

Afrikaner Deep Culture

The Boers developed their own subculture, based on self-sufficient patriarchal communities. They were wandering pastoralists with little interest in sedentary agriculture, encumbered by few possessions. The Boers compared their way of life to that of the Hebrew patriarchs of the Old Testament. Staunch Calvinists, the Boers saw themselves as the children of God in the wilderness, a Christian elect divinely ordained to rule the land and the backward natives therein.

– *Encyclopaedia Britannica*

It is a curious time in the history of the Afrikaner to be writing this essay.

It is now 2004, a full decade since the first democratic elections were held in South Africa. We are into the third successive term of an African National Congress (ANC) majority and this year saw the final dissolution of the old National Party (NP) with the defection of NNP leader Martinus van Schalkwyk to the ANC¹.

As a people and as a nation, the Afrikaner is shattered.

In the decade since 1994 a massive Diaspora has taken place which sees over 1.6 million Afrikaners taking up residence in other parts of the world.²

Those who remain can be divided into broad categories of inevitable majority integration within the larger community of South Africans, a small amount of wealthy Afrikaners clinging to an insulated existence through sheer financial muscle and a tiny group of 'bitter-einders'³ being the subject of much public ridicule for their attempts at military resistance.⁴

Therefore, when I speak of Afrikaner deep culture it is to speak of the culture of a people who no longer have a claim to a homeland, internal cohesion, majority enactment of their rituals nor a political existence, yet the themes which gave rise to the horrors of Apartheid South Africa are still contained in her offspring.⁵

The tale of the Afrikaner is not a short or pleasant one to tell and it is hard to refrain from bitterness in its telling.

There also exists an omni-present temptation to fall into the cool waters of a sweeping academic abandon which may allow one, for a moment, to lose the pain of identity in a maze of events, footnotes and cross references but leaves the central question of a rage which consumed the lives of millions of people unanswered. This will not do.

I shall therefore speak as one who was there; trying to keep my story brief by talking of such small things as gave rise to great tragedy.

To have heard those who were leaders when I was a youth was to hear an unashamedly told tale of how the Afrikaner had been Chosen by God and blessed by the blood of Jesus Christ to fulfil a glorious destiny on the southernmost tip of the 'darkest' continent: Africa.

A great and frightening thing this covenant with the Lord was, terrible the price we have born and exalted the place we shall occupy for the unblinking courage we showed in our willingness to fulfil the immense trust we had been shown by the one who we may never look in the face lest our frail flesh be annihilated utterly in punishment for such temerity.

When I was but a child, mayhap all of five years old I was visiting my Uncle's family who, in the manner of tight knit Afrikaner family bonds, lived next door to us.

Secure in a world which considers the neglect of blood ties to be abhorrent I had little warning that on this day I would not only come to know the true nature of the Afrikaner God but that my very immortal soul would face great peril.

¹http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?set_id=1&click_id=13&art_id=vn20040812051635104C649796

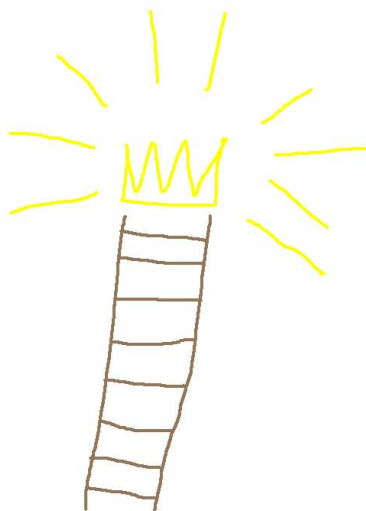
² UNISA, 1999

³ Bitter-Enders. Origin: Geurilla troops who refused to capitulate to peace agreements after the British victory in the Boer War.

⁴ http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?set_id=1&click_id=13&art_id=vn20040811060721488C470318

⁵ <http://www.awb.co.za>

My uncle's children and I spent the day quietly drawing while my Aunt read to us from the bible. The picture I drew was of a tall ladder with a shining golden crown at the apex and it looked something like this:



For me, this picture represented my best comprehension of the tales I was being told of God and it was with great pride that I presented it to my Aunt for inspection.

