

**XHOSA CO-OPERATIVE AGRICULTURAL WORK GROUPS - ECONOMIC HINDRANCE  
OR DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITY?**

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**Abstract**

"Co-operative agricultural work groups among Xhosa speakers - economic hindrance or development opportunity?"

The paper provides an analysis of co-operative agricultural work groups among rural Xhosa-speakers, and focuses on the potential role of this form of labour in attempts to stimulate household food self-sufficiency or, more generally, agricultural development, in parts of the Eastern Cape. Evidence on agricultural work groups from other parts of Africa is reviewed to indicate that the question of whether this form of labour promotes or retards the economic well-being of rural households is conflicting and potentially controversial. Very little evidence exists on the extent to which co-operative work affects agricultural productivity in terms of yields. In the case of the Transkei, there is some evidence of this kind, and this evidence is outlined in the paper. However, the paper suggests that it is also necessary to evaluate the potential role of co-operative work in promoting agricultural production in terms of the particular cultural, historical and economic conditions in terms of which co-operative work emerges and, secondly, in terms of the extent to which co-operative work is integrated into the socio-cultural milieu of those who participate in it.

I do not know the answer to the question posed in my title. I raise it because labour co-operation between rural people is very common in Africa, and one assumes that it thus has some usefulness. On the other hand, attempts at what people call rural development are so often failures. These are the two observations that guide the paper. I will proceed as follows:

1. Why does co-operative labour arise?
2. Is it counter-productive? Does it promote or retard the economic well-being of rural households? Look at the evidence from various parts of Africa as well as from Transkei. Does it stimulate household food self-sufficiency or, more generally, agricultural development?
3. In doing this it becomes clear that one has to be aware of the particular cultural, historical and economic conditions in terms of which co-operative work emerges and, secondly, of how co-operative work is integrated into the socio-cultural milieu of those who participate in it.
4. Running through this is the question (sometimes addressed explicitly) - What are the possible implications for those concerned with agricultural development ?

#### **Introduction: why does co-operative labour arise?**

In many parts of Africa, co-operative labour in the form of 'work parties' or other forms of collaboration between domestic groups is (or was) widespread. In terms of a typology that originates with Erasmus (1956), there are two types of work groups<sup>1</sup>. The first, 'exchange labour' or the 'reciprocal work group', is a small group of households which work for each other reciprocally and in rotation. These often have a fairly fixed membership,<sup>2</sup> endure over time, have a degree of corporateness, and possibly some form of formal leadership. When labour is required, the organizer or household head calls on the group for help and provides food for those who respond. No festivity occurs at the conclusion of the labour.

The second and larger type has been called the 'festive' work group. Specific people may be invited to come and work on an appointed day to perform a specific task, or a general call for workers may be publicly made. The work is accompanied or concluded by the distribution and consumption of beer or other kind of alcoholic drink. Reciprocity is not as strictly defined as in the former type, and may be weak. These are *ad hoc* groups, disbanding after the task has been completed. The distinction between the two types is often blurred in practice and many work groups in Africa have elements of both 'festive' and 'reciprocal' types.<sup>3</sup>

The evidence indicates that co-operative work in rural Africa arises in situations where labour is scarce (e.g. where people are absent from their homes as migrant workers), where poverty creates a shortage of

resources such as draught animals or implements, and where either cash or hired labour are in short supply (Moore 1975, Weinrich 1975, Swindell 1985). Agriculture, for example, because it is seasonal, may require all cultivating households in a particular area to perform a series of tasks requiring intensive labour inputs, which can be achieved only through pooling available resources. Heron (1990) has shown how such pooling works in the Transkei case. Labour combinations are also sometimes necessary for various heavy or time-consuming tasks. Apart from breaking labour bottlenecks, co-operative work groups have another advantage in that they are not specialized.

The question of how efficient communal labour may be is controversial. Some point out that there are possibly economies of scale associated with work parties, while Heron shows that in the Transkei, many would not be able to cultivate at all without the. Others claim that work of the 'festive' kind, in particular, is sometimes inefficient. The difficulty of making strictly 'economic' calculations about the efficiency or utility of co-operative work is recognized, and there are, of course, also non-economic benefits. How does one measure the utility of turning "days of back-breaking tedium into a brief and merry entertainment" (Ashton 1952, 131), or assess non-economic benefits such as prestige or the enhancement of social solidarity associated with festive work (Moore 1975)? The Transkei evidence, as we shall see below, indicates that work parties are a vital part of agricultural production, without which most homesteads would be worse off economically.

### **Work parties, tradition and change**

One of the ways of attempting to answer the question of utility is through looking at the historical circumstances that give rise to the practice of combining labour, at the cultural and moral contexts in which work parties are used, and at changes that affect this. A number of analyses of co-operative work in Africa have drawn attention to the fact that such work should not be viewed as "traditional" in the sense of existing unchanged from some point in the past. Instead, their operation needs to be analysed as part of specific, dynamic circumstances, in which they relate to other forms of work in diverse and changeable ways. To assume that work parties are "traditional" is, as Charsley (1976, 34) says, "to infiltrate a perspective" as well as to make assumptions about the values in terms of which they operate: "The institution so described comes readily to be seen as an entity "persisting" from an unchanging past, to be sharply distinguished from the new and the modern. ...its persistence or decline taken as an indicator of development change, but any sense of it as a dynamic aspect of society and economy is quickly lost" (ibid.). Instead, work parties are responses to particular situations, and have to be placed within a historical, economic and cultural context.

For example, it has been suggested that some forms of co-operative work may have arisen with the decline of slavery in Africa in the late nineteenth century (Swindell 1985, 138ff) especially as this occurred roughly at the same time as the development of commercial export crops. To take a more recent

example, Geschiere (1995) shows how a new form of co-operative work group arose among the Maka as cash-cropping of cocoa and coffee developed (in contrast to other cocoa-producing areas in Cameroon, where wage labour became prevalent). Although wage labour was known, there was strong resistance to it in Maka villages, and the form of labour that was adopted was based on reciprocity and the equality of members. This was not simply the adoption of a "traditional" form, but arose as a specific solution with specific labour demands, given the socio-cultural context of production, in which the key element was that individual ambition co-existed with an egalitarian ethic. Reciprocity in work limited the ability of the rich to become richer, but great importance was attached to the festive element, the "reception" to reward the workers, which, if successful, could enhance the host's prestige. Although wealthy farmers could benefit from hosting work groups, they had to do so within a framework in which reciprocity remained the norm, and poorer farmers could rent out their turn to host the group for cash and thereby maintain their farms.

