as an ensemble of right-bearing persons; in the representation of the church as a rule-governed, voluntary community made up of spiritually autonomous members, each with an inalienable right to freedom of belief, each paying her or his dues, each responsible for his or her own moral life; in the establishment of schools in which pupils were encouraged to improve themselves, and were dressed, addressed, and disciplined as serialized individuals; in the dissemination, through a variety of contexts, of modernist notions of time and money, of free wage labor and the private estate, of refined consumption as a reward for virtue; in the expectation of responsible participation in the moral and political community; and so on and on. Although these lessons merged, for the most part, into the fabric of everyday life, on some occasions they burst dramatically onto the public stage. The most notable, perhaps, occurred when missionaries and Tswana Christians confronted chiefs, publicly, to demand that converts be allowed to behave in accordance with their consciences rather than be made to follow "custom." The assertion of this right resonated closely with the European ideas of citizenship: as loyal subjects of their rulers, church people would obey the law, would pay their taxes, and would give tribute to their sovereigns. But they were entitled to pursue their own spiritual activities unopposed, and also to be excused from participating in "heathen" rituals. That this demand often led to bitter conflict merely confirmed the lessons of radical individualism and universal rights that the colonial evangelists had tried so hard to teach.

In what measure, then, did the Nonconformists succeed in the task they set themselves? How much might they be said to have made modernist subjects out of "selfish" beings? In addressing this issue, it is necessary to keep in mind an obvious yet crucial point, one that the evangelists tended to ignore to their cost: Southern Tswana had their own constructions of personhood, possession, and entitlement, all of which were integral to what became known, in colonial times, as *mekgwa le molele ya Setswana*, "Tswana customs and laws." This body of norms was seen by the Africans themselves, ever more explicitly (RRI:129), to regulate both the flow of daily life and the terms in which disputes were defined and dealt with. In a world known for its rich culture of argument, a world wherein discourses of the everyday were to be heard almost every day in the public domain, they also afforded a language with which to discuss matters of collective concern. *Mekgwa le molele*, as is well-known, have been the subject of several scholarly studies. What is important for present purposes is the way in which they shaped vernacular understandings of those aspects of *setswana* under challenge from the civilizing mission.

Southern Tswana are often said to have had a highly "legalistic" worldview—albeit not, as in the case of the Nonconformists, a moralistic or theocentric one. They also had an elaborate conception of selfhood (see RRI:142f.). Like its Protestant counterpart, the Tswana person was situated in a historically forged social milieu, a milieu, remember, that appeared at once highly ordered and yet fluid: on the one hand, people were securely situated in a hierarchy of well-defined social and political constituencies; on the other, rank and position were open to constant redefinition, the onus being thrown on individuals to "build themselves up." This, in part, is why the Europeans perceived the Africans to be "selfish" and "cunning." What they did not appreciate, though, is that individuality here depended on self-construction through the husbanding of relations, a labor that involved the negotiation of both personal status and the indigenous equivalent of contracts; Tswana had a well-developed range of voluntary forms of exchange and reciprocity whose infraction was actionable in court (Schapera 1938:239f.). As this suggests, *puse* *Maine*, everyday life here was shaped by a complex hybrid of status and contract, both understood rather differently than they were in contemporary Britain.

Personhood, then, was a matter of pragmatic, ongoing fabrication; adult males here were self-made, but in ways and by means quintessentially social, engaged, and, quite explicitly, interested. Rank and position were contrived and/or consolidated, with respect to others more senior or junior, by accumulating wealth in people, objects, and animals—primarily through marriage and affinity, patronage and clientage, political alliance, and material exchanges. The self, consequently, was not a state of being but a process of becoming, as were all the relations of which it was composed; inertia implied social death and the possibility of being "eaten" by others. Only at the end of life was that process arrested, temporarily, as the deceased passed into the ancestral realm, there to
be remade yet again by the actions of descendants. That is why status was constantly renegotiated. It expressed, in the public language of social position, the relative worth of an individual at any given moment. All of which must have made European personhood, as it was presented to Southern Tswana, difficult for them to accept. Various traces of the long conversation suggest that they saw the modernist subject as undersocialized, an ensemble of contractual ties and "paper" relations defined less as things becoming than as things being.

Southern Tswana being-in-the-world also involved membership of a political community—not merely, as the missionaries were wont to say, blind personal submission to a sovereign, and sovereignty itself was hedged about by constitutional constraint (Schapera 1938:53;). Different classes of citizen were recognized, but all enjoyed the protection of the *mekgwa le melao*. Non-citizens did not. Their rights of residence and movement, of person and possessions, were severely restricted. As this implies, the Tswana self-as-citizen connoted autonomy, entitlement, a sense of identity, and property. Without the last, in fact, neither personhood nor full citizenship could exist. For the *sise ke noto* of affiliation to a *monafe* ("nation") was access to residential land, arable fields, and pasture without payment—other, perhaps, than tribute, only non-social beings were denied it. Rights in this land might be held in perpetuity and were transmitted to heirs through a variety of devolutionary arrangements (Comaroff and Roberts 1981:705;). But they depended finally on use rather than on an abstruse notion of titled ownership. If fields fell into extended disuse they might be forfeited—they were not saleable—although *melao* to this effect were not everywhere the same, and changed in many places after overrule (Schapera 1970:97E). Landholdings could also be taken from an individual banished for such antisocial crimes as witchcraft or subversion. Conversely, when people were divested of all their property, for whatever reason, they faced social death and, in extremis, loss of citizenship.

It will be clear that these nineteenth-century Southern Tswana notions of personhood and property, like the indigenous idea of spirituality, were strongly oriented toward the performative. Being was becoming, and both were a matter of doing. This unspoken principle underpinned the conceptual scaffolding of their world. And it served as a prism through which they read and reacted to the civilizing mission—in this sphere as in all others. But their responses were not all alike: there was no single "native" ear or eye, just as there was no one "native" voice. As we would expect by now, the impact of the evangelists was refracted through, and mediated by, various orders of difference. To be sure, the way in which the modernist subject took root on Tswana terrain was itself part of the sedimentation of social and cultural distinction in the second half of the century. In order to make this point concretely, let us focus, by way of example, on just two of the aspects of personhood and property with which we have been concerned: land and matrimony.

For most Southern Tswana, and certainly for the lower peasantry, the idea of real estate, as surveyed by Europeans, continued to make limited sense. Until overrule, while land was plentiful, access and tenure were guaranteed under *mekgwa le melao* without need for papers. Afterwards, with increasing poverty, settler expansionism, and the concentration of holdings in the hands of the upper peasantry, the situation changed. But ownership, in the manner of *sekgoa*, still did not have much positive meaning. For these people, purchase was not a prospect. And title merely enlarged the possibility of dispossession at the hands of speculators. The fact that it did, and the fact that ever more of the rank and file were becoming landless amidst the worsening economic conditions of fin-de-siècle (above, chapter 4), led many rulers to proscribe all transfers—and simultaneously to affirm that only tenure under *mekgwa le melao* was permissible. Nor was this restricted to southern Bechuanaland. John Mackenzie (1975:44) notes that Khamo, for all his Christian zeal for reform, "proclaimed that the presence of Europeans in the country had not altered the Bechuanan law as to land, ... that ground was inalienable; that no house could be bought or sold."

