



African Women Farmers in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, 1875–1930: State Policies and Spiritual Vulnerabilities

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In 1916, an African man in the rural Eastern Cape province of South Africa wrote to the resident magistrate of his district. He complained that the land that had previously been farmed by his daughter, Angelina, had been taken away by the local headman and allocated to an unrelated African man. The father noted that his daughter was unmarried, that she had successfully raised seven children on the earnings from the crops she had cultivated over the years, and that she had paid the tax of ten shillings due on the allotment every year since the land had been allocated to her by the magistrate in 1906. When she had died in 1914, her father had continued to pay the tax in her name and wanted her children to be able

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to continue to farm the land.¹ Ultimately, the magistrate ruled against his complaint: in the state's view, his deceased daughter's children had no right to the land.²

A second court case involved a widow named Nomabola, who in 1911 was living at her father's homestead. She was accused by another relative of being a witch and of causing the relative's wife to be ill. She and her father woke up one night to find their huts had been set on fire. The father testified at the criminal case against the arsonist, stating that the relative had threatened that he would set fire to their home to drive them away.³ The daughter added detail to her father's story: 'I had met accused [the arsonist] the afternoon before the hut was burnt, he said to me 'I hate the sight of you, you witch; I will burn you this night.' She confirmed that the arsonist had repeatedly demanded that she leave the area: 'Accused tells my father to drive me away as he thinks I have bewitched him and his children. His wife is sick still.'⁴

This chapter investigates the history of African women farmers in the rural Eastern region of the Cape Province in South Africa to understand how African women came to occupy an increasingly tenuous economic position as farmers. It contends that the state implemented and enforced legal restrictions on women's ability to control property at the beginning of the twentieth century and in so doing, it elaborated on and reinforced women's positions as dependents of men and as 'subsistence' rather than market farmers. In addition, accusations of witchcraft against women, often made by in-laws or neighbours, heightened women's social and economic vulnerability and sometimes put them at risk of physical harm, a vulnerability that further eroded their status.

Although scholars do not typically discuss African women farmers as entrepreneurs, the women discussed in this chapter were taking the kinds of risks that we often associate with being entrepreneurs. Farming for the market afforded them opportunities for economic autonomy even when it came with greater risks for economic losses. Moreover, there were few

¹ Cape Province Archives Depot, Cape Town, Records of the Chief Magistrate of the Transkei [CMT] 3/589, File 44/24, Statement of William Ndamndum, Tsolo district, made in the Chief Magistrate's office, 17 November 1916.

² CMT 3/589, File 44/24, Letter from the Acting Resident Magistrate, Tsolo district, to the Chief Magistrate Transkei, 22 November 1916.

³ Cape Province Archives Depot, Cape Town, Records of the Resident Magistrate of Mt. Frere district [1/MFE] 1/1/1/39, R. vs. Maqashiya, 25 April 1911.

⁴ *Ibid.*

other types of entrepreneurial activities legally open to African women: trading licences were strictly controlled by the state, and married women were considered legal minors who could not own property of any sort in their own names. Migration to one of the larger towns or cities in South Africa afforded some business opportunities, such as running an unlicensed ‘Native Eating House’ or an illegal *shebeen* (drinking establishment), but taking up such opportunities exposed women to larger legal and social risks, as they not only risked arrest but also the loss of social respectability. Thus, while farming was not the only outlet for entrepreneurial women, it was the only one that was open to many African women living in the rural areas.

The cases of Angelina and Nomabola, as well the cases of a dozen or so other women that I have found in the archives of the Cape, suggest several issues that have not been investigated fully in the historical literature.⁵ One question is that, given the patriarchal and racially stratified nature of African and white settler society in South Africa, how did at least some African women become productive market farmers even for a short time? An answer to this question involves understanding state policies that altered the economic as well as the legal landscape and made it increasingly difficult for both African women and men to engage in market agriculture. A second question asks: what cultural ideas about gender and about success or misfortune did rural Africans hold? Missionaries and whites more generally connected godliness to worldly success, but Africans had their own ideas about spiritual powers and their relationship to economic successes and disasters. In particular, many Africans, even those who had converted to Christianity, believed in witchcraft and the use of malevolent powers by others to enrich themselves and alter events. The policies of the state and African beliefs about the entanglement of economic success with supernatural powers interacted in intriguing ways that had profound consequences for African women.

When historians in the 1970s and later began to dig deeply into the history of African agriculture in South Africa, they found evidence that a

⁵The cases that exist in the archives may not be fully representative of how involved women were in agriculture; these cases only relate to individuals who had court cases or disputes of some kind that involved the magistrates’ intervention. Women who never had such disputes would not surface in these documents. In addition, records of the court cases are incomplete—when transferred to the archives, retired magistrates ‘weeded’ the cases to keep the amount of storage space needed to a minimum. The individual cases that survived usually are complete, but entire years’ worth of cases are gone.

significant number of African farmers had become producers for the market in the mid- to late nineteenth century. Some produced crops for the market, many raised sheep for their wool and a large number participated in livestock markets.⁶ Much of this historical research focused on African men as significant agricultural entrepreneurs. More recently, in the early 2000s, the historian Helen Bradford strongly criticised this historiography, at least with regard to gender. She argued that historians had become captive to the ‘imperial logic of the civilizing mission’; that they had assumed that all African farmers were men who had sloughed off the more pastoralist-oriented identities of precolonial African men and assumed the agriculturalist identities of women. If true, this meant that African society had undergone a radical shift in gender roles within the space of one or two generations.⁷ Instead, Bradford suggests, it was often women who were engaged in agricultural production after the colonial government took control of the region, and who occasionally produced a marketable surplus. Bradford argues, however, that such innovation was short-lived, and that long before the end of the nineteenth century, women and families became economically dependent on the remittances of men who had become migrant labourers.

