Politics, Latent and Overt, in *Hill of Fools*

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R. G. Collingwood, the maverick Oxford philosopher of the inter-war years, made the important observation that to properly appreciate a statement it is absolutely necessary to understand and live with the question to which it was intended as an answer:

You cannot find out what a man means by simply studying his spoken or written statements, even though he has spoken or written with perfect command of language and perfectly truthful intention. In order to find out his meaning you must also know what the question was (a question in his own mind, and presumed by him to be in yours) to which the thing he has said or written was meant as an answer.

(31)

R. L. Peteni’s novel *Hill of Fools* (1976) is a work that benefits greatly when Collingwood’s maxim is observed. The author’s family history and the circumstances surrounding the book’s publication add a dimension of political and social meaning which its surface deliberately occludes. Perhaps more importantly, while the story can readily be enjoyed, the quality of sensibility behind the work is not readily accessed without understanding some of the socio-political background.

*Hill of Fools* really is a regional novel. Peteni’s love of the people with whom he grew up, their changing ways and conflicts; the rivers and the terrain of Keiskammahoek; the modes of transport and communication; the institutions of tradition, church, law and state: all these are depicted with that casual authority that stems from personal knowledge and memory. You pass Fort Cox, the agricultural college attended by Randall Peteni’s younger brother, Eugene, and where the character Bhuqa hopes to study (Peteni 1976,

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on the way to the Peteni home, where Shelton’s house still stands (albeit modernized) amidst traces of the orchards and gardens he planted (see photographs). The Zingcuka river (Wolf River) where Peteni played as a child rises in the Hogsback mountains and runs at the bottom of the lands below his father’s house, eventually flowing into the Xesi (the Keiskamma) just as the novel describes. Peteni himself hints in the Winter School lecture (1977) that former Lovedale students (many of whom were among the audience) would recognize the egregious strategy of the “attack by prayer” in Ntabeni’s sermon (1977, 49–51). A similar authenticity registers throughout.

Yet not least of the book’s strengths is the manner in which this ‘everyday story of country folk’ (to echo the subtitle of the BBC serial “The Archers”) captures the complex tensions between fading tradition and rural progressivism, reference points that slip so easily off the pen while pointing towards the broadest shift in human society the planet has experienced to date. Peteni really saw the inhabitants of this circumscribed region of the Eastern Cape as a microcosm of humanity in general. Far from distinguishing or separating his imagined world from that of universal humanity, Peteni’s regionalism was his means of signalling that universality. Its cultural specificity illuminates and carries the book’s generic significance.

Following early twentieth-century upheavals in the discipline of anthropology, rejecting the Eurocentric assumptions of the discipline’s founding moments in the nineteenth century, it became commonplace in literary studies in the 1970s to deride any attempt to validate a universal, or, much worse, to ‘speak for’ an ‘Other’; even to assume that there might be a mode of universal experience, let alone an adequate philosophical conception or expression of it. This was part of a flight from bogus hegemony (to borrow Gramsci’s useful term); a justified fear that supposed ‘universals’ were in fact Western cultural realia being smuggled in under a false passport. Cultural relativism, however philosophically inept its foundation – or lack of foundation – might be, was not only politically correct, it was the truth under erasure (as Derrida might have put it). This academic orthodoxy was gaining hold in literary studies just at the moment when Peteni was pushing his fiction in quite the opposite direction, towards the implicit assumption that cultural and political behaviour is part of a species-specific inheritance, common to humanity, and that people all over the world might be interested in the diverse ways in which this inheritance finds cultural manifestation. They might even be interested in the experiences of the people of Keiskammahoek. This assumption is clearly
expressed in the Winter School lecture (1977) and is the implicit rationale for *Hill of Fools*.

However, such an emphasis also carries its dangers. It is all too easy to slip from some version of ‘the local’ to a concern with ‘the universal,’ meanwhile passing over key sociopolitical tensions that define or place the action and locale horizontally in relation to circumambient territories with their own interconnected histories and economies. To do so would be to misread the pastoral genre, and eviscerate its political content. This is what happened with the early reception of *Hill of Fools* (see pp. 105–120): different types of ‘unknowing’ forced local and international reviewers into naïve readings devoid of political import.