A recent analysis of *Ganyu* (paid) work in Malawi is a further demonstration that waged work cannot simply be interpreted as a change from "tradition" and a move towards contractual and individualized social relations (Englund 1999). In Malawi's Dezda district, *Ganyu* labour is the most common way of recruiting agricultural labour from outside the household. However, the use of cash does not mean that these labour arrangements are not linked to "social obligations and privileges" (ibid. 138), of the kind that one might see as "traditional", i.e. relations with kin and the land. This is not the case in some parts of Transkei, where the entry of cash into labour arrangements appears to have significant moral implications (see below). Dezda households, perhaps unusually, prefer not to work collaboratively but to rely on their own labour (see also Davison 1993). Englund regards this as continuity with the past rather than a departure from it. Work-parties of all kinds are rare, and participation in them is not based on reciprocity, but is rewarded with beer, ending the transaction. The ability to provide the beer for such an occasion indicates that the household is relatively wealthy, but even such households prefer *Ganyu* labour, where the workers are selected by the householder and paid.

These labour arrangements take place in accordance with particular ideas about the nature of personhood, in terms of household head's constitution as a person, his/her position within the household, relations with kin and affines, and dependence on the land, which it holds through residence in a particular place and association with a matrilineage, and from which it obtains the essential maize. The person is "made" by maize as the basic foodstuff; maize which is available by virtue of residence in a particular territory and location in a kinship group (Englund 1999, 144). Households with cash income from employment or which expect better harvests than others are *expected* to use *Ganyu* labour in which they employ kin. Status is measured by the extent to which people are able to recruit others to work for them, and wealthy or prominent people are expected to benefit their kin in this manner. Recruitment thus makes visible distinct households and the nature of the recruiter's household as one constituted by a particular set of relationships and entitlements (e.g. to land). Thus "*Ganyu* labour arrangements are integral to the

constitution of economic actors as moral persons." (Ibid. 139) and "the interests involved in selecting *Ganyu* labour can be understood only within the wider context of relationships which constitute persons are composite selves." (Ibid. 151).

In the Dezda case, the recruiter's interest is to protect and increase wealth, but morally, the protection and accumulation of wealth has worth only if it is done through mobilizing others. "Wealth which is individual and private, mobilizing no one but the person him- or herself, constitutes its proprietor as the inversion of the moral being, a witch." (Ibid. 151). In addition, the production, distribution and consumption of material goods cannot be distinguished from social reproduction, since these material things "make a vital contribution to the very making of persons and households." (Ibid. 140). Real life is always beset with conflicts and contradictions however, and one cannot assume consensus and an absence of self-interest. (Ibid. 141). Since the self is a "composite of relationships" one has to place the individual actor within the social network of which the actor is composed. The problem is that a recruiter has to choose which kin to employ, and that those recruited choose to do the work. The latter, too, are liable to be accused of witchcraft "if seen to be passive recipients of others wealth" (ibid. 152). If inattention to certain relationships generates conflict, this can mean that the individual's interests are re-configured. The generalized moral sentiment is one thing, the way in which it is acted upon is another, and it is in this respect that the analytical notion of the composite self is useful "for tracing the sources of normative dissonance amid a generalized moral sentiment" (ibid. 152). "The analytical problems of self interest and labour arrangements require an analytical notion of the composite self. It is a tool with which to discern the origin of interests in a multitude of acts and contingencies, none of which is reducible to any one actor." (Ibid. 146).<sup>4</sup>

If you imagine an NGO or state agent wishing to foster agricultural development in a situation such as the one described by Englund, it is not difficult to foresee both potential advantages to the *Ganyu* labour system as well as inherent difficulties that might present themselves to an outsider not totally familiar with both its moral underpinnings and the way in which individual interests intersect with it.

Clearly, one must not assume that the "commoditisation" of labour in African rural areas is associated with a decline in earlier forms of collaborative work and an associated 'customary' morality, and that the use of wage labour then arises as a purely utilitarian measure when it becomes necessary to secure workers from beyond the household. Worby (1995), too, has warned against unilineal models of rural change which see wage labour as emerging from older forms of collaborative production as rural dwellers turn to cash cropping and become more "proletarianised". In rural Zimbabwe, he argues, wage labour relations go back to the early colonial period, and should not be viewed as the antithesis of collaborative labour. He stresses the need to analyse different forms of co-operative work in relation to each other, as well as in relation to wage labour, which in some parts of rural Zimbabwe co-exists with co-operative work.

In the Gokwe area studied by Worby, he found little evidence of communal (as opposed to kin-based) work groups until the 1950s, when agricultural production increased due to a number of factors and large labour combinations became necessary. Community based, strictly reciprocal festive work groups called *humwe* were organised to meet labour needs. The nature of these groups was transformed with the introduction of cotton as a cash crop in the 1960s. Cotton production required a higher quality of labour, and *humwe* groups now became "commoditised" in that beer was replaced with items such as tea, sugar and other shop-bought goods. Later, a goat or sheep were provided as well. Worby considers the quality of earlier *humwe* labour to be poor because it was performed "under the debilitating influence of alcohol [i.e. maize and sorghum beer]" (ibid. 15). Those who first started growing cotton were churchgoers and thus did not drink beer, and so "the beer party became a tea party" (ibid. 16). At the same time, work parties based on kinship, where reciprocity was not strict (and which were thus not suited to the strict requirements of cotton production), were transformed into more strictly reciprocal arrangements whereby two or more households agreed to work for each other on a rotational basis. Both kin and non-kin were involved in these arrangements, but the terms of the agreement, based on a careful calculation of labour inputs, were not defined in kinship terms. Those who tend to make use of this form of labour are frequently immigrants or people who have been resettled and who probably "need to establish relations of exchange and co-operation with strangers in order to access labour or means of production." (Ibid. 18). The introduction of cotton also gave rise to a dramatic increase in the amount of individualized casual wage labour, also strictly contractual. However, this did not lessen the incidence of collaborative, reciprocal labour, of either the earlier, communal *humwe* type or the type which arose out of kinship co-operation. On the contrary, such forms of labour are on the increase. Virtually the only people who employ casual wage labour are themselves salaried or self-employed as traders or vehicle-owners, not peasant farmers.

