

WOMEN OF PHOKENG
Consciousness, Life Strategy, and Migration
 in South Africa, 1900-1983

BELINDA BOZZOLI WITH MAMANTHO NKOTOSO

This evocative book recounts the lives and experiences of twenty-two black South African women—all born before 1915—from one small town in the Western Transvaal. The women are both ordinary and remarkable. From their childhood as daughters of a relatively well-to-do peasantry through their adolescence as educated Christians, to their first experiences as domestic servants in the cities of the Reef, they show an unusual perceptiveness of mind and a rebelliousness of spirit. Those who marry and settle in the historic Rand townships of the thirties and forties—Sophiatown, Alexandra, and Yvededorp—build strong family structures and help support them by illegal beer brewing and various other activities; their personal resilience and strong sense of their own respectability stand them in good stead when they begin to experience police harassment and township violence in the late 1940s. The "culture of subterfuge" that helps keep beer brewing alive is transformed by some of them into a more confrontational "culture of opposition" in the 1950s, when the increasingly powerful Nationalist Party government begins to attack the very bases of their survival. But despite the participation by some of these women in acts of defiance, the increasingly harsh environment in the townships finally drives them back to Phokeng, by now a "homeland" town dependent on platinum mines for its income. Here they survive on meagre pensions and the support provided by their children.

This book's originality and power lie in the central place given to the oral histories on which it is based. The words of these women take pride of place in a richly textured study that gives us a uniquely qualitative insight into the extraordinary history of South Africa in the twentieth century, as well as into the lives and world views of the unknown women who have been a part of it.

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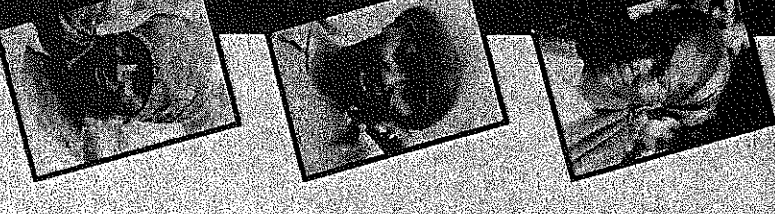
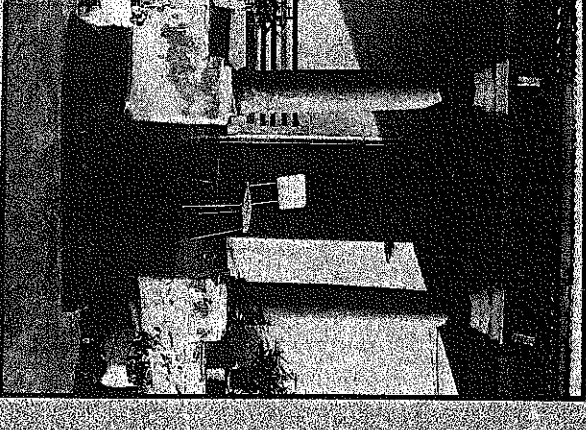
SOCIAL HISTORY OF AFRICA

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SOCIAL HISTORY OF AFRICA

SERIES EDITORS: ALLEN ISAACMAN AND LUISE WHITE

Introduction: Oral History, Consciousness, and Gender

This is a study of the lives of a small group of black South African women. It has three modest aims: to examine the broad processes and events that have shaped their experiences as black South Africans; to explore the specific ways in which their gender has affected their lives; and, most importantly, to study the forms of consciousness they express in their own interpretations of their histories.

Unlike those who dominate society, oppressed peoples are not often able to choose and shape the institutions within which they live. In the endless debates that pose "structure" against "agency," and that ask how much of our lives is determined for us and how much by us, we are apt to forget that the balance between the two differs depending on where we stand in relation to social power.¹ In South Africa, the ruling classes have possessed considerable political and economic power, enabling them to design social structures, to create and manipulate classes, borders, and communities, to destroy and reconstruct families, and even to enter most brutally into the private domain of sexuality. Intoxicated with their visions of perfect, conflict-free systems of accumulation, of pure ethnic or racial communities, or of man realising himself through a privileged relationship with God, they have often found it unnecessary even to disguise their social engineering. Liberal mystifications of bourgeois rule are a rarity in this stark order. Men here have indeed made their own history in ways quite remarkably of their own choosing.

