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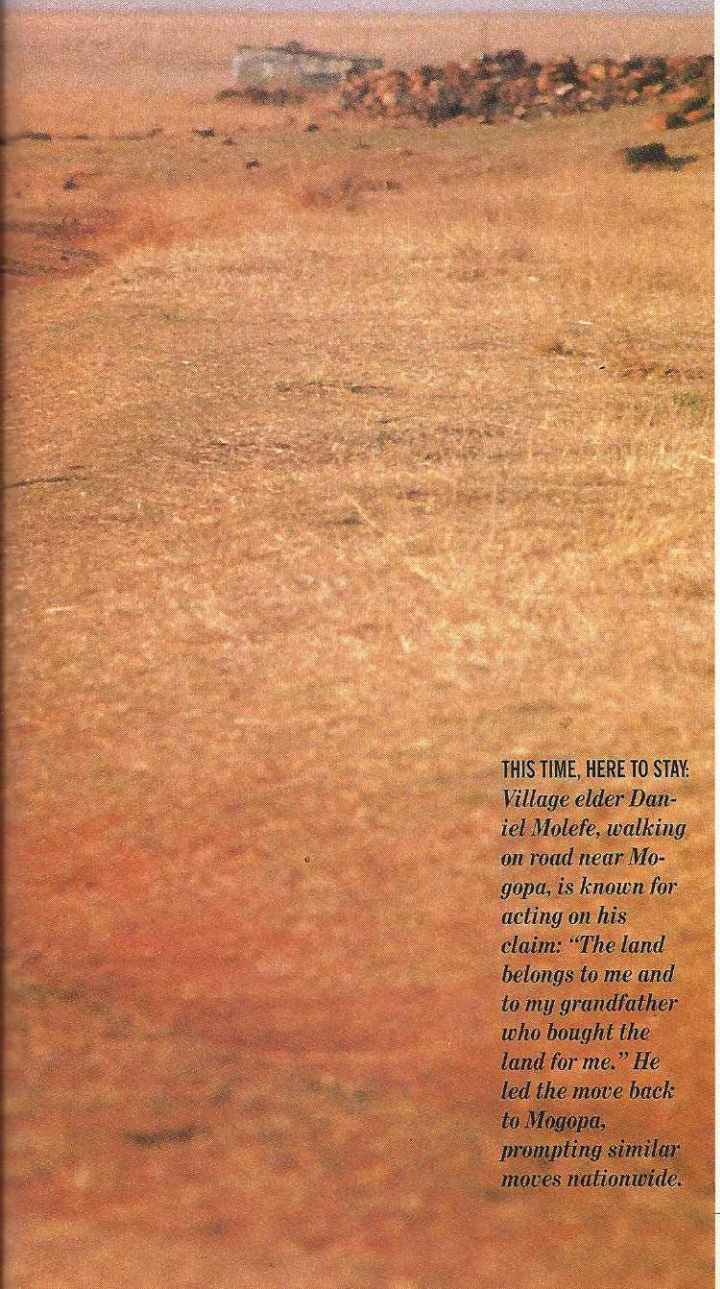
THE LONG WALK HOME

South Africa's recent mega-scandal may spur the long, slow shift to multi-racial government. But one question remains central for many blacks: Who controls the land? To understand the answer, trek across the veld to a village called Mogopa.

By David Goodman



THIS TIME, HERE TO STAY: *Village elder Daniel Molefe, walking on road near Mogopa, is known for acting on his claim: "The land belongs to me and to my grandfather who bought the land for me." He led the move back to Mogopa, prompting similar moves nationwide.*

MOUNDS OF RUBBLE LIE IN THE SPRAWLING veld that rings the South African town of Ventersdorp. They are telltale signs of a once-thriving community: neatly lined village lanes, concrete house foundations, and the occasional wisp of fabric or newsprint that gets tossed about by the everpresent breeze.

I come across three older women weeding an overgrown cemetery. Jogbeth Moatlhadi is down on her hands and knees, raking. I ask her why she is so concerned with cleaning up here.

"Because," she says emphatically, as if the answer were obvious, "it is our fathers and children and families in the graves."

This is what remains of the 79-year-old farming community of Mogopa, a lone black outpost surrounded by a sea of white-owned farmland. Mogopa was once a self-sufficient village of about 1,000 people of the Bakwena ba Mogopa tribe, where farmers worked land that had been bought by their forefathers at the turn of the century. But in 1983 the South African government declared that the village was a "black spot" in a white area and would have to be eliminated. The people of Mogopa refused to leave, and quickly became a national symbol of resistance to apartheid land policies.