### **Co-operative work groups in the Transkei**

The authors cited above indicate the importance of locating co-operative work in a historical and cultural context. Turning to the Transkei, here too it has been shown that a historical perspective is required if one is to understand contemporary manifestations of co-operative work and the morality on which they are based.<sup>5</sup> The colonisation and later annexation of the Transkeian Territories and Pondoland (in 1878 and 1894 respectively) were associated with a range of changes affecting rural households. These included a decline in the size of homesteads, growing dependence on cash, the institutionalisation of migrant labour, and subjection to a range of discriminatory policies. Growing individualism due to migrancy (which freed young men from dependence on their fathers), education and contact with missionary ideas, and the newfound economic independence of young men, enabled the latter to establish their own independent homesteads earlier in life than before. Since land was allocated to homesteads, having independent homesteads also made it easier for the younger men to get fields. This move towards smaller homesteads

had important implications for the organisation of agricultural production. Most importantly, maize had replaced sorghum as the staple crop, partly because it was less labour intensive, partly because it was more suited to inter-cropping, which was itself labour-saving. This lessened the need for a daily labour input, but the new system of production depended on new technology (ox-draught and the plough) as well as on labour inputs. Considerable labour inputs were needed at critical points in the agricultural cycle - for ploughing, planting the maize seed, weeding, and again at harvest time. The rest of the day-to-day labour, now concentrated in a single field, could be managed by the smaller household. These labour inputs were provided by forms of mutual assistance or collaborative work in which the members of different households collaborated to plough and plant each other's fields in rotation, and to assist each other with weeding and harvesting.

At the same time, colonial (and, after 1910, South African state) policy regarding "Native Reserves" such as the Transkei, and the emerging capitalist economy, combined to deprive rural blacks of freedoms and to prevent them from urbanising. The result was to retard the development of black peasant farmers, who became increasingly resistant to discrimination and attempts to incorporate them into the wider economy on unfavourable terms. They had little option but to try and conserve their rural resources, and migratory work was aimed primarily at securing their ability to do this (Mayer 1980). This helped to foster conditions for the emergence of co-operative, reciprocal work by producing a society consisting of small, poor and relatively undifferentiated land-holding homesteads with low cash incomes and few opportunities for cash-cropping, a determination to maintain homestead production, and a shortage of male labour.

The plough made it possible to cultivate much more land than the hoe, and the amount of land under cultivation in the Transkei increased considerably in the early 1920s and 1930s, and was reflected in increasing maize yields. Ox-draught, however, put much of the important agricultural work in the hands of men, because women were not allowed to work with cattle. This put the emphasis on male labour in the first two, key points in the agricultural cycle - ploughing and planting - and exacerbated the labour shortages resulting from migrant labour and declining homestead size. Collaboration between homestead heads became vital to resolve labour shortages. The success of this lies in the fact that "total and perhaps even *per capita* input may have continued to increase during the decades when mass migrancy became institutionalized" (Beinart 1982, 100). Co-operative work groups were not necessarily a totally new development, though they certainly became more important, frequent and widespread, and used for new purposes. Beinart (1982) found no evidence of work parties in earlier times, but Kropf's Xhosa dictionary, first published in the latter part of the 19th century, contains a number of terms relating to co-operative work, indicating their existence among Xhosa speakers prior to the changes outlined here.

As indicated earlier, anthropologists interested in co-operative work, such as Geschiere, Englund and Worby, have pointed to the importance of understanding the moral basis of this kind of labour. An

important implication of the changing nature of rural production in the Transkei is that it involved something of a shift from a morality based on kinship to one based on neighbourhood and territory. In the earlier productive mode, large polygynous homesteads (each containing 40 or more people) tilled a number of fields using the labour and other resources from within the homestead itself. As homesteads declined in size and the organization of rural production changed, labour collaboration became based on relationships between neighbouring homesteads. Neighbours were no doubt also often kin, and a kinship morality may have continued to support co-operation between them, but as kin became more dispersed neighbourhood became more entrenched as an important principle on which work-parties were formed. The evidence from Shixini administrative area in Transkei's Willowvale district, to which we now turn, provides confirmation of this.

### **Work parties in Shixini**

People in Shixini, as in other parts of coastal Transkei, have developed forms of co-operative work in their attempts to secure a livelihood. That they succeed, albeit to a limited extent, is evident in relatively good yields of maize (when climatic conditions are favourable) and the production of a wide variety of other vegetable crops, in a situation where pressure on land is not great, and relieved by the permanent emigration to urban areas of a proportion of residents. Careful measurements of maize yields in Shixini indicate that in "good" years, at least, many homesteads are able to produce enough maize to meet basic requirements (McAllister 1999). The ethic of mutual assistance that manifests itself in labour reciprocity and in other ways is vital to making this possible. The following table illustrates maize yields with data from sixteen homesteads.

### **Measured maize yields in Shixini, 1996/7**

Homestead	Garden size <sup>6</sup>	Yield in kgs.	Kgs. per hectare.
MY	1346	632.4	4698
MS	7964	3730.8	4683
NQ	5300	2402.2	4532
Homestead	Garden size <sup>7</sup>	Yield in kgs.	Kgs. per hectare.
NA	5458	1735.9	3180
HG	13982	3813.9	2727
MG	3742	881.1	2354
NT	6091	1374.9	2257

SK	3912	818.6	2092
NL	5614	1053.4	1875
NW	4212	744.2	1767
MN	2852	393.5	1379
NF	8891	1194.2	1343
GD	20225	2560.9	1266
NK	3544	437	1248
MP	4358	330.6	758
GL	6743	510.7	757

These sixteen homesteads produced and stored a total of 22,614.3 kilograms of maize in the 1996/97 season. The average was 1,413.39 kg. per homestead. In the 1980s ARDRI estimated the basic subsistence requirement for maize at 175 kg. per person per year or 1,050 kg. per homestead of six people (ARDRI 1989, 30). On this basis, eleven of the sixteen homesteads listed in the table produced sufficient to meet their maize requirements in this particular season. The average yield per hectare was 2,307.25 kg. (28.8 bags). It is worth pointing out that the two households with the lowest gross yields, when surveyed earlier and asked how much they had harvested, said "nothing".

