

South Africa in Context (1) A Historical Sketch

For the Dutch, South Africa is not an exotic, distant country. Its strong ties with the Netherlands are well grounded. The first white settlement on the southern point of Africa is the only region of Africa where European families settled during the 17th century to establish a new society and where the Negro people arrived after the European settlers.

Originally, humanly speaking, there was no intention to establish a nation. In the 17th century many Dutch people migrated to five continents, but nowhere else had a state developed with such a Dutch stamp on it. No wonder many Dutch people have a great interest in South Africa. How many of the older generation of Dutch immigrants still remember the Christian author, L. Penning's books about the Boer War?

Penning wrote with passion and vivid imagination about the Boers, who fought the British with great courage. He described the battlefields and the life and adventures of the Boers as if he had been in their midst. But Penning didn't see South Africa until 1923, when he was seventy years old. His grateful publishers had given him the trip. Upon his return to Holland, he wrote, "My wish has been fulfilled. I have seen the battlefields, talked with the Afrikaners, slept in their tents, and was welcomed on their farms." He also commented, "The Whites and the Blacks live next to each other. Much wisdom will be needed to reconcile the greatest of all disparities in a Christian spirit."

To gain some understanding of South Africa we should consider its specific historic development and its geography. Climate and geographical location profoundly influence any community. South Africa has been described as a country of "haunting beauty." But the first settlers despaired of South Africa. The land was poor. Vast tracts of the interior consisted of shrub and semi-desert. There were no navigable rivers, and travellers overland had to negotiate formidable mountain barriers.

Today, South Africa is the most advanced nation in Africa. But many have come to associate it with violence, injustice, sanctions, the Reformed Church, Mandela, and Archbishop Tutu. But the more one reads about South Africa, the quicker the reader will discover the complexities of its problems. In 1948, the British author H V. Morton, after a lengthy stay and extensive travel, wrote in his well researched documentary *In Search of South Africa*, "I had been in the country too long to be able to solve its problems and not long enough to be able to express an opinion about them." These were wise words. Regrettably many have not taken them to heart, judging by the quick solutions offered to solve all the problems South Africa faces.

The Cape Settlement

When Holland was at the peak of her Golden Age, and trade with the Far East was booming, the Dutch East India Company decided to open up a halfway house between Europe and the East. The voyage to the East Indies was long and fraught with danger. Many sailors succumbed to illnesses caused by poor quality of food and water. The

Company chose Jan Van Riebeeck (1618-1619) to command a small fleet of three ships to establish an outpost on the southern tip of Africa, the Cape, which seemed an ideal depot for resupplying ships with fresh provisions. Van Riebeeck was not only accompanied by a small force of soldiers and Company employees, but also by his wife, a lady of Huguenot ancestry, Maria de la Quellerie, and their baby.

Van Riebeeck was an enterprising, resolute and God-fearing man. Immediately after his arrival, he knelt in prayer and asked the Lord for wisdom and insight, for the spread of the Gospel and blessing upon the new enterprise. One of his first actions was the construction of a Fort and the laying out of a twenty-six-acre vegetable garden. The Company also ordered him to establish a store house, granary and a hospital. He was also expected to buy what meat he could from the local herders – the Hottentots, who called themselves Khoikhoi. He gave strict orders to his party to treat the native people fairly and establish good relationships with them. Since the population of the Cape was sparse and unable to furnish sufficient supplies for passing vessels, they felt the need for more immigrants. Therefore, in spite of the original intention of the Company, additional immigrants were invited to the Cape colony.

Under the iron rule of the Company, there was no freedom "either as to private life, political life or religious life." Dutch was the language spoken in worship, commerce, and education. The Company didn't neglect the spiritual needs of their employees. They provided ministers of religion who were of the Reformed faith. Some of these ministers also attempted to evangelize the indigenous Khoikhoi people, which resulted in the baptism of a few Khoikoi before the end of the seventeenth century.

The Dutch were joined by German settlers and, later, by French Huguenots fleeing the persecution during the reign of Louis XIV. As time went by, more Dutch immigrants arrived, and a civil government was provided for the Cape. In 1679 Simon van der Stel was appointed the first governor. Out of this Cape community, developed the Afrikaans-speaking people and the family of Dutch Reformed churches.

Modern Afrikaans is a basic form of Dutch with a rich infusion of English, Javanese and African vocabularies. In 1925 Afrikaans became an official language. In 1933 the Afrikaans Bible was read in the churches. Afrikaans became a language of culture, and many writers, poets and scholars used it as their mother tongue. One modern Afrikaner boasted, "Afrikaans has naturalized into its idiom all the best selected thoughts and ideas of English, Dutch, and German literature and popularized them in simplified language." Today new Afrikaner words are developed continually to replace English technical and sports terms.

South Africa's Population

When Van Riebeeck came to the Cape, there were no "teeming black men," called "the natives." The first people seen by the settlers were bushmen and Hottentots. The Bantu-speaking African "natives," now seen everywhere, were, like the Europeans – invaders.

While the white men were advancing from the West, the Bantu tribes were advancing from the east, and the two races did not meet each other until a century later. Due to the

Cape's small population, Van Riebeeck soon realized the need for more labourers to meet the demands of the Company's halfway station. He believed that the only way to solve the labour shortage was to import slaves. By Dutch law, aboriginal populations were exempted from slavery, which meant that the Hottentots were free people. The first party of slaves came in 1658 when a vessel from Amsterdam intercepted a Portuguese slave ship and brought 170 persons to the Cape. Since they were mostly girls and small boys, they failed to provide immediate help. A school was arranged and the students received a Christian education. Some of the children accepted the Christian faith, and some girls became wives of Dutch colonists. During the 17th century, many children born to slave mothers had white fathers.

The Company required that they be baptized and freed at a certain age. Slaves were imported from Angola and Guinea, and afterwards from Madagascar. They were also imported from the Dutch possessions in the Far East -principally Java as well as from Sri Lanka and the Malay Peninsula. These slaves worked in homes, in artisan workshops and in the fields. This use of slaves in the colony became a source of grievances in later years. In 1834, when South Africa was a British colony, slavery was officially abolished "in all lands subject to the British crown." The various racial groupings intermingled. Today's South African coloured people are descendants of intermarriage between the original Hottentots and Bushmen, white settlers and slaves. More than 90 percent of coloured are Christian and more than 80 per cent speak Afrikaans as their home language.

South Africa's Indians are descendants of labourers who came in 1860 from India on ten - year contracts to cultivate the sugar, tea, and other crops in Natal. Until 1911, they continued to come to the country. When their contract period ended, many were allowed to stay on. These labourers belonged to the lowest caste, the pariahs. They proved to be a cheap work force. The Indian immigrants showed great commercial acumen and resourcefulness and, within a generation or two, most of them left the sugar fields. Eventually, they became market gardeners, hawkers, and domestic servants. Most were Tamil and Gujarati-speaking Hindus from the southern part of India, but there was also an influential Muslim community. Many Indians became successful traders and entrepreneurs. Some also practiced as doctors and lawyers. The most famous of these was Mahatma Gandhi, whose formative years were spent in South Africa as a young lawyer campaigning for greater rights for members of the Indian community.

South Africa's Black community is complex. There are Blacks of different tribes such as the Zulus and Xhosas. Today, there are at least nine major black tribes. These different tribes have their own tribal loyalties and centuries - old conflicts. In the mid-20th century, Black immigrants streamed to South Africa. They felt the pull of her immense and prosperous economy. Ordinary Africans voted with their feet for the jobs the South African economy provided. But their migration to South Africa created horrible moral and social problems.

Johan D.Tangelder
September 2003