FORCED REMOVALS: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE COMMUNITIES OF BRAK AND ROOIRAND

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1.   INTRODUCTION

The sustained policy of demolishing homes and forcibly moving people from the land on which they had been living was for a long time one of the most reviled practices of the South African state (Desmond 1986, Du Toit 1982, Harries 1970, O'Regan 1989 and Tatz 1962). Land is (and has always been) of particular significance to humankind. Without it people would not have homes, building materials, grazing areas, places to cultivate crops, etc. The economic value of land is accordingly viewed as its 'real' value; it represents a sense of security and is a key asset in its own right. However, besides the economic aspect, a series of values (cultural, social, political and aesthetic), histories, identities and symbolic meanings are found in and on land, or are attached to it (James 2001:1 and Schneider 1981:33, 111 and 165). For this reason, according to Hydén (1999:152), the concept 'security' needs to include the aforementioned spheres (aspects) of life and cannot refer solely to the economic situation. Svedin (1999:164) is of the same opinion, and argues that conceptually it is not possible to separate culture and the environment. On the one hand, culture provides a grid for understanding nature, including concepts, normative rules (as well as the institutions encompassing and codifying such rules), practices (e.g. lifestyles and the tools developed for these purposes) and knowledge systems. On the other hand, the converse is also true. De Beer (1997:233 and 1999:21-2), for example, points out that land not only provides human beings with access to resources, but likewise creates the frame of reference which people employ to evaluate, categorise and assign meaning to other people, things, events and phenomena such as mountains, rivers, trees, the soil, etc.

A central expression of cultural values, norms and meanings is found in people's world-views (Erasmus 2000 and Forde 1976). World-views are implicit in maps of the world (*mappa mundae*), among other things. The process of creating a *mappa mundi* includes specific choices and certain aspects. Choices relate to components

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to be included and excluded (and why such selections are made), as well as to scale, opinions on philosophical ideas of time, relevant knowledge and *foci* of interest. Aspects include ways of modelling contemporary geographical under-standing, the interplay between craftsmanship and theoretical knowledge, personal narratives, available technology and the prevailing religious and political situations. When considering the values appropriate to developing a *mappa mundi*, it must be realised that values (although highly subjective) provide a frame of reference and are often made visible by means of the choice of boundary conditions (Svedin 1999:167-9 and De Beer 1997:233-4).

As the South African *mappa mundi* was created largely in terms of discriminatory institutional allocation and administration of land within an overall state of repres-sion, the present process of land reform, restitution and redistribution represents attempts to reverse these inequities and, by doing so, to reconstruct the South African *mappa mundi*. James (2001:15) distinguished two different governmental approaches in this regard: the first favoured the restitution and redistribution of land to those removed from it or denied access to it. This approach enjoyed a brief period of influence under the previous Land Affairs Minister, Derek Hanekom, who established a legal framework to facilitate the reclaiming of land by those unfairly deprived of or evicted from it. The second approach (under Minister Thoko Didiza) has a more developmentalist focus: it recognises the primacy of the market, and favours the development of small- through medium- to large-scale agriculture. Despite the differences between these two approaches regarding policy frameworks and outcomes, they largely correspond in so far as they acknowledge the inter-relation between economic process, political system and political action. Given the different variables in respect of land (as indicated above), the following discussion on the land claims of the communities of Brak and Rooirand (in the municipal area of Barkly West, Northern Cape) focuses on the components of the process (political economy as well as legal and racial aspects) along with the experiences of the people involved. Focusing on individual experiences (the so-called micro-foundations of experience) is, according to Coetzee and Wood (1997:2), Mair (1984:121) and Segar (1989:1), of increasing relevance in our present-day situation, which is not only characterised by the implications of globalisation, but also by the rise of particularism and by renewed emphasis on the individual.

2.   DATA GATHERING

A multidisciplinary research team collected the data presented in this report. During the first visit of the researchers the purpose and procedures of the research were explained to community leaders, and the researchers familiarised themselves with the areas of dispossession and allocation. Fieldwork commenced on 1 December

1999 and during 2000 a further four visits took place. Successful interviews were conducted with 203 individuals.