The Winter School lecture shows Peteni’s preference and relish for critique by indirection in political matters. The crucial passage runs as follows:

I did not want anybody to sit back, complacent, feeling that the spotlight was on Lennox Sebe’s Ciskei alone, or Kaiser Matanzima’s Transkei, or John Vorster’s apartheid South Africa. The spotlight is on the Ciskei, yes, on Transkei, on South Africa, on any other country where public life and personal relationships are bedevilled by tribalism or racialism or any form of sectionalism. I did not wish to analyse the present Ciskei as politically constituted, as one of the ‘homelands’ of South Africa, because I feared that I might be carried away by criticism of the policy of ‘separate development’ and weaken the impact of the theme of clan or tribal prejudice which was my main concern. Separate development is a temporary dispensation and is limited to South Africa. Perhaps in a few years it will be remembered by students of history alone. But tribalism or sectionalism in one form or another will I believe continue long after separate development has disappeared from the body politic.

(1977, 27)

So, yes, the book is about Bantustan politics, about apartheid politics, but subsumed within the more general evils of tribalism and ‘sectionalism’ – Peteni’s catch-all term for action, political and social, stemming from unjust discrimination – of which Bantustans and apartheid are mere examples. I was about to write ‘searing’ examples, before reflecting that to do so would be untrue to Peteni’s vision. What we need to understand, or get closer to, is the humble, somewhat pessimistic, yet deeply humane outlook that could, in July 1977, in the immediate aftermath of the previous year’s Soweto uprisings, look forward with tranquil unconcern to a situation where “in a
few years [apartheid] will be remembered by students of history alone.” Was this merely the voice of common sense (a quality markedly lacking in the proponents of apartheid), or something deeper, less obvious?

Peteni was well-endowed with common sense, but his feeling and assumptions about the future of Africa seem to rest on more profound assumptions. His mind moved through, above and below the present sociopolitical juncture with a somewhat Eliotesque sense of the invasion of time by the timeless (but, then, perhaps Eliot’s neo-Hegelian musings on time stem themselves from the effort to reconcile traditional, cyclical, recursive time with the directional time of modernity). A few initial pointers may help.

We can start by noting that nowhere in *Hill of Fools* does Peteni refer to a territory called the Ciskei. (In the article on the novel’s publishing history (see pp. 43–54), I note that the sub-title of the southern African edition, “A Novel of the Ciskei,” was given to it by the publisher, David Philip, in order to advertise the story’s local relevance.) To this may be added the perhaps incidental observation that Peteni’s middle name, ‘Langa’ (‘sun’), is the name of the founding ancestor of the abaMbo peoples, a name that hints at a heritage and history long pre-dating the tribulations of the so-called Mfengu. It suggests an effortless claim to immemorial belonging in the landscape that has become South Africa. Likewise, the happenings in *Hill of Fools* have an air of timelessness, a consequence of their partial basis in slow-moving tradition, while at the same time we can date the fictional events fairly precisely as a fusion of memories from Peteni’s youth in the 1930s and the current predicament of the Eastern Cape in the 1960s, governed by pass laws, influx control, job reservation and the other bureaucratic substitutes for legitimacy resorted to by the apartheid regime. Finally, we must consider the universalizing message of Christianity, its insistence that redemption is possible for all, and that spiritual equality is more than a piece of convenient ideology. Here is a perspective that denies the validity of sectionalism, regards it as intellectually suspect.

Add this up, and we have an intellectual, spiritual outlook which can note the various sectional barbarisms of South Africa, Rhodesia, Uganda and Kenya, as well as the rest of the world, *sub specie aeternitatis*, and be equally unimpressed. The vision is so conservative, in one sense, as to be almost radical. To claim, as he does in the Winter School lecture, that tribalism (the specific form of sectionalism rampant in the Bantustans) was a more stubborn, more disturbing and more enduring threat to the common good than apartheid was heretical at the time, and remains so today. For not only was ethnicity being exploited deliberately and reified as an apartheid
strategy in the creation of the Bantustans, but Peteni indicates in the lecture his full awareness of this fact. Some commentators wanted to deny the existence of ethnicity, finding it more convenient to reduce it to a bogus smokescreen designed to hide the real issue of white domination. Others took the route of pointing out that the Western understanding of ‘tribe’ as some kind of uniform ‘gang’ of blood relatives eternally fixed in unholy alliance was a serious misapprehension. (Nowhere does the early reception of *Hill of Fools* evidence any sensitivity to the real character of tribalism; this only penetrated literary academia in the 1980s.) It is indeed true that the shifting alliance of clans under the leadership of what the colonialist dubbed a ‘paramount chief,’ an alliance characterized by ongoing defections and renewals, was nowhere near the monolithic social unit of Western imaginings. It was also true, as Peteni saw, and as happenings in Rwanda and the DRC remind us almost daily at the moment, that ethnicity remains an easily exploitable form of sectionalism to which Africa remains endemically prone. It is therefore worth looking more closely at the politics that raged round Peteni, in his immediate vicinity, and in which he participated, in order to fill out the fusion of the timeless and temporally specific which informs *Hill of Fools*.

