PARTY POLITICS AND THE PLURAL SOCIETY: SOUTH AFRICA 1910-1929

by

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To all reasonable appearances the study of party politics in South Africa is the study of white politics. Since Union the white community has enjoyed a virtual monopoly of the electoral and parliamentary processes. To use a Namerian concept, the political nation has approximated to the white electorate. Only white political parties have been able to function. The issues dividing these parties would seem, in the main, to have been issues internal to the white community. Whether white politics are regarded,as Hancock puts it, as "a debate among Afrikaners about what to do about the English", the result is the same. Language equality, the "two streams" policy, "South Africa first", and the future of the imperial connection - all were "white-white" issues. They make perfect sense on their own terms, and they represent the South African version of similar issues that arose at the same time in the other Dominions and in Ireland. In South Africa, in fact, they engendered more bitterness and violence than elsewhere. Even so, they seem to have little relevance to the concerns of the non-white communities making up the majority of the population. (1921 Census: European 1,519,488; Asiatic 165,731; Mixed and other (Coloured) 545,548; Bantu 4,697,813. Total: 6,928,580.)

The reality was that all political life in South Africa was set in the framework of a plural or multi-racial society. Even accepting that the history of party politics must in the main, almost by definition, be that of white politics, it would clearly involve serious distortion to ignore the multi-racial dimension. There are various ways in which the fact of the plural society can be seen to penetrate party developments. If there were only whites to consider, we should not talk of "white politics". There have always been two strands in South African politics, one of white-white questions and the other of black-white questions, and they have always been closely interwoven. The black-white strand did not suddenly appear in the apartheid general election of 1948. It was already there in the general elections of 1924 and 1929. It has also been present in many ostensibly white-white issues. The Nationalists found it a simple matter, as early as 1914, to link the question of the imperial connection to that of the treatment of Indians in South Africa. The question of immigration has always had a plural side. The Afrikaner fear and the English hope was that immigration would one day give the English section a majority among the whites. But, from the white

point of view, immigration could also mean an improvement of the ratio of white to black. In the period covered here it was the Afrikaner fear that prevailed. Only the Unionists (the party of the "South African British") advocated state-subsidized immigration, while the South African Party expressed tepid approval for "desirable European immigration". The Nationalist programme of principles explicitly rejected any expenditure on immigration until the state had facilitated the settlement on the land of "burgers" (meaning primarily, in this context, poor whites).

This paper will attempt to cover two broad aspects of the connections between the plural society and the workings of party politics. The first concerns the relation between what used to be called "Native Policy" to party politics. The second assesses the relevance of political activity on the part of the non-whites themselves, including the limited access of some of them to the franchise in the Cape.

Despite the presence of a plural dimension in practically all political questions in South Africa, a determined effort was made to keep especially "Native Affairs" in as separate a category of treatment as was possible. Part of the background to this was that the assumption, hardly challenged in these years, that the colonial powers in Africa were in the position of ruling trustees for their African subjects, was applied to the government and parliament of the Union as well. This approach meant the expectation of a paternalist policy, perhaps even in perpetuity, especially if it was held that the wards were racially inferior. At the same time even a paternalist policy was meant to show progress of a kind, though not necessarily political advancement. The ideal, if vague, requirement was that the ruling white minority in South Africa should raise the backward African majority in the scale of civilization.

Almost from the moment political parties made their appearance in the Union, the wish was expressed that Native Affairs should be kept out of party politics as far as possible. In Botha's manifesto of principles for the S.A.P. in 1911, the following appears, taking its cue from Het Volk, the Botha-Smuts party in the Transvaal, five years earlier:

> "The placing of the Native Question above party politics, and the honourable and sympathetic treatment of the coloured races in a broad and liberal spirit."

This aspiration had a constructive side. If Native Policy became a football between the parties, the vacillations that would result might prove harmful and bewildering to the wards. This view was shared by the small band of dedicated and expert administrators in this field (mainly Cape officials) that the Union had inherited from the colonial era. They had no wish to work in a framework of policy changes contingent upon party fluctuations or the changing personnel at the head of the Native Affairs ministry. As they saw it, the party system encouraged lobbying by special interests, such as farmers, landowners,

the mines, liquor producers and traders. Concessions to these would mean arbitrary decisions and their frequent reversal instead of a coherent and consistent policy based upon their own kind of expertise. The fact that almost half of the Union's Africans - those on the reserves designated in 1913 - were under the tutelage of such administrators lent further weight to their views.