By contrast, the objects of these hegemonic designs — black and white working people — have experienced history largely as a series of defeats and enactments, through which their choices have become ever narrower. Land removals, prole-

enologists. This matter does not lend itself to interpretation through existing, structured concepts and notions of reality. Indeed, as one commentator has observed, oral history's very promise lies in "the discrepancy between oral sources and most of the interpretive categories so far elaborated by the social sciences."¹⁵

Yet this is also not a purely phenomenological book, in which a decontextualised compilation of "experience" is explored, although such an approach would imply more sensitivity to the human mind and psyche than would the positivist one. Instead, located within the Gramscian concerns of the relationships between social power and social consciousness outlined above, this book seeks to follow the birth and vicissitudes of that consciousness over time and space, drawing it into a consideration of context willy-nilly.

The context is not portrayed as the "base" upon which the "superstructure" of consciousness is constructed. Such notions have long been abandoned (in theory, although less so in practice) by students of culture and subjectivity.¹⁶ Instead, the trajectories of the lives of the informants are explored, with varying references to the contexts in which particular forms of consciousness and ideology appear at particular stages. As such the study sets out to be deeply historical, without reducing history to the mechanics of simple causation and determination. The "life worlds,"¹⁷ "life cycles,"¹⁸ and "life strategies"¹⁹ of the women of Phokeng are at the centre of the study. How have these been approached, and what are the methodological principles that have been used?

* * *

My name is Nkotsoe. I am a girl from Mabesernal, the nearby village. I think you know that village.

Yes I do. My name is Ernestina Mekgwe. I was born here in Phokeng and brought up here also.²⁰

The twenty-two women whose interviews are analysed here were all residents of Phokeng, an old and typically Tswana settlement, now in the officially designated and legally "independent" homeland of Bophuthatswana. Their stories exemplify some of the complexities involved in the formation of modern South Africa. Born at the turn of the century, they grew up in a rural economy that was both viable and resilient, but one that had already had to make significant adaptations to survive the newly emerging order of the times. Many of them became migrants to the city, however, in their early twenties, as migrancy became both an economic necessity and an institutionalised expectation. For many, what were planned as temporary sojourns in the city lasted for up to forty years, during which they lived a life defined by family, work, and community, a life that was only partially proletarian in character. In the end, they returned to their village to live as pensioners and grandmothers in the "homeland" of Bophuthatswana.

The women were interviewed, up to four times each, by Mmantho Nkotsoe — also a black South African woman — who, as she says, was born in a "nearby village." The conversations between Mmantho and the women were recorded as part of a larger oral history project (the Oral Documentation Project, or ODP) initiated at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1979. Some one thousand oral

histories of black and some white South Africans, mainly from the countryside of the Transvaal, have been collected since the project began.

The ODP has focussed on the life experiences of rural black South Africans in the Transvaal, and has a variety of analytical and geographical focal points. Methodologically, it adopted a pragmatic and eclectic approach.²¹ No fixed procedure for obtaining life stories was decided upon in advance; researchers and interviewers worked together to construct a viable set of ground rules as the material was being collected and problems emerged. Fundamental to the ODP was the initial decision that interviews with rural people, often barely literate and certainly unfamiliar with the English language, needed to be undertaken in the vernacular, preferably without the presence of a translator or other intervening party. Setswana- or Sesotho-speakers were the obvious candidates for the role of interviewer in the case of the Transvaal, and the ODP has over the years employed a succession of interviewers fluent in either or both of these languages, who would undertake interviews in collaboration with a researcher or team of researchers, and then transcribe the tapes and translate them into English. The ODP archives have been used by a variety of authors and interpreted in a range of different ways. Some have used them as a source of information not obtainable elsewhere;²² others have used selected interviews as the basis for essays on individual life experiences;²³ and a major biography of the ODP's most loquacious informant is under way.²⁴ This study has chosen a different means of interpreting the material, which was generated as a result of specific choices over time about the direction the interviewing should take.

Mmantho Nkotsoe, a university graduate, was trained by the ODP, and she and our initial research team — Tim Couzens, Charles van Onselen, and I — worked cooperatively on the project during 1981–1983. Her mandate was to find interesting elderly women who lived in the countryside and to record the stories of their lives. At first, the intention of the study was simply to record the stories of those whose lives are hidden from history; Mmantho was asked to travel around the Transvaal from village to village, and enquire whether any of the elderly women of the village would be willing to talk to her. She was working together with the other similarly trained oral historians in the ODP, but she alone had been asked to interview only women (the others interviewed men or women). Mmantho was given guidance as to the kinds of sociological questions which the study of the lives of African women in South Africa might involve. She was introduced to modern feminist literature, to the comparative literature on African women, and to the history of women in South Africa. She was trained to record life stories in roughly chronological sequence, and to prompt her informants with indirect questions about issues that she and we considered to be particularly interesting or informative. She was not, however, asked to administer anything like a structured interview schedule in the early stages of the project; when appropriate, she was to allow her informant to guide the interview.