The researchers had various meetings with the Town Clerk and other office-bearers in Barkly West, and visits were paid to the Deeds Offices in Kimberley and Bloemfontein, the National Archives in Cape Town and Bloemfontein, the Legal Resources Centre, the Supreme Court of the Northern Cape, and the Africana Museum in Kimberley. An extensive search was conducted in order to obtain documented and archival information related to the dispossession, the nature of the dispossessed land and the allocated accommodation, municipal valuation records, zoning records and maps, development plans and the layout of the areas at the time of dispossession.[1]

3.   HISTORY OF THE INHABITANTS AND THE DISPOSSESSED AREA

No one knows for certain the origin and early history of Brak and Rooirand – the so-called Bantu location[2] of the 'white' Barkly West township. According to minutes of the Town Council of Barkly West Municipality (23rd January 1973), all records regarding the location were destroyed in a fire. This may be one of the reasons for the dearth of information on the people of Brak and Rooirand and their circumstances prior to this date. Other reasons are that the history of Brak and Rooirand survives mainly in the memories of its uprooted inhabitants, since the community itself did not keep its own written records; the people's removal was not reported in the 'white' press, and, owing to lack of interest or negligence on the side of white officials, many documents were simply lost.

The district of Barkly West is well-known for the alluvial diamonds that were mined there – and still are, though to a lesser extent. San were the original inhabitants of this area, and a number of Korannas and Griquas had established themselves in the region by approximately 1770, while the Tlhaping (Tswana people) also later lived there (Kies 1972, Oberholster 1945 and Van der Westhuizen 1937). Important role-players in the later history of South Africa descended from these groups - among them the Griqua leaders Nicolaas Waterboer and Adam Kok.

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[1]   All Government Gazettes from January 1960 to December 1971 as well as the statute books of the late 1960s and early 1970s were examined, while minutes of meetings of the 'white' Municipal Council of Barkly West from 1955 to 1979 were also investigated.

[2]   Concepts like 'location', 'Native' and 'Bantu' are used in their historical and political contexts.

The received opinion is that the first diamond discovered in South Africa (the Eureka of 20 carats) was found near Hopetown along the Gariep River in 1867 (Matheys 1991:3). The news of the find evoked relatively little attention (Van Niekerk 1996:13-5). The discovery of the second diamond (the Star of South Africa of 83,5 carats) in 1869, and the subsequent large finds on the banks of the Vaal River in the district of Barkly West, triggered a diamond diggers' rush which was described in **The Diamond News** (October 1937) as the 'Second Great Trek' to the interior.

Some of the first white diggers, under the leadership of Major Francis, reached the Vaal River at Windsorton in November 1869. Chief Jan Bloem's Korannas helped them to find their first diamonds near the current Barkly West on 7 January 1870. According to Shillington (1985:38) the indigenous Koranna, Griqua and Thlaping became increasingly involved in the search for diamonds because of their knowledge of the area. They identified several exceptionally rich sites and fully realised the potential value of diamonds,[3] while most of the early diamond sales were handled directly by the indigenous leaders. However, the indigenous population soon surrendered their control to the incoming white prospectors and diggers. These soon outnumbered the locals - by the end of 1879 there were already approximately 5 000 white diggers along the Vaal River (Erasmus and Sauls 1995:138), and their claims were acknowledged by the authorities of the day and supported by international diamond buyers and financial institutions. It was only a question of time before the white diggers and prospectors, with their capital and advanced technology, would monopolise the diamond industry. Shillington (1985:35) says in this regard that the ease with which this was accomplished wrongly implied that the white diggers and prospectors were pioneers, while the role of the indigenous population is underestimated and unappreciated.

In spite of exceptionally rich deposits, the diamond source near Barkly West is now almost exhausted. When it became economically non-viable for white diggers (read treasure hunters) to mine there, they moved away, the infrastructure fell apart, and an impoverished community of indigenous people remained.