If one adds green maize to the average yield of 1413.39 kg. of maize per homestead on the basis of 45 days consumption at 1 kg. per day, the figure rises to 1458.39 kg. (3215 lbs., 1.435 tons, 1.458 tonnes, or 18.2 bags of 80 kg.). The equivalent yield per hectare is similarly raised to 2352.25 kg. (approx. 29 bags). The figure of 45 days is a very conservative one. Hunter (1936, 84) states that the consumption of green food from the fields lasted for "nearly four months" before the harvest of dried maize. If one quarter of the maize yield is consumed in this way (Lipton (1977) uses a figure of one third), then the harvest of homesteads which produce enough maize for the year represents three quarters of the total crop. For homesteads, which do not produce enough maize for the year, the green maize eaten directly from the lands represents *more* than one quarter of the total crop. The figure of 1 kg. per day is probably also too low. Cairns and Lea (1990) reported that in the Nkandla district of KwaZulu 5.2 kg. of green maize (wet mass including cob and sheath) was harvested per day, six days a week, for 3 months prior to the harvest. Most homesteads ate 25% of the total harvest green, and this amounted to 190 kg. of the average harvest of 756 kg. Using the figure of 25%, it is likely that the average figure of 1413.39 kg. of maize per homestead for the sixteen Shixini homesteads sampled represents 75% of the total maize yield, putting the total average yield at 1884.39 kg. This gives some idea of the overall significance of cultivation in Shixini, though of course one would need to add in the substantial quantities of other vegetables which are produced, as well as the off take from livestock, for which figures are not available. Even the

conservative average figure of 2352.25 kg. of maize per hectare is far higher than any previous estimates of maize yields in the Transkei (see Appendix 1).<sup>8</sup> I believe that co-operative work makes a major contribution to making these yields possible, and that any form of development intervention in places like Shixini needs to take this form of labour into account, since it is not merely labour, in a utilitarian sense, but an integral part of the social and moral context in which households exist.

### **Varieties of co-operative work in Shixini**

Most daily work in Shixini is undertaken by members of an individual homestead, but close neighbours often assist each other informally with many tasks. Members of a small number of neighbouring homesteads sometimes agree to help each other on a reciprocal basis and such work is inconspicuous, not in the public eye. A more formal but uncommon way of organizing neighbourhood labour is referred to as an *umbutho* (a "regiment"). It consists of a group of around eight adult women who agree to work for each other on variety of tasks on a reciprocal basis.

Many homesteads do not enter formal reciprocal alliances but nevertheless co-operate extensively with neighbours by participating in work-parties based on ad hoc requests for assistance. A small work group of this kind is called an *isicelo* (a request, from *ukucela*, "to ask for something"). Neighbours, friends or nearby kin are asked to help with a task and provided with beer or some other item as a reward. The reward is not a payment, but a necessary incentive and a sign that the work is appreciated. Failure to heed the request to assist without a very good reason is interpreted as a breach of friendship and neighbourliness, and those who participate anticipate that they, too, will receive assistance when they ask for it.

Another way of securing labour through the provision of goods is to invite people to partake of a commodity in return for labour. For example, it is common practice for a homestead head to kill a "pig for hoeing" (*ihagu yokuhlakula*), and to announce that meat is available. Individuals who take up the offer agree to hoe for a certain number of days in return. This is more than an acceptance of payment for labour, it is also a friendly neighbourly act which people expect from those they have a close relationship with and which ought to be reciprocated with labour (which will in turn elicit a material reward) at a later date.

Perhaps the most important form of co-operative work in Shixini is what is known as the ploughing or farming "company" (*inkampani yokulima*). This consists of from four to twelve homesteads, which combine their labour, implements and draught cattle to perform agricultural tasks such as ploughing, planting and, to a lesser extent, harvesting. Without them agricultural activity in Shixini would be difficult to sustain, and most homesteads belong to one. Work is done for each member in turn every season, and a member who fails to contribute as expected can be expelled from the group. Some

companies are based primarily on agnatic kinship, and justified in terms of kinship obligations. Most, however, include members of a variety of kin groups within a common locality. Relationships within the company depend in part on the resource contributions they make (Heron 1990). However, imbalances are recognized and may have to be tolerated for many years, and many companies contain "dependent" members who contribute little, yet remain members and thus are able to continue cultivating even under adverse personal circumstances. They reciprocate with their labour and with political support for those who provide the resources that they need in order to maintain production.

Sometimes two or more agricultural companies combine to perform a task at the request of a household head, in which case the head has to brew beer for the groups concerned, and a beer drink is held at the completion of the work, which anyone is free to attend. Beer also has to be brewed for two other, non-specialized work-parties, distinguishable from *isicelo* (see above) in that they involve generalized appeals for assistance rather than requests to individuals. Both types involve *amandwandwa* (workers), who share the beer brewed for them with the wider community. Other food is also provided. The smaller of the two is called *indwandwa yekhaya* (a home group) or, more commonly, a congress (*ikongresi*, lit: "a gathering"). The larger type is called an *indwandwa yelali* (a sub-ward group) or simply *indwandwa* (Heron 1990). These work parties may be called for tasks such as cutting grass, hoeing, fencing, collecting wood, and so on, but the commonest is for weeding, a task that is of vital importance to ensure good yields.

### **Reciprocity and the moral basis of labour co-operation**

The morality of these reciprocal exchanges of labour is conceptualised in terms of good neighbourliness (*ubumelwane*, which literally means "supporting each other"), mutual assistance (*ukencedana*) and human-ness (*isintu*). They are spoken of as *isiXhosa* ("the Xhosa way"), "the way we live together as people", or "the way we live as Xhosa". They are part of a rural Xhosa identity in terms of which, as the old Xhosa proverbs have it, "one hand washes the other" (*isandla sihlamba esinye*) and "a person is a person by means of [other] people" (*umntu ngumntu ngabanye Bantu*). These are general moral concepts, which by themselves do not explain actual networks of co-operation, based as they are on individual relationships, obligations, and interest. But they are nevertheless an important part of the consciousness of Shixini people, and they verbalise them frequently in explaining work events. Co-operative work arrangements almost invariably take place within a sub-ward, and many involve only members of a sub-ward section. In other words, they are a manifestation of relationships of neighbourliness and trust developed over generations.

