

## "Eating the Sweat from my Forehead": Farm Worker Narratives from South Africa's Apartheid Era

*Amanda M. Young-Hauser, Jan K. Coetzee & Kwakhe Maramnco*

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**Abstract:** In this article we draw on the life histories of farm workers living in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. Subjectively interpreting their realities, the farm labourers narrated their experiences of living in the era before, during and after apartheid. The impacts of apartheid, carrying identification papers, for example, were experienced as peripheral with the most significant changes being the disruptions in their personal lives, such as a new farm owner who came to embody repression, authority, exploitation, but also paternalism and benevolence. The farm represented the space and place where complex interactions and unequal relationships between the worker and the farmer played out. The workers' narratives revealed deep-rooted connections to the land on which they lived, a land which did not belong to them. Land was for our research participants particularly important for animal husbandry, as a source of food and as a spiritual space of power where links and relationships to their ancestors were maintained and cultural practices took place. Subjugated knowledge, no formal education and farmers' paternalistic practices contributed to farm labourers' dependence on agrarian work and life on the farm.

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## 1. Introduction

Agrarian workers in South Africa continue to experience worse conditions than those working in other sectors of the economy. This affects their wages, housing quality, access to education and health (PRINCE, 2004). In the present article we examine what keeps farm labourers constrained to a life on the farm. South Africa with its colonial history has undergone profound political, economical, legal, agricultural and social transformations. These changes affected and shaped the lives of all people living in South Africa, and in particular those of the majority African population. Yet, the existences of the five black farm workers who participated in this research and who were living and working in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa in geographically isolated locations throughout this period remained fairly constant over time. The greatest impacts they experienced

occurred at times of change of farm ownership when working conditions and life either improved or deteriorated. [1]

The lives of farm workers and farmers are entwined in complex relationships that extend beyond the labour/wage exchange (DU TOIT, 1993, p.315), creating an interdependent but unequal dynamic between the farm owner and the labourer (SYLVAIN, 2001). In this interplay of cultural, educational, economical and social asymmetries, the farmers are privileged with certain resources and material goods, which the labourers have to acquire through their loyalty (LANDINI, 2012, p.116). Geographical isolation implies little access to social infrastructure (social service amenities: health, education, transport, for example) for workers (HALL, 2003, p.2). Thus social relations come to be more defined in terms of labour relations in rural areas than in cities (DU TOIT, 1993, p.315), and due to the working and living proximity the labourers' obligations to the farmers often extend beyond a conventional employment arrangement (ibid.). Everyday life and space are negotiated within, rarely outside the farm boundaries in a multifarious and omnipresent relationship between the farm labourer and the farmer that is mainly characterised by inequalities. Crudely this resembles a feudal relationship between the landowner and the farm labourer, which, our research indicated, is manifested in inherent differences and enacted in paternalistic practices binding the farm labourer to a life on the farm barring alternative employment and housing options. [2]

With a population of just over 6,8 million (12.7% of the total population), the Eastern Cape Province, where this research took place, is the second largest province in South Africa. The province is ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous, comprising 5,9 million Africans (87.2%); just over half a million Coloureds (8%); nearly 20,000 Indians (0.3%); and 302,000 Whites (4.4%) (SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE OF RACE RELATIONS, 2012, p.17, pp.20-21). Nearly three quarters (72%) of the land in the Eastern Cape Province is owned privately. Some of the most salient and recurrent concerns by the research participants feature livestock and a profound yearning to own a plot of land or at least to have the opportunity to cultivate land, which is important for their food security. The labourers' physical and emotional well-being is largely contingent upon the relationship with the white farmers who hold multiple, often incongruous roles as employers, educators, benefactors, aides and castigators. Embedded in paternalism, which we conceptualise next, the worker's relationship with the farmer encompasses positive and negative aspects. Examining the everyday experiences of farm workers requires a research approach that captures material over a lifetime. We discuss this qualitative study, together with the importance of including a bilingual researcher and cultural interpreter, in Section 3. Farmers' paternalistic practices on the one hand, and the research participants' attachment to place, a wish to stay close to their ancestral burial grounds and a lack of formal education and resources on the other hand are the central themes that emerge and contribute to the farm workers remaining on the same farm (Sections 4 and 5). [3]

## 2. Conceptualising Paternalism

Over 50 years ago, ROBERTS (1959, p.63) observed that in apartheid South Africa "[t]he relationship between farmers and their workers cannot be understood unless it is recognised as essentially paternalistic". Today, the continuation of these paternalistic practices can be heard clearly in the stories of our research participants. Paternalism imbues every aspect of the farm workers' lives (DU TOIT, 1993, p.320) and is sustained at individual, organisational and institutional levels (AYCAN, 2006, p.446). With its origin in the Latin word *pater* [father], paternalism is organic and relates to the hierarchical structure between farmer and worker (DU TOIT, 1993, p.320). The practices of paternalism are subtle and associate to social class that speaks directly of power (MOODIE, 2010, pp.99-100), hierarchy, social, educational and resource inequalities. Akin a relationship between a father and his child, paternalism can take on characteristics of well-meaning, protection and "knowing" what is best for the other person: the farmer determines the labourers wants and needs (AYCAN, 2006, pp.451-452). It encompasses positive and negative aspects, representing a duality between care and control (p.453). [4]

