

Transkei — a Retrograde Step

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INDIVIDUAL ownership of land is to replace the traditional communal ownership in the Transkei—a native reserve in South Africa—which is approximately 16,500 sq. miles in area and is located in the South Eastern part of the Republic of South Africa.

This proposal and the justification for it are given in an article by Gilbert L. Rutman, Associate Professor at Southern Illinois University, in the November 1969 issue of *Land Economics*.*

Says the article "The majority of the African males in the Transkei temporarily migrate to industrial centres in search of wage employment, while their dependents remain at home to farm the family's land in accordance with tribal custom. In order to encourage a greater amount of investment in agriculture by these Africans (known as the Xhosa-speaking people), the nationalist government of South Africa is reducing the traditional powers of the native authorities by giving to these peasants individual rights to the land. White officials fear, however, that the transition in one step from a usufruct to an individual land tenure system would meet with strong resistance from these Africans because their economic life is still governed by tribal law and customs. For this reason the government intends only to modify the usufruct system at the present time, or in other words, to move to an intermediate stage between usufruct and individual tenure. The move toward private property is considered sufficient to create a progressive peasantry."

The author points out that prior to European contact in the eighteenth century the Transkeian African lived under a tribal system where land used for agricultural purposes was abundant—so abundant that it carried a zero price to the individual. Also, that since land was plentiful there was no incentive for anyone to establish a system of individual and private rights to land. The author quotes T. R. Batten author of *Problems of African Development* as follows: "Land was considered by most Africans in much the same way as Europeans think of sunshine and air—equally plentiful, equally necessary, and equally to be shared by all members of the community according to their needs. Land had no price and was not for sale."

The ownership of land, explains Professor Rutman, resided with the group; in the Transkei the native authorities performed the function of caretakers or

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administrators. All members of the tribe had equal rights to the community's land and no boundaries were set. Although cultivation was practised on allotted plots of land the harvests belonged exclusively to the cultivator thus the communal ownership of land did not imply nor necessitate the communal ownership of production. Arable reverted to pasturage immediately after the harvest. Land not used for individual cultivation was used for communal grazing for the tribe's livestock which were individually owned.

It is observed that for the very reason that land was abundant, and in communal ownership, modern forms of capital were practically non-existent, the African tending to select those production techniques that minimised the use of labour. The large areas, of vacant land made livestock production relatively attractive.

The author makes a brief reference to the conflicts between Europeans and the African natives which arose, he suggests, from the "continual demand for new land by the tribe because of the growth of livestock and human populations." One wonders whether perhaps it was the other way round, namely that the demand for new land by the European settlers caused the conflicts. Whatever the cause the outcome was that the European restricted the African's homeland to definite boundaries and the ultimate effect was a "shortage of land".

In 1964 the amount of arable land available per family was estimated at only three to five morgen (one morgen equals 2.117 acres), too small, given the present techniques of production, to feed the peasant and his family.

The grain deficit, explains the author, is currently financed out of the earnings of migratory workers; these earnings average about \$200 to \$600 per year. During the early 1960's it was estimated that at any one time 225,000 to 250,000 African males were engaged in wage employment on a yearly contract outside the Transkei; this amounts to over 50 per cent of the adult males between the age of fifteen and twenty.

Because of the shortage of land a rationing system had to be introduced. Various allocations of land were made to tribal members.

"The major change in the land tenure system is the division of the arable land into rectangular plots of equal size and the granting of title to these plots to present land holders in each of the Transkei's villages with the proviso that no new arable land will be added

and that these plots cannot be subdivided but must be passed on to the eldest son." "The result," says the author, "will be a growing landless class in the Transkei."

It is argued that forms of individual tenure will evolve "naturally" from land scarcity conditions. That is to say when land becomes an "economic factor" the people will change the tribal institutions to allow for the private acquisition of land.

The argument for individual ownership of land is based upon the fact that cultivators will not invest their capital or improve land if the benefits of such operations are shared by others who have equal rights of grazing; that the African makes no attempt to protect his land from soil erosion because a large part of the gains from such investments accrues to his neighbours who may not be similarly engaged. Further, he will not invest in improving the land, for example, by planting tree crops, because he cannot realize the capitalized value of any improvements he may make through the sale of his land. The result is that the individual African peasant refuses to invest voluntarily in the maintenance of conservation works so that the primary responsibility for investment in the land remains entirely in the hands of the Government.

In addition, it is argued that under the present system an individual African cannot accumulate enough land to make full time farming a profitable venture and that the absence of private property rights to land impedes private investment in improving the land because of divergencies in private and social benefits.

A major precondition, then, for making agriculture an attractive venture for individual farmers, concludes the author, must be "the introduction of individual tenure in the case of both the arable and pastoral land which would eliminate both of the problems discussed above."

There is a certain logic in the argument. Unless producers can be assured of the full fruits of their labour together with security of tenure, they will not produce to the maximum and make the best use of their resources. The answer, however, is not the private *ownership* of land but the private *possession* of land, i.e. possession on the same basis as private ownership and carrying with it all the advantages of private ownership with security of tenure so long as each occupier contributes to a common fund for the privileges he

enjoys. In this manner we can have the best of both worlds, safeguarded individual enterprise and safeguarded communal rights to land.

Leaving aside the question of the availability of other land, security of individual tenure should lead to increased production. To achieve this by absolute ownership is to lay the foundations of future strife. Improved production techniques, invention and the institution of private enterprise have not in themselves ensured the abolition of poverty as the United States as a prime example testifies.