Yet, contrary to Bradford’s conclusion, we have evidence of some women as market farmers living in the twentieth century. Going back to our opening example, the fact that Angelina was an unmarried woman who was able to raise seven children from the proceeds of her farming suggests that at least some African women were able to farm profitably into the twentieth century. The second issue that stands out in Angelina’s story is that, as an unmarried woman, she had land allocated to her by the local government official, the resident magistrate. This allocation had occurred around 1906, even though official policy disallowed the allocation of land to women on the principle that women were perpetual legal minors. Angelina’s case shows that, as late as 1906, the rule was not being strictly observed.⁸

⁶ Colin Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); William Beinart, ‘Beyond Homelands: Some Ideas About the History of African Rural Areas in South Africa’, *South African Historical Journal* 64, no. 1 (2012): pp. 5–21.

⁷ Helen Bradford, ‘Peasants, Historians and Gender: A South African Case Study Revisited, 1850–86’, *History and Theory* 39 (2000): pp. 87–90.

⁸ The Resident Magistrate who had allocated the land to Angelina, J. Mould Young, later became the Chief Magistrate of the Transkei and then Secretary of Native Affairs for Natal

As Nomabola's case from 1911 demonstrates, however, it was not just legal hurdles raised by the white settler state that hindered women's abilities to farm on their own. African neighbours often criticised widows and single women, and—particularly if those women were prosperous—some of these criticisms took the form of allegations of witchcraft. Beliefs in witchcraft took many forms, but typically involved beliefs in the use of supernatural powers or substances, or the manipulation of supernatural actors to benefit the witch by harming a competitor or enemy.

The anthropologist Isak Niehaus, who has investigated the topic of witchcraft beliefs extensively in the Limpopo province of South Africa (near the Zimbabwe border) in the period after 1948, has contended that '[P]rocesses of agricultural decline formed the social context of witchcraft', and that accusations of witchcraft increased over the course of the mid- to late twentieth century as Africans experienced greater rural poverty.⁹ I extend this argument to suggest that witchcraft accusations linked to agricultural decline in the Eastern Cape region began earlier in the twentieth century, and that these accusations often targeted women.¹⁰ Increased fears of witchcraft can be discussed as a manifestation of the 'spiritual insecurity' that Adam Ashforth has described as being 'related to, but not reducible to, the fears, dangers and doubts that arise from poverty, disease, hunger and violence.'¹¹ The targeting of women was a function both of some women's successes as farmers as well as more generalised economic anxiety over the growing rural competition for land in the rural areas and fears of impoverishment.

and thus was important for policy creation and implementation. See also the testimony of three magistrates to the 1903–1905 Native Affairs Commission that confirmed that they allowed women to farm land in their own names: National Archives Depot, Pretoria, Records of the 1903–1905 Native Affairs Commission, C17 Vol. 3, testimony of magistrates M.W. Liefeldt (Willowvale district), William Brownlee (Butterworth district) and N.O. Thompson (Kentani district), 998.

⁹Isak Niehaus, 'Witchcraft and the South African Bantustans: Evidence from Bushbuckridge', *South African Historical Journal* 64, no. 1 (2012): p. 47.

¹⁰Peter Delius, in his historical work on the Transvaal, also argued that women became more likely targets of witchcraft accusations as South African laws became more restrictive in the pre-1948 era; Peter Delius, 'Witches and Missionaries in Nineteenth Century Transvaal', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 27, no. 3 (September 2001): pp. 429–43, pp. 442–43.

¹¹Adam Ashforth, 'Human Security and Spiritual Insecurity: Why the Fear of Evil Forces Needs to Be Taken Seriously', *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 11, no. 1 (2010): pp. 99–106, p. 101.

This study draws upon reports from government officials and South African parliamentary committees, as well as from the transcripts of court cases, to discuss agriculture and allegations of witchcraft. African voices emerge as witnesses to committees and in court cases, and these voices provide evidence of how African lives were changing partly in response to official policies. There are obvious shortcomings in relying on government-produced documents when the government in question was a colonial one deeply invested in racial and cultural subordination, and the testimonies of witnesses in court cases present their own challenges to historians. Yet, the documents and the testimonies are rich in detail and bear vibrant witness to life in the rural areas of the Eastern Cape.

