



## Chapter One

# South Africa before Industrial Times

South Africa today is an industrial society. People need money to buy most of their daily needs, and the things they buy are manufactured in factories.

We no longer grow our own food, or make our own clothes from home-made materials, or build our own houses. Nowadays, most people work for a wage.

Until about 200 years ago, however, most people in South Africa had no money. For food, they grew crops and kept cattle, sheep and goats. Nearly everything they needed they had to make themselves.

Few people lived in the towns. Most people, white trekkers as well as blacks, lived on the land. From the land, they were able to produce their basic needs. For the sake of convenience, we will call these pre-industrial people *subsistence farmers*, living in a *subsistence society*.

Subsistence society in South Africa was much the same as subsistence societies anywhere in the world: people aimed to reproduce themselves and to feed their families. The most important things therefore were:

- land;
- domestic animals such as

- sheep, cattle or goats;
- the family and family labour;
- the community;
- trade.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF LAND

Land was vital in subsistence society for many reasons. Land provided people with crops for food; it supported cattle and other animals which were used for food, clothing and labour. Land also provided the materials such as clay, bricks and thatch for building houses.

Without the right to use land, people in subsistence society could not survive. Many wars were fought over the ownership or use of land.

The quality of land was very important, too. Land with rivers, or land with good pasture was in

great demand. The Tswana, for example, settled near springs; the main chiefdoms in Zululand developed in areas where there was the best combination of soil, pasturage and water. This access to good land was a great help in building up their cattle, wealth and power in later years.

### CATTLE

In South Africa cattle were very important for both black and white subsistence farmers. Cattle provided milk and meat; their skins were used for clothes and shoes.

In black societies, cattle were used for religious ceremonies and also for lobola, which was an important part of the economy. Lobola was an exchange of cattle for a fruitful marriage. If the



*Left: Women were all trained in pottery, but the work of the best potters was always in demand.*

*Below: Craftsmen forged iron into farming tools and weapons of hunting and war. Iron workers held an honoured position in society.*

wife proved infertile, her family would be obliged to give in marriage a second daughter. Lobola also enabled the bride's brothers in turn to afford the lobola for marriage and children themselves. Lobola circulated wealth and helped to build up the population and labour power of the family.

A man's wealth and power were therefore measured by his cattle.

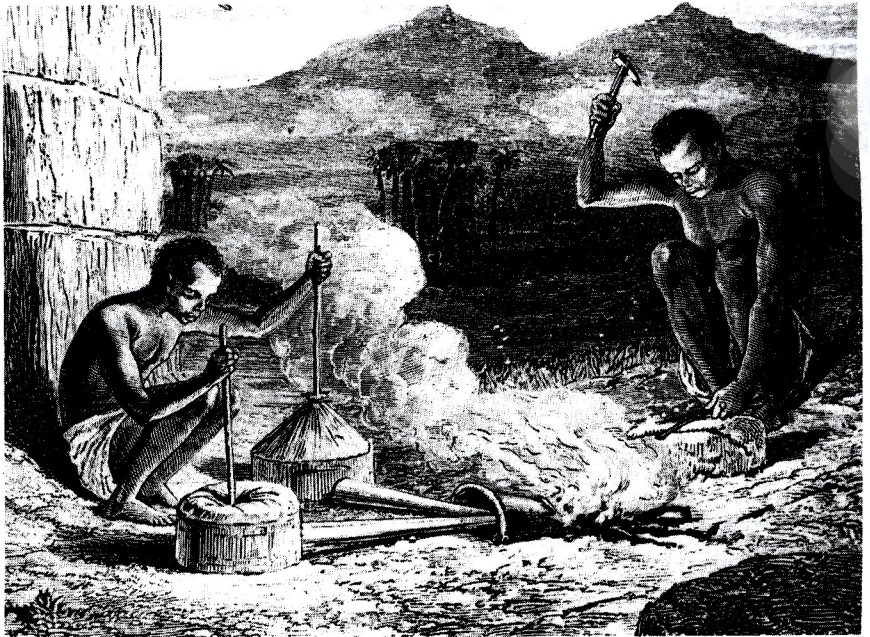
### THE FAMILY

Because of people's close ties to the land in subsistence society, it was important to have enough labour to work it. More labour produced more food. This labour came from the family. Families in subsistence societies were large — they usually consisted of the father, his wives and children, plus any unmarried relatives who might be needing a home.