In the early part of the project, Mmantho interviewed women from Potchefstroom, Kuruman, Vryburg and Phokeng.²⁵ But she developed a particularly striking rapport with the Phokeng women. Using her native Setswana to speak to Setswana-speaking informants, she elicited from the first few women from this particular place life stories and statements of world views that rang with intimacy. One obvious reason for this was Mmantho's own background in the neighbouring

village. Now, of course, she was a University-trained historian and sociologist. But to the women she was interviewing, as will become evident in the body of this study, she was almost a kinswoman, a young girl, a child to some, who wanted to know the stories of the past. Thus, what to positivists might seem to be Mmantho's weakness (her subjective involvement in the lives of the informants, and their perception of her as having a particular meaning in their lives) proved to be her greatest strength. It was in the light of this that Mmantho was then asked to continue her interviewing only with women from Phokeng, and to focus her questions more directly on their specific experiences. In the subsequent months, the full twenty-two life stories of women living in Phokeng, in their late seventies and early eighties, were collected. These provide the basis for this study, a remarkably coherent collection of stories with a similarity of context that enabled this "cohort" of women to be examined using sociological more than biographical tools.

This collection of stories has been both reported and interpreted somewhat unconventionally. The life stories have been treated as texts, imperfectly reflecting lives, and more accurately revealing "cultural and psychological myth,"²⁶ rather than as sources of "gobbets" of useful answers to key questions, as the positivist approach might have it. While the "texts" have not been given full priority over the "context," in poststructuralist fashion, literary methods of analysis have certainly been brought to bear upon them.²⁷ The seventy or so bare transcripts that make up the twenty-two life histories have been subjected to a variety of different readings; they have been treated variously as documents, narratives, stories, histories, incoherent ramblings, interlinked fragments of consciousness, conversations, and/or recitals of fact.²⁸ Each of these ways of looking at them has revealed a different set of meanings.

The first, and most conventional, use to which they have been put has been as reflections of the history of the places and times experienced by the women interviewed—they have indeed provided us with "more history." This aspect of their usefulness is particularly evident in the first three chapters of the book, where the history of Phokeng—a relatively unknown village, in an underresearched part of South Africa—is undoubtedly illuminated by the recollections of the women who have lived there.²⁹ The conversations throw light on the way of life in early peasant and sharecropping households, the standard of living attained, the sexual division of labour that prevailed, the history of schooling, family relations, ethnic divisions, and particular Bafokeng struggles, for example. As the women migrate, they are drawn into relationships that are far better documented by other researchers. But we may still see their stories as sources of information about the conditions of labour in domestic service, wages, networks of support, and social relations, as well as about the nature of life in freehold townships such as Sophiatown and Alexandra during the interwar years in particular. Of course the interviewees tend to romanticise their childhood, to get dates wrong, to abandon all chronology, and simply to forget. The reading of these transcripts has involved the craft of sifting the valid piece of information from the invalid, the weak informant from the strong one. But what source of sociological and historical information does not involve these processes? Can we assume that the witnesses to government commissions of enquiry, or the government officials and public figures who write official letters to one another—sources that have all the grave

respectability required of historians' footnotes—are freer of the sins of bias and distortion than the women of Phokeng? Thus, as with any source of information, there are crucial times and places where the informants interviewed here can and do provide valid, important, and useful insights, which might emerge as much in spite of their intentions as because of them. Of course these testimonies need to be read with a critical eye and with enough knowledge of the context to make it possible to sift the gold of true evidence from the bulk of ideology, poor memory, and wilful misleading that occurs. But it would be a poor researcher who did not perform this sifting process with every source available to her.

This book will have failed, however, if it is read as yet another contribution to the detailed understanding of "what happened"—whether in Phokeng, Parkview, or Pimville. It is not designed to add, in incremental fashion, to our store of information about sharecroppers or peasants, servants or beerbrewers, although it does reveal a lot of interesting detail about these things. But more importantly, these texts have revealed themselves to be unsurpassed sources for revealing otherwise hidden forms of consciousness. In the case of interviews such as these, which take the form of a dynamic conversation, expressions of consciousness and social identity are evident which do not normally find their way into the kinds of sources and methods conventionally used—where black South Africans are in any case thinly represented, and women hardly at all.³⁰ How has this aspect of interpretation of the texts occurred?