Her reaction was hard to process, I was familiar with the anger that came if I had unwittingly done something naughty but today there was another element present in her face. It was to be a few more years before I came to understand that what I was witnessing was the face of a well-educated adult transformed by mortal terror.

“Jy mag nie prentjies teken van God!” (You may not draw pictures of God) were the words she finally uttered as the bond of trust between my Mother's Sister and I disintegrated in the hazy light of a weekend afternoon.

I had committed two great sins; not only had I damned my immortal soul in a single act of careless blasphemy but, much worse, I had unconsciously drawn a precise diagram of the dilemma facing the Afrikaner.

His trauma was inherent in the system of belief he was carrying.

Under the command of a power much greater than he, entrusted with the task of climbing the infinite ladder to the godhead, the sacred deliverance he sought was to be eternally denied him.

To look God in the eyes and ask for clear directions was to relinquish your faith and to lose your soul. The Afrikaner could therefore never truly know the will of God and was thus damned to continual failure through his ignorance. It was a measure of his God's mercy that failure could be forgiven after the trauma of his punishment had been borne with stoic submission.

If, on occasion, it was to be God's will that the Afrikaner be the instrument to exact punishment on the Kaffir⁶ then it was merely a transmission of the great love he had been shown by his God. It is certain that he took no pleasure in it for, as was often said, he would have preferred to do his own work had God not given these childlike and savage people into his care.

And... if it should happen that there be an outcry of horror at his actions then this was to be met by patience for it is surely not surprising that the ways of God be mysterious to those who may possess virtue but were certainly not of the elect.

Lest the reader shake his head in disbelief at the story I am telling I must assure him that the Afrikaner did not come to his conclusions lightly.

It was the year 1838 and some 12 000 Afrikaners had so far made their ‘Groot Trek’⁷ to escape British rule in the Cape and achieve self-determination in the future Natal, Orange Free State and Transvaal provinces.

⁶ Arabic: Unbeliever

⁷ Groot Trek: ‘Great Journey’

In February of that year a small party of 70 unarmed 'Voortrekkers'⁸ under the leadership of Piet Retief met with the Zulu King, Dingaan, to discuss a land settlement. As the tale is told by the Afrikaner, Dingaan had invited them with the express purpose of betrayal.⁹ When they had settled to a feast celebrating the signing of the treaty Dingaan's warriors descended upon them and murdered them to the last man with a great cry of: "Kill the wizards!" In the months that followed Zulu warriors went on the warpath killing men, woman and children throughout the Natal area.

In November of that year the Voortrekkers in Natal were met by Andries Pretorius who had brought reinforcements and organised a commando militia of 464 men in order to scout the territory for defence. Dingaan had heard of his arrival and deployed a great force of Zulu warriors to hunt him down.

On December 14th Pretorius and his men arrived at the site of their stand against the massed might of the Zulu nation. Perfectly suited for a defensive position it was bordered by the Ncome river on one side, a donga¹⁰ on another and a great plain before it that could be raked by gun fire.

Deeply religious, Pretorius had prepared his men for this great battle by the recitation of a terrible covenant sworn on the Bible on the 9th and repeated every evening until, on the 16th the sun rose over the mist shrouded laager¹¹ of wagons.

"My brothers and fellow citizens, here we stand in the presence of the Holy God, creator of heaven and earth, to make a vow unto Him, that if His protection shall be with us and He give our enemy into our hand so that we might be victorious over him, that this day and date every year shall be spent as a memorial and a day of thanksgiving, just as a Sabbath is spent and that we shall erect a temple to His honour wherever it will be pleasing to Him and that we shall also instruct our children that they must also share in it, as well as for our generations yet to come. Because the Honour of His name shall thereby be glorified and the glory and honour of the victory shall be given Him. "

Armed with muzzle loaded flintlock muskets and three cannon fed with scrap metal the 464 Boers defeated a massed force of 10 000 Zulu, killing an estimated 4000 without suffering a single fatality.