The negative side of the idea of keeping Native Affairs out of party politics was revealed by Smuts before Union, when he remarked to Merriman that he did not believe in "politics for them", the Africans. Most politicians outside the Cape, and also the administrative experts, were in agreement with this notion that it was wiser to think in terms of excluding Africans from the ordinary political process. In his famous address to the Royal Colonial Institute and the African Society in 1917, Smuts went further: "White and black are different not only in colour, but almost in soul; they are different in political structure, and their political institutions should be different ..." But keeping "black and white ... as far apart as possible in government" did not mean any relaxation of white rule.

Also implied in the attempt to exclude Native Affairs from the party arena was the idea that their administration could then take place on a basis of white consensus. This was favoured by those who wished to avoid the suggestion of weakness that would be apparent in frequent policy changes. In a sense this was a variant of the standard argument for the unity of the whites in the light of their vulnerability as a minority. Where was unity more necessary than in the area of Native Policy itself? In practice, this unity was not attained and Native Affairs were always the concern, and at times the main concern, of the political parties. Equally, the differences between the parties on most other issues seldom lacked a bearing on Native Affairs themselves. It is worth asking questions about the influence of the vagaries of party fortunes and the facts of white division on the evolution of actual policy measures. One area to be investigated would be the role of grass-roots opinion, as expressed in resolutions at party conferences, for example, in the devising of policy by the leaders. The foundation congress of the S.A.P. in 1911 provides early evidence for such opinion. Farmers pressed their need for more labour and their fear of competition from the mines and towns. Other resolutions from the branches demonstrate rank and file hostility to any increase in the ownership and utilization of land by Africans. Calls were made for a law to prevent "squatting" by Africans on white farms. Hostility was expressed against what was called "Kaffir farming", whether by absentee and syndicate owners (including the mining companies in the northern Transvaal) or by wealthy and progressive farmers.

Politics in South Africa were sufficiently <u>elitist</u> in character to prevent the leadership from being stampeded by such pressures as these. To some extent the leaders themselves derived from backgrounds in which these attitudes were more or less universally accepted. This would be true of Botha and Hertzog, if not of Smuts. They all worked subject to the knowledge that these

attitudes were widely held among both their supporters and their opponents. To ignore them would mean not only inviting a popular veto on measures that liberal opinion might see as enlightened, but risking the penalty of defeat at the polls.

All this can readily be illustrated. Grass-roots opinion in the S.A.P. achieved legislative expression in the Native Land Act of 1913, in particular in the restrictions on African land purchase in those areas designated as white. Whereas the Beaumont Commission and the subsequent local committees reported in 1917/18 in favour of the consolidation of African landholding within the reserves, Botha shrank from placing their proposals before parliament. Whereas Smuts was proud of the degree of consensus he achieved in carrying through his own legislation on Native Affairs from 1919 to 1923 (taking the subject out of party politics once more), he was, in fact, under constant Nationalist and Labour criticism for not taking segregation far enough. During the passage of his Natives (Urban Areas) Act of 1923 he abandoned a vital principle, present in his original bill, by surrendering to the Nationalist insistence that there should be no guaranteed freehold or other security of tenure for Africans in the towns.

The statesman grappling with Native Policy was in constant danger of being outbid from the right. After the S.A.P. found itself in opposition in 1924, it made an occasional clumsy resort to the same technique: for example, Smuts' opposition to the principle of a minimum wage in the Wage Act of 1925, on the debatable ground that it would have the effect of reducing the wages of the most skilled white workers. More significant was that in office Hertzog himself aroused some rumblings of right wing discontent. Tielman Roos and other Transvaal Nationalists objected to his undertaking to leave the voting rights of Cape Coloureds undisturbed, while removing those of the Africans. They also disliked his proposals for the purchase, at the white taxpayer's expense, of more land for Africans as a kind of quid pro quo for the loss of the franchise.

There is evidence here of the exploitation of Native Policy differences as a weapon in the struggle between the parties for electoral support. The policies that emerged were devised and applied not in vacuo but in terms involving constant calculations as to what popular white reactions were likely to be. Hertzog was a statesman of sufficient stature to avoid deliberate pandering, at the stage of policy formulation, to extreme prejudice. But, as the "Black Peril" campaign of 1929 showed, he was fully alive to the device of appealing to prejudice for immediate electoral advantage.