Returning to the more general discussion of co-operative work in Africa initiated above, some of the moral implications of the Shixini data become apparent. All over Africa, work parties are thought to be governed by a norm of reciprocity<sup>9</sup>, as implied in the term "exchange labour" and its synonym,

"reciprocal work groups". In the case of "festive" work parties, however, the nature of reciprocity is not always clearly defined by the participants and may be weak. In some cases it may be that the reward offered at the end of the work, whether it be in the form of food or drink, ends the transaction (e.g. Barth 1967), but more frequently the host homestead is also expected to reciprocate with labour at some point in the future, is the case in Shixini. In many parts of Africa the beer and meat are valuable, there is a "definite exchange of work and food involved" (Richards 1939, 146) and the amount of work performed is related to the amount of beer/food provided, but "reciprocal work is also essential" (Goodfellow 1939, 246). Food and beer are not sufficient reward; labour has to be reciprocated with labour, but the expectation of labour reciprocity by itself is not sufficient to induce people to work.<sup>10</sup> Even in "festive" work arrangements, labour reciprocity can be strict. The Gusii *risaga* group described by Mayer had decidedly "festive" elements although it was categorised as of the "reciprocal" type, and "behind this immediate reciprocity of beer for work lies a wider reciprocity of help for help. To give ones labour, at the price of a beer drink, is a mutual obligation." (1951, 6).<sup>11</sup> The larger work groups in Shixini, with festive elements, conform to this. But reciprocity is not calculated in terms of exact equivalences, as in Zimbabwe, where participation in *humwe* work parties, supported by an ideology of mutual helpfulness and reciprocity, is governed by the rule that "for every participant sent from one household to work at the *humwe* of another, an equivalent number must be sent in reciprocation... Equivalence is reckoned in units of adult labour" (Worby 1995, 14).

In Shixini and elsewhere in Africa the sanction for non-participation confirms the principle of reciprocity, in both types of co-operative labour. Those who cannot attend a work party which they might be expected to join should give a reason why they cannot be there, otherwise they are likely to be refused assistance when they themselves need help, or to receive it only reluctantly (Gulliver 1971). People who persistently shirk their responsibilities can in extreme cases be ostracized and forced to settle elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> In Shixini, imbalances may be tolerated and justified in terms of the moral obligation to help kin or neighbours at a critical stage of their household development (cf. Donham 1985,164). Or reciprocity may take forms other than labour, as when households provide political support or other favours for those who labour for them. Many work groups in Shixini operate under a general assumption of reciprocity and mutual helpfulness, in that people help each other without expectation of immediate return, but in the knowledge that the receiver could be asked to provide labour, or grain, or something else, in the future, or in the next season. It is a form of social insurance (Sansom 1974). However, this general expectation operates within a pool from which labour is drawn, which must be distinguished from the actual relationships between people in terms of which they give and receive help.

The above observation that the moral basis of labour collaboration in the Transkei shifted from kinship to neighbourhood is also relevant here. Bloch (1973) has argued that kinship relations are characterized by strong morality and can tolerate long-term imbalance in labour and other exchanges. Other relationships, based on politics, friendship or neighbourhood, "have shorter term than those classed as kinship and thus

are less moral" though oddly, given this position, he is "quite prepared to believe that in some societies other types of relationships seem to have equal if not "more" moral commitment than kinship" (ibid. 77). Since kinship relations have a high moral content the effect of involving kin in co-operative work is to make for long-term tolerance of imbalance. Bloch argues that relationships based on factors such as territory or neighbourhood are, generally speaking, less moral, and tend to lend themselves to short-term interest and more immediate reciprocity. Kinship links are more reliable and long term and need not be constantly acted upon. Reciprocal relations are maintained with non-kin (rather than kin, between whom imbalances are tolerable) in the form of co-operative work arrangements so that a large pool of potential collaborators is maintained. Bloch interprets the Merina tendency to create artificial kinship links with the neighbours on whom they depended for agricultural co-operation, and he also views Gulliver's (1971) work, which indicates that the significant Ndenduli kinship relations are based on the fact of working together, in this way. The implications of his argument are that the economic "interest" in labour exchanges is likely to be more prominent where the relationships are less moral and more immediately reciprocal. The evidence provided by Englund, in particular, contradicts this (see above). The implication is not, however, that more moral relations (based on kinship or otherwise) are more interest free, simply that they can tolerate longer-term imbalance. In Shixini, the evidence indicates that the moral obligation to assist if asked, and to reciprocate, is no stronger among kin than among neighbours, and imbalances may be tolerated irrespective of whether there is a kinship link or not. It is in the context of the historical emergence of co-operative work, as outlined above, that this kind of change in emphasis makes sense.

The notion that work parties are governed by an ethic of reciprocity and mutual helpfulness has been disputed by Kuckertz (1985), in a detailed analysis of one form of co-operative work in Pondoland, approximately 200 kilometers from Shixini in northeastern Transkei.<sup>13</sup> It is necessary to examine this claim, because, if Kuckertz is correct, the argument presented in this paper may be misconceived and the moral basis of co-operative work might lie not in notions of mutual help and reciprocity but elsewhere. In addition, a critique of Kuckertz's argument provides further evidence of the need to locate work-parties and their associated morality within a wider, changing historical and socio-economic context.

Kuckertz looks at the Pondo *ilima* work group, consisting of around 20-25 people, in terms of which an individual household requests help from a number of others, especially in the hoeing season. It is typical of Southern African work parties, elsewhere called *matsema* among Basotho, *lilima* among Swazi, *lejema* among Lovedu, etc. In Caguba village of the Mthwa chiefdom where Kuckertz worked, there is no public announcement of *ilima*; the homestead head (or his/her delegate) simply goes around asking (*ukucela*) people to come and work. Participation is in the interest only of the organizing homestead, which brews beer for the workers. People participate out of the moral obligation to assist those who are in need of help and who ask for it. Work parties are not based on any notion of generalized reciprocity because Pondo themselves do not see it in these terms. People participate not because of economic factors but because of

moral ones, and joining a work party is not to the volunteers' economic advantage since the recipient is not obliged to reciprocate with an equivalent labour input or in any other way.