Rooirand and Brak were situated on the rocky banks of the Vaal River and was an interethnic community. Former residents identified themselves as Africans, coloureds and Griqua, and indicated their home language as follows: more than eight out of every ten individuals (81%) spoke Setswana; Afrikaans was the home

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[3]   One can contend not only that the majority of diamonds were found by the indigenous population
       in the early years (Van Niekerk 1996:11-2), but also that they were familiar with diamonds before
       the 'official discovery' and had a particular use for them (Van Niekerk 1996:16).

language of 11%; double the number of respondents spoke IsiXhosa (5%) in comparison with Sesotho (2,5%), and one person spoke Griqua.

Residents needed the approval of the 'white' Town Council to erect their houses – subject to the conditions that no remuneration would be paid by the Municipality if it was deemed necessary to demolish the houses, and that the privilege would be revoked if fees (rent) were not paid on a monthly basis in advance (Town Council Minutes, 28 March 1967). During 1960 the rent per stand was 3/- (30 cents) per month in Brak and 6/- (60 cents) per month in Rooirand (Town Council Meeting, 26 April 1960). Rent was adjusted from time to time, while residents who owned livestock also paid rent for grazing rights.

The size, quality, condition and value of the self-built structures could not easily be estimated, established or verified. It seems, however, that these structures typically consisted of self-made mud bricks, corrugated iron roofs, and dung-smeared floors, and were fenced with stones, while some had their own kraal for livestock. Although the dispossession took place almost 30 years ago, and it is therefore difficult for former inhabitants to remember the exact size of their houses and stands, the estimated average size of a stand was close to 1 328 m^2.

In his report to the Municipal Town Council, the Urban Areas Commissioner of the Department of Native Affairs mentioned that conditions in Brak and Rooirand were pitiful. This situation prevailed for several years, partly because no municipal services were provided. At the Town Council meeting of 21 July 1966 Brak and Rooirand were accordingly described as follows: "In the old residential area … approximately 3 000 residents mainly live in unsuitable, ill-looking, self-built shacks and the conditions are very poor. Apart from a small number of private pit latrines, the entire population uses 19 communal pit latrines, the bushes, veld and walls. Even the pit latrines are not properly maintained. The Vaal River is used for drinking water and also serves as the only ablution facility. The old residential area is situated on the slope of the river bank and as a result various forms of muck and filth end up in the river during heavy rains, a situation that can be regarded as the gradual pollution of public water."

From the discussion it can be concluded that the inhabitants were settled on municipally owned commonage, each on his/her own stand, and living in self-built structures. They paid the municipality rent for the stands, but could never own them – in other words, they were settled there without any property rights. Residents had free and unlimited access to water from the nearby Vaal River (this was a source of natural water that was used for household purposes as well as for cultivation), as well as unlimited access to the surrounding 'bush' (which was regarded as common

to all) where they gathered firewood. People were also allowed to keep livestock on the commonage, for which they had to pay rent.

Although the overwhelming majority of the residents had lived in Brak and Rooirand for many years, the Town Council decided in the 1950s to remove them (Town Council Minutes, 24 April 1955). The next section deals with the reasons for this and with the racial legislation used by the Town Council in this regard.

4.   LEGAL FRAMEWORK

To understand the political context of Barkly West, it must be borne in mind that it is a rural and predominantly conservative community, which was represented in Parliament by the National Party during the previous political dispensation. Members of the Town Council were (obviously) all white, mainly Afrikaans-speaking, and apparently (from the attendance registers) all male.

On a visit by the Urban Areas Commissioner (Department of Native Affairs) to Barkly West in September 1954, he found that Brak and Rooirand were not suitably located in terms of the policy of apartheid – they were too close to the white suburbs and therefore did not satisfy government's buffer requirements for separate residential areas. As a result, the Town Council (which supported the government's policy) decided to remove Brak and Rooirand[4] to a terrain further from the white residential area, in other words to increase the distance between whites and blacks (Town Council Minutes, 24 April 1955).

In a letter dated 26 April 1961, the Secretary of the Department of Bantu Administration and Development stated that the Minister had approved the establishment of a new proposed black township (Town Council Minutes, 29 May 1961), as well as the delimitation, setting apart and construction of a terrain[5] as a Bantu residential area.[6] Consequently, the Department approved a Bantu housing loan of R152 000 to the Town Council[7], while Brak and Rooirand were proclaimed as a white area after they had been vacated.[8]

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[4]   According to the records of the municipality, they planned to relocate 1 913 people to 450 houses (Town Council Minutes, 8 February 1971).