Formal party statements on Native Policy over the period as a whole are not very enlightening. The consistent Nationalist principle was white domination "in a spirit of Christian trusteeship", with firm opposition to any "mixing of the races". The native should be given the opportunity to "develop himself according to his natural inclination and capacity" (Programme of Principles, 1925, article 10 [e]). The Unionists, as the chief opposition party in the decade after 1910, made little attempt to offer a coherent alternative to the policy

of the governing S.A.P. While accepting the broad principle of white supremacy, the party embraced both Cape and "northern" schools on the issue of non-white political rights and displayed comparable internal differences on the merits of a white labour policy and the industrial colour bar. After its absorption of the Unionists in 1920, the S.A.P. added to its appeal for inter-party co-operation "the endeavour to secure for the native races their natural and distinct development", together with the pious hope that "all grounds for future discord between white and black shall be avoided" (Programme of Principles, 1923, article 9). Labour party policy statements were dominated by the generally segregationist views of its leader, Creswell, together with specific demands for an industrial colour bar. The small "war-on-war" group which broke away in 1915 under the influence of W. H. Andrews to form the International Socialist League entertained a conception of the working class that incorporated the black worker as well as the white, but its electoral influence proved to be small.

If Native Policy came to serve as a convenient weapon in the party struggle, it was not one that could effectively be resorted to automatically and continuously. White agreement on essentials, such as the principle of permanent white supremacy was one reason for this. For a wedge to be driven between the parties in this sphere, fairly concrete and specific issues had first to arise. Throughout the period politicians, both those in and out of office, had many other more pressing interests. Some of these centred on the task of constructive state-building that had to be embarked upon after the creation of the Union. Others concerned the passions aroused by war, rebellion and strikes accompanied by violence. Unless some sectional white interest became involved and made itslef heard, or unless a threat was posed to law and order, Native Affairs were on the whole left to take their own course. Once the Native Lands Act had been passed in 1913, the inertia that set in was not broken until after the war. By then the course of social change - principally the migration of many Africans to the towns to join and compete with "poor whites" in the labour market - was forcing a new range of problems on the government. It was against this background that Smuts made his own contribution to Union Native Policy.

As far as the Pact parties are concerned, it would be incorrect to suggest that after the Rand Revolt they simply fastened on the industrial colour bar as a convenient vote catcher. That had been precisely the issue at stake in the Rand Revolt, which arose out of a dispute that began outside the sphere to party politics. The Pact parties went to work in a climate of demands from white workers and their trade unions for political action to safeguard their privileged status from non-white competition. Smuts could offer them nothing, for in their eyes he stood accused (however inaccurately) of having favoured their "capitalist" opponents. To the extent that the Pact government facilitated the introduction of the industrial colour bar through the passage of the Mines and Works Amendment Act of 1926, this was partly the result of white trade union pressure. The Labour party was taking up the cudgels on behalf of the skilled white artisan, usually of "British" origin, seeking to protect himself from non-white competition. The "civilised labour policy", by which administrative action furnished protected areas of employment in state

undertakings, such as the railways, at rates of pay designed to support a "civilised" (white) standard of living, was designed rather for the unskilled white. Whether of the rural bywoner type or recent arrivals in the towns, the poor whites were mainly Afrikaners, and this aspect of Pact policy was presumably promoted chiefly by the Nationalists.

It has often been suggested that the limited extent to which issues of Native Policy served to divide the white parties was partly a matter of priorities. If there was over-preoccupation with white-white issues, this was because the politicians believed that the establishment of a united white nation was a prerequisite to a successful response to the "Native problem". Smuts, in particular, was inclined to utter warnings at moments of internecine strife among the whites, depicting them as confronted always by the intractable fact of the non-white majority. To the Nationalists these warnings meant little. For them Afrikaner unity was more urgent than white unity. The party was more overtly anti-imperialist than anti-black. Most of their party opponents accepted the same order of priorities. Thus the former Unionist Sir Charles Crewe argued in 1926 on behalf of the S.A.P. that the motivation behind Hertzog's onslaught on the Cape African franchise was to weaken the imperial connection. Since disfranchisement would mean that "nearly 14,000 Britiah votes would be lost", it should be opposed. It was not the upholding of the liberal tradition that was invoked but the need to safeguard the imperial connection against the secessionist party. In practice, of course, the priorities did not work out. The nettle of Native Policy had to be grasped anyway. But it was the primacy of white-white issues and the failure of any stable solution to these to emerge that determined the medium in which the fumbling ruling responses to black-white problems were made.