With regard to the Ciskei Bantustan, first, there is the point that the name, Ciskei (like its twin, ‘Transkei’), belongs to colonial historiography. ‘Cis’ and ‘Trans’ make sense only from the Cape-orientated perspective of the white settler incursion moving haltingly eastward along the coastal margin of the continent towards the Kei River in the course of the nineteenth century. Then, even if one accepts the name as a neutral demarcator of territory – as it is once more becoming today – we are up against the ideological ambiguity of a specific geographical locale which is at the same time apartheid South Africa’s fourth Bantustan. Under the crack-pot ‘separate development’ ideology of the Nationalist government, Ciskei became first a separate administrative territory (1961), and then in 1972 it was declared ‘self-governing.’ During the 70s large numbers of Xhosa people (over 70,000) were ‘removed’ to this ‘homeland’ (apartheid fictions tend to engender a rash of scare-quotes, for which authors must apologize to their readers). In 1981, it became the fourth such homeland to be granted ‘independence.’ The dispensation prevailed until dismantled shortly after liberation in 1994, though the disastrous political and bureaucratic legacy lingers to hamper today’s Eastern Province, which inherited the toxic aftermath of both the Transkei and the Ciskei experiments. So, on the face of it, the publisher’s sub-title (“A Novel of the Ciskei”) appears inadvertently to gesture to a major ‘achievement’ of the apartheid regime, forcing Peteni’s
novel to play the role of a founding contribution to the literary culture of a Bantustan on the way to fake independence. What a gift to the school prescription committees of the Ciskei Education Department in their Zwelitsha headquarters! (Zwelitsha was in reality a black dormitory suburb of nearby King William’s Town, standing a few kilometers away in the ‘white’ corridor separating the Ciskei and the Transkei.) Here was a book that gave them a historical presence, one which their teachers and pupils would relish – because it is a good story – and whose mere circulation might add to the ‘reality’ of the Ciskei regime’s wobbly existence.4

There is another anomaly. The ostensible rationale for the apartheid Bantustans was that they supposedly afforded ethnic groupings the opportunity to ‘develop along their own lines’ – to cite the ubiquitous euphemism. People were being offered their traditional heartlands (provided of course these didn’t contain any resource, infrastructure or geographical advantage the white Republic might conceivably need) to use as they pleased. However, the anonymous author of “Ethnicity and Pseudo-Ethnicity in the Ciskei” (1989) – and it speaks volumes that the writer of the piece, which blows the lid off machinations surrounding this faux State, feels safer preserving authorial anonymity – correctly opens his or her account as follows: “The Ciskei is unique among the South African Bantustan ‘homelands’ in that it has absolutely no basis in any ethnic, cultural or linguistic fact whatsoever” (395; but see note 1). The geographical entity was, and is, an uncertain demarcation of territory rooted in settler historiography – nothing more.

The historical Ciskei

Is there, then, a Ciskei older and less artificial than the recent apartheid construct? And could this have a bearing on the territory and culture we meet in Peteni’s novel? Nguni-speaking people (Thembu, Xhosa, Pondomise and others) have inhabited the Transkei and Ciskei as far back as recorded tradition. This historical fact stands in marked contrast to the self-serving myth, popular with and promulgated by early white historiographers, that the southward migration of Nguni people met the eastward expansion of the Cape Colony in the contested area round the Great Fish River, thereby establishing prima facie an equivalent right to an empty land on the part of the whites. For instance, here is the government ethnologist N. J. van Warmelo, writing in 1935 about those Africans “already settled” within the boundaries of the “present Cape Province” before the end of the C17:
I say “already settled”, because those . . . Bantu were themselves comparative newcomers in the country, having been still on the march (that is, very gradually advancing) to the South and West, as they had probably been for centuries, when the European colonists on the frontier, which was also gradually being extended eastwards, first came into contact with them . . . . In numerous border encounters during the troubled times that followed the newcomers from East and West battled for the right of way. In the end neither really gained his point, for while the course of Bantu expansion westwards was stayed, the direction of European expansion was deflected North, and the Transkei remains a purely native territory to this day. (1935, 60)