The head of the organizing homestead cannot rely on a general assumption of mutual helpfulness; he cannot assume that people will know that he is having a work party, and arrive to assist him in the hope of receiving assistance in return. He has to ask for help. The fact that there has to be an explicit invitation, and that the invitation is selective, casts doubt on "the assumption of a generally operating system of mutual helpfulness and reciprocity, and highlights the fact of individual interests..." (Ibid. 116). People come along out of "long-standing friendship" (ibid. 122), although some attend out of their own initiative without being asked, having heard of the work party from the invitees. Work parties are "part of social contexts where relationships between people exist independently of purely economic calculations." Who comes to help has little to do with neighbourhood proximity, kinship or membership of the "mat" associations (hospitality groups). Friendship may be based on any number of factors, including kinship, common initiation, or previous assistance rendered. So the people who work are part of the homestead's network of relationships. It is an action set. However, there are territorial limits involved. In the example Kuckertz provides, all but three of the 26 people who came to help were from the same ward or village, the other three from a neighbouring village, and 15 were of the same mat association.

Work parties in Caguba thus "underscore the economic individualism typical of Mthwa... Rather than being instances of co-operation in the sense of sharing economic interests, common economic interest...exists only on the level of the individual homestead." (Ibid. 117) People would prefer not to have work-parties because of the expense of providing beer "which cuts deeply into the resources of the organizing household." (Ibid. 120) and there is a risk of trouble and tension (over issues such as adultery) at the beer party. Yet in the 1980-81 season, 85 out of 106 households organised work parties, mostly related to the cultivation cycle.

In Shixini, too, one can characterize production as one of "homestead economic individualism" and regard work parties as being in the economic interest of the sponsoring homestead. But Kuckertz seems also to assume that the two kinds of interest (individual and common) cannot co-exist and are mutually exclusive (though at one point he does refer, without elaborating, to "group interests" (ibid. 115)). In the Transkei, common economic resources are represented in things like grazing, water, thatching grass, building materials, and so on. These things are held in common by territorial groups; they are of obvious economic importance and utilized by individual households. There are rules governing their use, since individual usage should not be at the expense of others in the community. Secondly, if homesteads depend heavily on inter-homestead co-operation at certain times of the year, as Kuckertz rightly claims, then it is in the economic interests of each homestead for other homesteads to continue to exist and for every homestead to maintain friendly relations with a number of others. If each homestead depends on the

support of others it is in the common interest for all homesteads to survive and grow. Only by trying to keep the social and the strictly "economic" separate can this be ignored.

If there is no norm of reciprocity and assumption of mutual helpfulness, asks Kuckertz, how is social cohesion maintained, how does the society hang together? It hangs together because the organizer of the work party will at a different point in time help others when he/she is asked; he/she, too, adopts the moral principle of helping those in need who ask for help, and is obligated to accept this principle since he/she acted in terms of it in asking for the help of others (ibid. 128-9). Long and short-term dimensions (morality and interest) are interwoven to provide social unity over time. But it is morality that is the motive, not reciprocity. Yet "the heavy engagement in work parties during a certain period of the year creates an infinite number of long-term relationships. The short term economic relationship comes to an end with the beer drinking after the work party has fulfilled its task. The workers can go home freed from the burden of the promise they gave... The homestead head...is left with the lasting obligation inherent in the moral precept which gained him his economic advantage." (Ibid. 129)

Caught in this attempt to keep social and economic domains separate (ibid. 115), the result of Kuckertz's analysis, although aiming to examine the effects of motive, is to confuse motive with effect, by specifying the moral (emic) conditions which underlie the analytical notion of reciprocity. Reciprocity in this case is the analyst's tool; it need not be stated explicitly by the people involved. The shared ethic of giving help that is rightfully asked for has the long-term effect of producing an ethic that implies reciprocity and mutual helpfulness. So, far from demonstrating that reciprocity does not exist, he specifies the moral conditions that underlie it and make it necessary. It seems that part of the difficulty here is that a distinction is not made by Kuckertz between a general and abstract moral precept such as "mutual helpfulness" which admittedly has no specific explanatory power, and reciprocity as norm which, because it presupposes action (resulting from or in anticipation of another action), is compatible with specific interests and can be used to explain behaviour in a specific interactional situation (Iturra 1977). Gulliver (1971, 214)) seems to be referring to this in speaking of "the practical morality of reciprocity" in his analysis of cultivating groups among the Ndenduli in terms of interest, networks and action sets.

Why should Cagubans not express any ethic of mutual helpfulness and reciprocity, prefer to do without work parties, be reluctant to brew beer, and therefore be so different from the people described by Hunter in Mpondoland in the 1930s (and also from Shixini people in the 1990s)? The question is left unattended by Kuckertz but it needs to be addressed in the context of the overall theme of this paper. It involves a look at some of the major social and economic changes that have affected the lives of Cagubans since the time of Hunter's fieldwork and which may have had the effect of changing moral norms and fostering the development of an individualistic ethic, with consequences for co-operative work.

One of these is missionary influence, conversion to Christianity and increased education and westernization (which often are associated with conversion). Kuckertz points out in a footnote that "Mpondoland has been under the influence of Christian preaching for about 150 years" (ibid. 130). However, only around 4%-5% of Mpondo were Christians when Hunter worked there in the 1930s (Hunter, 1936, 349), whereas 88% of Cagubans were Christians when Kuckertz did fieldwork (Kuckertz, 1983/84, 114). Evidence from other parts of Africa indicates that conversion to Christianity co-incides with changes in the nature of co-operative work (e.g. Worby 1999, Charsley 1976, Mayer 1951, Wilson et al 1952) partly because of the prohibition on beer drinking that goes with conversion. And in Pondoland itself Hunter pointed out that although *amalima* work parties were "very extensively used" in more conservative districts (1936, 90), with virtually every homestead having at least one a year, mainly for the first weeding. Christians or "dressed" people held *amalima* infrequently, partly to avoid beer-drinking, partly (in Hunter's opinion) because they were "more industrious" and attempted to maximise production, i.e. they were more driven by utilitarian interests (ibid. 91).