The government fought back by cutting off essential services to the area and stopping pension payments. When that did not work, it resorted to brute force. In the early morning hours of Valentine's Day, 1984, the people of Mogopa were awakened by police armed with whips, guns, and dogs, and forcibly relocated to a barren town bordering the tribal "homeland" of Bophuthatswana. As villagers watched, bulldozers leveled the

Photo © Paul Weinberg

schoolhouses, clinic, two churches, and their decades-old stone houses. Their livestock was taken and their produce left unharvested.

"They just put us in a tin house," recalls Jogbeth Moatlhadi. "I was crying, and thought I was going to die."

Forced removals had long been a feature of white South Africa's land policy for rural blacks. As such, Mogopa's experience was nothing new. What is unprecedented, however, is that shiny metal shacks have risen from the rubble outside Ventersdorp in the last two years: The Mogopa people have returned to take back their land. And, following Mogopa's lead, impatient blacks have taken similar wildcat actions at a number of locations around the country.

The most dramatic confrontation over land distribution occurred in May just two miles from Mogopa. Inspired by their neighbors' action, 300 black farmers reoccupied Goedgevonden, the village they had been forced out of in the late 1970s. Right-wing white farmers attacked the group, only to be driven off by gunfire from South African police which left four whites wounded. It is believed to be the first time since Afrikaners took power in 1948 that police opened fire on whites.

These land seizures are part of a burgeoning grass-roots land-reform movement that is prodding and even overtaking official policies from either the South African government or the African National Congress (ANC). At a conference held soon after the release of a government white paper on land reform in March, representatives of some 50,000 people who have been evicted from their communities rejected the government's land-reform package. They vowed to move back and reclaim the land they insist was "stolen" from them. More than any government policies, these grass-roots actions may pose the greatest test to the white community's commitment to genuine reform.

Quietly leading the charge of dispossessed rural blacks, Daniel Molefe, the Mogopa elder who led his village's defiant return to its land, declares, "I am not afraid of the Boers because the land belongs to me and to my grandfather who bought the land for me." Molefe and about 50 other people went back in the fall of 1988 following four years of partly successful court battles, three moves in search of a better home, and widespread misery among the scattered community.

By now some 350 families have returned to Mogopa, despite threats and protests from South African government officials. Negotiations between the Bakwena ba Mogopa and the government are ongoing, and the fate of the village is still officially unresolved. Mogopa lawyers and land activists say privately that the Mogopa people have pretty much won the battle and will be allowed to remain.

Sitting with Molefe outside his corrugated steel home, I see signs of the rejuvenated village's life everywhere. Goats and chickens belonging to the villagers run about, and people come and go from a small shop that a neighbor has opened. I ask Molefe if he is worried about being forced out again in the future. Peering from beneath a tattered derby, he says softly but firmly: "The community is moving no more. You can arrest us, you can put us in jail, you can kill us. But we shall be happy we died on our own land."

The land question is easily the most emotional and explosive issue confronting a changing South Africa, especially in rural areas. The question is this: how to redress the consequences of racist land policies that have reserved 87% of South Africa for whites—who comprise 14% of the population—and have provided the legal basis for forcibly relocating

Photo © David Goodman

REVERENCE—AND RESISTANCE: ***Tending graves of relatives, member of Bakwena ba Mogopa tribe symbolizes a people's strong ties to their land.***

WITH THE LAND ACTS, BLACKS FOUND THEMSELVES 'PARIAHS IN THE LAND OF THEIR BIRTH.'

millions of blacks to barren wastelands?

South African State President F.W. de Klerk offered his answer to the thorny dilemma. De Klerk won qualified praise for his effort to lead white South Africans in negotiations with the black majority over a new constitution for the country, but the land issue remained an enormous problem.

In early February, de Klerk announced that the Land Acts, a pillar of apartheid, would be repealed. "Land reform should be dealt with fundamentally and comprehensively," he wrote in the government white paper on land reform that was released on March 13. Parliament followed suit by repealing the Land Acts in June. But conservatives succeeded in postponing until next year key rural land reform legislation, thus leaving in limbo the 47% of the black population that lives in rural areas.

Mr. de Klerk warned when introducing his package of reforms, "No one dares underestimate the emotion and even the potential conflict attached to land rights." He hoped to forge a delicate balance between placating blacks and reassuring whites. So far, he has succeeded at neither goal.