The ideological uses of such a view became all too apparent as the Afrikaner Nationalist grip tightened on the country. On 1 April 1959, the then Nationalist Minister of Finance, Eric Louw, was reported in Die Burger as saying that “die Bantoe uit die Noorde oor die Limpopo begin trek het toe Van Riebeeck in Tafelbaai aan land gestap het” (The Bantu had begun to trek from the north over the Limpopo when Van Riebeeck landed in Table Bay – quoted in Wilson 1959, 167). This myth was definitively debunked by the anthropologist Monica Wilson, who drew on written records of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Portuguese wrecks along the Transkei coast, oral history, and evidence from archaeological sites to show that “There is nothing in the recorded traditions to indicate any substantial movement of Nguni people from north of the Drakensburg – much less the Limpopo – within the period covered by the genealogies, i.e. since 1300, and it may well have been centuries before that” (178).5

So while there was substance to Van Warmelo’s portrait of a Transkei to some degree stranded outside the tentacles of Western influence, three important facts are obfuscated. First, the eastern movement of the settlers was substantially halted in the Ciskei by Xhosa resistance for more than a century (see Peires, Ch. 9); secondly, colonial interest in the area, while real, paled alongside the attractions of diamonds in Kimberley (1866) and then gold to the north on the Witwatersrand (1886); and thirdly, as we have seen, Nguni people were established in the Ciskei/Transkei region at least from the mid-sixteenth century: how much before must remain guesswork. There is indeed a Transkei/Ciskei whose architecture pre-dates by ages the shabby impositions of apartheid fantasy, and the book’s southern African subtitle, insofar as it was read as referring to the impending creation of the Ciskei Bantustan, was to a degree misleading – yet not entirely so, as we shall see.
The Hlubis and the Thembus

To appreciate the deep question that lies behind the book’s somewhat austere articulation of its story, we must look more closely at the political, historical and social background of the region Peteni is writing about. In particular, the origins of the novel’s two collective protagonists, the Thembus and the Hlubis, their history and relations in the area in which Peteni grew up, become relevant. In a letter to Butler (6 January 1972), Peteni is explicit about the origins of his tale:

The story is not an account of events in real life, but it is based on impressions of life as I knew it when I was a little boy growing up in the Keiskammahoek district of the Ciskei . . . . Faction fights between boys of rival villages were common when I was young.

The name “The Hill of Fools” is fictitious, though there is a place named “Kwazidenge” – the place of fools – in the district of Stutterheim, which I had in mind when I named the hill. The name of the hill and the village and the book is meant to stress the folly of human beings who resort to the method of violence, from generation to generation, to settle their differences.

So who are the Thembus and Hlubis of the Ciskei? First the Thembu: the Cape or southern Nguni to which they belong received scant attention from historians in their own right until the 1960s. They formerly appeared either as protagonists in the colonial frontier wars, or as responding to upheavals visited upon them from the north, during the so-called Mfecane, the series of knock-on conflicts and migrations that followed the rise of centralized Zulu power to the north (see below). The Thembu were in fact among the earliest immigrants to the region. Maylam notes that while it is difficult to estimate the date of their arrival, “The Thembu are reputed to have a particularly ancient lineage” (1986, 36). They may, for instance, have been the people encountered by survivors of the Portuguese wreck, the Santo Alberto, in 1593.

Despite this temporal priority, from the mid-eighteenth century the Thembu seem to have “fallen under Xhosa sway” (36), absorbing Xhosa custom and culture under their influence. Though the Xhosa never attained the degree of political centralization which came to distinguish the northern Nguni, they nevertheless exercised great political influence in the region in the mid-eighteenth century, especially under the chieftainship of Phalo (roughly 1730s–1775; see Peires). An index of this is that even today, all speakers of the southern Nguni languages and dialects are termed Xhosa in common usage, regardless of whether they belong to the Xhosa clans proper.
Phalo’s two sons, Gcaleka and Rharhabe, quarrelled over the succession, and after defeat and capture in the ensuing war, Rharhabe moved, with Phalo, west across the Kei River: hence the division between the Gcaleka Xhosa of the Transkei and the Rharhabe of the Ciskei. (This is probably as close to a historical root for the arbitrary distinction between the Ciskei and Transkei ‘homelands’ as one can find, and one which became important in later Bantustan politics.) It was the Rharhabe Xhosa, under Ndlambe, who were primarily responsible for halting the eastward creep of the white settlements, a tradition of resistance which was sustained in the area right through the dark days of apartheid.