The interactions between labourer and farmer extend beyond a customary working relationship defined by contractual boundaries. The farmer/labourer synergy is characteristic of a top down and directive approach, regulating the labourers' working and private lives and compromising their choices. Farm paternalism requires interdependency, the need for close and on-going relationships that include interactions resembling family relationships (SYLVAIN, 2001, p.720), and the performing of roles and scripts that both parties adhere to (GOFFMAN, 1956). The internalisation of cultural prescriptions limits the labourers' alternatives to "a narrow range of socially sanctioned options" (PRILLELTENSKY, 2008, p.120). As a form of bounded and power imbued relationship, paternalism in apartheid South Africa was built on privileges and not rights (ROBERTS, 1959, p.3), a crucial point that is in contemporary South Africa still present and reflected in the narratives of the five farm workers, presented below. Privileges not likely to be found in other workplaces during the heyday of apartheid, and being at the mercy of others rendered their lives vulnerable, dependable, insecure and unpredictable. Ultimately, the white farmer and the state during apartheid determined their working and private lives. [5]

Paternalism has a negative connotation in the individualistic-oriented West, but is a salient feature in cultures that value collectivism. Thus it has an ambiguous flavour with an ethical dimension whereby an employer enjoys legitimacy to act in a paternalistic manner (AYCAN, 2006, pp.451-452). Paternalistic practices restrict autonomy and choice (BLOKLAND, cited in AYCAN, 2006, p.451), and the participants' preferences are often compromised. ROBERTS (1959, p.64) proposed that a paternalistic relationship between the farmer and his labourers has advantages and disadvantages. We suggest that paternalism is problematic because paternalism is to remain "in perpetual childhood" (SYLVAIN, 2001, p.726), thus "unable to take responsibility" (DU TOIT, 1993, p.322), hampering

possibilities of personal growth, development and maturation, which are prerequisites for autonomy. [6]

The reference to "father" in the term paternalism alludes to potential benevolent, well-meant and kind acts, protection and guidance (AYCAN, 2006, p.451). The residents on the farm can be considered a pseudo-family (SYLVAIN, 2001, p.717) with mutual (farmer and worker) stakes in each other's well-being. The farmer claims his stake but often denies the labourer to reciprocate, further reinforcing inequality (AYCAN, 2006, p.452). A concern about well-being renders paternalism ambivalent, an uncomfortable territory of unspoken emotions and tensions, and at times, resistance to and replication of paternalistic practices. The lack of a clearly defined employer/employee association in the form of a contract inevitably leads to these relationships becoming problematic. [7]

### 3. The Present Study

Underpinning this narrative research is a phenomenologically oriented premise that validates all human experiences and allows the researcher to enter the life-world of the participant (FINLAY, 2012) and to explore the essence of what the research participant experiences as part of everyday life as well as how it is experienced (CRESWELL, 2013, p.80). It is in the realm of the everyday where human actions take place; the taken-for-granted, the ordinary and the extraordinary. [8]

We draw on the everyday life experiences of five farm workers from the Eastern Cape Province in South Africa. We use a purposive, non-random sample suitable to seek participants with certain kinds of experiences and knowledge. This form of sampling allows the researcher to explore the integral and shared life-worlds of a particular group of people such as these farm workers. The purposive, non-random sampling method allows us to explore and "disclose from inside and from its center" (FLICK, 2014, p.175) the experiences of the research participants. Purposive, non-random sampling encourages the researcher to think critically and to employ strict parameters to allow for a thorough exploration of the chosen topic (SILVERMAN, 2013, p.148). From the interview schedule (see the [Appendix](#)) it is clear that the scope of the interviews covers wide ranging aspects related to the life experiences of farm workers. The interview schedule provides a framework within which issues relevant to the life experiences of these farm workers can be assessed. We selected five participants (three men and two women) who were recruited through the East Cape Agricultural Research Project (ECARP), a non-governmental organisation (NGO). Given their involvement as an NGO in this region of the Eastern Cape Province, ECARP was well-positioned to select research participants who complied with the characteristics that we required. Spending most of their lives living and working on a farm, experiencing work and life on a farm before, during and after apartheid comprise the criteria to participate in the research. To obtain the required material we employed a semi-structured interview schedule that advocated a sense of structure and focus within the interview sessions. The incorporation of a semi-structured interview method is meant to encourage the participants to elaborate on their "experiences

and [the] lived meanings", attributed to their everyday life-world (KVALE, 2007, p.11). Furthermore, KVALE (p.65) summarises how to employ the semi-structured interview as "a sequence of themes to be covered, as well as some prepared questions ... there is openness to changes of sequence and question forms in order to follow up the answers given and the stories told by the interviewees". We elicited their life histories during the interviews with a particular focus on the relationship with the farm owner/employer, personal experiences, social capital, turning points, and political and social changes over the course of the participants' lives to explore processes that keep farm labourers for a lifetime tied to a subordinate existence on the farm. The research focused on social suffering, poverty, health and illness, political (including apartheid) and social changes, turning points, social capital, and place and space. The data collection took place between December 2008 and March 2013. Due to the advanced age of some of the participants (see Table 1: Participant vital statistics), the interviews were often carried out over multiple sessions to allow the participants to rest, hence the number of interviews varied according to the participants' fitness. The second author (JKC) was contracted by ECARP and designed the interview schedule (see Appendix) that was used when collecting the life histories. Four interviews were conducted in the office of the NGO in Grahamstown, and ten interviews in the homes of the participants on remote farms in the Cacadu District, specifically in the Carlisle Bridge area in the Makana Municipality local authority in the Eastern Cape Province, an area known as "former white" South Africa.