In due course—in British Bechuanaland, after the Land Commission of 1886—the colonial state intervened to make *landholding* within "native reserves" subject only to "tribal" law, thereby putting an end to the evangelical dream of a landed class of yeomen. As we shall see, there was to be a final irony here: some rulers, having insisted earlier on "customary" tenure to prevent alienation, were now to push for private title, either to protect their realms from incursion or as a reaction to their own loss of authority and resources (cf. Shillington 1985:175–76).

Among the middle and upper peasantry, and especially among the new Christian elite, there was a much more positive reaction to the idea of real estate. Recall chapters 3 and 4: as they became more affluent, people of this class fraction, many of them royals, began to buy farms outside their chieftains. It is difficult to track down the dealings of the period, but there is also evidence that territory once thought of as "tribal" ended up in individual hands; in any case, some wealthy men, including sovereigns, took to leasing land to whites (and even, on occasion, to their compatriots), thus becoming a small cadre of rentiers. These men tended to hold acreages under both "traditional" tenure and by private title, and at times judged the difference between the two. All this, however, changed after 1913, at least in much of South Africa, when the Natives Land Act severely limited ownership by blacks outside the reserves. By then, the European sense of private property had made deep inroads into this segment of the population, as had the language of rights altogether. Indeed, this language was already being used as a matter of course by Tswana leaders in their effort to protect the assets and interests of their fellows and followers (see below).

Over the long run, then, all Southern Tswana were caught up in a world
dominated by the authoritative rhetoric of rights—even though, for most of them, those rights were experienced primarily by their absence or their removal. Different fractions of the population reacted differently toward the conception of property essayed by the civilizing mission, just as they had in respect of other matters social and cultural, spiritual and material. Still, none could escape its implications. Or the political realities that accompanied it.

The modernist, right-bearing subject was not inscribed in landed possessions alone, however. S/he was invested in a total social persona. And this, by turn, brings us to marriage. For it is in the conjugal process that property and propriety, status and contract, came together in the formation of mature social beings. Indeed, if any one context was likely to reveal the inroads made by the Protestant person it was this. What, then, does the archaeology of changing matrimonial arrangements tell us of the effect of the civilizing mission on Southern Tswana selfhood?

A fair amount, according to the Rev. John Brown.

In a review of mission work at Taung, written in 1900, Brown cited shifting marital practices as indicative of the “quiet” but cumulative impact of Christianity in the district. He wrote:

The desire to be married in church seems to be growing. During the seven months we were shut in by the Boers, I married more than forty couples. I . . . hope that this desire is indicative of a stricter observance of the marriage vows, and more permanence in the marriage bond. Some of the knots tied by the missionary are soon unpicked; and those who have been united in church quarrel and separate. In spite of this fact, however, the growing tendency to formal marriage must help to make native home life purer and happier.

Plainly, both the rite and the rights entailed in Christian unions had become important in the construction of relations and identities here; and this in a place known for its resistance to the mission. But, as Brown acknowledged, there was another, more disquieting side to what was happening, one which led him to wonder why Tswana should have had any “desire for marrying according to law” at all. Now that only “legal” wedlock was recognized by church and state, marriage was becoming a matter of contract rather than morality or social commitment. Neither minister nor magistrate, he noted, could refuse to marry a “single” man, even if he had deserted a string of common-law wives. What was more, first marriages apart, legalized unions required legalized dissolution. “Before the law came,” Brown went on, “clear proof of infidelity or desertion was all that was needed before marrying again the party sinned against.”

Now a relict Christian woman who could not meet the cost of divorce was unable to remarry in church. And if she merely “allowed herself to be taken,” she would be expelled. “The law,” he opined, should not “seem to make right living more difficult than it was when heathen customs prevailed.”

But often it did, especially for those without the resources needed to exercise the rights that had come to define legitimate personhood in South Africa. In 1903, writing in Korana en Becowa, Plaatje (1996) condemned one of the many “obnoxious disabilities” suffered by blacks in the Transvaal, a handicap, which, he said, impeded the spread of Christianity: the three-pound tax on “legally” performed religious marriages. This tax, which amounted to the annual income of Africans working on white farms, created a “class” of persons who, though wed by “Native rites,” could not afford the ceremony required of those admitted to full church membership.

There were other material implications to “legal” marriage, of course. For example, men and women who entered into it, and assumed its contractual obligations, found that their estates also became subject to the law of the land. In the event, and as they were encouraged to do, many of them employed attorneys to commit their wealth to paper and to draft wills. This did not put an end to the arguments over succession and inheritance long associated with the politics of Tswana family life (Comaroff and Roberts 1981:175ff.). But, as bequests might now be contested in the courts, matters were made much harder for those who lacked the resources or the social knowledge to do so. When such cases did occur, they often took on a distinctly local flavor. Even the most devout and elevated of Christians rarely entered only one union during a lifetime; serial monogamy or, as Brown hinted, the coexistence of “legal” and other unions was more usual (cf. Comaroff and Roberts 1977). Under these conditions, suits hung either on the relative seniority of the children of the various unions, or on the “legitimacy” of heirs born to women who had been wed, according to “custom,” by men with “Christian” wives as well. Patently, rights in property, in the European sense of the term, were being re-formed by the effects of the rite kind of marriage on Tswana personhood.

All of this underscores the extent to which matrimony was a node of articulation between the making of persons and the hardening of social distinctions. It often is. Among elites, “Christian marriage” had become the norm; which suggests that, in the early 1900s, the church ran civil society in many respects.

Not that this ceased entirely; centered on bridewealth and other exchanges. Marital histories collected in 1970 show that more than half the unions contracted by religious ceremony over the previous forty years had also involved prestations of stock or token currency. While the range of kin taking part in these exchanges had narrowed, nuptials were seldom joined by two individuals alone; for all ritual and practical purposes, families remained more extended than the missionaries might have liked. Still, “legal” wedlock had become the sign of respectability among the prosperous—who, in championing an ideology
People who are married enjoy the privilege. They plan for their future. A wedding is advantageous since the children will grow up in a Christian life. The parents . . . send them to school . . . even if there is hunger, the children will be safe. [Marriage] helps people take care of their pence.

