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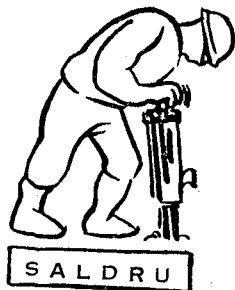
SALDRU FARM LABOUR CONFERENCE

SEPTEMBER 1976

Paper No. 7

The Independent Farmer of the Richtersveld

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Preliminary Draft : No portion of this paper  
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The Richtersveld reserve is situated in the North Eastern Cape just south of the Orange river. The arid landscape reflects the low and irregular rainfall which the region experiences. The sparse vegetation offers very little prospects for the would-be large land-owning farmer. However, this area of over 600 000 morgen supports nearly 100 farmers and their families without there being any individual ownership of land. The communally owned land of the reserve falls under the jurisdiction of the Department of Coloured Affairs, while it is directly controlled by a 'raad' consisting of twelve elected 'raadslede' under the chairmanship of a 'voorsitter' appointed by the Department.

This is one of the few remaining places in South Africa where farming land is available to a whole community of independent farmers. Any farmer registered in the reserve is entitled to keep a flock of animals with very little interference from the 'raad'. Farming forms the economic basis of this community of almost 1000 people who live in the three settlements of Lekkersing, Kuboes and Eksteenfontein.

Eksteenfontein, formerly known as Stinkfontein, has a population of over 400. It consists largely of Afrikaans-speaking 'Coloureds' <sup>people</sup> who came in a group to settle in the town in 1949.

These 'Inkommers', as they later became known, had originally been farmers in the Boesmanland area. This was in the time before strict racial classification, and they could probably have been described as 'poor whites' who lived and worked among the other whites of the region. They worked on very small state-owned farms and paid very little rent. But as the political scene in South Africa changed, so did the fate of these people. Some were classified as white, and some as coloured; without there being any real regard for consistency within a family.

Consequently the arbitrary definitions of racial classification often led to a man being classified as coloured, while his brother remained white. There is even one case of an old resident of Eksteenfontein who recalls working originally as a white, then as a coloured, then as white, and back again to coloured.

All this ultimately meant that these 'Basters', as they were known, were made to feel very unwelcome in their old community. They were discriminated against, not only by their white relatives (who no doubt found it an embarrassment to have coloured relatives living near them), but also by the community as a whole. This fact, together with increases in the tenure payable on the farms and the ultimate sale of their farms to the richer farmers in the area, all contributed to their decision to leave the Boesmanland territory en masse. After wandering around for some time without finding any permanent place to settle, their pastor (a Dominee Eksteen) obtained permission from the government for them to settle in the Richtersveld. They moved to Stinkfontein and renamed it after their dominee.

These historical roots have had a notable influence upon their lives. Instead of retaining feelings of resentment towards the Europeans, they have chosen to identify with them. They still consider themselves to be essentially Afrikaners and will go to great lengths to trace lines of descent from famous Voortrekkers. For example, there are at least five Dirkie Uyses in the community, all apparently direct descendants of the Dirkie Uys. But their feelings go deeper than this. They all belong to the Dutch Reformed church, speak a very pure and good Afrikaans, and most, especially the older members of the community, identify very strongly with the government. They talk about 'Ons regering' and 'Ons Eerste Minister' with great reverence, and express their thanks for what the government has done for them. 'Hulle het ons hierdie grond gegee; hulle betaal die ou mense 'n goeie pensioen; en hulle sorg vir jou as jy siek is'.

Besides them, there is also a small group of Nama-speaking people living in Eksteenfontein. They are descendents of the Khoi (Hottentot) and till recently led a largely nomadic existence, with their small flocks of sheep and goats being their main source of livelihood. They moved around with their flocks and their whole families living in 'matjiesh~~u~~ise' which could easily be moved to better grazing lands. This subsistence farming was only interrupted during severe droughts when the flocks would die and they would be forced to seek employment in the larger centres such as Port Nolloth, Alexander Bay and Steinkopf. Well before 1949 however, some Namas had begun settling in Kuboes, Lekkersing and Stinkfontein. Round about this time some outsiders had entered the area and settled mainly in Lekkersing. Kuboes and Stinkfontein remained predominantly Nama settlements.

When the 'Inkommers' (Afrikaans-speakers from Boesmanland) came to Stinkfontein in 1949, the Namas did not leave, but were forced into a minority position. The few die-hards who can still remember this episode in their history, have strong feelings of hostility towards the 'Inkommers'. They feel that the land has been taken away from them and cannot forgive the new residents of Eksteenfontein.