Participants	Number of interviews	Year of birth	Migration history
Mr. Phathekile Funani <sup>1</sup>	Three interviews conducted on the farm	1927	Mr. Funani did not recall the details of his migration history as a child. He worked on three farms before moving to the current location where he has lived since 1967.
Mr. Siphetho Mphambo	Three interviews (two were conducted at office of ECARP, the last one on the farm)	1922	Mr. Mphambo spent his entire life on the same farm where his father had worked before him.
Mr. Sizakele Olai	Three interviews, all carried out on the farm	1934	As a child Mr. Olai moved three times with his family. He still lives on the same farm his family relocated to.

<sup>1</sup> We use pseudonyms (commonly known surnames within the Xhosa population) to protect the participants' identities.

Participants	Number of interviews	Year of birth	Migration history
Mrs. Nowethu Guma	Two interviews, conducted at the office of ECARP	Unsure (but of similar age as the above participants)	Mrs. Guma moved twice with her family and then settled on the farm where her husband worked. She has been there ever since her marriage.
Mrs. Nofezile Silumko	Three interviews carried out on the farm	Unsure (also of similar age as the other participants)	As a child, Mrs. Silumko moved three times with her family. After her marriage she went to stay on the farm where her husband worked and has been living there ever since.

Table 1: Participant vital statistics [9]

Mr. Mphambo became unwell and passed away shortly before a planned fourth follow-up interview could be carried out. The third author (KM) conducted the interviews in isi-Xhosa,<sup>2</sup> his and the participants' mother tongue. All authors were present during the third follow up interview with Mrs. Silumko,<sup>3</sup> where the third author (KM) acted as an interpreter in a multi-way conversation leading to a co-construction of data between the research participant, the researchers and the interpreter (cf. EDWARDS, 1998; WILLIAMSON et al., 2011). Research across the language divide is a process considered "fraught with difficulties" (EDWARDS, 1998, p.197), because language mirrors culture, society, space and place (FILEP, 2009, p.60). In addition, emotional concepts are not universal as affective experiences are expressed differently (WETHERELL, 2011, pp.18, 42) and are not compatible across different languages. [10]

The third author (KM) was the link to the specific community (farm labourers). As a native isi-Xhosa speaker and familiar with cultural practices of the Xhosa people, he was integral as a cultural broker to facilitate cultural understandings and linguistic characteristics. Interpretation and translation are part of a larger process of undertaking multilingual research (cf. CRANE, LOMBARD & TENZ, 2009), because descriptions of experiences are embedded in everyday practices and sense-making procedures of social life are thus difficult to translate (WETHERELL, 2011, p.69). He transcribed the interviews in isi-Xhosa and then translated the transcripts into English. We treat the interview translations as

2 Isi-Xhosa is one of South Africa's 11 official languages. With approximately 16 percent (8.3 million people) of the population speaking isi-Xhosa this is one of the most widely spoken languages, particularly in the Eastern Cape Province, where this research was carried out (SOUTH AFRICAN LANGUAGES, n.d.).

3 The research was carried out in the Eastern Cape Province because of the fact that the NGO ECARP, that commissioned this research, operates in this province. ECARP has its headquarters in Grahamstown, which is one of the oldest cities in the Eastern Cape. The area within which the research has been conducted has always been a predominantly agricultural area in as far as its main economic activities are concerned. Most farms in this district have been in the hands of consecutive generations of white farmers, many of whom stemmed directly from the British settlers who occupied this area in 1820. It is therefore possible to draw significant conclusions regarding paternalistic practices because of long lines of authority passed on from one generation to the next.

primary data because of the collaborative interpretation process that included the interpreter (KM). We acknowledge, however that some scholars consider translated data as secondary data because in the process of translating the translator selects words and concepts to re-construct meaning (TEMPLE, EDWARDS & ALEXANDER, 2006). [11]

To better understand and interpret the participants' experiences of everyday agrarian life, to make sense of and bring coherence to the rich life histories, we drew on BRAUN and CLARKE (2006) for an initial thematic analysis. The first author (AMYH) grouped and documented themes, inferred from extended passages (McADAMS, 2012, p.18), within and across the transcripts to identify patterns, commonalities, differences, prominent features and inconsistencies. Refining the findings, she coded the findings. To promote an inductive process, to consider new interpretative possibilities and to reflect anew about phenomena, we challenged the taken-for-granted (CORBIN & STRAUSS, 2008, p.67). The core themes that emerged from the data concerned the relationship between the labourer and the farmer and reflect the interactions embedded in paternalism. In particular, the farm workers' narratives include accounts of hardship and survival, gratitude and obligations, violence, cultural practices and the apartheid system. Boundaries within and between these themes, however, are fluid and contextual. Mr. Funani, for example, proposed: "His [the current owner's] father said I would enjoy all the benefits I enjoyed when the farm was still under his management. All those things have changed now [with his son running the farm]". This was echoed in Mr. Olai's statement: "I must admit that not all farmers had the same attitude towards black people", illustrating how the labourers' circumstances changed with the passage of time and according to the employer. [12]