As an afterthought, she added, "[A] wedding is a form of bondage that permits freedom." It was not, however, an option open to all. Among the very poor, the prospect of a formal union, Christian or otherwise, presented a daunting challenge. So much so that, over the course of this century, there has been a steady decline in all forms of marriage among the lower peasantry—who have long given poverty, unwarmed and unqualified, as the reason. Conversely, there has been a notable rise in informal unions referred to as "vat en six," Africans for "take and settle," and in female-headed households. The implication is obvious: those who lacked property found it well-nigh impossible to achieve "proper" personhood for themselves and their offspring, either in the civil or in the religious domain. The two, as Plaatje's comment made plain, were closely interconnected. Without the necessary assets it was difficult to marry formally; this meant exclusion from full membership in the mainstream denominations, made it impossible to secure places for children in "good" schools and training institutions (J. Comaroff 1974:157), tended to foreclose access to such "civil" rights as were available to blacks in South Africa—and put great hurdles in the way of the kind of salvation offered by the orthodox churches.

Here a pause and a change of register, so to speak.

As we said at the outset, the evangelical discourse of rights was not restricted to the register of radical individualism, nor just to the politics of modernist personhood. It was to resonate, also, in the mythos of primal sovereignty.
Crisp 1905; Sandilands 1953), maps (e.g., Campbell 1822) and typologies of languages and "dialects" (e.g., J. Mackenzie 1887;1; Broadbent 1865); and, of great significance for the formation of a modern ethnic consciousness, into vernacular school texts (e.g., R. Moffat 1842:570f.; see volume 3). It also foreshadowed the cultural and political cartography of modern southern Africa, the ethnoscape on which colonial rule (and later apartheid) was to be built. The organization of the evangelical field itself gave living expression to the emerging ethnomodel of the frontier: divided into "Griqua," "Hottentot," "Bechuana," and other missions, its districts and stations paralleled the ethnic and tribal categories it had helped to formalize.

Ethnic consciousness, we would argue, has its origins in encounters between peoples who signify their differences and inequalities—in power, economic position, political ambitions, and historical imaginings—by cultural means. Typically, it is the subordinate, not the dominant, who are first marked and named. (Hence it is that, prior to the British colonial presence, peoples in servitude to Tswana were ethnicized and labeled, while the latter remained relatively unmarked and unnamed.) As this suggests, collective identity is everywhere a relation, nowhere a thing (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992:51). Viewed thus, the construction of "the Bechuana" as "a people" (see, e.g., R. Moffat 1842:236), the genesis of their own ethnicity in its modernist sense, occurred in response to the (increasingly unequal) terms in which they were engaged by significant others along the colonial frontier. European evangelists played an especially important role in this process. Their challenge to those whom they called Bechuana took many forms: apart from all else, they insisted that the Africans give coherent account of their own practices; that they hear their "custom" (mekgwa) condemned by Christian teaching, itself couched in the universalist language of reason and enlightenment; that they agree to the fact that "native" ways were degenerate and backward, and ought forever to be put aside. The teleological cast of the civilization mission, as we noted before, did not welcome the possibility that two systems of knowledge, each with its own ontology, might coexist or be spliced together. Consequently, Southern Tswana found themselves being asked, in various ways, to objectify their own culture, setswana, by contrast to "European ways."

As we have seen throughout this and the previous volume, the documentary record is replete with dialogue, transcribed by missionaries, about the differences between setswana and sekgoa. These accounts are decidedly equivocal. And revealing. On one hand, recall (RRI:245), the evangelists often wrote that Tswana saw the ways of the whites to be clearly superior; on the other, we are told that they "could not see ... anything in [European] customs more agreeable ... than in their own" and, sometimes "laughing extravagantly," would "pronounce [ours] clumsy, awkward, and troublesome" (R. Moffat 1842:247-48). In truth, the Africans seem to have been more bemused than amused. They certainly made clear their difficulty in understanding why setswana and sekgoa should not coexist and comingle, why one should be adjudged better than the other; hence the Tlhaping elder who said to the burgers of Cape Town that the ways of "each [were] best for those who were used to it!" (G. Thompson 1967:166, above, p. 140). Here were resonances, once again, of the confrontation between a universalizing and a relativizing worldview. As the colonial encounter took its course, Southern Tswana would give living expression to theirs: they would cull new cultural forms, large and small, from the fusion of the two worlds. Meanwhile, however, they responded in varying ways to the demand to choose between knowledges, traditions, deities. Those closest to the mission often did distinguish themselves from heathenism in the ways called for by the clergymen; others combined a public Christian persona with the private practice of setswana. But many more responded by not recognizing the duality at all.

It goes without saying that the context of any ethnic identity is a product of complex, drawn out historical processes: being a heterogeneous, fluid ensemble of signs and practices, a living culture is forged not merely in conversations, but also in the minutiae of everyday action, in the inscription of linguistic forms and material relations, in the course of struggle, contestation, and creative self-assertion. Here, however, we wish to highlight four points about the manner in which "Bechuana" identity was re-presented by the evangelists back to Southern Tswana themselves—in their schools, courts, churches, and other contexts—and, then, to the whites of colonial South Africa.

First and foremost, "the Bechuana" were portrayed as a people governed by the primal sovereignty of their "custom" (mekgwa, the concept now had vernacular denotation; see above). No matter that they had different chiefs and lived in different polities. No matter that they lacked any overarching identity hitherto, nor seem to have shared a proper noun. Everyone of them, allegedly, was bound together by a common, ineluctable attachment to the ways of their ancestors. By their very "nature," moreover, they followed their traditions with little question (e.g., J. Philip 1828,2:118). This, the clerics told themselves, was why it had proved so difficult to sow the seeds of rational self-interest among them; so difficult to make all but a few "separate themselves," thus to become citizens of God's Kingdom. Even when attracted by aspects of mission teaching, they did not easily put aside their old ways. Even when they took on the trappings of civilization, they still "prefer[ed] the customs in which they [had] been brought up" (J. Mackenzie 1871:397). What is more, Robert Moffat wrote (1842:249-50; emphases added):

[T]he national council [is] the stronghold or shield of the native customs, in which speakers have, in masterly style, inveighed against any aggression on their ancient ceremonies, threatening confiscation and death to those who would arraign the wisdom of their forefathers.
Evangelists continued to report the stubborn hold of mekgwa—such as bridewealth (Jennings 1933), initiation, and "taboos" (Willoughby 1928, 1932)—well into this century, long after most Southern Tswana had joined the church. These reports, like the notion that "the Bechuana" were unretractively subservient to ancestral usage, might have been based on a misreading of processes of cultural exchange and transformation. But that is beside the historical point. For the Europeans, the primal force that bound these people together, the sovereignty of setswana, was inherently and self-evidently conservative, communal, antimonard. By very virtue of being ethnic Bechuana, in sum, they were beighted subjects in a kingdom of custom. Shades here of an idea which, until recently, had wide currency in Anglo-American social science: that ethnicity, especially expressed in "tribalism" and/or "traditionalism," is inimical to modernity. Also its corollary: that the removal of difference is a sine qua non of the worldly progress toward universal civilization (see Geertz 1963; cf. Gellner 1983, 1987).

