

**The Natives Land Act of 1913 engineered the poverty  
of Black South Africans:  
a historico-ecclesiastical perspective<sup>1</sup>**

*Leepo Modise*

Department of Philosophy, Practical and Systematic Theology,  
University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

*Ndikho Mtshiselwa*

Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies,  
University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

*Abstract*

The legacy of socio-economic injustice which was inherited from the Natives Land Act of 1913 continues to haunt the majority of black South Africans. The land dispossession of the indigenous people of South Africa under this Act caused poverty which is still prevalent in our country today. Many South Africans, especially black South Africans, are trapped in a cycle of poverty that emerged as a result of our history of colonialism and apartheid. The interrogation of the unsettling discourse on land in South Africa as well as the continuous poverty cycle is fundamental for offering empowering possibilities for the poor. As such, the role played by the South African churches to support and/or oppose the Natives Land Act of 1913 cannot be ignored. The main question engaged with in the present text is: if the issue of poverty, as foregrounded in the discourse of land and within the ecclesial discussion, is engaged with from a historico-ecclesiastical<sup>2</sup> perspective, could the discourse provide a valuable contribution towards poverty alleviation in South Africa?

**Introduction**

A day after the Natives Land Act of 1913 was enacted in South Africa, Solomon Plaatje (1995:13) remarked:

Awakening on Friday morning, June 20, 1913, the South African native found himself, not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth.

Delving into this awakening, it seems that, 100 years ago, the Natives Land Act of 1913 created socio-economic injustice in terms of poverty and dispossession of land from black South Africans. The theme of socio-economic injustice and land enjoys the attention of several scholars in South Africa. It is argued that the socio-economic injustice and landlessness of many black South Africans were inherited from colonial and apartheid land dispossessions and exploitation of black Africans (Helliker 2011:43–44; Hall 2010:18; Mngxitama 2006:41; Bradstock 2005:1979; Hendricks 2004:8; Carter & May 2001:1987). That being the case, one would suspect that the legacy of socio-economic injustice which was possibly inherited from the Natives Land Act of 1913 continues to haunt the majority of black South Africans. Although we may not appreciate such a suspicion, the fact that an estimated 4.35% of white people are poor, compared to 61.4% of black South Africans (Stats SA 2012a:71), points to the direction of our suspicion. The challenge of poverty is a disturbing reality in South Africa.

Land reform in South Africa was established by the government with the view that redistribution of farmland would make a significant contribution to poverty alleviation. South African churches have also wrestled with the issue of land, to no avail. In the South African context, dispossession of land has played and, dare we say, still plays an important role in impoverishing black South Africans. The Natives Land Act of 1913 deprived the majority of black South Africans of the right to productively own land for their economic wellbeing and sustainability. Thus, poverty as experienced in post-apartheid South Africa can be attributed to the legacy of the colonial and apartheid past, with reference to the Land Act of 1913 and land dispossession.

In view of the reality of poverty as well as the apparent slow progress of land reform the main question that springs up is: How land dispossession through the Land Act of 1913 contributes towards impoverishment of black South Africans as foregrounded in the discourse of the history of land, and within the ecclesial

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was read at the conference of the Theological Society of South Africa (TSSA) in Cape Town, South Africa, June 2013.

<sup>2</sup> This article will be approached from the historical and ecclesiastic (Church) viewpoint in terms of land possession and dispossession which has an impact on the socio-economic aspect of the black South African – the role played by churches towards land possession or dispossession by/from black South Africans.

involvement in this discourse, is engaged from a historico-ecclesiastical perspective, and could this discourse provide a valuable contribution towards poverty alleviation in South Africa? In addressing this question, we engage with the literature on the history of South Africa as penned by historians, economists and theologians. In doing so, the following structure is followed:

- An overview of poverty in South Africa
- Black South Africans and land possession: a historical overview
- The impact of land dispossession on poverty
- The South African churches and the Natives Land Act of 1913
- The legacy of the Natives Land Act of 1913 in post-apartheid South Africa