The results of the analysis were discussed among the co-authors. The third author (KM) was essential to the interpretation and understanding of cultural meanings. The fact that the third author could provide the translation of the texts from the native language (isi-Xhosa) into English, that he could aid in the interpretation of the narratives and that he is intimately involved as a community worker in the community adds to the validity of the data. It would not have been possible for us to conduct ethnographic research, mainly because of the cultural differences between the first (AMYH) and the second (JKC) author and the research participants. It is also doubtful as to whether the farm owners (predominantly white) would have agreed to the first and second authors' entering the farm for prolonged periods of observation. [13]

#### 4. Agrarian Life in the Eastern Cape

Housed on the farm, employer and employee live in close proximity, creating a micro-environment, a "pseudo-community" that provides a sense of belonging and at the same time a space of conflict where most day-to-day activities occur. Within the space and place of the farm, a range of relationships are enacted with the close working and living arrangements blurring the work and privacy boundaries. [14]

The life histories of the five participants differ in obvious aspects: their job tasks and skills, family circumstances, or the number of farms they lived and worked on, for example. They share, however, many similar experiences of working on a farm with their lives being shaped and dominated by a bound relationship between them and a white farmer, their employer. "We ate the sweat from our foreheads", is Mr. Funani's repeated metaphor to emphasise life's harshness, which is also reflected in the other participants' accounts. Importantly, the apartheid regime is not considered a defining factor to their sense of well-being, despite participants' resentment of not owning land. As "agents of apartheid" (Mr. Funani), farmers are considered to represent the political system. The workers' recollection of the apartheid era is ambiguous. Victimisation was experienced because of the restriction of movements and the imperative to carry identification papers, for example. But Mrs. Guma's suffering started "when the farm where I live was bought by another owner". The new owner reduced the number of cows allowed and this had a far greater impact on Mrs. Guma's life than the political system. [15]

"There are acres of unused land here, but he [the farmer] does not give me land. My wish is to get my own land on the farm", is Mr. Funani's appraisal of the situation. Title deeds by race are unavailable (SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE OF RACE RELATIONS, 2012, p.598). None of the participants own land: The understanding is that "black people do not own the country. The land belongs to white people" (Mr. Funani). [16]

A lack of owning land does not preclude a deep-rooted connection to the land that represents personal history, familiarity, and a place of belonging. Place as a particular physical or lived space (AGNEW, 2011, p.318) is fluid in the farm workers' narratives and fuses together with outdoor spaces where much of their working activities and interactions with the farmer occur. Mutually constitutive, space and place bring together "the realms of the natural, the social, and the intellectual", elements that are replicated in the self as people are natural, social and intellectual beings (SACK, 1993, p.328). [17]

Land has always been important for animal husbandry and the provision of food. Poverty and food insecurity are closely linked with the (in)ability to plant vegetables and keep livestock. Because of distrust among the labourers of those who excel and succeed at anything new, more than five decades ago already ROBERTS (1959, p.42) observed that "the majority of African farm workers' families do not appear to derive as much benefit as they might from these

vegetable gardens". Mr. Funani provides an alternative explanation to this perceived lack of crop cultivation: "it is also difficult to do what your heart desires on someone else's land". This speaks to a restricted personal choice of what the worker can cultivate because of the farmer's interference and is supported by ROBERTS' findings that the farmers often plough and plant the workers' land (ibid.). [18]

Considered a significant part of the wage payment in kind, grazing rights to keep cattle and goats on the farmers' land varies from farm to farm with an average of 6.5 cattle per family permitted and an actual figure of 5 cattle kept (p.40). This is also Mr. Mphambo's allowance: "I am reluctant to leave [the farm] because of the number of livestock that he [farmer] has allowed me to have, the five cows. I fear that another employer would not give me permission to have five cows". Exceeding the number of permitted animals the workers are forced to sell, often to the farmer who exploits the situation by undercutting the price. Mr. Mphambo's account illustrates their dependency on the farmer's goodwill:

"He knew that we would pay him back once we have sold our cows. The current employer is oppressing us. He would under no circumstances lend anyone money. He would tell us to sell our cows even if you have a problem that needs your urgent attention." [19]

The restricted number of cattle is seen as a deliberate act of oppressing black people and to inflict poverty because "the cow is our bank. It is a walking bank" (Mr. Mphambo). To keep cattle is considered part of the heritage of black people (Mrs. Guma). Mr. Funani's interpretation of the stock quota is that

"[w]hite people realised that black people were using their livestock to feed their families and decided to cut down the number of livestock that they could have. They forced blacks to keep five cows and five goats only. They then cut down the number of goats to one." [20]

Animal husbandry supplements their income, diet and is also integral to cultural rituals. Mr. Olai considers the high price of a Boerbok,<sup>4</sup> given its sacrificial use for healing practices, a deliberate act of oppression to prevent blacks from becoming financial equals. [21]