The Hlubis were much later immigrants who arrived in the early decades of the nineteenth century as a consequence of the Mfecane (the word means the ‘smashing’ or ‘hammering’) which followed the rise of northern Nguni power in Natal. In the course of the eighteenth century, Nguni peoples to the north of the Ciskei/Transkei area began to develop more centralized socio-political structures. There is of course a substantial literature devoted to explaining the rise of these polities, especially of the Zulu nation, often concentrating on the figure of Tshaka (cf. Wylie and Etherington for recent debate). Explanations typically focus on matters such as influence from white military practice, or increasing population pressures and competition for scarce natural resources, particularly pasture, or the flourishing of the ivory trade through Delagoa Bay as a catalyst for greater political consolidation (Maylam 1986, 29–32). All of these factors may have been involved to differing degrees. The result was a succession of wars and consequent upheavals, known as the Mfecane (Xhosa), or the Difaqane (Sotho), which sent successive segments and splinter groupings from defeated chiefdoms fleeing across the Drakensberg onto the Highveld, and others south and west into the territory of the Cape Nguni.

What happened to the Hlubis, in their home territory at the foot of the Drakensberg, was as follows. Their proximate neighbour, Matiwane, head of the Ndwane, was attacked from the east in quick succession by Dingiswayo, head of the Mthethwa grouping, and then by Zwide, the Ndwandwe leader, forcing Matiwane to flee westward towards the Hlubis, up against the foothills of the Drakensburg. By agreement, the Hlubi had been looking after a substantial number of cattle belonging to the Ndwane. They attempted to take advantage of the military plight of Matiwane by expropriating the cattle in question, only to be crushed by his forces as he retreated west. This was in about 1821 (Maylam 1986, 54). The Hlubi chief, Mtimkhulu, was slain, and the chiefdom broke up. One group fled over the Drakensberg onto the Highveld; another ended up on the western border of Natal. A third retreated south where they became part of the refugee
groupings known collectively as the Mfengu; also to become the fictional protagonists in Peteni’s novel.

The Mfengu (or ‘Fingos’ in much of the colonial literature) came to occupy an intensely interesting and politically ambiguous niche in the life of the frontier. (The name comes from ‘Siyamfenguza!’ meaning ‘we are wandering,’ reputedly the cry uttered by such people as they sought a place to live in exchange for service.) As destitute, landless refugees, they were initially welcomed by the Xhosa, and groups were scattered among them by their leader, Hintsa, as new followers who would have to accept a degree of subservience for a time, but would earn full assimilation in due course (Peires 1981, 88). The Mfengu used their agricultural skills to good advantage, they accumulated surplus cattle, they grew and traded tobacco. In short, they achieved a degree of economic success which made their patrons, the Xhosa, keen to extract substantial tributes (Bundy 1979, 33). The twin pressures of Xhosa exactions and their own trading success, together with their unusual history and uncertain status, pushed the Mfengu into closer alliance with the white settlers. Their qualified responsiveness to Missionary evangelism, education and economic tutoring, and their retreat from pastoralism towards increasingly successful semi-commercial agriculture, shaped their distinctive if loose collective identity. In 1835, some 16 000 Mfengu, invited by Governor D’Urban and persuaded by the missionary John Ayliff, crossed the Kei River to settle near Grahamstown. ‘Anonymous’ takes up the story:

On the 14 May 1835, the Mfengu gathered under an old milkwood tree in Peddie district and swore a great oath to obey the Queen [Victoria], to accept Christianity, and to educate their children. This oath was to have momentous consequences. The Mfengu fought alongside Colonial forces in all the Frontier Wars and were rewarded by extensive tracts of Rharhabe land. As the better-educated and more European-oriented group, they naturally secured the bulk of elite positions as clerks, teachers, peasants, and petty traders that were available to blacks . . . based on merit and achievement, as opposed to the pre-colonial Xhosa pattern of strong hereditary chiefs. They viewed themselves as the bearers of a great universal Christian Civilisation, and tended to regard the Rharhabe and other Xhosa as backward and uncivilized.