The region east of the Kei River, contemporaneously known as the 'Transkei', that is the focus of this chapter, was annexed by the British-ruled Cape Colony in the period between 1878 and 1894. Archaeological evidence suggests that African farmers have lived in this region for at least 1500–2000 years. European shipwreck survivors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reported the existence of prosperous coastal communities, and Cape colonial officials as well as white missionaries noted in the 1820s that the region was evenly settled by African chiefdoms and the land was used for cultivation and grazing.¹² Households lived in homesteads that could contain three generations of family members. These Xhosa-speaking societies were patrilineal and women upon marriage typically moved into their in-laws' households without losing their status as daughters within their own natal households. A newly married woman had a relatively low status within her in-laws' home, at least until she had a child, but in her own parents' home, her status was equal to that of her brothers.¹³

¹²J.M. Feely and S.M. Bell-Cross, 'The Distribution of Early Iron Age Settlement in the Eastern Cape: Some Historical and Ecological Implications', *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 66 (2011): pp. 105–12; Godfrey Callaway, *Mxamli: The Feaster* (London: Central Board of Missions, 1919), pp. 37–39.

¹³The most detailed sources on family structure and women's roles in families were not compiled until after the beginning of the colonial period; see, for example, Godfrey Callaway, *Sketches of Kafir Life* (London: Mowbray & Co., 1905) and John Henderson Soga, *The Ama-Xosa: Life and Customs* (Lovedale: Lovedale Press, 1932). The first detailed anthropological account of the people in this region was Monica Wilson's book for which she did research in the 1930s (she had grown up in the region as well); Monica Wilson, *Reaction to Conquest: Effects of Contact with Europeans on the Pondo of South Africa*, 2nd Edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).

The Transkei was annexed to the Cape Colony in the 1880s. In the late 1800s, the most significant change to African agriculture in this region resulted from the impact of missionaries and, more gradually, the extension of markets. Mission stations often became destinations for itinerant traders and eventually locations for trading stations that in turn increased the penetration of colonial markets in agricultural commodities and manufactured goods. Missionaries also typically had specific ideas about the proper and, from their point of view, moral gender division of labour. In particular, missionaries wanted African men to cultivate the land and not be so invested in raising livestock; they also wanted African women to be responsible for less agricultural labour. A related impact was that missionaries and traders introduced ploughs to African agriculture to replace the digging sticks that women had historically used to prepare the ground for planting. Ploughs increased the yield, creating a marketable surplus, and they were usually pulled by teams of oxen, which brought men and older boys into cultivation as women were not ideally supposed to handle their husbands' cattle. A few officials noted that the adoption of ploughs was also speeded by the unwillingness of young women to marry into families who did not own ploughs.¹⁴

As ploughs spread beyond mission station settlements, they facilitated broader economic impacts on African agricultural production. In one district (Mthatha) in 1879, there were 3567 households (and a total population of approximately 16,000), with a total ownership of 639 ploughs.¹⁵ In this early period, increased grain production to create a marketable surplus was less significant than was the raising of merino (or merino-crossbred) sheep, whose wool could be sold to traders. The number of sheep owned in the Mthatha district in 1879 was 21,672, and that of cattle was 12,687. By 1885, in Mthatha, the human population had increased to 20,000, the numbers of sheep to 40,000 and of cattle to 30,000; African farmers produced approximately 173,000 bags of grain¹⁶

¹⁴ Edgar H. Brookes, *The History of Native Policy in South Africa from 1830 to the Present Day* (Cape Town: Nasionale Pers, 1924): p. 395, citing comments by Sir Henry Elliot, Chief Magistrate of the Transkei in the Cape Province's *Blue Book on Native Affairs 1893*, 44.

¹⁵ 'Census Returns for Territory of Tembuland', September 1879, in Cape of Good Hope, *Blue Book on Native Affairs 1879* (Government Printing Office, 1880). The number of ploughs owned may not reflect their full impact, because people hired out their ploughs and their trained oxen to other families.

¹⁶ Each bag of grain weighed 200 lbs. One magistrate calculated that each household needed to produce at least ten bags of grain per year for consumption purposes; Bradford,

and had access to 15 trading stores outside of the small town in the district.¹⁷ In the larger Engcobo district nearby, a total African population in 1884 of 22,300 owned approximately 60,000 sheep and 20,000 cattle, produced approximately 111,000 bags of grain, and had access to 25 trading stores.¹⁸ By 1919, the population figures for these two districts were as follows: in Mthatha district, there were 44,000 people, 34,160 cattle and 168,703 sheep; in Engcobo there were 67,000 people, 48,000 cattle and 200,000 sheep.¹⁹

The figures cited above undermine the assumption present in some of the historical literature that all African agriculture was rendered unprofitable by the 1890s, or pushed to bare subsistence levels by the onset of white rule. There was, however, a troubling development that threatened the continued vitality of African agriculture. The region had experienced little expropriation of land by white settlers, and thus African families tended to retain access into the twentieth century to land suitable for both farming and grazing. Even so, in the 1890s, Transkeian magistrates were suggesting that population increases were beginning to create land scarcity.²⁰

Landlessness among the African population worsened, especially from the 1910s as a result of population increases and policies that restricted access to land by Africans. And with landlessness came both poverty and broader economic anxiety. In that same period, from the 1880s through the 1920s, male migrant labour to the goldmines and to other industries in South Africa's cities expanded dramatically. The absence of men from their families' farms for months or years at a time meant that women had to take over the responsibility for farming. But in shouldering control of land and livestock, women had also to take on considerable risks.