Turning to the relation of political activity on the part of non-whites themselves to party politics, we begin with the Cape franchise. Before Union, the Cape's African and Coloured voters made up some 16% of the total electorate. In four of the constituencies the figure was 30%, and there were some non-white voters in every constituency. This meant that once a party system had evolved in the Cape, which was the case by 1898, there were several constituencies in which non-white voters held the balance between the two main parties, the S.A.P. and the Progressives. In those seats, mainly in the eastern Cape, in which the non-white voters were mainly Africans, local leaders emerged who in the end decided the question as to which of the two white parties would receive the bulk of the African votes at their disposal. The situation in those seats in which the non-white voters were mainly Coloureds is less clear. There certainly was competition for their votes between the white parties, and this served to divide the African Political Organisation, the main Coloured body. It seems undeniable that in the framework of Cape politics the working of the party system served to safeguard the voting rights of non-whites. The Franchise and Ballot Act of 1892 had been passed with the object of reducing the number of tribal Africans likely to qualify as voters, but at that time there was no proper party system in operation. Largely for the reason that the number of non-white voters remained more or less constant, no later moves were in fact made to raise the qualifications further or to tamper in any way with the non-racial franchise. Such moves would, in any case, have been likely to fail because of the need to obtain the

support of both parties for them. Evidently these party considerations, rather than a Cape liberal tradition conceived in isolation from them, provide the chief explanation for the survival of non-white voting rights there.

Under Union the situation was totally different. The proportion of non-white voters to the total Union electorate was less than 9% by 1929 (Coloureds 5.6%, Africans 3.4%). Since Union constituencies were larger than those of the old Cape assembly, the number of seats in which non-white votes could be decisive was smaller than before, perhaps ten at most, out of a total of 121. Clearly Union had meant a drastic dilution of non-white voting power. The dilution was made almost catastrophic by the legislation of 1930 and 1931. First, white women throughout the Union were enfranchised. In the Cape they were not required to meet the existing economic and literary qualifications. Then, on the logic that the white men of the province should not be required to meet these qualifications while their womenfolk were exempted from them, the qualifications were abolished in respect of white men also. The result was that by 1935 non-white voters constituted only 3.7% of the total Union electorate (Coloureds 2.6%, Africans 1.1%).

Hertzog's developing onslaught on the Cape African franchise has to be viewed in the context of his generally segregationist approach to Native Affairs. He regarded the abolition of that franchise as the key requirement. In view of their numbers, he believed that as more of them qualified for the vote the Africans at the Cape would, in due course, "swamp" the white electorate. Cape members of parliament would gradually find themselves compelled to support what would become universal demands among Union Africans: that the Cape franchise be extended to the other provinces and that non-whites be given the right to sit in parliament. For Hertzog, the immediate danger lay in any increase in the dependence of Cape members of parliament on African voters. As such an increase took place the task of persuading a sufficient number of Cape M.P.s to furnish the necessary two-thirds majority for the abolition of the franchise would become more difficult.

In parliament Hertzog's systematic and open attacks on the Cape franchise for Africans began in 1920. He was clearly not driven to make them by pressures in his own party. Equally, his object was not to secure any petty electoral advantage for it. At the same time, in giving the lead he did he was sure of the backing of the whole of his own party, including its Cape segment, and also much support outside it. From the ranks of his own party the only criticism of his measures in this connection was directed against the compromises he was prepared to make to secure his main objective.