The very intimacy and interactivity of the interviews has lent them a special character, and the study has not pretended that these life stories were obtained through the sterile means of removing the interviewer as far as possible from any involvement in the interaction, and turning her into the "absent" listener. Instead, the interaction itself is analysed here,³¹ and the book acknowledges the transcripts of these interviews for being precisely what they are—records of conversations between black South Africans of differing backgrounds and levels of education, but with sufficient similarities between them to lend authenticity, richness, and depth to what is being said. As such, the interviews reveal things about the women and their mentalities that would otherwise remain opaque. Mmantho's questions as well as the women's answers are usually included, as are fairly lengthy extracts in which the full flow of their interaction is revealed. We see how even the most canny of informants tells Mmantho, the educated young girl from the nearby village, a little about her childbearing and marital experiences. Mmantho allays the suspicions of most of her informants about her political credentials in a culture riddled with suspicion and fear. It is Mmantho who draws out of her subjects stories of home and work that many white, or male, or "outsider" researchers might struggle to obtain, even using the most "scientific" of methods. Let us examine more carefully the various components of this process of interaction, in order to help us understand what precisely it is that these interviews are capable of yielding.

The interviews are not treated as having a clearly defined beginning and end, as perhaps a pseudoscientific interpretation of them might suggest.³² Of course they have boundaries—between the "formal" period of actual interviewing, where questions are asked and answers recorded, and the "informal" preliminaries, interludes, and lengthy farewells which surround and cushion what some think of as the "actual" interview. But both the informal and the formal parts of the

Mmantho is also black, and to the white outsider, the interviews sometimes read like private conversations.³⁵ Interviewees will sometimes express a hostility towards whites that they feel Mmantho will understand. At other times they confide in her, with a sense of amazement, about the extraordinary behaviour displayed by whites. Elsewhere, they show simple interest, treating her as a source of potentially important and useful information about whites — what can you tell me about these people? The impression given is that whites are mysterious, they come in a variety of different “types,”³⁶ and their behaviour requires constant explanation. There are, it is assumed, nice whites and not-so-nice ones.³⁷ Whites are the outside category in these interviews, blacks the inside one. “We blacks” is a commonly used phrase, for example. Mmantho herself does not indulge in exchanging information about “good” and “bad” whites. But her interviewees assume she is a ready listener to such information because of the assumption of a common universe.

Thirdly, Mmantho is also a woman. Common womanhood is appealed to less frequently than Tswana-ness or blackness as a basis for mutual understanding. But Mmantho was trained to ask questions about the female experience, and about relations between men and women. Although the sociological categories she brings to bear on the interviews do not always “work,”³⁸ there are few examples of places in the interviews where such questions are brushed off or ignored. Rather, interviewees participate eagerly in discussions of such matters as how “women get rich through farming,”³⁹ how “men do not worry about women who dislike arranged marriages,”⁴⁰ or how women took out their breasts and showed them to the police, shouting “you were fed from this breast.”⁴¹ Perhaps the fact that Mmantho is a good fifty to sixty years younger than her informants made them less than forthcoming about the details of childbirth, or about the role of prostitution in township life — and the study is unable to pursue the issue of sexuality beyond a limited sphere. Still, childbirth rituals, fears of rape, and the difficulties of arranged marriage are issues raised by several of the women.

Mmantho’s youth often causes her to be subjected to the older women’s homilies about the evils of the younger generation, the virtues of the good old days, and the decline of moral and ethical standards. They like Mmantho because she shows respect towards them, and because she does not objectify them as “old people.” Reminiscences are often treated by the women as opportunities for them to educate the younger girl about the culture, history, and achievements of her own people, and to draw her into an acknowledgement of the failures of the present. Her high level of education, while often treated as something of local valued, is assumed by some of the women to render Mmantho ignorant of local history and culture. She combines, therefore, the roles of a learned authority, whose questions must be answered, and an ignorant junior, who must be told about reality. At the same time, some of the women prefer to present themselves to Mmantho in terms they know will be understood by a younger, modern person.