### **An overview of poverty in South Africa**

When conceptualising poverty, it is worth noting that poverty is a failure to attain a minimal standard of living which is measured in terms of basic consumption needs (Scheepers 2010:164; Odhiambo 2009:323). In considering such a view as well as looking at the South African discourse on socio-economic injustice, the following picture of poverty emerges. In 2009, about 35% of South Africans were extremely poor (Odhiambo 2009:321). For Odhiambo, poverty is experienced differently in that there are levels of extreme and moderate poverty. Given the apparent different levels of poverty, it is then not surprising that Lehohla (2008:24) alludes to the minimal standard of living in terms of the upper poverty line, lower poverty line and food poverty line. His work is valuable in that it presents the South African context in which poverty is experienced at diverse levels. By the year 2008, the upper poverty line was R507 per month, the lower poverty line was R360 per month and the food poverty line was R259 per month (Lehohla 2008:24). The accumulation of less than R507 per month means that a person is poor. Furthermore, the receipt of less than R259 per month places an individual in the category of extremely poor South Africans. According to the latest (2011) measurements of poverty by Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), the upper poverty line per month is R650, the lower poverty line is R503 and the food poverty line is at R393 per month (2012a:71). Missing from the latter, though, is a deeper look at poor people in terms of their social construct.

A portrayal of poverty in terms of race is in order. Black South Africans experience more poverty compared to people from other racial groups. On average 4.35% of white people are poor in comparison to 61.4% of black Africans (Stats SA 2012a:71). The margins in the experience of poverty are visible and thus perturbing. In addition, such margins reveal an unsettling racial dimension of poverty in South Africa, which will later be premised in the discourse of land and the Land Act of 1913 in particular. Black Africans who were disadvantaged during the colonial and apartheid regimes continue to be predominantly poor in post-apartheid South Africa. In our view, they are poor, by and large, partly due to the loss of land (assets) in the colonial and apartheid regimes. Thus, a discussion of poverty and the lack of assets are worth exploring.

Carter and May's location of the discussion of poverty within the notion of the possession of assets in South Africa is relevant in this article. They contend that poverty alleviation will be possible when the poor accumulate productive assets such as land (Carter & May 2001:1991–1999). On the surface, this contention would appear disingenuous. However, if construed first and foremost within the context of the asset poverty line, one in which the view that a household and/or an individual requires minimal assets to escape poverty, such a contention would make sense. Despite Carter and May's limitation on quantifying and/or asserting the exact minimal assets required to deviate from poverty, they reveal the dependency of poverty alleviation on the accumulation of land.<sup>3</sup> Failure to acquire land (as an asset) permeates a situation where previously disadvantaged poor black South Africans are trapped in poverty. Such a situation leads us to the discussion of the concept of chronic poverty.

Pearsall (2002:254) defines the adjective "chronic" as a problem that persists for a long time. This definition serves as the point of departure in an attempt at conceptualising chronic poverty. In the light of the definition of the adjective "chronic", one understands chronic poverty as a problematic state of poverty that has been in existence for a long period. Drawing from the literature on economics, chronic poverty is a status of poverty that is experienced for a period of five years and more (Hulme & Shepherd 2003:405; McKay & Lawson 2003:426). Aliber holds the same view as the latter, but he further views poverty that is transmitted from one generation to the next as being chronic poverty (Aliber 2003:476). On that score, it is no wonder that the view of the present socio-economic injustice, as inherited from the colonial and apartheid past, has received prominence in the South African discourse on land. The argument that poverty is inherited from such a past is narrowed to the discussion on the Natives Land Act of 1913 and the land dispossession of poor black Africans.

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<sup>3</sup> Poverty alleviation is not only dependent on the accumulation of land; such accumulation forms an integral part of the mechanism to alleviate poverty.

In such a discussion, we investigate the impact of this Act on poverty. Prior to this investigation, a look at how black South Africans possessed and productively utilised land for their economic welfare is paramount.