The members of the family worked together to produce their basic needs. They shared many of the daily tasks. At the same time, each member of the family had his or her own job. The women would usually grow the food and prepare it. They were skilled in pottery and made other things for the home. They also raised the children. The older girls helped the adult women in their tasks.

The men hunted and supervised the older boys, training them to look after the animals. In time, a man became the head of a family, with a duty to protect it in times of danger.

Some men were trained to do specialist tasks — there were



people who were healers and spiritual leaders, some were musicians, others learned the craft of iron-making. Iron-makers held an honoured position in subsistence society. They had a valuable skill, providing farmers with iron implements and soldiers with weapons of war.

It is easy to see why people wanted large families in subsistence societies — more people would make work easier to share out. Even children played their part in helping the family to survive, doing whatever small tasks they could. Children were always welcome in subsistence societies.

### THE COMMUNITY

The family was able to make or produce most of what it needed. But there were some tasks that could not be performed by the family alone. Hunting, for example, needed to be carried

out by a large party of men, more than a family could provide.

Sometimes, too, there were dangers. People needed to protect themselves. Large groups or communities gave them strength against natural hazards, and against those who tried to take their land away from them.

As the groups grew larger, they developed into *chiefdoms*. The leader or chief was expected to speak and act on behalf of the community.

Loyalty to the community was very important in subsistence society, for the community worked for the well-being of all its members. The community would not hesitate to make sacrifices to help if one of its kinsfolk was in trouble. Life-long friendships were formed by members of the same age-group, and hospitality, too, was most important.

In subsistence society, there-

fore, people were *community based* — they did not think of working only for themselves, or for their immediate family alone, but saw themselves as members of a community. Their fortunes rose or fell with the fortunes of the community.

In African subsistence societies in particular, there were no great class differences. This was mainly because there were no great property owners. No one man could have land to own and use as he liked. He could use the land, but if he used it badly, then the chief would take it back.

The chief decided how much land each family needed, so that there would be no disputes.

In South Africa, most black subsistence farmers were skilled farmers working under difficult conditions. Although land was plentiful a few hundred years ago, there was not much rainfall

and the soil was not rich. But farmers practised methods of soil conservation and irrigation. They were quick to improve farming methods and to cultivate new crops such as mealies and tomatoes, which were brought from outside Africa.

When the land no longer produced good crops or good grazing for the animals, people moved on to new land together, while the old land rested.

In later years, when whites came to South Africa, they, too, moved in groups, and they, too, appointed leaders to be their chiefs to prevent quarrelling and to organise fighting in times of war.

## TRADE

Although the community was mostly able to produce its own

needs, there nevertheless was some brisk trading in subsistence society. In hard times, such as drought, trade helped to get essential food for the community. In good times, when the community produced more than it needed, they used their surplus to trade for additional goods which they could not easily produce themselves.

In the wetter climate of Zululand, for example, it was easier to grow good crops of maize. The people there were able to exchange this maize for oxen, which were bred in the drier uplands. Hundreds of years ago, the Venda and the Phalaborwa were using their access to iron to conduct regular trading from the western Transvaal (as we know it today) right across to the coast.

Trade was also conducted with non-Africans. Ivory, iron, tin and animal skins were much sought

*The trading post.*



after by Arab and European trading ships many years before white settlement in South Africa. Blacks would exchange these goods for glass beads, brass and, later, guns.

Up to about 200 years ago, however, trade was not so important as to change the nature of subsistence society. The basic things used by people continued to be made or produced by the family itself. Very few people depended completely on trade for a living.

Then, gradually, things began to change.

### HOW LAND BECAME SCARCE

As long as there was enough land, black subsistence farmers could survive. But slowly land became scarce.

More and more people were filling up the land; the population was growing. Sometimes, when chiefdoms moved to new land, they found other people there already.

The result was a great land hunger. People began to fight for more land. Battles over land became more and more frequent and severe. Eventually wars began to change the traditional, subsistence way of life.

The communities became more organised. The successful chiefdoms grew in size, taking over smaller chiefdoms. They began to support growing armies of young men with food and specially made weapons.