The very interviewing technique used by Mmantho — the pursuing, in as near chronological order as possible, of the trajectory of the life of each woman through her experiences as a young girl, a married woman, a peasant and an urban worker, a mother and a churchgoer — also contributed to the special character of the interviews. Mmantho was sensitive, for example, to the fact that most

interaction have their functions, and are interpreted as part of the text — again providing us with insight into the kinds of people being interviewed. In the former, for example, Mmantho establishes the crucial rapport discussed above; in the latter, she requires the interviewee to respond to her questioning initiatives, to submit to a certain degree to the authority she claims to possess. In these conversations it becomes clear that what is formally recorded is informed and indeed inspired by what is not. Many of the insights these interviews give us are not derived from any clear-cut and formalised set of interview questions; nor are they insights that any interviewer, administering the same set of questions, could have gained. Rather, they are a product of the unique formal and informal exchanges between this particular interviewer and her interviewees.

Mmantho herself brings particular characteristics to bear upon the situation. The fact that she is “a girl from Mabeleskraal, the nearby village” is perhaps the most important of these³³ — the focus on Phokeng was selected at an early stage in the study precisely because of Mmantho’s ability to call upon common understandings between herself and her interviewees from this particular place. As the “local girl,” Mmantho can appeal to common conceptions of space, community, boundary, property, history, hierarchy and culture, both on the broad level (she is a Tswana too) and on a local level (she knows Mrs. X who lives down the road; her sister went to Y school, which Mrs. J’s daughter went to, or of which Mrs. M has heard). These are areas where her knowledge of the society is more experiential and intuitive than learnt. On the level of class, too, Mmantho is not an outsider — for she shows great sensitivity to and empathy for those whom she interviews, in spite of her better education. Mmantho “knows what is going on” in Phokeng. The interviews display a sense of conversation and intimacy between interviewer and interviewee, which is obviously aided by Mmantho’s fluent use of rural Setswana. The interviews are replete with references to Tswana words, some with a local meaning, to surnames, clan names, and regional realities.³⁴ Her local origins allow a particular type of interview to emerge, one rich in local detail, and one which allows us to “overhear” interactions. This means that what is taken for granted between Mmantho and her interviewee is often of as much significance as what is regarded as unusual and extraordinary value by both of them. The structure that both parties almost unconsciously attribute to Bafokeng society and the world around it is one that contains categories which are of great interest to the sociologist. Often, as suggested earlier, social scientific categories of analysis prove inappropriate for, or have to be adapted to fit, reality as it is perceived locally. This is not to say there are not hidden, invisible structures that common consciousness does not perceive. Of course there are — and part of Mmantho’s quest was to discover them. But often these hidden forces are better understood by starting with the common consciousness of existing forces, than by assuming that categories derived from other contexts are appropriate by virtue of their theoretical pedigree. In the interviews, the women assume that Mmantho is aware of such matters as the boundaries of the community, its inner workings, and the roles it attributes to its members, as well as a whole range of other matters they feel she “knows,” assumptions that give us a lot to work with. Sometimes this rapport fails, and the interviewee gets irritated with Mmantho because she hasn’t indicated the common ground the subject thought they both possessed; or Mmantho finds her question gets the “wrong” answer, because she has assumed common ground that does not exist.

Besides the process of interaction that produced the texts, the interviewees themselves have brought certain personal and individual qualities to the interviews, which add to their value. It should be said that the interviewees here were all informed that their stories were to be recorded, translated, and made fully available to scholars. The women who agreed to participate did so for a variety of reasons, each of which leaves its mark on the kind of interview they give. Some agreed because they believed they had an interesting and important story or series of stories to tell. They show a sense of their place in history, and their significance as historical actors. Naomi Setsheidi, for example, stops Mmantho and changes the direction of the interview completely at times, with the sense that she knows important things that Mmantho is not particularly good at getting at. Others believe that by participating in the interview some aspect of their lives will perhaps be bettered. One woman refused to be reinterviewed, claiming that "nothing had come" of her previous interviews, so why, she asked, should she be reinterviewed again. Some treat the interview as an occasion to tell Mmantho all the things they have been longing to convey to the younger generation—either about the lost past, their own lost dignity, or about the lost struggles that achieved things which the younger generation now take for granted. The women regard themselves as "stores of information and history." They talk about times long ago, and about old practices, sometimes patronising Mmantho with a cultural heritage she "should" know about, but at other times simply telling her that there are things she has not heard of.