The research participants further point out that the farm labourers' private sphere is compromised because they require consent from the farmer to perform cultural rituals, including the provision of the exact number of guests, and, during apartheid, permission from the police to brew *umqombothi*, a traditional beer brewed from maize, malt, sorghum and yeast. The farmer and the state regulate Mr. Olai's and the other participants' lives, and he considers asking for permission to conduct a cultural ritual as being enforced upon them: "When performing our cultural customs we need lots of money to buy groceries, to hire cars and most

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4 *Boerbok* is the Afrikaans word for Boer goat.

importantly to ask permission from farmers to perform and invite our guests to their farms to be part of our customs" (Mr. Olai). [22]

Cultural beliefs and practices are intertwined with a deep connection to the land, the place occupying the ancestral burial ground and the *ixhanti*, the pole full of cattle horns. The *ixhanti* signifies a direct link to the ancestors and a marker for their permanent residency from which they are unwilling to part despite often unsatisfactory housing conditions (substandard construction of the residential building, lack of electricity or unpredictable water supply, for example). A culturally significant place, the sacred space of the *kraal* links the living to their ancestors, who remain a vital presence in their lives (ASHFORTH, 2005, pp.170-176). It offers a space to communicate and to ask for protection, guidance and advice: "When there's something that's troubling me I go to the family kraal and talk to my ancestors" (Mr. Olai). [23]

The spaces of cultural events are imbued with personal histories, where family traditions and cultural rituals are handed down from one generation to the next, where milestones, such as the birth of a child, or a son's return from circumcision school are celebrated and the dead bemoaned and buried. Permeated with history, these experiences and activities encompass the essence of what makes the participants' places unique and unlike any other place. This is considered in Mrs. Silumko's reflection: "I think about how I would live if I were to be moved from this place to another place. I like this place and I wish to spend the remainder of my life here". Mr. Mphambo echoes this sentiment:

"... my identity is closely linked to the place where I live. That is where I grew up. This is where I learned about humanity. That is why I am saying I would not be able to leave that place. Hey, I like the place I live in now very much. It would seem to me that I would not be better off in another place. I do not know whether it is because I like the place I live in now. I take it as my permanent home." [24]

Organic and deeply personal, this place provides a sense of belonging with its significance extending beyond life to include death and the after-life. At this intersection, past, present, future and a spiritual dimension fuse, a shared space between the living and the ancestors: "You must ask your ancestors, the white bones and the spirits of your forefathers to be with you, and to your Lord God, to guide you and to give you power and wisdom" (Mr. Olai). Fearing separation from the nearness to his ancestors, loss of intimacy and familiarity, Mr. Funani is concerned because "some farmers are reluctant to give families of the deceased permission to visit graves on their farms". [25]

This setting for social rootedness (AGNEW, 2011, p.319) was ignored and seriously challenged when the farmer had shifted Mrs. Silumko's family against her wish:

"I remember the day when the farmer told my husband that he would relocate us to this place because he wanted my husband to be close to the Lucerne fields.<sup>5</sup> I was fiercely opposed to this idea. I told the farmer that I feared being removed from the other farm people. I told him that I have never lived alone far from other people. The farmer told me not to worry because I would get used to the new place." [26]

Given the expansive size of farms, having to be moved away from the collective living space shared with other people brings about isolation and self-reliance undermining the sharing and reciprocity, important ways of survival. When visiting Mrs. Silumko in March 2013 we came to realise the extent of the isolation following her family's relocation to the one corner of the massive farm. Not only is her small homestead to be reached by long stretches of hardly negotiable gravel road, but water has to be channelled over long distances to the house (increasing the possibilities of interruptions as a result of mechanical problems). [27]

Living on the farm and in close proximity with the farmer brings an element of collective protection and security. But it also has its down-side. Workers are expected to work long hours and to be available at all times:

"When I am not available he goes to my wife and asks about my whereabouts and when I would be back. When my wife tells him that I will come back on Sunday, he would tell my wife to go and collect his livestock" (Mr. Funani). [28]

This practice speaks to the farmer's involvement also in the non-working domain, unregulated working arrangements and "overtime", equating to forced labour. Paternalism is often elusive and invisible but enacts and manifests in psychological and physical exploitation. Participants use a vocabulary, expressing dependency, subjugation and a lack of work and privacy boundaries. The words "permission" and "oppression" feature saliently and tie in with the description of AYCANA's (2006, p.449) "paternalistic leadership behavior", hallmarks of which are the creation of a family atmosphere in the work environment; getting involved outside the work sphere; expecting loyalty; and the maintenance of authority. [29]

*Baasskap*<sup>6</sup> is considered the "ultimate expression of paternalism" (SYLVAIN, 2001, p.728). Although none of the participants draws on this word, Mr. Olai refers to calling his boss *Baas* [master or boss] and continues with this habit even though he suggests "we are no longer calling white people Baas, we call them Mister. This is victory for the black people". Despite this perceived progress, he expresses embarrassment when calling the boss by his name or addressing him as "Mister".

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5 Lucerne (scientific name: *Medicago sativa*) or grass-clover is a disease resistant plant also known as *alfalfa*. It has multiple uses and benefits. Lucerne is cultivated for livestock feed or used as a natural fertilizer to improve the soil quality (<http://www.botanical-online.com/english/alfalfa.htm> [Accessed: January 10, 2015]).