### **Black South Africans and land possession: a historical overview**

Prior to the Natives Land Act of 1913 and the dispossession of land owned by black Africans was an era where very few natives experienced poverty. Thus, to strengthen the case that poverty was entrenched by such an Act and that the economic stability of the black South African was grounded in the use of land, we present a historical overview of land possession and usage. Maylam (1986:8) reports that in 1874 it was estimated that about five million acres of land owned by the colonists and companies were occupied by black South Africans. In this instance, they paid rent to the white landlords. It is difficult, though to be convinced that black South Africans generated wealth and/or economic welfare from renting land. Nonetheless, it seems evident that land was accessible to black South Africans, irrespective of land ownership. Furthermore, the mission stations were allocated areas of land, often amounting to between 6 000 and 8 000 acres for each station, for occupation by black South Africans (Maylam 1986:86). In this case, many black Africans did not own land. Instead, it is apparent that they partly benefited from the land allocation. Later in 1880, land purchased by black South Africans was more widely reported. To this end, land ownership and its productive use by black South Africans expanded. In addition, the acres of land owned by black South Africans expanded from 6 000 to 8 000 acres to 238 473 acres of land in Natal by 1905 (Maylam 1989:86). Based on the evidence presented by Maylam, one can be certain that black South Africans owned and utilised land effectively for their welfare as well as for their economic stability prior to the Natives Land Act of 1913. If there had been no evidence of productive use of land by black South Africans as well as of their accumulation of productive land, the view that the Act under discussion engineered poverty would not stand. By productively using the land, the black Africans participated in the economic market of South Africa. Based on this, the discussion now turns to an inquiry into how the Nguni tribes and the Basotho people used their land in South Africa.

#### *The Nguni tribes and land ownership*

Throwing light on the productive use of land owned by black Africans, Bundy claims that black South African farmers could either own and use crown lands or cultivate mission lands for their economic wellbeing (Bundy 1979:170–74). With Bundy's claim in mind, one understands that black South Africans, having access to land, used it for their economic wellbeing. Thus, very few experienced poverty. The Nguni tribes seized the opportunity to accumulate wealth and stabilise their economic sufficiency through acquiring and using assets (land). In addition to the accumulation of land and wealth, the relative failure of white farming in the Natal colony in the nineteenth century meant that considerable opportunities were open for black Africans to produce and trade their agricultural products. Bundy shed light on black Africans' agricultural production and trading capabilities in noting that African-grown maize was exported to Cape Town in large quantities and that African peasants were trading wool on the Natal market (Bundy 1979:182). Suffice it to say then that black Africans proved to be competent in trading in the local agriculture market. Subsequently we are inclined to be of the view that, prior to the Land Act of 1913 and the dispossession of land from black Africans, very few indigenous South Africans experienced poverty.

Self-reliance, economic independence and prosperity among black Africans did not go unnoticed by white people in South Africa. As such in 1853, the Natal Native Affairs Commission observed that black South Africans were rapidly becoming rich and economically independent (Bundy 1979:183). This was because, access to land by black Africans yielded positive results in the South African economy and in their lives. As with Bundy, the competitiveness of black Africans, the Nguni tribes, unsettled the white farmers. He points out:

The involvement by a black peasantry in the wider economy was well under way. Numbers of mission-based and peri-urban peasants, and very many more small peasants and squatter-peasants on locations and privately owned lands, were cultivating more widely and seeking to dispose of a surplus. The colonial sector of Natal's rural economy continued to stagnate, especially during the commercial depression of the mid-1860s. Local farmers complained long and loud about the shortage of labour and the 'independence' of Africans living among them (Bundy 1979:183).

This reveals the competitiveness of black South Africans. Sharing a similar view with Bundy, Maylam (1986:87) alludes to the competitiveness of black Africans and highlights the white persons' fear of the economic efficiency and competitiveness of the Hlubi people (mostly referred to as Hlubi boys). In doing so, he argues that the resilience of the Hlubi economic state not only deprived the colonists of labour but also created competitive conditions at a time when, in the latter half of the 1860s, the colonial economy was in a slump (Maylam 1986:87). It is then not surprising that the economic competition by the Hlubi group to some extent

forced the colonial authority to proceed with breaking up of the Hlubi chiefdom and its key resources. As such, the land and cattle belonging to the Hlubi people were expropriated. It therefore seems that the only way to end the economic competition was to take away the land which was a key resource for many a black African. Given the preceding competition as well as the struggle of the colonial economy in the late 1860s, Maylam's (1986:87) observation that in 1874 large areas of land in the Hlubi and Ngwe locations were opened up for settler occupation, makes sense. In our view, the latter marks the beginning of black Africans' poverty, entrenched by the white colonists. Also, such an entrenchment received momentum and endorsement in the Natives Land Act of 1913, which we will explore later. Another noteworthy example of the black Africans' economic efficiency and competitiveness is evident in the Edendale community.