In the case of the S.A.P. as an opposition, party considerations loomed rather larger. Estimates vary, but there were probably only four seats in which the abolition of the franchise for Africans would have involved the loss of S.A.P.-held seats to the Nationalists. Elsewhere in the Cape the S.A.P. would have suffered a net loss of perhaps 8,000 voters spread over all the remaining

constituencies. More significant was the fact that the S.A.P. was divided on the specific issue of the franchise. A small group of liberals, all from the Cape at this time, were wedded to it as a matter of principle. The bulk of the parliamentary party in the other three provinces, including English-speaking members from the Transvaal and Natal, were in fact opposed to the Cape franchise, at least in its application to Africans. As a whole, the party was prepared to accept Smuts's lead. Eventually, after his talks with Hertzog on a possible bi-partisan policy had failed, Smuts called for a second "National Convention" on the whole issue of Native Policy, including the franchise, in order to settle the question outside the sphere of party politics (the familiar illusion) and to secure the greatest possible agreement among the whites. Smuts was also more concerned than Hertzog to obtain some kind of formal African acquiescence in any measures that were taken, perhaps with a view to meeting the criticism that was certain to come from liberal sources outside the country.

In the end, in 1936, with the exception of a handful of members, the parliamentary S.A.P. did vote for the removal of Cape Africans from the common roll. This sequel strengthens the case for regarding the S.A.P. opposition to Hertzog's policy in the late 'twenties as having been determined by party considerations. On the latter occasion, with coalition and fusion having suspended conflict along "normal" two-party lines, these considerations were absent. The fact that such a situation could arise at all points not merely to the inadequacy of the entrenchment negotiated in 1908 but also to the political weakness of the rights that were entrenched. The workings of party politics, including the weight given to what survived of non-white voting strength, gave some protection to these rights - but only for a time. Although the matter was never put to the test, the degree of such protection which the rights had enjoyed in Cape Colony itself, where there had been no entrenchment, was obviously far greater.

On the franchise as well as on other questions that concerned them there were abundant expressions of non-white opinion. Articulate African opinion was virtually unanimous in supporting the retention of the Cape franchise. This applies also to Africans outside the Cape who did not want any separate representation for themselves (which would have improved their own position) if this meant any tampering with the Cape franchise. As Chief Kumalo explained to the Select Committee in 1927, "as long as the Cape people have the vote we hold that in due course of time we shall also have the vote". Such views, together with the demand for the right of Africans to sit in parliament, could be, and were, used by the Nationalists to give substance to their fears about the future effects of the Cape franchise.

As far as non-white political associations and pressure groups are concerned, their roles were necessarily outside the arena of party politics. They were also much weaker structures than the parties and far more divided. They are important less for any power they could exercise than for the opinions and attitudes they expressed. They give us African, Indian and Coloured "voices" rather than political activity in pursuit of attainable ends. Of course, this needs qualification. If the Smuts-Gandhi agreement resulted in any benefits

for Indians, this had something to do with the demonstrations of 1913. It also had to do with the imperial side of the Indian question. On both counts the Nationalists objected to the concessions they held Botha and Smuts to have made. Throughout this period the African National Congress (originally the South African Native National Congress of 1912) was simply a voice. Whether the voice was representative of more than the small group of mission-educated Africans (including hereditary chiefs) from which its membership was drawn seems doubtful.

The case of Clements Kadalie's Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union was clearly different. For a time after World War I this organization of African workers flourished as something of a mass movement, particularly in the Cape's eastern province, and showed itself capable of inspiring strike action. There was a stage during which both Smuts and Hertzog showed some respect for Kadalie and a willingness to accommodate to some of the I.C.U.'s demands. This was clearly linked to the importance of African votes in the Cape at a time of near parity between the two main parties. The indicators are that in the general election of 1921 the influence of the I.C.U. was placed at the disposal of Smuts and the S.A.P., a probability which may explain why the deportation moves against Kadalie were abandoned earlier that year. In the 1924 election the I.C.U. evidently supported the Pact parties, particularly the Nationalists. During the late 'twenties the I.C.U. seems to have declined. Where there were no doubt other causes, the Pact's legislation making strikes by African trade unions illegal, and the section of the Native Administration Act of 1927 directed against those alleged to be promoting "hostility between Natives and Europeans", certainly played a part.

Much that was new in African political activity was taking place as a response to social and economic change. Some of it was local and spontaneous, as was the case with the followers of the prophet Enoch, who were shot down at Bulhoek in 1921, and with several strikes by different groups of African workers. To the extent that new organizations appeared, Africans were conceivably demonstrating more power as we get closer to 1930 than had been possible up to 1910 (if we discount the tribal resistance offered by a section of the Zulus in 1906-8). In relative terms this was entirely dwarfed by the growth in the power of the newly formed, white-dominated state, in terms of its laws as well as its governing and coercive agencies. Such political activity by Africans as there was may have been disliked by most whites, but it could not be regarded as a serious threat to their position. The impact of political activity by non-whites generally was, at the level of party politics, therefore slight.