6 The Afrikaans concept, literally "boss ship" in the sense of authority and dominance.

"To be honest with you some of us are still abashed to call the farmer Mister. We are still calling them like that ... we say Baas when talking to them. Yes, we feel embarrassed when we call them by their names or say Mister." [30]

Linguistic adjustments do not achieve the abolition of entrenched hierarchical relationships. [31]

In particular, the male participants' stories contain accounts of exposure to verbal and physical abuse and violence at the hands of the farmers and police. The most severe punishment results in *sjambok* (whip used to herd cattle) marks on Mr. Olai's back:

"I have sjambok marks on my back. I was busy milking the goats when two goats, the one I was busy milking and another one, got involved in a fight. One of the goats ran over the container with milk and the milk was spilt on the ground. The farmer came and saw the spilt milk. He was fuming with anger and asked me why I spilt the milk. I told him that the goats spilt the milk. He wanted to know why I did not remove the container of the milk when I noticed that a fight was going to ensue between the goats. I told him that I did not notice that a fight was going to ensue between the goats, as I was busy concentrating on milking one of the goats. He then hit me with the sjambok" (Mr. Olai). [32]

Mr. Funani also experienced beatings and has been exposed to vulgar and abusive language. The inflicted psychological and physical pains are endured mostly without resistance. [33]

## 5. Knowledge and Education

Paternalism is expressed in unequal power relationships, which Mr. Olai considers a deliberate act of suppression "because they [the whites] don't want us to be equal to them". [34]

An implication of paternalism is an assumed superiority over the subordinate "with respect to key competencies (knowledge, skills, and experience) as well as moral standards" (AYCAN, 2006, p.451). Education and knowledge are tools to exert power that can operate imperceptibly (PRILLELTENSKY, 2008, pp.119-120). All participants consider themselves uneducated and illiterate, yet, they have skills, knowledge and understandings that allow them to function effectively in everyday life. Farm workers operate under their own set of obligations and kinship principles with practices being adapted to suit their circumstances and context (SYLVAIN, 2001, p.730). FOUCAULT (1980, p.82) considers subjugated knowledge a "set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate". To advance and legitimise subjugated knowledge the participants describe instances of superior skills: "I was number one when it comes to sorting wool. That is my skill" (Mr. Mphambo). [35]

Mr. Funani recounts a conversation with the farmer where they disagreed on animal footprints:

"He [the farmer] confused the caracal's footprints with those of a dog. I told him that it was not footprints of a dog; it was footprints of a caracal. Minutes later he noticed footprints of a jackal and asked whose dogs' footprints they were. I corrected him again, telling him that he was looking at the footprints of a jackal. I kept quiet because I realised that he wouldn't be convinced otherwise." [36]

Knowledge and skills are important, contested and challenged. The labourers' knowledge is rooted in tribal traditions and understandings, which they largely take for granted. This engineered ignorance has historical and racial roots, a consequence of disallowing for multiple ways of knowing (MAY, cited in STEYN 2012, p.10). The experiences of indigenous peoples are not often accounted for (SMITH, 1999, p.63), which is reflected in the participants' understanding of superior Western knowledge, education and culture. SMITH proposes "the globalization of knowledge and Western culture constantly reaffirms the West's view of itself as the centre of legitimate knowledge and the source of 'civilized' knowledge" (ibid.). Understanding of what counted as knowledge is intrinsically linked with Western ways of knowing: "Educated people have knowledge about many things. Illiterate people lack information" (Mrs. Guma). [37]

None of the participants attended school. They talk about their skills with pride but often in binary understandings of knowing or not knowing. Mr. Mphambo recounts:

"The current owner gets information from me. He does not know anything. He asked me to advise him for approximately one week. He changed soon after that. He was jealous because I was brighter than him. He did things on his own, messing up a lot of things. You are making yourself bankrupt once you mess up." [38]

Asserting himself, Mr. Mphambo reverses paternalistic practices: he knows best. Resembling a rebellious and defiant child, Mr. Mphambo's outbursts can be considered a consequence of paternalistic treatment. Similarly, Mr. Olai tells the farmer "that I have never been to school but I also know what I am talking about". [39]

He draws his knowledge from past experiences that told him when a cow was ready to give birth. Both Mr. Mphambo's and Mr. Olai's experiences resonate with the accepted belief that a second-class voice has no legitimate knowledge (FRICKER, cited in STEYN, 2012, p.19). Lacking formal education, Mrs. Silumko learnt on the job: "The white woman there taught me about work". She is proud to "render good services and maintain good relations with my employers even though I was not educated". [40]

She does beadwork and thatches roofs, skills that she considered incidental. In a similar vein, Mrs. Guma does not consider knitting an *amakhukho* (African traditional handmade grass mats) a skill. Embedded in Western ideology, shaped by hegemony and power, the value of formal Western education is such that Mrs. Guma vowed to get her children educated: "The only thing that I never

received is education. I am not educated. I took an oath that I would educate my children. I educated all my children including my grandchildren". [41]