At the heart of de Klerk's policy is the abolition of all racially based land legislation, such as the Land Acts, and an insistence that free-market forces determine future land relations. Blacks are thus free to buy land and settle where they please for the first time in the history of white-ruled South Africa. But the government white paper also includes guarantees that local communities will be able to preserve their "community norms and standards," a caveat that critics claim is "apartheid in disguise."

The critical flaw in the government's formula is that the majority of blacks have been reduced to abject poverty as a result of past land laws, and lack the resources to purchase land.

By further denying blacks any form of reparations for land and livestock that were taken from them, the new laws effectively entrench white privilege and land ownership. It is a final irony that the government should now appeal to "free market" principles, which were anathema to previous land policies.

The ANC has denounced the government's overtures, noting bitterly, "The government takes the geography of apartheid as its starting point and explicitly refuses to deal with the landlessness and dispossession that is the direct legacy of apartheid's policy."

The dispossession of blacks became official government policy with the passage of the Land Acts of 1913 and 1936. The acts set aside a mere 13% of the countryside for occupation by blacks. As a leading ANC member observed in 1916, "Awakening on Friday morning, 20 June, 1913, the South African native found himself, not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth."

The intended effect of these acts was steadily realized in the ensuing decades: Blacks, many of whom had been successful commercial farmers, were soon unable to support themselves in any way but as wage laborers. By contrast, the legislation was a windfall for whites: Poor white farmers were suddenly endowed with large tracts of prime agricultural land, and the rapidly growing diamond- and gold-mining industries had a vast supply of cheap labor at their disposal.

The strategy adopted for eradicating black villages, or "black spots," from areas that were subsequently declared "white areas" was to forcibly uproot villagers and move them into overcrowded black reserves known as homelands, or Bantustans; 3.5 million blacks have been forcibly relocated since 1913.

Forced removals began receiving increased international attention in the early 1980s, when the South African government attempted to evict some of the oldest communities still remaining in white areas. Among the remaining "black spots" was Mogopa, which became, as The Washington Post reported, "South Africa's most notorious forced removal."

New forced removals of villages have stopped. Instead, the government is busy evicting the increasing number of previously removed communities that are reoccupying their land. A new generation of re-removals has thus been catalyzed by the government's inadequate reforms. In confusion, the government is trying to stem the flood for which it opened the gates.

Not far from Mogopa, down a dirt road and across a lattice of cattle fences, I arrive on the tree-shaded streets of Ventersdorp. Ventersdorp is surrounded by a beautiful landscape mosaic of tan, green, and rich red earth. This is white South Africa's heartland; accordingly, it has achieved notoriety as the headquarters of the neo-Nazi Afrikaner Resistance Movement. The enormous rank of grain silos towering above the town confirms the role of farming as the lifeblood of the white community that lives here. The horizon line is broken by black farm workers in colorful coveralls, stooping over to plant the season's first seeds.

I stop at a large farm to visit with its owner, Hennie du Plessis. The Du Plessises are an anomaly in Ventersdorp—a liberal English family in the heart of a staunchly conservative Afrikaner community. In spite of the clannish nature of Afrikaner society, Hennie du Plessis has been repeatedly reelected to

one of the most powerful positions in the farming community: He is a director of the local branch of a $723 million-a-year regional agricultural cooperative.

"The farming sector is in poor health," du Plessis concedes bluntly over dinner at his sprawling ranch-style home one evening. Du Plessis would know. He is responsible for managing the debt of struggling farmers in the cooperative. "I reckon we'll lose another 30% of the farmers in the next three to four years," he says matter-of-factly.

South African white farmers have long enjoyed substantial government support. Farm subsidies at one time comprised 20% of the average farm income. These subsidies were aimed partly at winning the political loyalty of farmers to the ruling National Party. After years of easy credit, big spending, international sanctions, and a decade with numerous drought years, South Africa's white farmers are now struggling. By 1989 the total debt of farmers reached a staggering $5.6 billion—more than double the country's net farming income.