A second important factor lies in the agricultural "betterment" schemes widely implemented in Transkei, including Caguba, in the 1960s and 1970s. It is well known that these schemes, usually involving the relocation of people in new, concentrated village-type settlements, had dire economic and social effects, including the further entrenchment of migratory wage labour, the breaking down of generations old neighbourhood groups, the creation of suspicion and ill-feeling between new neighbours, and so on. They severely disrupted the social order, and in many cases it was reported that old patterns of economic co-operation fell away with the introduction of these schemes (de Wet 1989; Mayer 1980; McAllister 1989). It is no doubt because of betterment that Cagubans have such small fields (average size of only half a hectare), when compared with the pre-betterment situation, when fields were much larger in Mpondoland (Hunter 1936, 72-73). This, together with the increasing reliance on migrant labour that betterment invariably brought, may have had important effects on the role of agriculture in the local economy and on the nature and importance of co-operative work. Moore (1975, 282-284) outlines the general conditions under which one would expect co-operative labour to decline, and in the case of betterment, all of these conditions were met. In short, it is likely that homestead production declined and became relatively unimportant for economic survival, with migrancy growing in importance. Kuckertz did not recognise this; migrancy "has no direct implications for the organization of work parties." (1985, 118).

Further evidence for this argument comes from James (1985), who illustrated how the implementation of a betterment scheme in the northern Transvaal, together with the introduction of a state-run co-operative, helped to transform agricultural labour. Before the changes, labour was based on reciprocity, but this eventually gave way to contractual relationships. In addition, relocation in terms of the betterment scheme allowed newcomers into the area. Many of these were converts to Christianity and disdained work parties

because of their association with beer. Others, not originally part of the community, lacked the social ties to successfully join the reciprocal work party exchange circuit that continued, at first, to exist.

Shixini people, by contrast, have been relatively unaffected by changes of this kind. They too depend heavily on migrant labour, but until about 1980 many men were able to spend long periods at home between spells of wage employment, and even today over 80% of migrants visit their homes at least once a year, often at the start of the agricultural season. There has been little Christian influence in Shixini, the area is relatively isolated, and "betterment" has not been implemented there (gardens, which have largely replaced fields, are sometimes over two hectares in size). Homestead production is important and, as already stated, produces a significant proportion of grain requirements (McAllister 1999).

### **Labour, homestead production and the construction of Xhosa identity**

In conclusion, we have to ask how it can be that a homestead mode of production characterized by a reliance on co-operative labour and a norm of reciprocity remains in evidence in Shixini and other parts of Transkei. The answer, as relevant to questions of development as it is to understanding work parties, lies partly in questions of identity, partly in questions of demography. It is well known that during the apartheid era and before, areas like Transkei were turned into "labour reserves" from which to draw migrant workers to the mines and industries of "white" South Africa. In addition, in the 1960s and 1970s, especially, parts of these areas were turned into "dumping grounds" to which "surplus" black people were relocated from other parts of the country. As indicated above, state support for agriculture and other forms of development in the Transkei has been negligible, and black rural areas in South Africa have been severely neglected in virtually every way. The people who lived in these areas were thus incorporated into the wider economy while being denied the benefits of citizenship and state support. Their reaction was to develop forms of resistance to incorporation into the wider society, and to maintain homestead production and the rural social system as far as possible. Among conservative Xhosa this took the form of a traditionalist ideology known as "redness" (*ubuqaba*), after the conservative custom of using clothes dyed with red ochre. "Red" Xhosa were characterized by a fierce adherence to custom and a rejection of western ("white") ways. A vital part of this ideology was the devotion to rural Xhosa society and tradition, and especially to "building the homestead" (McAllister 2001), as the context in which co-operative work developed and continues to exist.

By riding roughshod over culture and the local forms of organization in which it was manifested, agricultural "betterment" schemes, as we have seen, disrupted forms of rural social organisation and rendered homestead production less viable than before. In the Transkei and elsewhere this was strongly resisted in the 1960s and 1970s, often successfully, especially in the more conservative coastal districts like Willowvale. Even by the time apartheid collapsed in the early 1990s, a large part of the Transkei (around 45%), concentrated in the coastal districts, had not been subjected to betterment (which by then

had become known as "planning and rehabilitation"). A plan developed for Shixini was partly implemented in the 1980s but was eventually abandoned, partly because of strong resistance from most of Shixini's people, who were well aware of the negative implications of the scheme for homestead production and economic well being.

The tenacity of the Red ideology even in situations where Transkei men spent a large part of their working lives in urban areas is remarkable - testimony both to their determination to maintain rural production and the unpalatability of apartheid. Philip Mayer and the other contributors to the "Xhosa in Town" trilogy published in the early 1960s demonstrated how urban residence had by no means diminished the commitment to rural life on the part of Transkei migrants in East London. Mayer (1960) and Reader (1961) showed how Red migrants remained oriented towards their country homes by maintaining a particular structure of social relationships that "encapsulated" them in the city. They reproduced their rural social relations through forming links exclusively with their "home boys" (*amakhaya*), with whom they lived in town. Within these closely knit social networks relationships were acted out and their conservative ideological stance maintained primarily through communal cooking and eating among room-mates, and through membership of *iiseti*, drinking groups composed strictly of *amakhaya*. *Iiseti* were larger than room groups and embraced *amakhaya* from a wider rural neighbourhood. It was through involvement in this set of relationships, in which communal activity and generalised reciprocity prevailed, that the Red migrants remained committed to their country homes.

Mayer (1960) predicted that the immanent destruction of the areas in which Red migrants lived and the creation of Mdantsane, the "dormitory" city outside of East London, to which people were to be relocated in terms of the apartheid ideology, would make continued "encapsulation" impossible in the future. However, Bank (1999) has demonstrated that the pattern of cultural reproduction of Red Xhosa conservativeness was maintained into the 1980s in East London. As Bank puts it: "Sharing and a collective work ethic were ...embedded in the routines of everyday life, as was an ethos of generalised reciprocity." In this "moral economy of collective trusteeship and joint responsibility", these relations of trust were maintained by "a common commitment to building the *umzi*, providing unconditional support to *amakhaya*, and to respecting age as the key determinant of social standing..." (Ibid. 409).