¹⁷'Peasants, Historians, and Gender,' p. 97.

¹⁸CMT 1/37, Letter #11/85, from the Resident Magistrate, Umtata (Mthatha) District, to the Chief Magistrate of the Transkei, 12 January 1885.

¹⁹CMT 1/30, Letter from the Resident Magistrate, Engcobo district, to the Chief Magistrate of the Transkei, enclosing 'Statistical Return for the District of Engcobo Tembuland', 23 January 1885.

²⁰CMT 3/942, May 1919 Stock Census; the magistrate noted that the 200,000 number for the population of sheep was a combined number of sheep and goats; CMT 3/679, Returns labelled 'Agriculture', for the Cape Province's *Blue Book on Native Affairs, 1909*, from the Resident Magistrate, Mthatha district, to the Chief Magistrate of the Transkei.

²¹CMT 3/59, Report from the Resident Magistrate, Butterworth district, to the Chief Magistrate of the Transkei, 1 January 1897.

In the initial phase of colonial control in the region (until the mid-1890s), magistrates and other government officials in the Transkei region did little to alter the existing patterns of land use and tenancy. But they did investigate what they understood to be ‘Native Laws and Customs’ that would then go on to inform their future decisions with regard to land tenure. These guidelines emerged out of information elicited from older African men and from white policy-makers and missionaries, who presented themselves as experts on local customs. Officials often designed policies to accord with these customary practices, although, in the case of women’s status, they crafted policies to change women’s roles within African families.²¹ Over time, these government policies restricted women’s opportunities as farmers. The effects of the combination of restrictive government policies and longer-term cultural suspicions about women merged in the first several decades of colonial rule.

This commonly held idea among white policy-makers that the African family in the rural areas was just eking out a subsistence level of agricultural production underwrote land policies.²² The Transkei was set aside as a ‘Native Reserve’ in the 1880s, a legal designation that restricted the ability of whites to settle there. African-occupied land in Native Reserves was considered legally ‘Crown Land’—the state claimed ownership and allocated it to individual African families in exchange for the payment of taxes or quitrents.²³ But the amount of land available for African farmers was very much a finite resource.

Government policies regarding land tenure for Africans were based on two somewhat contradictory premises. The first was that Africans were not productive farmers so they did not need much land—just enough to grow subsistence food crops, a task that could be performed by women. The second was that limiting the amount of land available to African farmers would effectively push African men onto the labour market precisely because the small amount of land available to them would not be sufficient to fully support a family. The larger South African economy needed

²¹ Natasha Erlank, ‘Gendering Commonality: African Men and the 1883 Commission on Native Law and Custom’, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29 (2003): pp. 937–53.

²² Howard Pim, *Introduction to Bantu Economics* (Fort Hare: Lovedale Press, 1930); Govan Mbeki, *The Transkei in the Making* (Verulam Press, 1939), pp. 9–11.

²³ The taxation system was too complex to be detailed in this chapter. In general, until the mid-1890s, land was allocated to married African men who paid hut tax for each wife. After the implementation of the Glen Grey Act (see below), agricultural allotments were surveyed and quitrent replaced hut tax.

Africans and particularly African men as labourers for the mining industry, after diamonds were discovered in 1867 and gold in 1886, and for white-owned farms. But white employers did not want to or could not afford to pay Africans enough to draw them out of independent agriculture as long as independent agriculture was productive enough to support most families. The policy solution was to restrict land available for African agriculture, as one influential magistrate argued in 1899:

I have long held and still hold that the labour question and the land question are indissolubly bound together...Hitherto under our communal tenure system there has been little absolute necessity for our young natives to leave their homes to work, the land supplies them with food and a few shillings will purchase a blanket...²⁴

Restricting Africans' access to land would, in this magistrate's view, achieve the aim of driving African men into the wage-labour market while simultaneously leaving wives and families in the rural areas. Once enacted as policy, the encouragement of male labour migration through land policies helped to create a resilient form of geographical segregation that foreshadowed the apartheid policies of the 1940s and later. As Glen Elder noted in his study of the 'procreational economic geography of apartheid': 'Apartheid was premised upon the spatial fracturing of the black family unit, but not its destruction.'²⁵ The policies that led to the undermining of the African agricultural sector and the fracturing of African families were begun in this earlier, pre-apartheid period.

The new system of land tenure that the magistrate above endorsed was the plan to survey all of the land in the Transkei, divide it into allotments of usually between four and ten morgen (roughly equal to four to ten hectares) and allocate each allotment to one married African man and his family.²⁶ Called the 'Glen Grey system' because it was first implemented in the Glen Grey district of the Eastern Cape Colony, each married man held

²⁴ CMT 3/60, Letter from the Resident Magistrate, Butterworth district, to the Chief Magistrate of the Transkei, 23 January 1899.

²⁵ Glen S. Elder, 'Malevolent Traditions: Hostel Violence and the Procreational Geography of Apartheid', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29 (2003): pp. 921–35, p. 928.