Moffat's reference to "the national council" is also telling since, strictly speaking, none existed. It presaged the vision, which spread largely unremarked among colonial evangelists, of a (supratribal) Tswana ethno-nation. The germ of the idea, of course, was implicit both in the term "Bechuana" and in the imputation of a shared allegiance to the primal sovereignty of mekgwa. Here lies the second of our four points: that, increasingly, "the Bechuana," in the singular, were re-presented as a grouping with common concerns above and beyond those of the "tribes" (i.e., chiefdoms) which formed their everyday political communities (see below). At times this entity was made out to be much like a modern European nation. Witness, again, Jules Verne's novel, written in 1872, about a scientific expedition to South Africa. Taking its ethnographic background from early mission texts, it tells of the arrival of the scientists at a Tswana capital and of a ceremony in which they and the local ruler pulled each others' noses "according to African custom." All of which, Verne (1876:47) said, turned the Europeans into "naturalized Bechuana." This romance reminds us of something else as well: it was in their encounter with others, real or imagined, that nineteenth-century Europeans refigured and refined their own images of nationality and moral community. In this process, Africa, and the evangelical enterprise, assumed considerable salience (Stuart 1992:379). The mutual nose-pulling—sometimes also leg-pulling—makes the point well: the construction of collective identities here was not a matter of one party imposing its own, mature form of ethnicity or nationhood on another. It was one in which both participated in the reciprocal gesture of fashioning self and other. As bodies touched so did bodies politic. Each recognized the other, in both senses of that term, and both were transformed—if not, in the long run, equally or in the same way.

For the evangelists, in the meantime, it was a short step from the conclusion that Tswana shared a collective identity to the assumption that they "naturally" shared rights and interests. And so, from the 1830s onward, missionaries repeated repeatedly to what might harm or advance the commonweal of "the Bechuana people." Here as elsewhere, the road from primal sovereignty to the "rightful" claims of an ethnic group was tarred with myths and mirages. But it was also paved with good intentions. Many of the Nonconformists saw themselves as "protectors of the natives" against the predations of other colonizers. In this role, as we know, a number of them became deeply involved in imperialist politics. Joseph Ludorf's representation of the Southern Tswana at the Bloemhof Commission, and his subsequent manifesto for a "United Botswana, Batlhaping and Bangwaketse Nation" (RRI:283-86), was only one dramatic instance—although it was particularly illuminating since he proposed the founding of an independent ethnic nation-state with a legislature, a system of courts, a charted territory, a militia, and a constitution that fused setswana and European statecraft. A few years later, two "Bechuana" polities were established, albeit as "possessions" of the United Kingdom: the Crown Colony of British Bechuanaland (later absorbed into South Africa to become, under apartheid, Bophuthatswana) and the Bechuanaland Protectorate (after 1966, Botswana). There is no denying that the exertions of the evangelists contributed much to making these ethno-national polities thinkable in the first place. They also prepared the ground for the colonial state to sow its own special brand of tribal policies.

To the extent that it was shaped by the encounter with Europe, Tswana ethnic consciousness was also the product of other, less overtly "political" exchanges. As the chiefdoms became part of the British Empire, their shared identity was given substance by fusing received signs, styles, and images with new ones—many of missionary provenance. Some of the latter transcended the boundaries of the parochial: Christian elites, for example, gathered under the banner of the cross, distinguished by their English clothes, and uniformed converts came to see themselves as citizens of the "Nation of God." Yet, at the same time and in counterpoint, the rise of "tribal" churches—like the folk dress of the countryside—expressed a visible sense of setswana, positing it as one among many rural ethnicities in southern Africa.

So, too, did the development of print media. Both the WMMS and the LMS made initial efforts to establish vernacular newspapers in the late 1850s, and a monthly was produced in Kuruman between 1883 and 1896; according to Plaatje (1916:5), it enjoyed a wide readership among "peasants in Bechuanaland and elsewhere." The titles of these publications—Molekoli oa Beuana (The Bechuana Visitor); Mosotes o Bchuana (The Bechuana Instructor); and Mokgapa o Beuana (Bechuana News)—all presumed a similar national audience, albeit in slightly varying orthographies. It was no accident that they emerged during the second half of the nineteenth century in these and comparable African commu-
nities along the colonial frontier (M. Wilson 1971:74). To the evangelists, newspapers served as tools for shaping self-conscious, “informed” civil communities. As Benedict Anderson (1983:63) has argued, they were significantly implicated in the imagining of modern national identities, both colonial and metropolitan. By refracting world events into the universe of local readers, they generated a sense of common experience, of a “solid simultaneity through time.” Yet these very media also made some nations seem more worldly than others, others more parochial and tribal. The image on the masthead of The Bechuana Visitor, for example, showed a “civilized” party of Europeans, complete with its national colors, stepping ashore on a generic “native” beach.

The mission monthlies were a mix of religious exhortation, announcements, and letters from African readers within the church and beyond. They also reported on current events, not least on skirmishes between warring parties along the frontier. In so doing, they helped to create the very social identities they presupposed. It is not surprising, then, that the first Setswana newspaper to be owned and published by blacks in Bechuanaland should have been called Koranta a Bechuana, “The Newspaper of the Bechuana.” Or that its proprietor and editor should have been prominent mission school alumni. Between 1901 and 1908, Koranta wrote with pride of achievements in Tswana language and culture, and printed arguments in defense of “national” interests and entitlements. Significantly, it also voiced the distaste felt by educated elites for the primitive connotations of tribal labels. And it spoke out, at times, for a more modernist African nationalism, one centered on the universal rights of individuals, irrespective of race, culture, or creed.

But—and this leads to our third point—there was an anomaly here. While “the Bechuana” (singular) were being conjured up as an ethnocracy with its own rights and interests, these peoples (plural) inhabited a world in which everyday political processes occurred within and among local chiefdoms. (Note that mofafe, Setswana for “polity,” was rendered in mission dictionaries as “tribe” and “nation,” and was used to describe both a chieftain and “the Bechuana” at large; RE:306.) In acting on behalf of “the natives,” furthermore, evangelists usually represented specific sovereigns and their subjects, not the ethnocracy at large; it was mainly to this lower level, in fact, that their day-to-day interventions in affairs of state were confined. As we saw in volume 1 (pp. 306f.), it was also in this context that Southern Tswana were instructed in the language of legality and governmentality; that they learned the parole of colonial politics and collective self-representation; that they were encouraged to see their “tribes” as antecedents, in miniature, of the European nation-state. We noted there too that Tswana rulers were quick to absorb the ethos—speak of imperial diplomacy, if not always to use it with great conviction (cf. Ramsay 1991). Thus it was that, in 1884, Chief Montshiwa agreed to a treaty with the Crown in the argot of constitutional nationhood; that he wrote, or had written, a string of letters in similar vein claiming legal entitlements and protections for his people; that, in 1903, his heir asked the Colonial Secretary, on behalf of the Bechuanaland Protectorate, to recognize “our rights and privileges as loyal citizens.” In short, once the terms of this discourse were internalized, they became part of collective imaginings—and self-assertion—at both the levels to which the term mofafe had come to apply.