(1989, 398)

Anthropological writers of the mid-twentieth century (such as Mayer and Wilson) tend to distinguish between the ‘red-blanket’ Xhosa and the ‘school people’; meaning the traditionalists versus the missionary-influenced,
Western-educated ‘modernizers.’ Peteni mentions the distinction in the Winter School lecture. Typically, though by no means consistently, Mfengu would be identified as School people, while Xhosa traditionalists might be described as red blanket, or red ochre people, from the practice of using red clay to adorn themselves. (The figure of Zuziwe’s unworthy betrothed, Ntabeni Mlilo, the cowardly Mfengu preacher who uses the pulpit for his own ends, is Peteni’s satire on the School people.) It is worth noting that around Keiskamma, ‘red-blanket’ people were a rarity. Writing in 1955, and employing the pejorative terminology of the day, Hobart Houghton noted:

. . . in Keiskammahoek district there are virtually no “red” people at all. Pagan and Christian homesteads are built alike and equipped with European furnishings . . . . Pagan and Christian men dress alike in European style. Most pagan women wear the the long-sleeved, blue, print dresses and the somber black doeks of their Christian neighbours.

(60)

These static anthropological categories, ‘red’ and ‘school,’ lack historical depth in that they don’t convey the gradual formation of class structure over time, as the tentacles of the Western global economy spread through the region towards the end of the nineteenth century. The Mfengu peasantry, which had prospered in earlier years, and tended to have better education, began to feel the attractions of migratory wage labour more consistently. Proletarianisation was in process. Competition from white commercial farmers, buttressed by the predations of the 1913 Native Land Act, and increasing land and population pressures, together with the growth of mining and industrial capital in the South African economy, combined to impoverish and disrupt the life of the rural peasantry (Bundy 1979, 239–43).

Plans for decreeing the Ciskei Bantustan’s ‘independence’ were far advanced and gaining momentum while Peteni was planning and writing *Hill of Fools*. These involved, among other things, dismantling the old Cape liberal system which had been so fortuitously advantageous to Mfengu interests – relying as it had to some extent on competition, educational attainment and economic prowess – and replacing this with resuscitated and partly artificial tribalism. Government ethnologists went back to documents and early histories and attempted to establish genealogies. This misguided political use of ethnicity worked, naturally enough, to the advantage of the Rharhabe Xhosa and threatened to jeopardize the claims of the Mfengu. Old resentments nurtured from the days of the frontier wars resurfaced, particularly memories of the Rharhabe land given to the Mfengu as reward for collaboration.
In 1968, the Mfengu leader Justice Mabandla and his associates joined the ethnic game by issuing a ‘Fingo Manifesto’ in which it was urged that the Mfengu be treated as a separate people, distinct from the Rharhabe, in shaping the new Ciskei. As noted in the Introduction, they were defeated in the 1973 election by Lennox Sebe, the leading Rharhabe candidate, thanks in part to election frauds committed on his behalf by the South African regime (Anonymous 1989, 399). Sebe (who, his brother Charles claimed after his fall from power, was not really Rharhabe at all, but Mfengu – Anonymous 1989, 401) initially consolidated his position through stirring up anti-Mfengu sentiment, but having attained power by playing the ethnic card, in office he later attempted to backtrack and unite the ‘state’ by promoting compliant Mfengu to high positions. A lethal tangle of dubious lineages, patronage and nepotism, heavily influenced by ethnicity, was the result, and its aftermath continues to bedevil the liberated Eastern Cape Province to this day. As has been evident throughout post-independent Africa, ethnicity and modernity seldom co-operate happily.

**Peteni’s position**

Where did Peteni stand in all this? It was during the run-up to the 1973 Ciskei elections that Butler submitted *Hill of Fools* for possible publication, and in his letter of recommendation to James Currey of the Heinemann African Writers series, Butler observed: “Friends say he [Peteni] may become minister of education. He hopes to act as a mediator between Xhosas and Fingoes – which, he says wryly, might be like trying to mediate in Northern Ireland” (Butler to James Currey, 16 February 1972). Following the Ciskei elections, he briefly entered the parliamentary arena as an executive party member of the defeated Ciskei National Party (*Imbokotho*) under Justice Mabandla, representing Keiskammahoek, in opposition to Sebe’s Ciskei National Independence Party (see Introduction, this volume). For whatever reason – his party’s failure to attain power, inability to influence events, dissatisfaction with the cut-throat rivalry and corruption evident in the Ciskei exercise – Peteni soon resigned from the executive, continuing to lecture at Fort Hare. He remained a staunch member of *Imbokotho*.