The Richtersveld is a communal farming area and the private ownership of land (other than the 'erfs' in the centres where houses are owned) is not possible. Upon their arrival the 'Inkommers' farmed with sheep and goats and attempted to cultivate some of the land. Cultivation failed because the farmers were entirely reliant upon the inadequate and irregular rainfall of the region, and because it was difficult to obtain permission to fence off these lands (the fines payable by the owners of sheep and goats which strayed into the cultivated fields was inadequate). All that remains of this noble attempt are a few rusty ploughs,

solitary dilapidated houses and the remnants of old 'dorsvloere'.

But not all the farmers are satisfied with this state of affairs. There are a few who believe that cultivation might be a viable proposition. They feel that the 'raad' has not given the venture its full support and that, with its help, the venture might have been successful. It is clear that the 'raad' is doing nothing to encourage cultivation. This might be because it is felt that the issuing of private land might destroy the basic communal nature of the reserve. Also, there is not enough level ground in this hilly region to satisfy the needs of all the farmers. Consequently, they might feel that they do not want to favour some and deprive others. As a result sheep and goats are the only real source of livelihood and there are approximately 39 000 of these animals in the reserve.

Sheep and goats are the only animals which can comfortably survive in the region, but there is only one farmer who farms only with one (goats). Both sheep and goats have their relative merits and demerits and most farmers keep both in order to ensure that chance factors are less likely to affect their entire herd at once. This requires some explanation.

The goats are more prolific, more intelligent and less susceptible to eating poisonous plants than are the sheep. However, their kids need a lot of human attention (more than one herder during the lambing season is essential), and they need to be kept for at least three years before they can fetch a good price (between R20 and R30).

Sheep, on the other hand, do not multiply as quickly as do the goats and are more prone to illnesses. But they are better economic propositions, since the skins of newly-born lambs fetch between R15 and R20, wool is sold twice per year, and the adults can be sold at an earlier age (from 10 months).

When the 'Inkommers' arrived in Stinkfontein with

their herds, they experienced great hardships before they were able to adapt to the new terrain. Both the farmers and the animals were unfamiliar with the vegetation, and it took some time before the herds were able to distinguish between the poisonous and non-poisonous plants. There are many reports of farmers who entered the Richtersveld with hundreds of sheep and goats, only to find that their entire herds were lost through eating poisonous plants or through drought. Fortunes were by no means stable, but most of the farmers who suffered these severe setbacks were gradually able to reverse the process, and today own sizeable herds.

Out of a total of approximately 70 adult ~~males~~<sup>males</sup> working in Eksteenfontein, there are over thirty independent farmers. Half of the remaining forty work in the reserve (as 'draadspanners', teachers, builders and water-carriers), while the rest are migrant labourers working in Port Nolloth, Okiep, Beauvallon and Vioolsdrif. Obviously some of the adult men have left Eksteenfontein permanently, but the percentage of adult men in the population indicates that this movement has not been very significant to date.

There are very few cases of men voluntarily seeking any employment other than farming. This fact, as well as interviews with many of the residents allow one to conclude that there is very little pull into the cities, but that economic pressures push the would-be farmers off the land. The farmers generally seem content with their existence and many express their pleasure at being able to remain farmers, rather than having to be forced to seek employment elsewhere. The farmers value their independence very highly, and all those who have worked outside the reserve say that they prefer their farming existence to that of working for a boss.

The 'raad' has the power to restrict the size of a herd of any one registered farmer to 500, but this has never been exercised. Also there is only a nominal fee

of 2½c per annum payable on every animal a farmer owns in excess of 100. And yet very few farmers have excessively large herds. Only one farmer owns a flock of more than one thousand (1070), with the average being around 400. There are four possible reasons for this.

Firstly, since it is communal farming land, all the farmers are equally dependent upon the availability of good grazing and water. No single farmer has more land or water at his disposal than the others. Secondly, there is very little mechanization, so that no farmer is really more efficient than the others. Thirdly, farming is very precarious, and its success depends to a large extent upon the very close supervision of the farmer himself. And since the maximum practical size of a single herd is about one thousand, it is not a viable proposition for a farmer to have so many 'vee' that he is obliged to split his herd. And finally, farmers seldom own all the 'vee' in their herds. As mentioned earlier, there are only about 100 farmers in the Richtersveld, while the total population is in the vicinity of 1000. At the same time, almost every resident in the Richtersveld owns at least one animal. Farmers start giving their children animals from a very early age, especially during good years. The young men therefore, who do not farm themselves, normally have some close relative (who is a farmer) looking after his sheep and goats. Of course a farmer will look after his children's animals until they are old enough to farm themselves (in the case of boys), or until they get married (in the case of girls). When young women get married they normally bring a few animals which then get incorporated into the husband's herd.