By the 1980s the Red Xhosa ideology had all but disappeared in many areas inhabited by rural Xhosa, but a strong conservatism remained, especially in Transkei's coastal districts. Shixini people today can no longer be described as "Red", but many remain very conservative, strongly attached to Xhosa tradition, and committed to a rural lifestyle. From the early 1980s onwards, when it became easier for black people in South Africa to urbanize, there has been permanent emigration out of Shixini at a rate similar to that of the natural population increase, leaving the more conservative, rural-oriented people as permanent residents, and keeping the pressure off land and other natural resources. The relative remoteness of the area means that it was not subjected to large population inflows in the 1960s and 1970s, when forced

relocation from other parts of the country was at its height. For the same reason, it does not attract many immigrants despite the relatively good supply of land. It has virtually nothing to offer by way of facilities such as schools, medical services, shops and roads - it is a "backwater" - and became steadily more so during the days of Transkei's "independence", a trend that continues as the transport infrastructure and other services deteriorate further under the new Eastern Province administration. Current conditions thus favour the retention of the forms of co-operative work and their associated morality, which emerged as the mainstay of the rural Transkei economy around the turn of the century, but only because of further changes and developments which have made it possible to do so in the context of the continued maintenance of a rural Xhosa identity. It is these conditions, along with the historical ones giving rise to co-operative work, and the very real economic significance of such work, that any development agent working in a place like Shixini would need to understand.

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## Appendix 1.

A survey by ARDRI of the area served by the Lima Community Development Association (basically the coastal half of Xorha (Elliotdale) district) immediately adjacent to Willowvale, found that in 1987-88, a bad year (defined as being too wet), only 4% of households harvested more than 8 bags (640 kg.) of maize. Fifty-two percent harvested "nothing", 25% got from 1 to 3 bags, and 18% from 4 to 8 bags. The average yield per hectare was 112 kg., and the long-term average was 315 kg. per hectare. So the survey concluded that "in an average year the Lima area as a whole produces 30% of its subsistence grain requirements." (ARDRI 1989, 30). These low yields were obtained, they reported, despite a relatively high use of fertiliser, manure, cultivators and planters. The ARDRI figures are close to those used by the Tomlinson Commission for rural black agriculture as a whole, namely 2,5 bags (500 lbs.) per morgen (about 280 kg. per hectare), which they compared unfavourably with the yield from commercial (white) agriculture of nearly 7 bags per morgen in 1959-60 (Lipton 1977). Another survey in 10 areas drawn from three districts in Transkei (Umtata, Tsolo and Kentani) produced very similar figures to the ARDRI survey. It found that the average yield was 100 kg. per acre (247 kg. per hectare) and that in good years 30% of households grew enough food to feed themselves (Leeuwenberg 1977). Bembridge (1991), reporting on a survey in two Transkeian districts (Libode and Tsolo), puts average maize yields at 414 kg. per hectare, with the highest yields recorded being 2420 kg. per ha. In these districts, according to the survey results, 70% of homesteads did not meet annual grain requirements of 175 kg. per person. Similar figures for maize yields are provided by other commentators (e.g. Westcott 1977, Moll 1984, Phillips-Howard 1995).<sup>14</sup>

Other figures are slightly higher. Hunter (1936, 94) records that yields of 5,5 bags per acre (13,75 bags per hectare) were obtained from demonstration fields in Pondoland in 1929-30, with ordinary people harvesting only about 2 bags per acre (5 bags per hectare) from fields which were, on average, 7903 square yards (approx. 67 hectare) in extent (ibid., 72-73). Assuming that these were 200 lb. bags, this equates to approximately 1250 kg. per hectare for the demonstration fields, and 455 kg. per hectare for ordinary people. A somewhat higher figure is provided by Mpambani (1994, 13), where Transkei maize yields are estimated at 624 kg. per hectare (i.e. 7 to 8 bags of 80 kg. each). Significantly, the only case of a survey using careful measurements of crops grown in the Transkei is one done in Amadiba location in Bizana district in 1985, which recorded average yields (of all crops) of 25 bags per annum, high enough for basic staple requirements (see Beinart 1992, 185). It does seem that land holdings were unusually large there by Transkei standards (six hectares per household), so yields per hectare may still have been relatively low. Unfortunately Beinart does not cite separate figures for maize yields from this survey, and I have not been able to access the original.<sup>15</sup>

**Notes:**

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<sup>1</sup> See also Moore (1975), Donham (1985) and Swindell (1985).

<sup>2</sup> Though there may be changes in the composition of the group from time to time.

<sup>3</sup> I have argued elsewhere (McAllister 2001) that the distinction is, in fact, no longer a useful one.

<sup>4</sup> Davison (1993), in like vein, argues that women in southern Malawi refrain from organizing collaborative labour because they are concerned to maximize their production, both for subsistence and for cash sale. In any case, the "cultural tradition" of collaborative production in these areas is weak

<sup>5</sup> Beinart's work on the history of Pondoland provides much of the evidence for the above synopsis (e.g. Beinart 1982).

<sup>6</sup> This figure represents the amount of land under crops and from which the maize yield was derived, not the total size of the garden, which in most cases included some uncultivated sections.

<sup>7</sup> This figure represents the amount of land under crops and from which the maize yield was derived, not the total size of the garden, which in most cases included some uncultivated sections.

<sup>8</sup> For further evidence on the significance of these yields, and for details on how they were measured, see McAllister 2000.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. Shaw (1974), Hunter (1936), Wilson et al (1952), Mayer (1951), Uchendu (1970), Donham (1985), Geschiere (1995), Worby (1995).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Sansom (1974), Gregson (1969), Wilson et al (1952), Saul (1983)

<sup>11</sup> Karp has made a similar point about Iteso work parties. The beer that is provided for workers is not an exchange of beer for labour, but facilitates and is part of "a complex series of [delayed] reciprocal exchanges.... the vehicle through which cooperation is achieved." (1980, 88).

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Kuper (1947, 147); Mayer (1951); Wilson et al. al. (1952); Donham (1985).

<sup>13</sup> Historically an independent chiefdom, Pondoland is inhabited by Xhosa-speaking people culturally very similar to those in other parts of the Transkei

<sup>14</sup> Beinart (1992, 184) gives much higher figures for Tsolo, but this is clearly at variance with the figures provided in the published version of the conference paper by Westcott which he cites.

<sup>15</sup> Institute for Management and Development Studies: Socio-economic Survey of Area 6, Eastern Pondoland (Bizana Sugar Project). Umtata, University of Transkei, 1986.