Like the story of the ancient Israelites facing the Canaanite hordes in their Bible the Boers believed that they were saved from certain destruction by the direct intervention of God. If there was ever any doubt that he had been specially chosen it was resolved once and for all on the day of the battle of Blood River, a day which would become known as the 'Day of the Vow' and be religiously observed until the final trauma of the defeat of the National Party in 1994.

If the Afrikaner had been headstrong and independent before he received this evidence of becoming a chosen people, the great theme of separatism which permeated his politics and society bloomed into full flower after this great glorious victory.

When . in the 1980's, sanctions were imposed on South Africa by the outside world they were laughed off by the Afrikaner community as further evidence of the great gulf which separated these well-intentioned but naïve others from the Afrikaner. If 'they' were going to be unreasonable about the situation 'we' found ourselves then the Afrikaner would simply do what he has always done and rely on his own resources. After all, as the old saying goes:

"'n Boer maak 'n plan'"¹²

For the Afrikaner his growing status as pariah became further evidence to him of his destiny as he united his people in massive projects such as ARMSCOR and SASOL which would forever leave him free of reliance on outside parties for his survival.

Under the motto of their coat of arms; *"eendragt maak magt"*¹³ an epic dream unfolded which was shared from the highest leadership to the common worker. In refusing to bow to sanctions South Africa was not only proving itself the equal of any of the great world powers but, in a Manichean scene played out at many a family Braai¹⁴, offered an impenetrable barrier to any doubts expressed by wives or members of the younger generation.

The effect of this unhealthy and extreme emphasis on unity in homes, schools and places of work was a simple one. Much as we find in China today; dissent of any kind could not be tolerated.

⁸ Voortrekker: A participant in the 'Groot Trek.' A scout.

⁹ See "Indaba my Children", Credo Mutwa for an alternative account.

¹⁰ Donga: A long ditch caused by erosion.

¹¹ Laager: Ox wagons drawn into a defensive circle.

¹² "A farmer makes a plan."

¹³ Dutch. "Unity makes Power"

¹⁴ Braai: Barbecue

Just as the Afrikaner could not face his God to ask for clear directions he was discouraged from asking questions of his leaders lest the answer should reveal the cracks in the great dream he had woven for himself. Mistakes, if they were made, could not be admitted to for they would interrupt the clean logic of the dream and could encourage questioning of the divine nature of the Godhead.

Often, more effort was expended on hiding the effects of unquestioning obedience than in accomplishing any real work as evidenced by the “Info Scandal” of the late 70's.

Despite appearances all was not well in Suburbia. Amidst increasing International isolation, a deeply traumatic war in Angola which returning troops spoke of with wrath and alienation, massacres in the black townships, random terrorist bombings and frequent rumours of domestic servants planning to murder their masters in their beds; a creeping silence started to permeate the country. If apocalypse was not now, it was not far of.

Writing here from the relative safety of Cape Town all these years later; it is still a surprise that the anticipated Armageddon failed to occur. Perhaps it was the much quoted, but rarely introspected, words of PW Botha in his infamous ‘Crossing the Rubicon’ speech of 1985 by planting the seeds for the strange and disorientating environment we are facing in South Africa today.

“The strategic position of South Africa has changed. We must adapt or die.”

Somehow, the “Groot Krokodil”¹⁵ had found a way and the immense courage to explicitly verbalise the reality of the Afrikaner situation and offer an alternative glimpse of a future which was both heroic and did not require the loss of Afrikaner self-respect, mitigating what could have turned into a full-blown civil war.

Still, the future of the Afrikaner is uncertain today after he attempts to find a new place for himself after the traumatic loss of his homeland in the 1994 election.