Take just one example, which is revealing precisely because it had little to do with colonial diplomacy or deals with whites. Sometime during 1917 or 1918 there arose a “Barolong National Council” with its head offices in Johanesburg. In April 1918, it called a meeting of “All Chiefs, Leaders, and Headmen of the Barolong People,” to be held at one of the rural capitals. On the agenda were a “discussion of the constitution”; arrangements for collecting national funds; with which to buy stock, a farm, “and other landed property”; and a consideration of anything “deemed advisable to the general welfare of the people.” “National” identities of this kind were reinforced, in South Africa, by the deployment of tribalism in the system of “native administration” that evolved after 1910. In the Bechuanaland Protectorate they became part of the structure of indirect rule. They survived into independent Botswana, where they correlate broadly with the district administrative divisions. Minorities in the country today protest that this excludes people who do not fit into the Tswana mofafe. Or into the ethnology, developed during the colonial era, that remains the basis of collective entitlement (Durham 1993).

Fourth and finally, parallel to the construction of Tswana ethnicity went the progressive erosion of chiefly dominion. As we have seen, most evangelists, especially early on, treated local rulers with respect, abetted them in their dealings, and promised not to interfere in matters of state; some, by contrast, subverted those who opposed the gospel; one or two came to see the chieftainship per se as an obstacle and urged its disestablishment (Dachs 1972). Conversely, sovereigns varied in the degree to which they succeeded in using the mission to their own ends, those to the north doing notably better than those closer to the frontiers of white settlement (Gulbrandsen 1993). Over the long run, however, such differences were relatively inconsequential. By forcing a wedge between the secular and the sacred, and by introducing alternative bases of empowerment, the presence of the church itself wrought wide-ranging changes in vernacular politics. This was exacerbated by the colonial state; both in South Africa and in Botswana—albeit much more so in the former—“native” legal jurisdiction was narrowed, indigenous potentates were made into tax collectors and civil servants, and the scope of tribal administration was redefined. And so, ironically, the more Tswana discovered and asserted a collective identity founded on “traditional” affinities, the less any “traditional” political figures had the wherewithal to represent their concerns. There were exceptions, obviously. A number of royals remained influential well into this century, especially.
in Botswana. And a few, on occasion, took it upon themselves to act for “the Bechuana”—most famously the three chiefs who traveled to London in 1895, accompanied by Willoughby, to protest the transfer of Bechuanaland to the British South Africa Company (see, e.g., Maylam 1980; Ramsay 1991; chapter 4). But such things occurred less and less as the colonial state undermined local authority and divided as it ruled: the objectification of “the Bechuana,” as an ethnic group with an awareness of its own objectives, unfolded amidst a deepening legitimation crisis in South Africa and a gradual process of corrosion in the Bechuanaland Protectorate. It was against this backdrop that new forms of political association, action, and representation—the congress and union movements, parties, and the like—would emerge during the twentieth century.

Drawing all this together, then, the discourse of primal sovereignty played into the refiguration of “the Bechuana” as an ethnic group with inalienable rights: the right to perpetuate itself, to speak its own language, to occupy its own territory, to follow its own leaders and customs, to husband its own interests. At the same time, however, setswana, the “stuff” that made these people what they were, was said by European colonizers to be inescapably parochial, persistently primitive; it had to be erased if individual Africans were to be remade into African individuals and, as such, into citizens of the modern world. The fact that Southern Tswana had their own elaborate repertoire of rights, their own ideas of sovereignty, their own practices of personhood and property, went largely unrecognized. Further, because everyday vernacular politics were “tribal”—they were translated into the refined language of English civics only to be ceded to the Crown—the capacity of “the Bechuana” for autonomous self-representation was being eroded even as they were emerging into modern nationhood.

In the colonial discourse of rights, as this suggests, the attribution of primal sovereignty had a paradoxical quality. Apart from all else, it was erected, to use the argot of critical postmodernism, on an impossibility: in order to make “the Bechuana” into civilized moderns, it was deemed necessary to unmake what it was that made them Bechuana in the first place, to remove the differences that made them different; yet, because “they” had been objectified into African individuals and, as such, into citizens of the modern world. The fact that Southern Tswana had their own elaborate repertoire of rights, their own ideas of sovereignty, their own practices of personhood and property, went largely unrecognized. Further, because everyday vernacular politics were “tribal”—they were translated into the refined language of English civics only to be ceded to the Crown—the capacity of “the Bechuana” for autonomous self-representation was being eroded even as they were emerging into modern nationhood.

The civilizing mission had not set out to contrive a world of virtual realities, of course, nor to abet the machinations of the colonial state. To the contrary, it had dreamed—naively, perhaps; paternalistically, for sure—of a very different kind of political landscape, a very different kind of moral community. Nonetheless, these were the implications of the processes in which it had involved itself. And they had a deeply sinister side to them. Since peoples like the Southern Tswana were held to have rights as a consequence of their membership in an ethnic group, it was also possible to remove those (or other) rights on the same basis—and, by appealing to legalities in doing so, to make it appear entirely legitimate and reasonable. As we shall see, because of its ostensibly “premodern” infrastructure, primal sovereignty was used to dispossess and disenfranchise black South Africans from the time of colonial overrule through the age of apartheid. But more of that in a moment.

**CONTRACTION, CONSCIOUSNESS, CONTESTATION**

Others, besides the Crown... and the Plough of the Transvaal, have also rights. Alas! for the wrongs and the blood that cry to heaven against the souls of certain Europeans! Certainly, the great day of account is not far! The African races will yet be free under the banner of Christ.

Monshiwa, Bakobo, and Moikechee, 1870

**Contradictions, Recognized and Unrecognized**

Most of the evangelists saw no contradiction, no disjunction in the discourse of rights, between the register of radical individualism and that of primal sovereignty; indeed, they did not explicitly distinguish them at all. The effort to implant modern, right-bearing individualism might have pointed toward a society of universal citizens, while the conjuring up of a primal Bechuana identity was meant toward the creation of ethnic subjects. From their perspective, however, the two were part of a seamless campaign to rework the indigenous world, one describing that world as it ought to be, the other as it was. The former, in short,
was a narrative of becoming, of revealed "civilization" and increasingly, as the twentieth century dawned, of "modernity"; the latter was a narrative of being, of concealed "tradition."