Physical violence and verbal abuse are common accounts: "They [white people and police] would beat us like beating small children" (Mr. Mphambo). But shame and humiliation turn into defiance, acts of resisting paternalism and replicating paternalistic patterns. "No, we are happy in our community, because we can discipline. We discipline white people" (Mr. Mphambo). The oppressed is no longer ignorant of his oppressor and, at least in Mr. Mphambo's mind, the roles are reversed. Instilling fear is the endured, familiar and now replicated currency and Mr. Mphambo imagines disciplining white people: "The current owner knows that we are capable of disciplining him. He is scared of us". [42]

In the past an unchallenged ideology functioned well, now farmyard paternalism is more contested (DU TOIT, 1993, p.317). Paternalism is organic and relates to the hierarchical structure between farmer and worker (p.320), the frequent and direct interactions and the space within which these interactions take place. WHITE (2010, p.677) considers the engrained experiences of subservience as the legacy of paternalism, resulting in farm workers' incapacity to competently articulate their needs. Contesting yet modelling paternalism, Mr. Mphambo exemplifies the problematic communication that remains unspoken and unaddressed: "farm workers are spoiling the employers. They do not reprimand them when they are doing wrong things". Here, the lack of dialogue extends to include the absence of communicative intervention from the farm worker community. [43]

## 6. Discussion

Exploring factors that contribute to the farm labourers remaining on a farm and living a subordinate existence, we find that the consequences of paternalistic practices and subjugated knowledge (cf. FOUCAULT, 1980) bind labourers to life on the farm. While the political system restricted their autonomy, apartheid is not necessarily considered the cause of their lack of self-determination, instead it is associated with the farmer/employer. Paternalistic acts and instances where these are resisted and, at times, replicated take place on the farm, a space and place that bring together "the respective realms of the natural, the social, and the intellectual" (SACK, 1993, p.328). It is in this territory that social and power relations are performed and meaning is created (ibid.).

"The first thing that whites did was to take away the oxen that blacks used to plough and cultivate their fields. This is how our ability to plant large tracts of land was limited. We were then given small plots of land where we could plant cabbages, potatoes and other veggies in small amounts only. This made us to heavily depend on white people" (Mr. Olai). [44]

Recounting this, Mr. Olai displays an awareness of the unequal power relationship between the master and his worker. He seems to accept passively and unquestioningly a reliance on white people, which brings us back to the initial

inquiry: what keeps farm labourers bound to their employers? Social movements develop from unmet needs and people's grievances (KAGAN, BURTON, DUCKETT, LAWTHOM & SIDDIQUEE, 2011, p.222). On the other hand, DU TOIT (1993, p.331) cautions:

"Disillusionment does not automatically lead to resistance. Workers are conscious of the harshness of their lives, of their own poverty, and of their powerlessness. The rueful, understated humour with which workers speak of their own hardship is indeed testimony to their own resilience and tenacity in facing these truths". [45]

Paternalistic practices can take the form of exploitation or benevolence (AYCAN, 2006, p.455). Drawing on the farm workers' narratives, we propose that paternalism is not necessarily perceived dichotomous—in other words: either bad or good. In reality, paternalism is often a fusion of exploitation and benevolence that is contextual and temporal and obscures the boundaries between private and work life. The historically evolving paternalistic relationship between the white farmer and the black worker (HALL, 2003, p.2) ties in with DU TOIT's (1993, p.322) proposition that on the farm paternalism is about race where "racial and social identities are virtually interchangeable" legacies of the country's colonial and apartheid history. [46]

Paternalism encompasses moral dimensions and aspects of obligation, gratitude, authority, and protection. It intersects with guilt, power, hierarchy as well as compassion and concern for other's well-being. Because of its many facets and the power asymmetry between the farmer and the labourer, recognising, pinpointing, naming paternalistic practices and responding is problematic. The farm, then, is a space which is familiar, intimate and meaningful to the farm labourer and at the same time meaning is created to define what is more appropriate by the more powerful farmer (CRESSWELL, 2008, p.27). [47]

In the preceding sections we unfold accounts of people who lived their entire lives on farms. Elements of these accounts are disturbing because they relate acts and experiences of discrimination, oppression and inequality. But the stories also include references to courage, survival and endurance. By listening to these stories we move slowly towards understanding the complexity of South Africa's political economy. [48]

Agriculture has always been at the centre of the livelihood of South Africans. Historians often remind us that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a large part of the entire rural population of Southern Africa practised subsistence farming. In his monumental work "The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry", Colin BUNDY (1979, p.240) points out that African producers, as opposed to white ones, had in the period leading up to the end of nineteenth century often used their agricultural land more effectively and also often coped better with economic backlashes than was the case with many white farmers. The developments in the mining industry after the discovery of gold and diamonds created new opportunities in as far as the labour market was concerned. During the same time (1890 to 1913), African farmers were severely hurt by the

introduction of a range of taxes, rent and other levies. It became difficult to acquire agricultural land and agricultural aid was mainly provided to white farmers who also benefited from the expansion of the railway system in the white areas. The distances between their farms and the markets, their decreasing credit-worthiness and, finally, the implementation of the Native Land Act in 1913, lead to only one alternative for many African farmers: to sell their labour, usually at a low price to white farmers. The Native Land Act of 1913 had a devastating effect on farming by the African population. The introduction of the policy of apartheid (or, as it was called, separate development) after 1948 guaranteed cheap African labour to the farming industry and further curbed the African population's access to farming. It is against this background that our research participants' stories need to be read. [49]