The women are almost all keen to be interviewed. They wish their village and their people to be known. They place a value on history, on recording the deeds of people, and on genealogy. They display a feeling that the past contains truths and inspirations that the present that they might think they are not worthy interviewees give Mmantho the sense that they might think they are not worthy of being interviewed,⁴⁴ although it might be Mmantho's special status as an interviewer that brings their self-confidence and assertiveness to the fore.

Each interviewee constructs her life story in a different way. The different personalities of the interviewees of course affect their responses. But there are also ideological and cultural perceptions that have a social determination, varying from person to person. While the least successful interviewees treat the interview as something rather official, answering questions in a static, monosyllabic way, and giving even Mmantho the status of an outsider, denied access to the interviewee's inner feelings, the best become story tellers, creating a series of well-told anecdotes.⁴⁵ In telling stories, the informants construct the past in ways that place them at the centre of important events, and convey to us what they think is important about their lives—the pleasure or horror of living in Sophiatown, their courage, or their trauma, in difficult circumstances; and what type of person they wish to present themselves as being. Certain character "types" emerge, whether by the artful design of the interviewee or as a reflection of different social patterns of identity. The "Mayibuye" woman, who saw Christianity and education as a means to other ends, who took part in social protest, rebelled against arranged marriage, and has a coherent sense of her reasons for her various dissatisfactions, may be distinguished from the more conservative church-going woman, who tends to accept authority, to be overwhelmed by defeat, and to show a suspicion of social movements, for example. The study does not often try to label each individual woman as such. It is difficult to do so without obscuring

"ordinary people," especially less educated ones, do not think of their lives as an elaborate curriculum vitae, arranged in chronological order and divided up into neat compartments such as work, home, and leisure.⁴² Her interviewing technique adapted itself to the rambling style of many interviewees, to the fact that personal histories are a jumble and that they contain inconsistencies; or to occasions when the interviewee herself would wish to lead the discussion at certain crucial points rather than allow herself to be led—all of which would be anathema to the positivist. The consciousness of the interviewees is most often revealed, here, where they are not necessarily being "led" by Mmantho, but when they make unsolicited or seemingly irrelevant statements, in the "wrong" chronological order, about matters they consider to be important. Often it is what is spontaneous about the interviews that is most revealing.⁴³

Some of these special characteristics of Mmantho as an interviewer were very clearly highlighted when, after the first thirty or so interviews were completed, we decided to "advance" to a more "scientific" stage in the research, by devising and administering a more formal questionnaire, based on the findings of the first interviews. The questionnaire was designed to overcome the problems of inconsistency between the interviewees—all would now be asked the same set of questions in the same order—and of major gaps that existed in the testimonies. The resulting more tightly structured interviews were factually informative, and probably, in case it appears that this book lacks any commitment to structure whatsoever, essential in giving us a bank of information common to all members of this "cohort" of women. But they lacked qualitative insights. They told us about the ages and dates of birth of each member of the informants' families, for example, but informants failed to take the opportunity to make their own statements, answer their own questions, lead the interview, or give their own opinions. The interviews became less interactive, more one-sided. Subjectivity vanished. The terms of reference were dictated by myself; Mmantho became simply the channel of my structured views, and the resulting words of the informants were often static and shallow, although Mmantho managed to make more imaginative use of the questionnaire than seemed possible.

This problem became even more obvious when Mmantho left the project, and the final round of questionnaires was administered by a second interviewer who, although black and with every intention of sympathy, was male, from an entirely different region and social class from the Phokeng women, and not a native Setswana speaker. The women failed to respond to the questions with more than yes or no answers in some cases; and some expressed feelings of resentment and anxiety about being interviewed. The rapport was lacking, the women became reticent, and they presented themselves to him in less open a manner.

Thus when we look at each interview as the text of a conversation between Mmantho and another woman, we are able to ask questions about the self-perception of older Tswana women vis-à-vis the younger generation, or about the boundaries of common identity established between interviewer and interviewee, which suggest something about the meaning of being a "Tswana," a woman, a black, or a Mofokeng. We can probe how the relating of historical tales and details is seen as an important and socially underestimated activity, or how complex is the matter of the value given the high level of education of a woman like Mmantho.

the way in which the women's stories are also repositories of different fragmented components of consciousness and identity; the same woman who presents herself as having a rather clear sense of herself as a "Mayibuye" woman, also reveals aspects of her identity as a tribeswoman, churchgoer, wife, mother, daughter, township dweller, and so on. What the study attempts to reveal are the patterns of interplay between the inconsistent and fragmented aspects of identity, the myriad building blocks out of which a particular individual is constructed, and the larger patterns she might try to present. We ask when and why it is that at certain times, identity appears to cohere. Does it have to do with the presence of an "organic intellectual" (in Gramsci's terms) who seeks to and is able to organise consciousness?⁴⁶ The study does not seek to suggest that the presence of a variety of aspects of identity confirms the currently fashionable view that all subjectivity is "decentred," but suggests that there is an interplay between the self and its multiple components, an interplay that may be historically examined, and which involves processes of social interaction and ideological creativity.