The chief became more power-



*The search for land became more desperate when Dutch and British settlers trekked inland.*

ful. He had greater control over what the community produced. He also controlled the spoils of war — cattle and other animals captured from the losers. The system of government changed, too. Where there had been traditional systems of consultation, these often disappeared. The chief took on the powers of a king, and a privileged class of hand-picked 'indunas' emerged — an aristocracy with more power and more wealth than the counsellors of old.

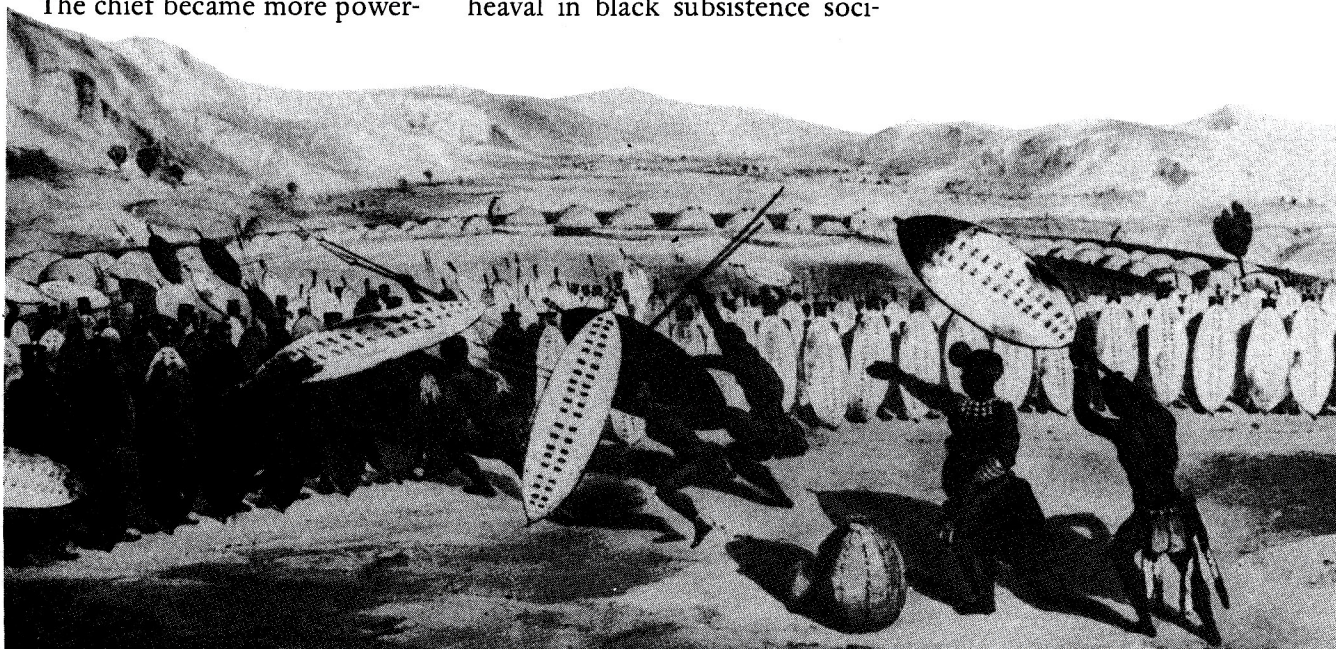
### THE MFECANE

About 200 years ago, the land shortage came to a head. There followed a period of great upheaval in black subsistence soci-

ety. The land wars started a chain reaction throughout South Africa, scattering people as far as central and East Africa.

New groupings and new chiefdoms came into being. Thousands were killed in the wars, thousands more fled from their traditional pastures, taking refuge in caves or in the mountains. Thousands more were captured and absorbed by the conquering chiefdoms. Other wandering refugees banded together to form new communities for their own protection. It was during this time that nations like the Zulu, Basotho and Ndebele came into being.

This period became known as the *Mfecane* (the crushing) or the *Difaqane* (forced migration).



## WHITE COLONIALISM

In the midst of the upheaval of the Mfecane, Dutch settlers entered the scene. They had arrived in the Cape in 1652 and set up a colony there. They had destroyed subsistence life by taking the land from the Khoi and the San (whom they called 'Hottentots' and 'Bushmen'). To farm the land, they used the Khoi — as well as slave labour, mostly from Malaya. A hundred and fifty years later, British colonists arrived to take over the Cape. Many of the Dutch settlers were unhappy with British rule and proceeded to move into the interior, looking for new land.