The narratives in this article emphasise that insecurity, distress and powerlessness are experienced in a specific place and context. The place and the context of these narratives are struggle, work and servitude but also accounts of dignity, knowledge and skills, and a sense of belonging. The Xhosa saying "A person is a person through other people" holds true for most of those who told us their stories: "I am similar to other people because we are all suffering ... Yes, we have the same culture, we are one family and we live on the same farm" (Mr. Mphambo). [50]

More needs to be done to improve the lives of farm workers. They cannot simply be left to fight their own cause in the complex realm of present day labour relations. It is the aim of this article to contribute to the debate surrounding better working conditions. It is hoped that one day a comprehensive framework will diminish, if not remove, unfair labour practices. The narratives of those who suffered as a result of injustices of the past can, however, provide a backdrop against which the urgency for radical changes concerning farm workers' positions and plights need to be considered. [51]

### **Appendix: Interview Schedule**

1. Biographical information and migration history
2. Experiences of social change/transformations
  - 2.1. What is progress? How does a farm worker see progress?
  - 2.2. Concerns about modern life
  - 2.3. Hankering after the past (romanticising the past)
  - 2.4. Aspirations/hopes for a better life
  - 2.5. Disillusionment
  - 2.6. Frustrations
  - 2.7. Fears

### 3. Identity

- 3.1. Do you think you are similar to other people living around you? Or different? What makes you different? Do you share the same lifestyle? Who are "your own people"?
- 3.2. If you have to tell people who you are, what would you say?
- 3.3. How important are neighbours for you?
- 3.4. Important turning points (events/circumstances that changed the direction of life)
- 3.5. When thinking of yourself and your life, what words/images would you use to describe yourself (e.g. a rock, a flower, a river)? Why?
- 3.6. When thinking back on your life, what memory(ies) stands out? What do you remember the clearest from your life?

### 4. Suffering

- 4.1. What is it (physical, emotional, social)?
- 4.2. Memories of suffering as a child?
- 4.3. Memories of suffering as an adult?

### 5. Social networks

- 5.1. How do you feel in this community (attachments, frustrations, fears, joys)?
- 5.2. Where do you go to when you need help?
- 5.3. Where do you find support?
- 5.4. When in need, from whom do you get support first?
- 5.5. Contact with others (neighbours, kin, friends)? How important?

### 6. Social capital

- 6.1. Education and training
- 6.2. Children/grandchildren who can provide support
- 6.3. What are your specific skills?
- 6.4. What role does religion play in your life?

### 7. Place and space

- 7.1. Can you be a better person at another place? (To what extent is identity associated with place?)
- 7.2. Do you regard this as your permanent home?
- 7.3. Is this a home where you can enjoy life/peace? Where you experience opportunities for life? Is this the home of your ancestors?
- 7.4. Do you fear that you might be removed from here?
- 7.5. If you have to select a place that you could describe as "the place from where I am", where would that place be?

## 8. Poverty

- 8.1. If you had to describe it, what is "poverty"?
- 8.2. If you had to describe it, what is "affluence"?
- 8.3. If you had to describe it, what is "backwardness"?
- 8.4. If you had to describe it, what is "peasant way of life"?

## 9. Apartheid

- 9.1. What stands out in your memory on Apartheid?
- 9.2. How did you personally suffer under Apartheid?
- 9.3. How did your family suffer under Apartheid?

## 10. Remuneration

- 10.1. How are (were) you paid (cash, kind, exchange)?

## 11. Political changes

- 11.1. Have things changed politically (for you) over the last ten years?
- 11.2. Do we live in a better South Africa (compared to ten years ago)?

## 12. Individual livelihood

## 13. Social change

## 14. Illness and health

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## Authors

*Amanda M. YOUNG-HAUSER* is a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa and contributes to the research programme on "The Narrative Study of Lives". She did her PhD at the University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand.

Contact:

Amanda M. Young-Hauser  
Department of Sociology  
University of the Free State  
P O Box 339  
Bloemfontein 9300, South Africa  
Tel.: +27 (51) 401 3058  
E-mail: [a.younghauser@gmail.com](mailto:a.younghauser@gmail.com)

*Jan K. COETZEE* is a senior professor at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa and the director of the research programme on "The Narrative Study of Lives". He specialises in qualitative methodology, as well as interpretivist sociological theory. His recent work focuses on trauma narratives and intersubjectively constituted memory.

Contact:

Prof. Jan K. Coetzee  
Department of Sociology  
University of the Free State  
P O Box 339  
Bloemfontein 9300, South Africa  
Tel.: +27 (51) 401 2881  
E-mail: [coetzeejk@ufs.ac.za](mailto:coetzeejk@ufs.ac.za)

*Kwakhe MARAMNCO* is a researcher/socio-economic rights facilitator at the East Cape Agricultural Research Project based in Grahamstown. He graduated from Rhodes University with a Bachelor of Social Sciences, majoring in industrial sociology and politics and international relations.

Contact:

Kwakhe Maramnco  
East Cape Agricultural Research Project (ECARP)  
PO Box 855  
Grahamstown 6140, South Africa  
Tel.: +27 (46) 6225429  
E-mail: [kwakhe@ecarp.org.za](mailto:kwakhe@ecarp.org.za)

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