Hancock observes that, in the general circumstances of the South African situation, the ruling minority would be unlikely to make concessions except under pressure (Smuts, Vol. I, p. 319). Non-white political activity in this period amounted to pressure of a kind. Some capacity for disruptive local action, strikes and passive disobedience was shown. Some contribution was made to an emerging pattern of resistance to "colonial" (or white minority) rule. In the event, the

pressure proved not to be of the kind that was capable of exacting concessions. Instead, the opposite happened and coercive measures on the part of the white-dominated state not only increased but far outstripped the techniques of the non-white organizations. Non-white political activity, by arousing white fears of the consequences, presumably also contributed to a hardening of white attitudes against any non-white political advance. A priori reasoning along these lines needs to be backed by evidence. It is also not clear whether the increase in coercive measures was simply the work of the government and authorities acting on their own initiative, or whether they were responding to the pressures of the political parties and white opinion.

Many non-white critics would take the view that party and other differences among the whites have been, at best, simply irrelevant to the welfare of the non-whites and, at worst, "the quarrels of robbers over the spoils". Whatever the party in power, the policies of government and parliament since Union would be held to have been in the same essential mould and to have served throughout to underpin white supremacy and white economic advantage. This view might endorse the idea that differences in the sphere of Native Policy were in fact quite small but were exaggerated by politicians anxious to forge a new weapon in the party struggle. Alternatively, it might hold that the differences were merely over what were the best means to achieve ends that were a matter of agreement among the whites but worked uniformly to the disadvantage of the non-whites.

The determinist and question-begging streak in this view is present in some other overall approaches to the recent political history of South Africa. It is tempting to regard the triumph of Afrikaner nationalism in 1948 as the terminal point in a prolonged series of moves towards such a goal. The outcome seems almost logical as the function of Afrikaner numerical preponderance in the electorate. The signposts are clear: 1912, 1924 and 1933. The heroes change: first Hertzog, then Malan and Strijdom. Even here the fact of the plural society asserts itself, but in a subsidiary role. What is involved is the apparent tendency of the most explicitly self-interested and discriminatory appeals to the white race to score electoral success. Hertzog was helped in 1924 and 1929, Malan in 1948.

In effect, Union had meant the grant of self-determination, through the institution of parliamentary democracy, to the white electorate. In the long run the right of self-determination was seized and monopolized, within the rules of the constitutional framework, by Afrikaner nationalists. In a sense which was imperfectly recognized at the time, Union also meant the cession to the white minority of political supremacy over all other groups in a plural society. Now it could be held that the institutions of self-government, especially when made the virtual preserve of a minority, would not be workable in a mixed society (again, in the long run) along lines that would be regarded as normal elsewhere. They would tend to be manipulated by the privileged minority to entrench its position still further and to protect special interests within the fold. Sooner or later, in reaction, challenges to the political system would come from the subject groups, at first over particular questions but ultimately against the

very basis of the system itself. The response of the ruling minority would then be to seek to suppress these challenges through the power of the state. Logically, the process could end in the destruction of even the trappings of the system of parliamentary democracy on which that power was originally based. In applying Acton's dictum in this way, we are clearly shifting from party politics to the roots of authoritarian rule in South Africa. At the same time, if there is any sense in this approach, the tendency adduced might well have been present from the start, and th historian trying to keep party politics in view would then certainly encounter it.

The determinist element in the approaches just discussed should not be accepted uncritically. Lord Selborne complained that "a parliament of white men" was the worst form of government for an African majority. On the other hand, it could be shown that over the years the parliamentary system has not necessarily been the most efficient instrument of oppression and exploitation. Justice must also be done to the fluidity that was so often a feature of the political situation. As far as party fortunes are concerned, there have been moments of great uncertainty in South Africa - for example, in this period, at the general elections of 1915, 1920 and even 1924. The complexities only emerge when the problems are investigated in detail. To illuminate this "Dark Age" in South African history, the studies in depth still have to be done.

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