We can attempt to rebuild our identity on the old themes for, with enough determination, the triple complex of being Chosen by God, for Glory and Trauma is highly adaptable to the history of any people that have yet to find a place for themselves on this earth. We might even elect to learn from our mistakes and sketch a softer picture with fewer places for hard dichotomy, supplant Manichaeism with patient dialogue and strive consciously to prevent Armageddon.

Yet, what of the rage that continues unabated in the Afrikaner breastbone? What of the anger that sees him still beating and screaming at his wife and children? What of the sporadic mass murders of family and pets followed with suicide by the head of the household? What of the spiralling increase in drug addiction and continued alcoholism? What of epidemic levels of self-destruction and self-mutilation amongst the more sensitive and artistic youth?

Why are these people so tall of stature, big of build and fair in appearance so angry and tormented?

It may be that there exists a deeper current which pulses through the depths of the Afrikaner subconscious which has to be understood before he can attain liberation from the forces that have shaped him. For, in order for him to stand completely clear of his violent past it is necessary but not sufficient for him to recognize the nature of his belief in the light of experience and self-examination.

With the loss of his homeland and the crashing in of foreign cultural ideas such as Ubuntu¹⁶ and the European enlightenment he has lost all categories of meaning in a universe which no longer holds any guarantee for the continuity of identity after death and certainly does not offer any assurances that he may triumph against the terrible forces he sees arrayed against him by virtue of his unique and special relationship to God.

To be chosen is to have identity and origin, perhaps even a destination, no matter how terrible the cost.

Facing a great void of uncertainty about what it is that you are, where you have come from and to where you are going it can replace oceanic feelings of existential flux with a guarantee that you have not committed sin and will not be subject to punishment for being born into this world of bright colour, intricate form and unforgiving cause and effect.

But it also cuts you off from experiencing the world around you. The action of the individual's life becomes entirely internalized in a titanic inner battle which sees the psyche entangled in a merciless train of thoughts continually working to bulwark a belief system which is really not working.

As an orphan of the universe who has been given a provisional identity on the condition that his faith be absolute and his questions few the Afrikaner individual is damned to the endless commission of imaginary Sins as his blind stumbling through existence causes him to continually bump his head against the doorways of life. In a desperate quest for affirmation from his Father in heaven the smallest

¹⁵ Great Crocodile. Nickname given to President PW Botha

¹⁶ African concept. Most commonly translated as “All men are brothers”

accident can be seen as a sign of displeasure and even the tiniest of successes can only be attributed to the direct intervention of his God. If this is true of the adults it is even truer for the message given to the children. Under the threat of the loss of the souls of their children Afrikaner parents find their natural instincts to care and nurture continually thwarted by the interruption of ambiguous moral codes and undefined strictures imposed by heaven.

The rage of the Afrikaner is the rage of the universal orphan left to fend for himself in an indifferent universe. Caught between a dreaming of a place better than the one he finds himself in and the fear that any action he takes to improve his own world will shatter his dream; he stands alone - a stranger to himself and to those around him.

jou kop groei hemelruim toe
asof dit 'n swaar klip moet dra

jou kniee is stewig in die aarde geplant
en dis nes
of jou hol
in die son wil loer

so oog in oog
en tand vir tand

hemel en aarde is in houding gesnoer

- Breyten Breytenbach

Antoine van Gelder
November 2004
Cape Town, South Africa

Postscript

I recently received word of my Uncle who has joined in the second great trek to London.

He is apparently in fine spirit, with much of the lassitude which gripped him before he left African shores shaken off. He has new energy and a vision, I am told.

It seems that what may, to the naïve, appear as exile is not to be the end of the Afrikaner; it has been revealed to the elect that the journey through Africa was a time of great testing in preparation for the monumental task which lies ahead. It was no accident that the Holy Gospel had been entrusted to the Afrikaner in a land which Europe forgot.

It is to be a time of rejoicing now, for the Afrikaner has triumphed in his task of preserving the word that, now, when the time has come to return to the lands from which he came it should be untainted and strengthened for the final liberation of our world as the great armies of righteousness finally meet on the old battlefields spoken of in the Revelation of St John.

Go figure.