The Nguni people of the Edendale community efficiently used land for their economic welfare in the 1860s (Maylam 1986:86-87). During this period, there is little or no evidence of black Africans' dependency on white people. Economic independence prevented poverty among the indigenous people of South Africa. Agricultural products were supplied to local markets, with profits from the agricultural production and trade used as investment for further accumulation of assets (land) and wealth. Evidence of the preceding is echoed by Maylam. He remarks that by 1860, a thousand acres of land were under cultivation, and the more successful black African farmers were beginning to use their profits to buy more land elsewhere (Maylam 1986:87). In this case, the productive use of land not only benefitted individuals, it was also advantageous to the community of and/or many African people. In this regard, it was reported that in 1867 a group of thirty to forty families paid 1 100 pounds for a farm near Ladysmith; another farm in the Kleinfontein vicinity was purchased by Africans in 1870 (Maylam 1986:87). It is worth noting with regard to the economic activities that black Africans did not show any selfish ambitions. Instead, they retained their own communal lifestyle in perusing economic enterprise by purchasing the land as a group. Engagement with both Maylam's and Etherington's scholarship reveals that the Nguni tribes owned and productively used land for trade, investments and further assets (land) accumulation. As a result their economic independence, welfare and stability prevented poverty among black Africans. A similar observation can also be made with reference to the Basotho people of the Orange Free State.

#### *The Basotho people and land accumulation*

It is historically evident that the Basotho people efficiently participated in commercial farming during the nineteenth century. Such evidence springs from the scholarship of both Maylam and Makula. According to Maylam in particular, since the 1830s, Southern Basotho people produced agricultural products which yielded a positive contribution to their economic wellbeing as well as to the economy of South Africa (Maylam 1986:118; cf Makula 2005:29). Trading among the Basotho people was stimulated. In the same vein is the attestation that the British colonist, in search of grain, cattle, wool and hides, traded with clothing, hardware, firearms, horses and liquor (Maylam 1986:118).<sup>4</sup> The Southern Basotho people were largely able to meet the demands for trading because of the size of land they possessed. Thus, land ownership was paramount for their productivity and economic efficiency. Furthermore their efficiency and competitiveness is revealed by the view that in 1857, the Basotho people had enough grain stored for four to eight years (Maylam 1986:118). We have no doubt that black Africans were in possession of land and wealth in South Africa prior to their land dispossession and the Natives Land Act of 1913. Furthermore, the above portrayal of effective and efficient utilisation of land by the black African people provides clear evidence that indigenous South Africans used their land effectively and productively. Subsequently, they maintained food security locally and globally.

The opening of the diamond mines presented another opportunity for the Basotho people to expand their market for agricultural products. Maylam indicates that in as much as the exploration in the diamond mines enhanced and enlarged their agriculture market, it also brought economic prosperity to the Basotho communities (Maylam 1986:118). Produce from the farms was sold to the miners. In addition, Maylam (1986:118) states that in 1878 the Basotho people exported grain which is estimated to have been worth £400 000 and wool worth £75 000. We are predisposed towards the view that the Basotho people sustained their economic wellbeing and further contributed to the global market. Access to and participation of black Africans in both the local and global market proved to be evident in the history of the Basotho people and land.

A historical overview of black Africans and land possession proves to be valuable in the discourse of land and poverty in South Africa. Many times in such a discourse a revelation of land and wealth accumulation, economic stability and of the participation of black Africans in the local and global agriculture markets, is omitted. An attempt to address such an omission is made by the present section. It has become clear that poverty was minimal while the economic welfare was evident prior to the land dispossession of many black African people and the Land Act of 1913 in South Africa. A critical question emerges: what engineered the poverty of black South Africans, in the light of their historical land possession and wealth?

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<sup>4</sup> The royal Kwena lineage, in particular, was concerned with the accumulation of firearms as a means of perpetuating its dominance. Hence, they encouraged trading with the white colonists.

### *The impact of land dispossession on poverty*

An inquiry into the impact of land dispossession of black South Africans on their poverty is pertinent. In our view, efforts to address poverty seem to have often been impoverished by a somewhat minimal premising of the discourse of land and poverty within the historical context of land dispossession. Attesting to the latter view, Odhiambo (2009:321) remarks that mechanism and efforts to alleviate poverty have been limited in discussing the legacy of apartheid as it resulted in a skewed distribution of assets. A similar contestation has emerged in South African literature on land. The Department of Agriculture views poverty in South Africa as a legacy of a race-based socio-economic development practices that were enforced throughout the history of the country (DOA 2002:19; cf. Stats SA 2012b:4; Drimie 2009:21; Lehohla 2008:3). Drimie (2009:21), in particular, explicitly views the loss of land as reason for poverty. However, such a view is impoverished by its failure to draw light to the historical evidence of the land-loss in South Africa's colonial and apartheid past. To this effect, Stats SA (2012b:5) links the discourse of poverty to the black Africans' historical loss of land, specifically farms. During the colonial and apartheid past poor black people could not access and own assets such as agricultural land, livestock and houses (Carter & May 2001:1988). Would a diagnosis of poverty as a legacy of colonialism and apartheid offer a valuable contribution to the discourse of land and poverty? In a bid to engage this pertinent question, we delve into the impact of land dispossession on poverty within the context of the colonial South African past.