The meliorative role he had evidently wanted to play in real life, in the politics of the Ciskei and in the educational arenas of the nation, informs the didactic drive of *Hill of Fools*. The conflicts and behaviours he observed in the Ciskei *imbroglio*, during the years of its contested formation, melded with stories and memories from his youth to create a *luta continua*. To arrive at a valid embodiment for his vision, Peteni turned to suitable literary models; to the example of Achebe, particularly in the early novels, to A. C.
Jordan’s *Ingqumbo Yeminyanya* (1940), and to the earlier ground-breaking achievement of Sol Plaatje in *Mhudi*. As Tim Couzens noted in his 1973 introduction to the Quagga edition, although Plaatje addressed the political and economic depredations of the 1913 Native Land Act directly in his work *Native Life in South Africa* (1916), he also approached these issues indirectly in *Mhudi*, using a significant fictionalizing strategy that may well have registered with Peteni. Plaatje’s novel was probably written in about 1917, though it failed to find a publisher until 1930, and a simple substitution of ‘land’ for ‘cattle’ (a shift occasioned in any case by the process of colonial invasion) renders the story of the Barolong resistance to Mizilikazi’s oppression of the 1930s an exact parallel to the African land crisis in the years following the introduction of the 1913 Native Land Act. Couzens expressed the device as follows:

> In the 1830s in the novel one finds a tribe [the ‘Matabele’] imposing taxation on another tribe [the ‘Barolong’]. In the end the latter’s ability to tolerate this burden (relatively minor as it was, Plaatje maintains) collapses and they rebel. Their subsequent suppression leads them to ally themselves with other peoples in a similar plight – until the oppressors are finally overthrown. The parallels with the early twentieth century are not difficult to perceive.

(1975, 13)

Similarly, Jordan’s re-working in *Ingqumbo Yeminyanya* of early twentieth-century conflicts in the Tsolo district of the Transkei (Beinart 1992, 471) made a profound impression on Peteni, perhaps revealing to him the artistic potential of ancient and modern conflicts rooted in the district where he had grown up. Peteni added to these models some of the technique, the international confidence and artistic verve he found in the example of Achebe. Possible features of Achebe’s influence are apparent in his MA dissertation, “The Conflicts and tensions of a Changing World as depicted in the Novels of Chinua Achebe” (UNISA, 1979), for which he was reading as *Hill of Fools* made its appearance. Peteni’s study concentrates on the early ‘village’ novels (principally *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*), and his examination of change in Africa exults in Achebe’s celebration of the universal in the parochial:

> His [Achebe’s] message – the truth of Igbo life and culture – is directed at Nigeria, Africa, and the world at large. There is no evidence of narrow nationalism in his novels, no preoccupation with race or colour to the exclusion of all other problems of life.

(1979, 10)
If *Hill of Fools* is one of South Africa’s earliest ‘regional’ novels by an African, it is similarly devoted to human universality. “The Xesi river is not an important river as rivers go,” he writes, “But to the villagers of Kwazidenge it is as important as the Nile to the Egyptians, the Thames to the Englishmen, the Vaal to South Africans” (Peteni 1976, 4). Ethnicity, racialism, tribalism, even gender oppression he regarded as instances of ‘sectionalism,’ something to be grown out of, disciplined, not indulged (Peteni 1977). His was a posture of civic virtue under siege in a savage political shark-tank, waiting patiently for his fellow citizens, black and white to live out similar ideals, and *Hill of Fools* was his attempt to address them, albeit quietly and indirectly.

To make his case, he turns away from the obvious tensions between Rharhabe Xhosa and Mfengu, currently bubbling in the Ciskeian political cauldron, and in which he was personally involved, and sets in their stead a politically more ‘innocent’ squabble between Hlubi and Thembu, two clans each of which, at different times as we have seen, had been forced to live in subservience to the Xhosa. This move, retrieving memories of village squabbles from childhood to illustrate the current predicament, distances and isolates his fable from contemporary politics, while placing the story in relation to a much longer historical continuum. The Mfengu affinity for Christian universalism, rooted in their history, turns him towards essentialist analysis as the foundation of his tale: the universal tendency for people to act on reified habit and tradition rather than in response to genuine human values. The power plays enacted daily around him in the brutal fantasy world of Ciskeian politics are deliberately reduced in the novel to the testosterone-driven heroics and posturing of reckless young men showing off on the Hill of Fools.

So are the barbarities of apartheid South Africa – and this is the issue that must stick in the gullet of those at the time who struggled against the system with a view to its total overthrow. Peteni undoubtedly accepted the transient existence and authority of the homeland system. Marginalized in Bantustan politics, not really part of the younger generation’s increasingly militant opposition to apartheid, hardly linked to the international anti-apartheid movement-in-exile, Peteni’s was a lonely position. The intellectual isolation led him towards deeper ponderings, only tangentially related to the immediate struggle.