A shortcoming in the book lies in its use of translated versions of the interviews, and their interpretation by myself, a non-Setswana speaker. No self-respecting literary analyst would allow this to occur in his or her field, and there is no doubt that this whole study would have benefited had it been written by a native Setswana speaker. The book has been limited by the fact that only broad generalisations can be made about the meaning of particular statements made by the women, and it has been impossible to draw conclusions about the more intricate, subtle, idiomatic, and nuanced expressions of their views. If I have done injustice to the Setswana, which no doubt I have, let us hope this is compensated for by the fact that here the interviewees are speaking to us in fully translated versions of their own language, rather than in the halting English they themselves speak (although Mmantho's translations do at times reflect her own late twentieth-century idiomatic English). At least this is the English version of a Setswana original. But students of South African society await the day when a new generation of fluent Bantu-speaking sociologists emerges, able to convey to the English-speaking world what insights they gain from the analysis of the words of ordinary speakers of their own tongue.

It may seem insensitive to impose upon qualitative and subjective material such as this the heavy artillery of the sociological armoury, weighing down modest life stories with a massive interpretive framework. It is to be hoped that a good deal of the material in this book will be interpreted by the reader, much as would a work of literature. But, Studs Terkel aside, "raw" oral histories are often opaque or merely anecdotal to those who lack a detailed historical understanding of the contexts that have generated them. This is not a work of phenomenology, as is made clear above. Some interpretive structure has been imposed or generated, although every effort has been made to reduce its intrusiveness.

This book addresses a wide audience, but a good deal of it is directed to sociologists of Africa in general, and of South Africa in particular. Sociology is, along with psychology perhaps, a discipline that has singularly failed to confront the challenges of interpretation that have been presented to Southern Africanists by historians and social anthropologists over the past two decades. Perhaps because its disciplinary heritage lies in Western capitalist societies, where it was born and

where its greatest theoretical and substantive contributions have been located, the sociology of Africa is strangely rootless. Originally created as an offshoot of either philosophy or social work, South African sociology has perhaps too readily accepted its own separation from social anthropology—a separation justifiable (barely) in the West, for whom "primitive" societies have been geographically distant. This has led to a blindness to the special features of African societies, and an almost unqualified acceptance of the broad conceptual models provided by Western sociology—be these Marxist, Weberian, or Durkheimian—with perhaps some concessions to the essentially Eurocentric "underdevelopment" theories of the 1970s. While an eclectic internationalism is commendable, and should not be replaced by a chauvinistic introversion, their filtration with the grander jargons of large theories has excused sociologists from having to confront societies such as African, and even Afrikaner, ones, which have distinctive and often non-Western characteristics such as chiefship, paternalism, patronage systems, powerful kinship structures, particular cultural formations, and particular configurations of age and gender. And while sociologists might well argue that such matters have been treated in a static and normative way by social anthropologists in the past, they have also not taken full cognisance of the substantial and successful attempts made in the field of African history to redirect the arcane concerns of social anthropology by seeking new sources, new theoretical and conceptual inspirations, and new subject matter.

While it is impossible to summarise here the whole reorientation of South African studies over the past twenty years,⁴⁷ it would seem essential to suggest briefly how much the conceptualisation of this study owes to the work of Southern African Marxists and Africanists, so that the significance of its conclusions may be assessed, and its distinctiveness as a work of sociology made explicit. The first intellectual heritage on which it draws is that of the writers of the early 1970s, whose major contribution was to recast the history of South Africa over at least the past one hundred years in materialist terms. The apparently determining force of long-entrenched racism in shaping modern South African institutions was reexamined, and shown to have been itself an ideology that was both cynically used and complexly reconstructed by various interests created by an increasingly successful capitalist revolution after 1867. The major policies of the twentieth century were about land, labour, and wages, each constructed in different ways around the races, and not simply about the gratuitous domination of white over black. The influence of this school of thought can be seen in the way in which this book is constructed. At the very broadest level, a system based primarily on the process of capital accumulation looms at every point in the story, which shows how it has been used and shaped by ethnic, racial, and gender forms and ideologies in Phokeng and outside it, and suggests that it has been overseen by a powerful state. The very rise and decline of the Bafokeng peasantry, part of a process originally identified for the broader region in the early 1970s, may be attributed to the African response to, incorporation within, and subsequent rejection by this system. The creation of black ghetto-like living areas in the cities was also part of a strategy designed to reduce the costs of labour as well as to control it, a strategy epitomised by the infamous pass laws themselves.