All this means that the farmer keeps the size of his herd small, not only by selling and slaughtering, but also by giving or returning animals to members of his family. For example, a farmer might be looking after his brother's animals. When these have grown sufficiently in number, the brother might cease being a migrant labourer and return to manage his own herd. Or, the

farmer might have a few sons who have periodically been given sheep and goats. When the son has accumulated enough animals in this way, he will also leave the main herd and go and farm on his own.

But the social effects of this last factor have much deeper implications. One could be tempted to say that it makes everyone in the community feel that he or she is a farmer at heart. But while such vague generalizations are always dangerous, it seems to be quite reasonable to say that it has tended to prevent farming from becoming a strictly individual and economic venture. Certainly, one could say that this accounts, to a large extent, for the success of farming on communal ground. While one might rightfully call them independent farmers, one could hardly say that they are all individual. This, together with the close kinship ties that exist in the community, could account for the communal feelings that exist between the farmers, as well as a playing down of competition among them. What is good for the farmers is good for the community.

The importance of kinship ties for the farming is also reflected in the amount of contact and co-operation that farmers of one extended family have (as farmers) with each other. There is no real contact between the farmers of Eksteenfontein and those in the other settlements. However, there is an unwritten law which states that every farmer will remain in the area of his settlement as laid down by custom. Further, within each settlement little groups of farmers (usually close family or friends) will form and stay in a certain grazing area. These little groups then co-operate very closely in terms of deciding where each is going to keep his herd, as well as discussing the grazing prospects in each different section of their area. In this way they can avoid tramping on each other's <sup>lands</sup> (by not having two or more farmers decide to keep their herds at the same place), or wasting their efforts (by one farmer going to an area which has just been cleared by another).

It could also help to explain why the Namas in



Eksteenfontein (as opposed to those in Kuboes) have not been successful farmers in recent times, and why they feel that the land has been taken away from them. That is to say, there is not simply a disorganized scramble for any land which is vacant at any specific time, and that the Namas would have to get into one of these groups in order to avoid causing a large amount of friction.

Since the farming is on communal ground, there are no camps for individual farmers. Each farmer is therefore obliged to have someone who is constantly with his flock, and a full-time shepherd or 'veewagter' is employed for this purpose. The 'veewagter' is normally a Nama (who is paid a certain wage) or a son or younger brother of the farmer, and he stays with the flock all the time. The herds are usually quite far from Eksteenfontein, so that the herder spends many months of the year with the farmer being his only contact with 'civilization'. In earlier years the 'wagter' could have his whole family staying with him, but compulsory education and the conveniences of life in the larger centres now means that he must stay alone.

The normal routine is for a farmer to establish a base camp or 'veepos' for a few days to which the 'wagter' will return every night after taking the herd out to graze for the day. The farmer goes out to the herd nearly every day and often spends the night there.

Almost every farmer owns a light pick-up truck or 'bakkie' without which it would be almost impossible for him to continue farming. Not only does he need the bakkie to travel to and from his flock, but he also needs it to travel to the larger centres (such as Port Nolloth and Springbok) which are over forty miles away. The few farmers who do not have bakkies are very reliant upon their friends and relatives who have, and since the arrival of these 'Inkommers' in 1949 there have always been motor vehicles in the community.

Owing to the extremely bad condition of the roads (if one may call them that), these bakkies have a very short life (about 25 000 miles) and have to be replaced

every three or four years. This is a very large expense for these farmers, but they consider it very necessary. It is necessary for economic as well as social purposes. Judging by the appearance of their houses, it would seem that the average farmer spends much more on his bakkie and its maintenance than on his house. But the bakkie is also used for other purposes such as carrying wood, transporting water, and shopping in the cheaper larger centres. The farmers do their own maintenance wherever possible and spend much time discussing mechanical problems with each other.

The farmers see themselves as important owners of wealth (indeed, a herd of 400 sheep and goats is worth R10 000) and have a very real pride in their profession. They generally appear to enjoy their work and like to stress its romantic side. On more than one occasion farmers told me that they were pretty much like the cowboys of the Wild West. 'Al wat ons nog nodig het, is rewolwers'.