For the question – in Collingwood’s sense – which drives *Hill of Fools* is ‘What is at the bottom of humanity’s troubles?’, and the answer Peteni supplies is classical: folly. The real theme of his book, openly expressed in its title, is the consequences of human folly – not a theme calculated to
appeal to politicians, to the politically engaged, or to revolutionaries. Viewed from the perspective of a tenuously maintained civility, the gross thrashings and flailings of oppression and the struggle against it can seem obtuse and nugatory. For there is evidently another ‘hill’ in the novel, set in disdainful opposition to the Hill of Fools, but also on the Hlubi side of the river. It is best described as the lofty spiritual disposition evident in Peteni’s relation to his story, that calm detached sympathy which as a writer he seems to have learned from the example of A. C. Jordan’s *Ingqumbo Yeminyanya*. If it has a physical embodiment in the novel, this attitude is seen in the author’s relation to his heroine, Zuziwe, whom he portrays as spirited, open-hearted, responding faithfully to human imperatives that go beyond socialized norms, and whose anguished course he watches with that “gentle stoicism” (to quote Guy Butler, *op cit.*, 1973) which so clearly matches his history, the history of his family and the story of his people. His literary demeanour is fully consonant with the trajectory of his forbears, a Western-educated cultural élite, increasingly alienated by aggressive white domination, disdainful of power-hungry opportunism among the Bantustan politicians, with little immediate hope of release from apartheid oppression, but secure in the knowledge that ‘this too shall pass.’

NOTES

1. Later, colonialism strengthened the distinction between the Transkei and the Ciskei in that the latter, as an integral part of the Cape Colony since annexation in 1866, was administered from Cape Town and fell within the dispensation of Cape liberalism; whereas the Transkei was always administered as a separate entity (Charton 1980, 11).


4. The novel did indeed become a popular prescription in several of the Bantustans and in schools in the Republic under the jurisdiction of the former DET (Department of Education and Training), the education authority responsible for black (African) schools under apartheid.

5. Wilson urges that the origins of this ideologically useful myth (and most myths are ideologically useful, that is why they survive) lie in some far-fetched speculation on the part of G. M. Theal, the pioneering South African historian, in his *History and Ethnography of South Africa before 1795* (1907), which was later reproduced by successive ‘scissors-and-paste’ historians. She quotes him as follows: The legends of all the tribes of importance now living south of the Zambezi river, none of which can be more than a few centuries old, point to a distant northern occupation . . . . The Mumbos of the Portuguese are to a certainty the Abambo of more recent
history . . . . A section of the Abambo must have directed its
march towards the south some time between 1570 and 1590 . . . .
The Abambo at length reached the valley of the Tugela river, in
what is now the colony of Natal, where they formed settlements.

(1959, 173)

Wilson avers, “For all this there is not a shred of evidence” and she concludes:
“Theal’s speculation – for it was no more than that – was taken as assured fact by
Walker [Eric A. Walker in his Historical Atlas of South Africa, 1922] and Soga [J. H. Soga in The South-Eastern Bantu, 1930], and has provided a legendary basis for
South African history ever since” (173–74). Van Warmelo acknowledged the
decisiveness of Wilson’s arguments in later publications (cf. Van Warmelo 1974,
56).

6. The standard work on the Mfengu is Moyer (1976).

7. In conversation a colleague, Mr Thandi August, remarked that in Xhosa
tradition it is said that Hintsa settled the Mfengu where they could form a buffer
between the Xhosa and the white colonisers to the west. If true, this was thinking
remarkably symmetrical with that of the British government in placing the settlers of
1820 to act as a defensive barrier along the frontier – also without their knowledge.
The Mfengu later joined forces with the British against Hintsa.

8. Richard Moyer noted in 1976 that: “Though ‘separate development’ is
contrary to the traditional objectives of the Mfengu elite, who have always wanted
some form of non-racialism in South Africa, its establishment through the Bantustan
system has forced them as a community to abandon that pursuit. To ignore ‘separate
development’ would mean the end of their separate identity and absorption back into
the general Xhosa community. This fate is one thing they can not accept, as the
Mfengu still regard themselves as African elite” (571–72). Perhaps Peteni’s
defection from practical politics reflected an unwillingness to accede to any
prevarication clouding the universalism so long cherished by his people – but this is
speculation.

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