[5]   After consultation with the Group Areas Council, the Town Council decided on an area north of the Kuruman road and west of the Spitzkop road as indicated on the Surveyor-General's map No. 614/61.

[6]   In accordance with section 2(1) (a) and (b) of the Natives (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act, 1945 (25/1945).

[7]   The necessary Government Notice (No. 989) was issued on 10 November 1961.

[8]   Proclamation 331 of 1962 (**Government Gazette** of 21 December 1962).

From the information it is clear that the decision to remove the inhabitants of Brak and Rooirand was part of the sustained policy of demolishing homes and forcibly moving people from the land on which they had been living, and that it was done not in time of need (natural disaster or impending national crisis), but because of a policy aimed at bringing about a geographical, social, economic and political separation of groups. In other words it was the result of discriminatory practices along racial lines. The impact of the removal will be discussed in the next section.

5.   THE REMOVAL

Forced removals have been described and analysed in an impressive body of literature (Colson 1971 and Harries 1987). According to Niehaus (1989:178), a dominant theme in the literature is the comparison of conditions of life prior to and after removal. While this kind of material certainly provides an overview of the structure and pattern of resettlement, there is also a growing awareness of the need to collect people's memories of daily life before it was disrupted by their removal (Sharp 1982).

The inhabitants of Brak and Rooirand lived under the proverbial sword of relocation for almost twenty years, and removals commenced in March 1971. Oral testimony of respondents confirms that they were under stress during this period, as well as the actual removal. They were not allowed to maintain, renovate or improve their houses or environment and the decline in general conditions and circumstances, as described above, can directly be linked to the Town Council's policy. People were dissatisfied with having to leave their familiar surroundings where they had lived in close proximity, had enjoyed a collective community life, and where crime had been virtually non-existent. To them these (social) criteria were more important than physical considerations. Although the majority of the inhabitants of Brak and Rooirand were relocated to Mataleng, the relocation still restricted their access to former friends, family members and neighbours. For them it was destructive and they suffered separation from relatives and former neighbours, not only because their social and emotional ties had been entirely within the neighbourhood of Brak and Rooirand, but also because there were initially neither support networks nor community control in the newly constructed Mataleng. Furthermore, the removal offended the people's dignity, because the decision was taken without their knowledge and without prior consultation. Moreover, they were removed without any financial compensation.

The issue of compensation is a very sensitive one for the people and requires further elucidation. The Location Superintendent informed the Town Council that in his opinion the residents were not unwilling to move to the newly developed

township of Mataleng, but were complaining about the high municipal rent tariffs they would have to pay (Town Council Minutes, 7 July 1970). The Town Council, however, justified its decision about the rent by arguing that it had to pay off the loan that had been procured in order to build the houses and to develop the infrastructure of Mataleng. The Secretary of Bantu Administration and Development supported the Town Council in this regard, and suggested that those who did not want to pay rent should be relocated to the homelands (Town Council Minutes, 24 November 1970).[9]

It was the policy of the Department of Bantu Administration and Development to pay compensation in the case of removals. It therefore requested information concerning the payment of remuneration with regard to the dwellings in Brak and Rooirand. The Location Superintendent investigated the matter (Town Council Minutes, 4 April 1966), whereafter the Town Council made the following average cost estimates: to pay for a three-roomed house R45,08; in the case of a two-roomed house it was R19,99; a single-roomed house was worth R15,83 (Town Council Minutes, 15 August 1967). In his response to the information from the municipality, the Secretary of Bantu Administration and Development acknowledged that the sentimental value of the houses was much higher than their actual monetary value. He therefore approved that a sum of R4 518,84 be paid out as compensation for the vacated houses (Town Council Minutes, 18 January 1973). According to section 19 (5) of Act No. 25 of 1945, only 30% of the estimated value of properties could be paid out to the owners of vacated houses. However, the Town Council decided not to do this, but rather to pay the 30% (R1 355,65) into the Bantu Income Account of the Municipality (Town Council Minutes, 3 April 1973). Not only did the inhabitants of Brak and Rooirand face an unreasonable 'option' (either to be removed to the homelands - and thus lose their South African citizenship - or to be removed to Mataleng), but the Town Council's unjust implementation of the government's policy on compensation resulted in no remuneration at all being paid to the residents of Brak and Rooirand.