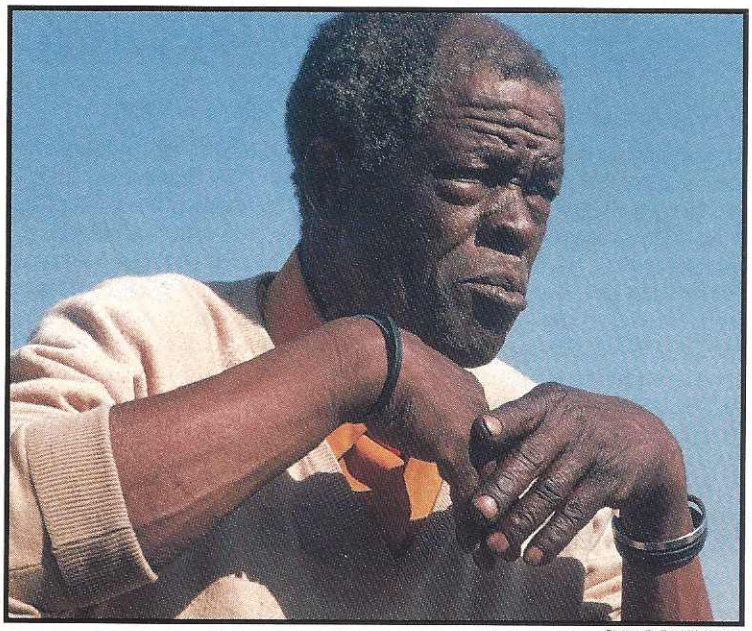


Photo © Paul Weinberg

MOLEFE: ***"I am not afraid of the Boers."***

The hard times facing South Africa's farmers have been a major factor in the growth of the white right wing. "Ninety-nine percent of the farmers who are failing are the very conservative ones," observes du Plessis. "They blame their failure on the fact that the government doesn't help them enough, and is giving all the money to blacks instead of trying to save struggling white farmers."

Du Plessis disagrees with this sentiment: "A lot of our farmers are not succeeding because they've never applied modern farming and business methods to their work. They're not keeping up with the times."

At a cattle sale the following day, fear about land nationalization comes up often in my conversations with farmers. "From a farming point of view, the land is the main issue—whether they take my land," Piet Viljoen says as we mill around the noisy stockyard. Viljoen is a farmer and a Conservative Party member of the Ventersdorp city council. A soft-spoken man, he displays a degree of militancy that surprises me. "If it will go into an armed struggle in the end, I'm willing to go that far to preserve my way of life. I've got no problem with that."

The cattle sale is followed by an evening banquet. It is attended by farmers and their spouses, all turned out in their finest. Trophies gleam in the hands of proud owners of winning livestock, and couples step out to the tune of a country swing band.

Over the din of the music, I hear a number of farmers echo Piet Viljoen's bluster about fighting to preserve their land. It is an ironic sentiment in light of what is actually happening in South Africa's white heartland. White South Africans are indeed struggling and losing their land—but it is to white creditors, not black nationalists.

The expropriation of private land is by far the hottest issue on the land-reform plate of the African National Congress. Since 1955 the Freedom Charter has been the ANC's guiding policy document. The charter declared that "the land shall be shared among those who work it," which has long been interpreted as a vague blueprint for fundamental land redistribution in a post-apartheid society.

Today the ANC is soft-pedaling the notion of expropriating large amounts of white-owned land for use by dispossessed blacks. In a "discussion document" issued earlier this year by the ANC Land Commission to its regional offices, ANC land activists warn: "Some people think that the answer to the land problem is to nationalize the land. But this is not the easy solution that we used to think it was." The document cites problems that resulted from land nationalization in Mozambique and the Soviet Union. Indeed, black activists harbor little affection for the notion of massive state land ownership, having seen such schemes exploited for the benefit of corrupt puppet leaders in South Africa's desperate Bantustans.

But the ANC remains under intense pressure from its grass-roots activists to win back lost lands. The question is, at what price? "Some people say there shouldn't be any compensation [to whites for expropriating their land] because the land was robbed from us," explained Derek Hanekom, a staff member of the ANC Land Commission. "I think the dominant position at the moment is that there should be compensation, but the details have to be worked out. It is not clear what one would consider to be fair compensation."

In its national conference this past July, the ANC set forth its land-reform strategy in a "land manifesto." A central ANC demand is the establishment of a land-claims court that could return land or require reparations where land was taken unjustly. The ANC is also calling for the state to "play a leading role in the acquisition and redistribution of land to the poor." "Expropriation with just compensation" is mentioned as one of a variety of ways for the state to facilitate land redistribution. "Nationalization" is not even mentioned in the manifesto.

The government had originally dismissed the

'THEY EXPROPRIATED OUR LAND FOR THEIR CATTLE,' A MOGOPA LEADER SAYS.

notion that confiscated land be returned to blacks. "A program for the restoration of land to individual communities who were forced to give up their land on account of past policies...would not be feasible," insisted Jacob de Villiers, minister of agriculture and development aid, in an interview in April this year. A political uproar ensued, and by June the government announced that it would establish an Advisory Commission on Land Allocation that will hear disputes over land ownership and make nonbinding recommendations to de Klerk.