²⁶ Lindsay F. Braun, *Colonial Survey and Native Landscapes in Rural South Africa, 1850–1913* (Boston: Brill, 2014), pp. 139–42; R.J. Thompson and B.M. Nicholls, 'The Glen Grey Act: Forgotten Dimensions in an Old Theme', *South African Journal of Economic History* 8 (1993): pp. 58–70.

his surveyed allotment on a quitrent title. Quitrent title did not allow him to sell the land, and when he died, the title was to pass to his eldest son; thus, the quitrent system effectively disinherited all but the eldest sons and prevented a legal market in land from developing. Legally, the man's widow could not inherit the quitrent title in her own name, although if her son was relatively young, she could control the land in the son's name until he married. If there was no legally recognised heir (i.e. no son), the land was supposed to revert to the state to be re-allocated.²⁷

After the passage of the Glen Grey Act in 1894, the new land tenure system was extended to the Transkei in a district-by-district process that took two decades to complete.²⁸ While quitrent title provided greater security of tenure for men, many Africans objected to the provision that a widow had no legal right to remain on the land unless she had a son who inherited and allowed her to stay. In an 1898 hearing on the law, the Rev. Jantyi Zachariah Tantsi stated that the widow's lack of rights was a major grievance: '...failing male issue, the mother apparently has no protection.'²⁹ One commissioner pressed Tantsi on the question of a widow's right even to lifetime tenure: 'Is it not better to leave it [the law] as it is—namely, that the eldest son would be under [social] obligation to look after his mother? The property is only valuable if cultivated; the widow cannot cultivate it...'³⁰ This question revealed one guiding assumption behind the law: that women could not or should not cultivate the land outside a male-headed household. The Chief Magistrate of the Transkei noted that while the letter of the law denied the widow any legal right to the land, he believed that it was best for the local magistrate to bring pressure to bear on the male heirs to support the widow and any other children rather than change the law.³¹

In a 1903 set of hearings on the law, an African labour agent who lived in the Transkei, Enoch Mamba, and several African (male) farmers again raised the issue of the unjustness of not allowing the widow any rights but

²⁷ Sean Redding, *Sorcery and Sovereignty: Taxation, Power, and Rebellion in South Africa, 1880–1963* (Athens, OH.: Ohio University Press, 2006): pp. 156–62.

²⁸ Colin Bundy, 'Mr. Rhodes and the Poisoned Goods: Popular Opposition to the Glen Grey Council System, 1894–1906', in William Beinart and Colin Bundy (eds), *Hidden Struggles in Rural South Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987): pp. 138–65.

²⁹ Cape of Good Hope, *Report of the Select Committee on the Glen Grey Act, 1898* (Cape Town: Cape Times Ltd., 1898), p. 3.

³⁰ *Report of the Select Committee on the Glen Grey Act, 1898*, p. 7.

³¹ *Report of the Select Committee on the Glen Grey Act, 1898*, p. 30.

instead having to depend solely on the goodwill of her husband's male heir.³² And as late as 1913, the Chief Magistrate of the Transkei (A.H. Stanford) stated to the Parliamentary Select Committee on Native Custom and Marriage Laws that there was a general feeling among African men that widows should be allowed to inherit: 'It was pointed out that frequently the son might be a bad son, and would not look after his mother, and that he might make things so unpleasant that his mother could not live with him, if the law did not give her protection.'³³ Stanford noted that these opinions had led officials to allow widows to continue as quitrent title holders at least until their eldest sons were married.

What does the fact that these African men were so invested in allowing widows the legal right to take over land and farming indicate? It seems clear that the men saw a wife as having rights to property within the marriage, and that they also saw wives and women generally as capable farmers. At least into the second decade of the twentieth century, officials saw enough merit in that position to modify how they actually implemented the law, and they often allowed widows to remain on their husbands' land allotments.

Significantly though, the letter of the law itself was not changed and the prohibition against women taking over quitrent title became more commonly implemented by the mid-1910s. The harmful effects of the law were then compounded by a suite of policies that denied women's rights to own other kinds of property, as well as national, provincial and local laws that made it difficult or illegal for women to migrate to urban areas to work. While men went to the mines and industries as migrant labourers, the policies made it difficult for women to do anything other than remain in the rural areas and engage in farming at whatever level they could. Legally, however, they could claim no ownership over land or livestock.³⁴ As land allotments became scarce as a result of population increases, even vestigial rights to land and property were challenged, both by white officials and by other Africans who sought their own access to land. Some of the increasing conflict over land merged with familial tensions and became evident in the prevalence of greater suspicions of African women and their

³² Cape of Good Hope, *Report of the Select Committee on the Glen Grey Act, 1903* (Cape Town: Cape Times Ltd., 1903), pp. 15, 74–5, 102.

³³ Union of South Africa, *Report of the Select Committee on Native Custom and Marriage Laws* (Cape Town: Solomon Printers, 1913), p. 74.