But a second influence on the book—the work of Africanists who have examined the impact of this revolution upon indigenous societies—has bred a

caution about an unmodified "political economy" that would explain everything in terms of large-scale processes such as these. Of course here, as elsewhere, the broader pattern taken by events has engendered large, historically changing, and encircling material limits within which smaller struggles occur. But the need for caution is made especially pertinent in the light of the fact that the capitalist revolution in South Africa, powerful as it may have been, had always had to take account of, adapt to, and attempt to incorporate and control surviving and relatively resilient noncapitalist African societies and economies. These societies were not simply overwhelmed and destroyed (as in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand); nor did they contain class cleavages and ideologies that were transferable to capitalism (as feudalism or slavery did, for example). Powerful residual ideologies remained for many decades in South Africa, even when, in later years, precapitalist economic relationships became unviable. As we will be seeing in the case of the women of Phokeng, these ideologies contained notions of gender, age, royalty, property, and patterns of deference and assertion that differed fundamentally from those which a more purely "class" system might breed. And their presence has had a substantial impact upon the structural position, experience, and consciousness of the women as a result. Over time their behaviour as well as their ideas (which in turn influenced their behaviour) came to embody the complex interplay between the larger forces encircling and often squeezing them, and the cultural and structural attributes they brought into the situation. A combination of a materialist and an Africanist understanding is surely necessary for this process to be adequately captured.

Thus this study shows that not only has popular consciousness been forged out of the complex and mobile interplay between class, race, and gender ideologies, but it has also been forged in the context of surviving preindustrial world views. And because our concerns are with women, this draws us into an even further, important refinement: our conception of "hegemony" should in fact be modified to cope with the fact that the women of Phokeng are and were not simply the objects of the policies of white government and industrialising power-brokers — but they were affected by the policies of their own black chiefs and elders as well, so that their oppositional visions contained within them contradictory forces. Opposition to one's parents' choice of a marriage partner might well entail an embracing of the individualism offered by the new society, while resisting the imposition of passes upon women may be cast in terms of a preindustrial ideal vision of the family. The complexities involved in understanding the terms "resistance" or "opposition" are considerable when one perceives people as being so intricately enmeshed in different types of domination that opposition to one type may involve collaboration with another. The notion of "domestic struggles" developed in the body of the book represents one way of handling these multiple and mutually intersecting contradictions.

The social and historical complexities surrounding the lives of African men and women are thus only minimally explicable by reference to "political economy." These facts explain why a South African sociology without African history and without anthropology is forced to abandon what should legitimately be a substantial proportion of its own terrain. This study does not of course claim to solve all the problems and weaknesses of South African sociology through the oral and historical techniques used here. For one thing, not every question can be answered

by the use of oral history. But it does claim to reveal the existence of a world — already fairly substantially documented by other disciplines — that should be the domain of the African sociologist but that is, generally speaking, neglected. The realities of African culture, childhood, family, gender, class, race, and resistance — all staples of the sociological menu — are at least brought into focus through this study, by the interplay of disciplines and concepts, the local and the universal, and the worlds of culture, society, and political economy. Perhaps other sociologists will take them further, and open up new possibilities for us to explore.

Perhaps in conclusion it should be said that, whatever the theoretical pretensions of this introduction, the reader should approach the book more as a source of insights about people than about theories. Theory, after all, is mainly a means to other ends, and not an end in itself. This book will have achieved its aim if, at the end of it, the reader feels he or she has a better understanding of the kinds of people the women of Phokeng are, and of why they think, feel, and act as they do. If a work of sociology can achieve that, it will have made a small contribution towards creating that most elusive of all things — a humane and democratic society, in which all are respected for who and what they are, and in which "liberation" refers to the freeing of subjectivity as much as to the altering of structure.