But farming in the Richtersveld is by no means a romantic occupation, and its success depends to a large extent upon the constant attention of the farmer himself. He spends most of his time with the 'vee' and has usually spent the entire earlier part of his life as a veewagter. It is not unusual for a son to remain his father's 'veewagter' until his late twenties or early thirties. These long days and nights spent in close proximity to his herd give rise to a very restricted but specialized knowledge. Each individual animal is known and instantly recognized by the farmer and he recognizes almost every plant in the vast terrain which he covers. He takes great delight in demonstrating these skills to the uninitiated urban dweller and enjoys telling folk tales about the animals he encounters.

The small groups of farmers have somehow managed to communicate with each other on farming matters in a specialized form of Afrikaans which is quite unintelligible to the outside observer. In general the language spoken in the veld is quite different from the clear, neat and

precise Afrikaans spoken in Eksteenfontein. This is especially noticeable when the little groups of farmers get together around a campfire in the veld, where their conversation always seems to centre around the business of farming, punctuated by long silences and loud sighs.

Farming is very clearly a family concern. Not only do all the members of the family own some of the 'vee', but they also very often play a very active role in looking after them. The young men are normally the 'veewagters' for their fathers, and most young boys spend their school holidays looking after some aspect of the farming. But during the lambing season this activity usually reaches its peak. The migrant workers usually choose their holidays to coincide with this period so that they might assist in all the work that has to be done, and the farmer might move out to the 'veepos' with his whole family (if it is during the school holidays) in order to be there all the time. Those farmers who do not have bakkies will usually borrow one for this period from a son or other relative who is a migrant worker and whose 'vee' the farmer is looking after.

But this is not the only form of assistance which the farmer receives. They are all very religious and relate this belief very closely <sup>to</sup> the fortunes of their farming. 'Die Here het ons al hierdie diere gegee. Selfs al vat hy almal van ons af weg, het ons nog baie waarvoor ons moet dankbaar wees.'

Accurate figures are difficult to obtain, but the yearly expenditure sheet of a typical Eksteenfontein farmer might look like this:

Animals consumed by family	24	
" given to wagter as food	12	
" lost	30	
Wagter's wages	15 animals or	R300
Payments in kind to wagter	10 "	" R200
Running expenses and depreciation on bakkie	30 "	" R600
Total	121 Animals or	R2420

In other words, the farmer must increase his herd by more than 120 before he earns any real money. With a herd of 400 the increase will vary between 120 and 280 per year, so that his income will also range between nil and R3 200 per year (nil and R266 per month). This tremendous range in incomes depends upon whether it has been a good or bad year, but one can hazard a guess and say that their income should average out at about R100 per month. One sees here how important the son can be to the farmer if he takes over the work of the 'wagter'. Similarly, the bakkie is also a large expense to the farmer and those with smaller herds will not be able to afford to own one.

The relationship between a farmer and his Nama 'veewagter' is hardly typical of a 'master-servant' one. Contrary to expectations (based upon information gathered from the Namas in Eksteenfontein), the farmer does not consider himself to be superior to his 'wagter'. The 'wagter' calls him by his first name (one even called his farmer 'Ou Frik' whenever talking to him), they sit around the same camp fire, eat from the same pot, share in the same conversation, and sleep next to each other in the veld. This is probably due to the fact that the farmer is very reliant upon the skill, experience and loyalty of the 'wagter', although the wage that he can afford is not really a great incentive to persuade him to stay.

The 'veewagters' are employed specifically for their skill and ability to look after the animals. They earn between R15 and R30 per month, and occasionally get an animal from the farmer. Besides this the farmer must also supply them with food and clothing. They get three weeks vacation per year and a few days rest here and there.

Notwithstanding these benefits, looking after another man's herd is not an attractive job. The salary of R30 per month is not as bad as it sounds when it is remembered that this is over and above living expenses.

Two of the 'veewagters remarked that at least this was a way of getting some money together, which would not have been possible in other employment. But the living conditions, on the other hand, are very hard. Consequently there is an extremely large turnover of 'wagters', and few stay with one farmer for more than one year at a time. The farmers seem concerned about the shortage of good 'wagters' but appear to be unable to pay them more.

Jan is one such 'wagter' and works for a reasonably prosperous Eksteenfontein farmer whose sons are much too young to look after his herd. Jan is 44 years old and was born in the Richtersveld to parents who were true nomadic herders with their own herd. However, when Jan was about 14 years old, a severe drought took most of his father's herd and the children were forced to fend for themselves and seek employment wherever it could be found. Jan spent the next few years of his life working for a Nama family living in Stinkfontein (before the arrival of the 'Inkommers'). He was their general 'houseboy' and worked only for his food and clothing. As can be seen, these were extremely hard times and Jan is very reluctant to talk about them. 'Ek wil liever daardie dae vergeet'.