³⁴ Francis Wilson, 'Historical Roots of Inequality in South Africa', *Economic History of Developing Regions* 26, no. 1 (2011): pp. 1–15.

supernatural powers, as we shall see below. Thus, the changes in land tenure, combined with male labour migration, put considerable strains on women and family life in general, both in economic and social terms.³⁵

Although labour migration became an economic necessity to supplement the incomes of most rural families, at least a few households were able to continue agricultural production above subsistence levels until the 1950s. Those women in the rural areas with access to land, either through their husbands, their fathers or their brothers, could—and did—create marketable surpluses of grain or produce, or turn livestock ownership into a profitable enterprise by owning wool-producing sheep or egg-producing chickens, or by investing earnings in cattle.³⁶ Cattle could be hired out to other African farmers to pull ploughs and wagons, or could be lent to family members to solidify familial relationships. Women also occasionally rented their husbands' quitrent sites to other Africans to earn money in their husbands' absence even though such rentals were illegal.³⁷

Although most migrant workers sent remittances to rural families regularly, the daily control of the family and of agriculture frequently shifted to wives, daughters and widows. As women gained this enlarged responsibility for agriculture, some tried to turn it to their advantage. A wife, or widow who remained at her husband's homestead, could pay the yearly rent and farm the land. A few women, like Angelina, became profitable farmers on their own, and women who earned wages by becoming migrant labourers themselves frequently invested earnings in agriculture, a scenario described by the Chief Magistrate of the Transkei in 1913:

Now you have many cases where women on becoming majors [attaining age 21 while unmarried] claim their own earnings and retain them...The last case I had was one...in which the daughter had invested her earnings in

³⁵ Charles Simkins, 'Agricultural Production in the African Reserves of South Africa, 1918–1969', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 7, no. 2 (1981): pp. 256–83; William Beinart, 'A Century of Migrancy from Mpondoland', in Peter Delius, Laura Phillips, and Fiona Rankin-Smith (eds), *A Long Way Home: Migrant Worker Worlds 1800–2014* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2014): pp. 59–73; Debbie Budlender, Sibongile Mgweba, Kettleetso Motsepe, and Leilanie Williams, *Women, Land and Customary Law* (Johannesburg: Community Agency for Social Enquiry, 2011), pp. 9–12.

³⁶ Simkins, 'Agricultural Production', 270.

³⁷ See relevant examples in various court cases: Cape Province Archives Depot, Cape Town, Records of the Resident Magistrate, Mthatha district [1/UTA] 2/1/1/116, Case 408, William Mtweu vs. Richard Ntengo, 17 July 1925; 1/UTA 2/1/1/157, Case 138/43, Samente Ndabeni vs. Dumanda Ntlakwana, 7 December 1943.

cattle. She was a Native teacher. The brother tried to use that stock for himself. It was shown in evidence that she was educating her two younger sisters out of her own earnings as a teacher and from the sale of wool from her stock.³⁸

In 1928, another unmarried woman, Ethel Moses, worked as a domestic servant for whites in the Cape Province city of East London. She used her wages to buy cattle and left them at her father's homestead while she continued to work in the town. Her father's first wife had also worked in town and invested first in sheep and then in cattle for twenty years.³⁹ These women used earnings to shore up positions in the rural areas in much the same way that men often did. But their successes in investing in livestock were premised on their male relatives allowing them use of the land.⁴⁰

As segregationist laws placed restrictions on Africans' economic opportunities and access to land, the legal prohibition on women having quitrent titles began to affect how family members treated women. The laws and the courts recognised few legal rights for women, and wives and widows were often competing directly against African men in their husbands' families for scarce resources. Women who continued to farm lands that had originally been allocated to their husbands or sons found themselves vulnerable to land or livestock seizures and lawsuits brought by African men. They also found themselves open to accusations related to the use of supernatural means for malevolent ends—witchcraft.

Even before the widespread onset of male labour migration, husbands and in-laws sometimes accused wives and widows of witchcraft if children became ill or died, or if livestock died or crops withered. Witchcraft accusations were made illegal by the Witchcraft Ordinance of 1896, but suspicions remained common, and the services of ritual specialists, known as diviners, who could determine if a specific misfortune was the result of a witch's actions, remained in high demand. People accused of witchcraft could face consequences ranging from social isolation, to repeated threats and harassment, to assaults and arson attempts on their homes to drive them away. J.H. Soga, a Xhosa minister, noted in his 1932 ethnography of

³⁸ *Report of the Select Committee on Native Custom and Marriage Laws, 1913*, p. 75.

³⁹ 1/UTA 2/1/1/123, Case 130, 'Ethel Moses (spinster)' vs. James Ncangwa, 24 February 1928.

⁴⁰ For another example, see the civil case involving Sannah Temba: Cape Province Archives Depot, Cape Town, Records of the Resident Magistrate, Mt. Fletcher district [1/MTF] 2/1/1/18, Case 122/13, Sannah Temba vs. Jim Ngonyama, 1913.

the Xhosa population that when a witch was ‘smelt out’ in a divining ceremony, it was expected that she would leave the vicinity. ‘If no notice is taken of this warning within a reasonable time, the sorcerer’s [witch’s] huts are burnt without further ado, during the night.’⁴¹ In the aftermath of a witchcraft accusation, diviners were often the ones who stood trial in magistrates’ courts for making the accusation, but other people, sometimes acting on their own suspicions and sometimes following up a diviner’s accusation, also potentially faced criminal charges.