The majority of the inhabitants stated that they sustained damages during their removal to Mataleng. This included the breaking of crockery, damage to furniture and the loss of livestock. Again, the extent and value of these losses cannot easily be established or verified. Some respondents maintained that their livestock had to be sold to white cattle-dealers for prices far below their value. Beside the financial loss, they also pointed out that they traditionally used to keep a number and variety of animals, which they cannot do now. Some of them stated that the commonage is

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[9]   As a matter of fact, many inhabitants were actually resettled in Pampierstad in the former Bophuthatswana.

at present available for grazing purposes, but that it is risky to take their livestock there without a shepherd.

For these reasons, inhabitants are of the opinion that government is obliged to pay financial compensation. The amount claimed varies from R100 to R480 000 (R14 501 was the average amount), while 17 % of respondents indicated that they would be satisfied with whatever government decides.

6.   DISCUSSION

Measured against criteria such as improvement of the infrastructure, etc., one might feel tempted to believe that the inhabitants were better off in Mataleng than in Brak and Rooirand. But to adopt such a narrow perspective is to ignore, firstly, that to lose one's home is a deeply disturbing experience and, secondly, that the municipality of Barkly West demolished a black suburb and relocated its inhabitants further away from the town centre in a state-controlled, ethnically-based township. Apartheid's political architecture determined the landscape and characteristics of Mataleng: faceless four-roomed, cement-brick, rented houses, totally bereft of identity and character - they all looked the same, only the numbers differed.

The relevant point here is that the resettlement took place during the apartheid era, when restrictions were increasingly imposed on blacks by the authorities. As is often the case with forced removals (Du Toit 1982, Fernandes 1997 and Gans 1991), the decision to move was not taken voluntarily, but was enforced on powerless, vulnerable people. Furthermore, the objectives of the relocation were formulated and the process conducted by ignorant white officials whose cultural frame of reference with regard to the importance and meaning of kinship, the nuclear family, peer-group membership, neighbourhood ties, etc. differed from that of the claimants.

From the discussion it can be concluded that, irrespective of the supposed rationale, the displacement of the inhabitants of Brak and Rooirand was a major violation of their human rights.[10] The Town Council was responsible for a protracted, inhuman uprooting period, which actually started with the first rumours of resettlement. It conducted no preliminary investigations, nor was there any support during either the transition period or the rerooting period. For the people of Brak and Rooirand, 'benefits' from the resettlement were limited (serious economic disruption was the

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[10]   During recent years human rights and environmental organizations have come to consider displacement a major violation of the right to life, particularly of the poor.

order of the day, while no compensation was paid) and they experienced their removal negatively.

It can rightfully be asked whether the anthropological recording of people's experiences contributes to the knowledge and understanding of removals and resettlements in particular or of socio-cultural realities in general. Individuals are attached to social and cultural values and experience forms part of the individual's 'experiential inside of reality'. According to Barth (1994:5), any existential human problem "will have found diverse solutions, which must be worth knowing about, thinking about and comparing". Therefore when, with due allowance for the context, the analytical outsider makes generalisations and turns experience into expression, it becomes part of ethnography. In this regard Hastrup and Hervik (1994:10) maintain that "(w)hile the scope of anthropology lies beyond the retelling of local stories, these and their experiential grounding remain the foundation of anthropological knowledge". Many of the hardships and problems described by the inhabitants of Brak and Rooirand were features of everyday life in South Africa and in no way unique to Brak and Rooirand (Desmond 1986, Erasmus 1998 and Segar 1989). It was the fate of millions of black people to be obliged to live in relocated areas. Although Brak and Rooirand were among the earliest forced removal areas in the Northern Cape they have never been thoroughly researched, and are therefore relatively unknown and may soon be forgotten. Forced removals are traumatic, undignified experiences which occupy people's minds. To give them the opportunity to talk about (and thus become reconciled to) their past and to have their experiences heard will help to restore their dignity, because it validates the fact that their life histories are worth telling and worth knowing.

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