In fact, for the mission, the universal citizen and the ethnic subject, liberal individualism and primal sovereignty, were conditions of each other's possibility—if for reasons not readily reflected on by the Europeans at the time. British colonialism, and colonial evangelism, was everywhere a double gesture. On one hand, it justified itself in terms of difference and inequality: the greater enlightenment of the colonizer legitimized his right to rule and to civilize. On the other, that legitimacy was founded, ostensibly, on a commitment to the eventual erasure of difference in the name of a common humanity. Of course, had the difference actually been removed, the bases of overrule would themselves have disappeared. It was not; they did not. Colonialism, in short, promised equality but sustained inequality; promised universal rights but kept the ruled in a state of relative rightlessness; promised individual advancement but produced ethnic subjection. In church and in state. In South Africa as elsewhere, the discourse of radical individualism and modern personhood bore the promise; the discourse of primal sovereignty and ethnic subjection, the realpolitik. It was by virtue of the latter, too, that "the Bechuanas" were enmeshed within a larger, more inclusive form of marking, of coloration and devaluation; that of race, in which all shades of non-European ethnicity, all kinds of colonial otherness, were finally submerged. The evangelists might have seen themselves as "friends of the natives." But, like their compatriots, they tended nonetheless to view Africans as inferiors, as rude beings only now entering "racial adolescence" (Wyllonghby 1923:239). They might not have taken black inferiority to be an immutable fact of nature; yet, to most of them, Tswana were, by and large, still a long way back on the great evolutionary road of Universal History (see volume 3). Had this not been so, the civilizing mission would have had no reason to be.

We said that most evangelists at the time did not see the disjunction between liberal individualism and primal sovereignty. One or two did. John Mackenzie's dreams for "Austral Africa" sought to overcome it by envisaging a colorless citizenship in which "natives" would eventually be indistinguishable from anyone else (RRI:293). There ought to be no reservations, he argued, no tribal protectorates, no special entitlements for ethnic or racial groups (see Holmberg 1966:55f.; K. Hall 1975:102; Lovell 1934:48f.). Just imperial subjects with equal rights. For Mackenzie, this was the only way to deal with the antinomy between universal citizenship and traditional attachments, between the perpetuation and removal of difference—though, patently, he would not have put it this way. There is an instructive lesson in his exceptionalism. Mackenzie, the most vociferous imperialist among the clergymen, seems to have realized that the rhetoric of primal sovereignty would be used against the Tswana by white colonials as long as their rights depended on their ethnic and racial identity. He wrote (1887,2:456):

There is nothing in the superstition or the customs of these tribes to disqualify them from exercising their rights as subjects of the Queen, when education enables them to do so. . . . There is nothing whatever in the character of the South African native to deter us from trusting him with the exercise of . . . "rights" after the manner of the English constitution.

To withhold these "inherent rights" on the basis of color or race, tribe or nation, he added (1887,2:461), "is a deadly delusion."

Double Consciousness, Double Standards, and the Denial of Rights

As we have already intimated, the language of primal sovereignty was to be used, over the long run, to disenfranchise and disable blacks in South Africa, thwarting their efforts to become free, right-bearing, propertied citizens. In this respect, recall our earlier point that Southern Tswana, one and all, had been familiarized with the realpolitik of rights on the frontier; that some discerned in it the "English mode of warfare"; yet that many, most notably the rising elite, had internalized the Protestant ethic and, with it, an idea of community based on the spirit of liberal individualism. It was predictable, then, that "the Bechuanas," both as an incipient ethno-nation and as a congeries of chiefdoms, should fight the implications of overrule in the language of entitlement, invoking it to protest against their loss of autonomy, the seizure of their territory, the imposition of taxes, the condition of wage labor, and so on. It was also to be anticipated that, in this struggle, both they and the colonizers—statesmen, settlers, manufacturers, mine managers—would exploit the contradictions between individual and communal rights, between the rights of private citizens and those of ethnic subjects.

Let us give just one, especially pertinent example drawn from the history of contestation over rights in this colonial theater. It concerns the Land Commission set up by the British authorities in 1885, soon after the establishment of the Bechuanaland Protectorate and British Bechuanaland, but before the latter was absorbed into the Cape Colony and then South Africa. Like many such commissions, its mandate was to clear up conflicting territorial claims among local "tribes" and between them and white settlers, thus to pave the way for Pax Britannica. Its more self-interested aim, arguably, was to gather intelligence and lay the geopolitical foundations for overrule in the interior.

Among the disputes heard by the commission was a minor wrangle between the Tshidi-Rolong and the Ngwaketse over some 432 square miles of remote pasture that lay in their shared borderland. Montshiwa, the Tshidi ruler to whom it was awarded, used the occasion to press for the introduction of individual land ownership, with registered title. A canny non-Christian chief—
but a strong ally of the WMMS in his later life (above, chapter 2)—he had learned the language of liberal individualism. In particular, he was aware of the salience of private property to British notions of civility and modernity. Montshiwa held that, if freehold were granted and deeds lodged with the government, the latter would have to protect Tswana proprietors from settler expropriation. According to Tshidi informants many years on, he also thought that the creation of individual property rights might prepare the ground for other kinds of rights as well; but there is no documentary trace of any of this. What we do know, however, is that Montshiwa, strongly backed by his advisers, put the case in a manner that would have done the early evangelists—and John Stuart Mill—proud: those who had occupied the land, he said, deserved to own it because they had “improved” it. And they would do so even more if they had secure, permanent, inheritable possession.27

As it turned out, other chiefs followed the line taken by Montshiwa and, for much the same reasons, also made the case for individual title. But the commission rejected their argument: the Southern Tswana were simply “not ready” for it. Shillington (1985:174) stresses how cynical the blanket denial of African rights to private ownership. Notwithstanding the recommendations of Mackenzie and several “native” spokesmen, the Report (Great Britain 1886a: 12) said that sovereigns ought still to hold the land “according to native custom” as trustees for those using it on “communistic” principles; until “the people” requested it, a better system of tenure under “separate . . . deed” could not be introduced. But the people were asking for it. Or, at least, their royal representatives were, for the latter were fully aware of how “customary” tenure was being used to discount their holdings, personal and collective. As one Thapong ruler insisted, the only way to ensure that his “farm” did not become a “location” was to secure it by title (Shillington 1985:176). He and his companions were told, however, that the “communal system” was better protection against the alienation of their land. In a final, parenthetic irony, the rhetoric of custom was turned back on the whites: Chief Mankurwane, as we said earlier (chapter 2), used the commission to challenge the LMS ownership of land and water resources at Kuruman. Despite the claim of the evangelists that they had bought these holdings, he insisted that they could only have been granted leave to use sites which had never been saleable under tribal law. But, unlike the chiefs, the LMS won its case.28

Montshiwa protested the outcome to the colonial authorities, contending that customary arrangements in his own realm had been flagrantly and repeatedly violated for the sake of white interests. But history had turned the received script inside out: here was a “heathen” chief invoking universal rights and arguing for the introduction of private property, only to be held to his own “custom” by Europeans who posed as agents of enlightened modernity—but insisted on the primal attachment to tradition of a people who were explicitly demanding to set it aside. A subsequent commission, the influential South African Native Affairs Commission of 1903–5,60 was to declare that “the Native population as a whole instinctively cling to and cherish the communal system” (South Africa 1905:26; our italics). Moreover, it went on (p. 27),

[while] it is largely held to-day, that individualism is ultimately conducive to greater industry, enterprise and production . . .
our limited experience has not in all cases furnished proof of this.