The white trekkers only dimly understood what was happening to black society. They, too, were subsistence farmers in search of new land. Nevertheless, they profited from the Mfecane. Large areas were deserted. When black farmers came from their places of refuge after the wars to their traditional pastures, white settlers had already claimed them.

There began a bitter struggle for land, first in the eastern Cape between the Xhosa and the Dutch and later the British, then in Natal between the Zulus and the Dutch and the British, and then in the interior.

### HOW BLACKS LOST THE STRUGGLE FOR LAND

For a large part of the 19th century, blacks and whites were in a deadlock. In the Soutpansberg in the Transvaal, the Venda were actually pushing the white trekkers back from their frontiers. In the eastern Cape and in Zululand, land wars dragged on until the 1870s.



The turning point came when Britain sent large armies to South Africa. They settled the outcome. With their horses, their modern guns and their cannons, they were eventually able to crush the Xhosa in the eastern Cape and the Zulus in Natal (but only after the British lost over 1 000 men in just one battle at Isandhlwana in 1879).

By this time, fighting had become as important as farming. Young men were spending more and more time at war, and less time with the cattle and the land. As black farmers began to lose

the struggle for land, it became clear that there was no longer enough land for most people to live a subsistence life.

The land that was left could not support all the subsistence farmers. Some of them began to work for the white farmers in return for the right to farm a piece of land, and perhaps some food or a calf as payment each year.

### HOW TRADE GREW

War was not the only form of contact between black and white

*A settler farm in the early years of colonialism, using slave labour.*



farmers: trade was becoming more and more important. As white settlers spread further into the country they began to exchange cattle and other goods with black farmers.

Traders from Durban and Cape Town began to bring goods like knives, blankets, ploughs and things which subsistence farmers did not easily make – and in this time of war, guns were in great demand.

As time went on, trade became more important. People began to make fewer pots, tools, clothes and other everyday things. They began to rely more on traders' goods.

## MONEY

At first they traded by exchange. But as trade became established, traders began to ask for money instead of goods – money was easier to exchange and easier to transport. So black farmers had to find money to buy the traders' goods.

One way they did this was to sell their extra crops or wool in the white settler towns. Many began to prosper; and between about 1830 and 1890 there emerged a flourishing African peasantry. (However, their good fortune was not to last – see

Chapter Six.)

Black farmers found they needed money for another reason – to pay taxes.

When the Boers and the British took over the land, they formed governments, which ruled over blacks as well as whites.

These Boer and British governments soon began to demand taxes from the people they ruled. Blacks had to pay a hut tax as well as a poll tax. The poll tax was a tax of one pound – or about two Rand – for every man over 18 years of age. These taxes were collected in money.

As time went on, most subsistence farmers got this money for taxes by going out to work for a short time on white farms or in the towns. They would earn some money as workers and then come back home when they had earned enough to pay the tax man or the trader.

## CHANGES

So even before the discovery of diamonds and gold, colonialism had changed subsistence life.

\* The first important change came with the shortage of land. Black subsistence society was slowly being destroyed as they lost the struggle for land.

\* The second important change came when black subsistence

farmers started to use things which the family or tribe did not make. They bartered these goods with traders.

\* The third important change came when black subsistence farmers found they needed money for trade and for tax. Some managed to produce enough extra crops to sell, but most had to leave their land for a time and become workers by selling their labour.

Each of these changes took black subsistence farmers another step away from subsistence society. Each of these changes took them a step closer to the time of the industrial revolution, when thousands of subsistence farmers would be forced to leave home to become workers on the mines.

## THE LOSS OF THE LAND: A POET SPEAKS

We pass where life was,  
the sun showing the place every  
morning,  
where every reflection of our  
eyes  
is attracted to our ancestors . . .  
Why not the body of the land  
forever,  
why not my *rooigrond* living on,  
the spirits of our ancestors  
buried there?  
While false beliefs like glue  
hold our new homes together . . .

– from *Old Homes* by David Mphusu. (*Staffrider* Vol 1 No 1)