At the age of about 20 Jan found employment as a 'wagter' for one of the 'Inkommer' farmers. He did this for about six years and then moved to Port Nolloth to seek employment there. He was employed as a general labourer in many different lines of work, seldom remaining in one job for more than a year. During this period he also got married to a Nama who was employed as a domestic servant in Port Nolloth. They acquired a little shack and she bore him three children who all completed standard 2.

~~Get~~ Jan then returned to the Richtersveld about 6 years ago. He easily found work as a 'wagter' for one of the farmers in Eksteenfontein, but stayed with him only until he had enough money to return to Port Nolloth for a while (his wife and children still live there, but they are self-supporting). When his money ran out, he returned to Eksteenfontein. This cycle has continued

ever since. Today Jan is considered to be one of the best 'wagters' in Eksteenfontein and finds no difficulty in getting work. His previous employer would even allow him a few month's unpaid leave and then <sup>etc</sup> ~~greatly~~ accept him back.

Jan gets up well before dawn every day of the week (" 'n Wagter ken mos nie naweek nie") to see to the fire and make coffee. When the sun comes up he is ready to take out the 'vee' for the day's grazing. The vegetation is so sparse that he must keep moving all day long. In this way he easily covers 10 to 12 miles over very difficult terrain. After a short nap at midday, he will seldom return to the 'veepos' before sunset. The evenings are spent preparing supper and talking to the farmer. But besides this he also spends a large part of the night ensuring that ~~the~~ jackals do not come too near the flock.

However, he does not find this too trying and says that it is the only employment for which he is really qualified. What he is not too happy about, is the fact that he leads this day to day existence without any prospects for improvement. He dislikes having to look after another man's 'vee'. But it is quite feasible that Jan could build up his own herd. There are many cases of farmers in Eksteenfontein who started out as 'wagters' for other farmers. There is even a case of one farmer who built up such a herd of his own that he eventually had more than the farmer for who he was herding at the time. Needless to say, he was forced to leave. But to return to Jan's case, it is clear that the motivation is not there and that he is not prepared to save for the long period necessary before his herd can be his source of income.

Another 'veewagter', Dawid, has a different outlook. He was born to Nama parents in Wynberg, Cape. After completing standard 4 he worked in the Cape for a few years but then decided to return to the previous home of his parents. He became a 'wagter' in the Steinkopf area and only recently began working in the Richtersveld. He is much younger than Jan and still has hopes of building up his own herd one day. He says that he enjoys the wide

open spaces and does not want to change his occupation. However, Dawid is as yet unmarried and his outlook might change when he gets older.

Decisions about the farming are normally taken by the farmer in conjunction with his 'wagter' or the other farmers in his group. The 'raad' which controls the reserve consists of a few 'raadslede' (representatives) from each of the settlements. They make decisions affecting the whole Richtersveld community: construction of community buildings (schools, clinics, shops), new dams and the erection of windmills, which of the large camps will remain closed and for how long, etc. Since many of their decisions affect farming, most of the 'raadslede' are farmers. However, there is some dissatisfaction about the adequacy of this means of representation.

The farmers sell their produce (slaughter-animals, wool and karakul skins) in the larger towns or to buyers who enter the Richtersveld. They pay a fixed tax of R12 per year and receive a little assistance from the government in their farming. There is an annual government dip of all livestock in Eksteenfontein and government inspectors help to combat disease at regular intervals.

There is no real monetary assistance during severe droughts or outbreak of disease. Although the last three years have been the best in the last three decades, the farmers are already beginning to bank their surplus incomes so that fodder might be bought in future times of drought.

The government has all surface mineral rights in the reserve, while all other mining is undertaken by private mining companies who pay a certain percentage of their revenue to the 'raad'. Residents in the reserve are allowed to stake out their own claims which can then be sold to the mining companies. However, the number of claims that any one resident might own is very small and few (only three) residents of Eksteenfontein have sufficient

specialized knowledge to select claims.

Few adult farmers have been educated beyond standard 2, but most of the younger generation have completed standard 6. At the moment it is too soon to say whether this increase in education is going to attract them to the cities, or whether they will retain the notion that farming is the ultimate form of livelihood. At the moment there is little evidence that their encapsulated existence is coming to an end.



Appendix I

Energy flow chart of Richtersveld.