Having been told for almost a century that “healthy individualism” was both the means and the measure of their move toward modernity, black South Africans were to be informed that, even if they no longer “cherished” their communal ways, their kind of individualism was somehow different, lesser. More immediately, however, in dismissing the Tshidi case for private tenure, the Bechuanaland Land Commission simply ignored the fact that most of the intended recipients of titles were highly educated mission school alumni and members of a propertied elite. To wit, the commission never deigned to ask who the landowners would actually be. Their rationale for rejecting the request—the tacit appeal to the sovereignty of custom—did not admit a discourse of individuation. Even more, it actively denied it. After all, the nub of primal sovereignty is the notion that, in their “natural” (instinctive?) attachment to their land, other chiefs followed the line taken by Montshiwa and, clinging to and cherish the communal tenure. In a final, parenthetic irony, the rhetoric of custom was turned back on the whites: Chief Mankurwane, as we said earlier (chapter 2), used the commission to challenge the LMS ownership of land and water resources at Kuruman. Despite the claim of the evangelists that they had bought these holdings, he insisted that they could only have been granted leave to use sites which had never been saleable under tribal law. But, unlike the chiefs, the LMS won its case.29

Montshiwa protested the outcome to the colonial authorities, contending that customary arrangements in his own realm had been flagrantly and repeatedly violated for the sake of white interests. But history had turned the received script inside out: here was a “heathen” chief invoking universal rights and arguing for the introduction of private property, only to be held to his own “custom” by Europeans who posed as agents of enlightened modernity—but insisted on the primal attachment to tradition of a people who were explicitly demanding to set it aside. A subsequent commission, the influential South African Native Affairs Commission of 1903–5,60 was to declare that “the Native population as a whole instinctively cling to and cherish the communal system” (South Africa 1905:26; our italics). Moreover, it went on (p. 27),

[while] it is largely held to-day, that individualism is ultimately conducive to greater industry, enterprise and production . . .
our limited experience has not in all cases furnished proof of this.

Having been told for almost a century that “healthy individualism” was both the means and the measure of their move toward modernity, black South Africans were to be informed that, even if they no longer “cherished” their communal ways, their kind of individualism was somehow different, lesser. More immediately, however, in dismissing the Tshidi case for private tenure, the Bechuanaland Land Commission simply ignored the fact that most of the intended recipients of titles were highly educated mission school alumni and members of a propertied elite. To wit, the commission never deigned to ask who the landowners would actually be. Their rationale for rejecting the request—the tacit appeal to the sovereignty of custom—did not admit a discourse of individuation. Even more, it actively denied it. After all, the nub of primal sovereignty is the notion that, in their “natural” (instinctive?) attachment to their ways, ethnic subjects are all alike.

In the end, Montshiwa won a compromise: the territory—which was to fall into the Bechuanaland Protectorate (not British Bechuanaland, thence South Africa)—could be divided up into farms and leased, on an annually renewable basis, to individuals. But its ownership had to remain, “according to native custom,” with the ruler and the chiefdom. Interestingly, after these farms were distributed, the terms of their leases were never enforced. They were treated by everyone concerned as if they were freehold. The nature of their tenure was to remain ambiguous until Botswana became independent, whereupon its government declared the matter finally resolved: the Barolong Farms, as the territory was called, was “tribal” land.

The Commission of 1885, like innumerable others to follow it, did not just deny the possibility of private property (and other) rights in the face of indigenous demand. Nor did it merely obstruct a move in the direction of liberal individualism. It also frustrated the collective capacity of a community and its leaders to remake their own world by due process. Until overthrow, Tswana chiefs regularly legislated changes in social policy, often transforming institutional, residential, and material arrangements in response to historical contingencies and shifts in popular opinion (see, e.g., Schapera 1942c, 1970; J. L. Comaroff 1973). Prior to the British presence, there was no reason why Chief Montshiwa should not have introduced some form of individual tenure through internal legislative procedures, provided that there was sufficient support for the mea-
Colonialism in South Africa, then, from its genesis in the civilizing mission to the age of apartheid, bequeathed Southern Tswana a double consciousness to match the two-faced character of the discourse of rights itself. One and all, they were encouraged to embark on the road to modernity, to fashion themselves into citizens of the civilized world. At the same time, as black Africans, they were made into ethnic subjects, ineluctably tied to their fellows, to their primal origins, and to setswana, a body of custom which marked them as premodern—and which was invoked to deny them the kind of personhood for tribal groupings congealed during the colonial era. The ideology and anamorphic nature of the discourse of rights, as we said before, that "natives" naturally preferred their own traditions to the alien practices of European modernity, and ought therefore to live by them; and, second, that they lacked the enlightenment, as individuals, to determine their own being-in-the-world. But that is a well-known story, a narrative that runs almost up to present.  

*****  

Contestation: Back to the Future, 1992—?

In the contemporary struggle for South Africa, the two dominant styles of formal politics—represented by the African National Congress (ANC) and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP)—are each heir to one of the registers in the colonial discourse of rights. A sizeable communist membership notwithstanding, the ANC has always stuck close to the ideology of liberal modernism first implanted by the Nonconformists; it grew out of the South African Native National Congress, formed in 1912 to protest the Land Act, and was led largely by mission school graduates. The SANNC spoke the language of civil and constitutional rights, relying heavily on rhetorical styles learned in the mainstream churches. Thus, for example, when its leaders fought against the Act, they argued that it had deprived "natives" not only of the right to individual title, but of the bare human rights of living on the land, except as servants in the employ of whites (Plaatje n.d.:28). In its dealings with successive governments, moreover, the SANNC took a position more notable for its progressive individualism than for its populism. While it envisaged a nonracial democratic South Africa, its spokesmen (they were all male) argued resolutely that blacks who had improved themselves ought to enjoy all the entitlements attendant on their achievements. Ethnicity was deliberately ignored: the SANNC was steadfastly supra-tribal, even pan-African, in its composition and its horizons, and avoided any hint of identity politics. It was also emphatically British in orientation and any claim to distinctness as a people. As we all know, its efforts were not rewarded. Although there are some important differences, the ANC, which has always had a substantial Tswana following, retains much of the disposition and political ideology of its predecessor—albeit oriented energetically toward the present. It continues to talk the language of rights and universal citizenship; as Hobsbawm (1992:4) recently intimated, it has sustained its commitment to a classically European form of nationalism and nationhood (see J. L. Comaroff 1996). Significantly, in negotiating the future, its leaders have paid painstaking attention to the promulgation of a liberal democratic constitution—despite having been pushed to concede collective rights and protections along ethnic and racial lines.