Witchcraft allegations were often directly related to dire economic and emotional circumstances within families, and women frequently became targets. An 1897 criminal case from Nqeleni district involved a man being tried for the crime of alleging a woman was a witch who (he said) had killed his two children through supernatural means. The woman, named Magebane, was married to the man’s neighbour. She testified: ‘[T]hree weeks ago I was...at a beer drink. The accused was there also. There were many people there and the accused said of me “woman you are a wizard you have finished my kraal [homestead]”. This was the day the second child of his died. My husband asked him what he was saying and he said “go home with your witch (*igqwira*).”’ Other witnesses confirmed her story and even though the man himself denied that he had made the accusation, he was ultimately found guilty.⁴² This was a case in which a man was searching for the cause of the tragic death of two of his children. It is impossible to state definitively that the children died as a direct result of poverty, but it is significant that the distraught father immediately suspected his neighbour’s wife of supernatural malevolence.

A 1908 case in which a woman sued for divorce as a result of her husband’s repeated accusations of witchcraft provides a clearer example of the tensions that could result from economic hardships and the translation of those tensions into witchcraft accusations against women. The woman testified that she had left her husband three years before and refused to return to live with him. ‘My life with defendant [her husband] has been very unhappy,’ she said.

⁴¹ Soga, *The Ama-Xosa*, p. 180. In many accounts, the words ‘witch,’ ‘wizard’ and ‘sorcerer’ are used interchangeably.

⁴² The magistrate sentenced him either to pay a fine of £2 or to spend 14 days in prison. Cape Province Archives Depot, Cape Town, Records of the Resident Magistrate, Nqeleni district [1/NQL] 1/1/1/3, Case 89 of 1897, R. vs. Mbali, 7 February 1897.

He accused me of being a witch and of having caused the death of his children and [live]stock. He has smacked me with his open hand, several times. He treated me cruelly and I returned home to my father's kraal [homestead]. Defendant followed me up during the first year of my absence and he was asked to pay 5 more head of cattle as dowry [if he wished the marriage to continue]. He said he would not pay more dowry for a witch.⁴³

The magistrate in this case decided that the marriage should be dissolved, but that her brother had to refund the bridewealth that the husband had paid at the time of the wedding.⁴⁴ Although witchcraft allegations in this case and the previous one were caused by the deaths of children and livestock, it is important to see these allegations not just as convenient scapegoating. They were evidence of deeply held spiritual beliefs about how the world worked and the assumption that women potentially posed spiritual dangers to their in-laws and neighbours. As such, these beliefs were part of a complex fabric of cultural understandings of economic and social outcomes and their relationship to supernatural powers.⁴⁵

The targeting of women speaks to the ways that economic insecurity surfaced as tensions between men and women and within familial relationships. The anthropologist Monica Wilson, who conducted her research in the region in the early 1930s, noted that 'The feeling that the wife is a stranger [in her husband's family] and dangerous is expressed in the accusations of witchcraft...and such accusations are lodged even against wives who have long been married.'⁴⁶

A cluster of cases in the 1920s provides additional evidence for the connective web between land shortages and worsening economic conditions in the region on the one hand and allegations of witchcraft made against women on the other. A widow in the Cofimvaba district in 1925 was accused of witchcraft by her husband's brother, and she was then driven away and her huts were burnt down. While the accusation of witchcraft probably resulted from the illness of one of her brother-in-law's children, her abandonment of the land after the arson freed it to be re-assigned

⁴³Cape Province Archives Depot, Cape Town, Records of the Resident Magistrate, Cofimvaba district [1/COF] 2/1/1/51, Case 180/08, Nobetter vs. Balele, 27 April 1908.

⁴⁴This outcome suggests that the magistrate did not fully believe the woman's story.

⁴⁵Niehaus, 'Witchcraft and the South African Bantustans', pp. 57–8. Women also acted as diviners: see Sean Redding, 'Women as Diviners and as Christian Converts in Rural South Africa, c. 1880–1963', *Journal of African History* 57 (2016): pp. 367–89.

⁴⁶Wilson, *Reaction to Conquest*, p. 43.

potentially to one of her in-laws.⁴⁷ Another complex arson case from Tsolo district in 1926 resulted when a widow's huts were burnt after she had been accused of being a witch. The alleged arsonist was her brother-in-law, who threatened her: 'I will bend you and kill you...your relations will report your death at the [magistrate's] office.' The woman's son heard the man say to her: '...this is your day. He meant the day for killing her.' The son, upon hearing this threat, had asked the man what the quarrel was about; the man turned on him and said, 'You come in here and make a noise because you claim this kraal as yours...I will burn down this kraal of yours of which you are boasting.' The woman testified that on the same night that these threats were made against her, 'I then left the hut and the kraal to go and sleep at another kraal. Next morning when I returned to my kraal I found two of my huts had been burnt down.' The brother-in-law was convicted of arson and sentenced to nine months in prison.⁴⁸

A final case dating from 1928 illuminates the way that economic hardships and family crises often crystallised as allegations of witchcraft against women. A widow, Maria, living in Nqamakwe district, was accused of witchcraft by her brother-in-law and the diviner he had hired; they alleged that she had killed her own husband through witchcraft. At the diviner's subsequent criminal trial, Maria testified:

My late husband was a man of some property. All my children have died. Until Monday July 2nd I have lived at my late husband's kraal [home]. My late husband's brother lives in the same kraal. His name is Keke. He will inherit the property if I die or leave my husband's kraal without the approval of his relatives...About a month after my husband's death, Keke said he was prepared to go to hell on account of the person who had killed my husband. Later he told me he had consulted a witchfinder who had pointed me out as the person who had killed my husband.