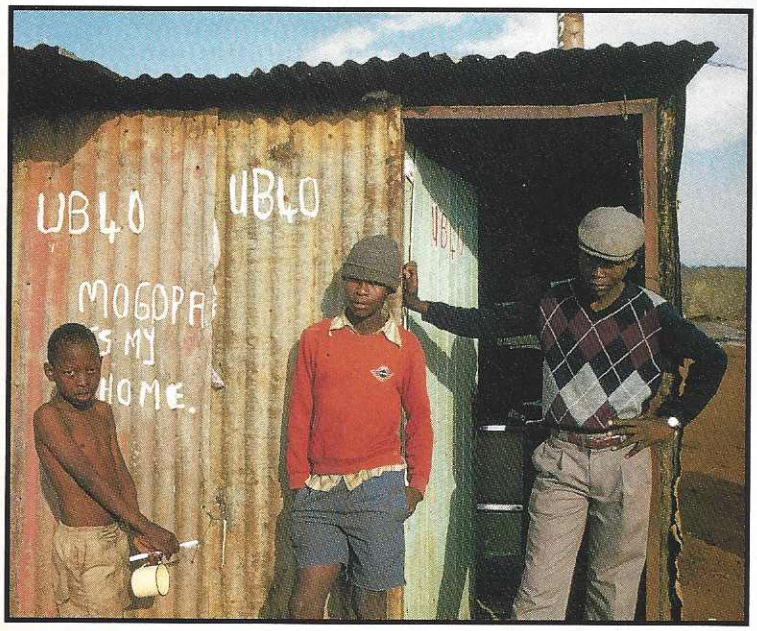


Photo © Paul Weinberg

A HOME, NOT A HOMELAND: ***Makeshift camps, such as one near Ventersdorp, sprang up when villagers refused to accept government relocation to Bophuthatswana.***

While having no enforcement powers, the commission represents an important victory for land activists. Aninka Claassens, a researcher at the Center for Applied Legal Studies at the University of the Witswatersrand, observed: "I don't think its significance is in what [the commission] itself is going to do or not do. I think the significance is that they've conceded the principle, and that is going to get exploited rapidly."

In his land reform white paper, President de Klerk had laid out a range of rural development and technical assistance programs that would be implemented. But, as mentioned earlier, when land reform legislation was passed by parliament in June, notably absent was de Klerk's proposed rural development legislation, which conservative white leaders succeeded in having postponed until next year. The only rural land reform measure now planned by the government is the allocation of 500,000 hectares (about 1.24 million acres) of land to black small farmers. This land will barely suffice for the more than 12 million blacks who live in rural areas of South Africa and the Bantustans.

According to de Villiers, the government currently has no funds allocated for rural reforms. The government appears to be postponing what promises to be a daunting expense.

The Urban Foundation, a private-sector South African think tank, estimates that implementing a comprehensive rural-development and land-reform strategy will cost more than $1 billion over the next four years.

De Klerk's failure to win passage of all of his reforms reflects the deep divisions in the white community on the land issue, and especially the fears of rural whites—fears demonstrated in February when farmers besieged Pretoria with tractors and trucks to protest impending land reforms. The South African Agricultural Union, the national farmers' body, has backed de Klerk's reforms, but a leading member organization, the Transvaal Agricultural Union, voted overwhelmingly to fight to preserve white farmland.

The future of the land reform process will ultimately be determined in negotiations over a new constitution. Only a democratically elected government will have the mandate and authority to enact controversial fundamental reforms. The efforts of the present white government, while representing a departure from past practices, are little more than a weak salve to the deep wounds of the black majority.

Now, back in Mogopa, Matthew Mpshe, chairman of the Mogopa Community Committee, takes me to visit the metal-sided clinic the returning villagers have rebuilt, and introduces me to the health-care worker whose training the community has helped pay for.

Later we walk to the new school. It is a cinderblock building with a spacious view of the surrounding fields. The old school was demolished during the removal, and one of the first actions the people took when they returned was to reconstruct the building, which took them seven days. The school's reopening in February was marked by a joyous celebration.

Mpshe reflects on the rationale for the community's removal. "They expropriated this land for their cattle," he says in disbelief, noting that the communal land had simply been used for livestock grazing in the community's absence. "I don't think cattle are better than people."

Mpshe looks over at the school and speaks proudly of the effort that went into rebuilding it. Walking through the empty classrooms, he says softly, "What the Boers break, we will build." WM