By contrast, the assertively Zulu-centric IFP owes its origins to the politics of primal sovereignty; in particular, to the creation, under apartheid, of "homelands" for tribal groupings congealed during the colonial era. The ideology and political style of Inkatha have always been ethno-nationalist in tenor: since cul-
tural identities run deeper than any other kind of attachment, goes the familiar argument, their bearers have a "natural" right to determine their own affairs and to be ruled by their own ("traditional") authorities. If a South African nation is to exist at all, then, it ought to give ethnic communities a high degree of autonomy, reserving to the state only those functions that cannot be devolved downward. The objective here is to secure collective entitlements—rather than unencumbered universal suffrage or individual rights—in a federated, pluralistic polity. The kind of politics that pursues this objective is typically fought along lines of ethnic cleavage, often with so-called "cultural weapons" both rhetorical and military. It is also inconsistent: the IFP leadership is ardently pro-capitalist and, when it is deemed appropriate, will resort to the distinctly non-indigenous vocabulary of modernist, free market political economy.

Inkatha, of course, is primarily a Zulu phenomenon. But similar claims were heard, before the first free national elections in 1994, in some circles within Bophuthatswana and other "homelands"; also among white conservatives. So much so, in fact, that a "Freedom Alliance" was formed, in the run-up to the elections, among parties led by homeland "leaders" and right-wing Afrikaners. Underlying this coalition was a shared belief in primordial sovereignty and the "natural" rights of ethnic groups. For those accustomed to reading South African history purely as a narrative of racial struggle, the establishment of this Freedom Alliance must have been an irony of cosmic proportions. Politics by parody, almost. After all, it brought together long-standing racial enemies that colonizing processes did not work out in exactly the same way throughout Africa. In British Tanganyika (Sweet 1982) and French West Africa (Snyder 1982), for example, the state encouraged individual landholding and private property more than it did in South Africa and other places with large settler populations. Nonetheless, the colonial encounter does appear everywhere to have involved a discourse of rights—a discourse in which local peoples were cast as ethnic subjects, naturalized, and engaged in an often agonistic dialectic of construction and negation.

We reiterate, as we rejoin our larger story, that colonization was never a monolithic movement through which an expansive Europe imposed itself, systematically and inexorably, on peripheral populations. It may have been a world-historical process. But it played itself out in multiple registers and in disconcertingly ambiguous ways. Never just, nor even mainly, an affair of states and governments, an epic orchestrated by heroic figures, it was carried on in thousands of contexts, both mundane and magisterial, by casts of characters with different means and ends. As we have seen, moreover, it was often a messy business, wherein Europeans—settlers, evangelists, capitalists, administrators, army men—fought among themselves in the effort to impress their wills on the bodies, the being, the terrain of others. These differences among colonizers, to be sure, did not do much to ease the experience of the colonized. For despite the complex dialogues and exchanges it opened up, the power of overrule lay in its (relative) capacity to reduce complexities to brutal, black-and-white contrasts. And, sometimes, to brute coercion. But visible differences in the master class did create an awareness of ruptures and incoherences in European control; ruptures at which local resistance was directed, and in which new hybridities could take root.

Note, too, that many of the "civilized" practices exported from Britain to the colonies were hardly uncontested at home—not least rights to property, to fair work conditions, to the franchise. As even a cursory reading of John Stuart Mill (1965,2) makes clear, peasant proprietorship and private smallholding were not deeply entrenched in the English countryside, despite efforts to essay their virtues by, among others, Mill himself (cf. Holt 1992:372–23). Some contemporary "condition of England" novels, like Disraeli's Sybil, actually rehearse the arguments for and against individual tenure ([1845] 1980:91-94), this text, itself a strident polemic for the "rights of labour," also suggests that struggles over civil and constitutional rights in the colonies were implicated in debates about the situation of the British working class (p. 343). As in the case of the bourgeois home, the imperial frontier was not a place where a mature ideology of rights was presented, fully tried and tested, to premodern Africans. It was a space in which the unfolding sociolegal and political histories of Britain and Africa met—there to be made, reciprocally, in relation to each other.

One final observation here. It returns us to the o-theme of this volume, now moving toward its close. For all its association with legacies, the introduction of a modernist discourse of rights to the Bechuana and other African peoples was not merely a matter of law. Inasmuch as it bore within it an elaborate ideology of personhood, of social contract, of material relations, it involved,
as some of the missionaries themselves understood (J. Philip 1828;231; Mackenzie 1975:72), a cultural revolution. The fetishization of rights, in short, was itself part of an embracing worldview, one in which, self-evidently, the language of entitlement appeared liberatory. That is why colonial evangelization and liberal individualism as an emancipation from the enchantment of custom and communalism, from the tyranny of tradition and the chiefship.

For Tswana, the promise would prove more equivocal—as it tends to be from the perspective of the colonized. Endowed with a culture whose fetishes and fetishes were not the same, they were quick to learn that “[without] equality, all rights are chimeras” (Fuentes 1992:211–12). They learned, too, that law was very much a two-edged sword. On one hand, it was a devastating weapon of warfare, like no other in its capacity to annihilate and dispossess without being seen to do anything at all. And yet the appeal to rights was a means that, over the long run, came to be used by black South Africans in self-protection. Not always successfully, but not always in vain either. More to the point, it often seemed to be the only real means to hand, since it was part of the technology of rule on which rested the inequalities and disablizations from which they suffered. This is why the language of the law is reducible neither to a brute weapon of control nor simply to an instrument of resistance. The inherently contradictory character of the colonial discourse of rights, the multiplicity of registers and the forms of consciousness to which it gave rise, ensured that it would be engaged, on all sides, in the effort to forge viable moral communities, identities, modes of being-in-the-world. It still is. Everywhere.

CONCLUSION

Generally speaking, there has been a complete revolution from the abject condition of existence (of earlier times). . . . A new way of life, with new deeds, new thoughts, new vision, and new orientations, new physical, mental and spiritual possibilities and capacities has been revealed to the African. . . . This complete revolution has, in the first place, been due to the quiet, patient unobtrusive missionary, the mainspring of African evolution.

S. M. Molema (1951:191–92)

W E BEGAN VOLUME 2 with the closing scenes of a colonial drama. We end it, writing from Mafikeng-Mmabatho in the “new” South Africa, at the opening of the postcolonial epoch. As we said in the Preface, “real” beginnings and endings are never very neat. Nor is “real” history ever respectful of clean epochal breaks. To this seems an appropriate juncture, a moment of transition, from which to reflect one last time on the story we have told; also, on the terms in which we tell it. Even more appropriate is the site, this hyphenated city on whose landscape has arisen a living archaeology of the South African past: founded at “the place of rocks” (mafikeng) by a Tswana Christian, it remains the terrain of a long-established chiefdom, was made internationally famous by an imperial sign, became the capital of a colonial protectorate, was built under apartheid as the toy-town hub of an “independent homeland,” and is now a provincial