After the death of another family member, the brother-in-law once again consulted a diviner who accused Maria of killing the second family member as well. Maria described the ceremony in which the accusation was made: 'They began to chant and to clap hands for the doctress [diviner] to dance. She danced round and round the fireplace, stopping at intervals.

⁴⁷ 1/COF 1/1/2/2, Preparatory Exam 7/1926, R. vs. Nkwenteshe Atyosi, 16 April 1926.

⁴⁸ Cape Province Archives Depot, Cape Town, Records of the Resident Magistrate, Tsolo district, [1/TSO] 1/1/21, Case 265 of 1925, R. vs. Mtsongwana Isaac, 1925.

She stopped and said “The people of this kraal are being killed by the *mpundulu* [a witchcraft familiar] of a woman”.⁴⁹ The diviner then identified Maria as the owner of the *mpundulu*. Later, at the diviner’s trial under the Witchcraft Ordinance, the brother-in-law denied that he had employed a diviner, and denied that he had made the witchcraft allegation against Maria. Under cross-examination, though, he acknowledged:

Maria is my brother’s widow. As such she is entitled to the use of his land as long as she remains at his kraal. If she leaves his kraal and goes to a place not approved by us [her husband’s relatives] she forfeits it. I would then enter upon that inheritance. As long as she remains there I am kept out of my inheritance.⁴⁹

The magistrate found the diviner guilty of making the accusation of witchcraft and sentenced her to pay a fine of £15 or to spend six months in prison.⁵⁰ While it is not clear whether a criminal case was ever brought against the brother-in-law as a result of this episode, the tensions within the family over the death of two family members and over the inheritance of quitrent title had reached a critical point in which they felt justified in forcing the widow out.

What we see from these cases, and there are dozens of similar cases in the archived court transcripts for the region, is a profound unease about women in the rural areas and their rights to farm and control land. Some of the accused witches were in relatively strong economic positions, for example, the widow who was doing well enough to have incited envy in her brother-in-law who burnt her huts. Other women may not have had the same success, but they still had one thing that other family members and neighbours often wanted: access to land.

In the final case from 1928 cited above, although the accusation of witchcraft was possibly motivated by the desire of the woman’s in-laws to reclaim the deceased husband’s property, there were also many layers of distrust and ill feeling towards her caused by her husband’s death and the suspicious death of another family member. Family deaths, emotional hardships caused by long absences of husbands and sons, economic misfortune and witchcraft allegations were part of the complex fabric of rural

⁴⁹ Cape Province Archives Depot, Cape Town, Records of the Resident Magistrate, Nqamakwe district [1/NKE] 1/1/1/40, Case 103 of 1928, R. vs. Putunywa Madinga, 25 July 1928.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

life by the mid-1920s. The anthropologist Monica Wilson observed the intimate nature of witchcraft accusations: 'As the proverb says, *Umbango uvuth' emlotheni* (Strife blazes up in the family ash-heap).'⁵¹

For their parts, magistrates and other white officials persisted in seeing witchcraft beliefs and accusations as superstitions that related to Africans' supposed 'backwardness'. They assumed that witchcraft beliefs were evidence of Africans' cultural inferiority, and that they would die out as Africans 'progressed' as a result of contact with Western civilisation. This assumption mirrored their assumptions about African agriculture as unproductive and 'backward'. White officials did not see the connections between the harsh, restrictive laws that the state enforced on Africans, restricting their access to agricultural land, nor did they see the connections between the difficulties faced by many African farmers and witchcraft allegations made against women.⁵²

Witchcraft allegations against women were a product of economic hardships, but they should also be read as evidence of a more generalised spiritual insecurity. The fact that many of these allegations focused on women and their alleged inherent malevolence related to the ways in which their economic position had become increasingly tenuous. They were dependent upon the goodwill and sufferance of African men and the white-controlled state but were still held responsible for economic failures and family tragedies.

Due to the nature of the larger South African economy and its reliance on male migrant labour, African families often found themselves squeezed in the rural areas. Farming, which had in the late decades of the 1800s been productive enough to support extended African families, became during the first few decades of the 1900s dramatically less productive for the majority. African women in this period usually remained in the rural areas where they continued as farmers, while a few women engaged in migrant labour themselves and invested their earnings in livestock kept on their families' land. In general, however, as the twentieth century progressed, many families became increasingly dependent on remittances from men working as labour migrants, in an early version of the 'procreational geography' of segregation. Moreover, by the late 1920s, women found themselves in ever more vulnerable positions: the laws restricted their ability to farm and control property, and Africans' general suspicions

⁵¹ Wilson, *Reaction to Conquest*, p. 308.

⁵² Niehaus, 'Witchcraft and the South African Bantustans'.

about women's access to supernatural powers left women open to accusations of witchcraft that challenged their attempts to persist as farmers. In the late 1880s, African women in rural South Africa had few opportunities to engage in entrepreneurial activities outside of farming for the market. By the late 1920s, even the opportunities for successful market farming had been extinguished by decades of white settler rule, decreasing availability of land and long-standing suspicions of women's powers.

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