The colonial regime marks the beginning and an entrenchment of poverty among black South Africans. In this regard, the discussion of the introduction of labour migration sought to demonstrate the removal of black Africans from their land. Africans were strategically driven out of the land of abundance. Hard cash in form of salaries and/or wages, presented to black African males by white colonists forced the black males to leave an abundance of wealth in the land they occupied and cultivated (Maylam 1986:118). To our understanding, this means that black Africans, the Kwenya people in particular, moved from agricultural land exploration and economic independence to dependence on the white colonists. At this stage the legal framework (Natives Land Act of 1913) that later sufficed to dispossess Africans of land had not yet been constructed. However, labour migration served to achieve the similar end of land dispossession.

Discouragement of the Basothos from working their land and being prosperous farmers is eminent. The capitalistic colonists through all their agents engineered poverty by forcing economic independent Basothos to voluntarily vacate their land of birth, living and economy to become labourers and dependent human beings in their own land. The historical land dispossessions in South Africa contributed to a serious neglect of human rights, dignity and acute inequalities in the country. Makula (2005) in his book *A quest for ubulungisa justice in the distribution of land in South Africa* attests to such a contribution. He contends that in the process of land dispossession, black Africans lost their source of income and food security (Makula 2005:29). Above all, indigenous people in South Africa lost their dignity and their economic independence. The discouragement of black South Africans to own and work their land, as gleaned in the labour migration, paved the way to a more structured and legalised impoverishment through the introduction of the Natives Land Act of 1913. The important point is that the state was manifestly beginning to act against the independent African peasantry in the interest of both white commercial farmers and the mining industry. This intervention was to become even more forceful with the passing of the 1913 Land Act.

### *The impact of the Natives Land Act of 1913 on socio-economic injustice*

The role played by the Natives Land Act of 1913 in the impoverishment of black South Africans in terms of socio-economic injustice and the land issue, is worth probing. As one gathers from the title *Reversing the legacy of the 1913 Natives Land Act*, Archary (2012) seeks to engage the theme of socio-economic injustice and land. She postulates that the Natives Land Act of 1913 resulted in the land dispossession and socio-economic degradation of black Africans (Archary 2012:2). Notwithstanding Archary's postulation, it is, however, limited because it does not cater for what this article attempts to inquire. That being an inquiry into whether the Natives Land Act of 1913 engineered the then state of poverty that black Africans found themselves in, dare we say, a state which is also apparent in today's South Africa. Four elements of the impact of the Natives Land Act of 1913 are presented. First, the Act prevented black Africans from acquiring more land (assets). Feinberg, building on Wickins's contribution, draws his reader's attention to a "schedule of Native Areas" which was embedded in the Natives Land Act of 1913 (1993:68; cf Wickins 1981:110). He reasons:

The schedule brought under the coverage of the Act about 22 million acres of land (just over 7 percent of South African territory) within the four provinces of the Union. The only reserves in the Orange Free State were included: Witzieshoek, in the Harrismith District (approximately 105,

000 acres); Thaba N'chu (13,900 acres); and Seliba (37,000 acres), the latter two located in the Thaba N'chu District (Feinberg 1993:68).

In this stipulation, Feinberg reveals that black South Africans were subsequently restricted to seven percent of the South African land they had owned prior to the enactment of the Act of 1913. For black South Africans, land was therefore inaccessible and opportunities for further accumulation of land through purchasing were severely curtailed. As a result their economic stability and welfare was disrupted by the Natives Land Act of 1913. Moreover, Feinberg clearly points out that as result of the Act of 1913, Africans could no longer buy or lease land outside a scheduled area (Feinberg 1993:68; Claassens 1991:43). The latter dimension on leasing brings us to the second element on which the Act had an impact. Black Africans could no longer rent land from their white landlords for the purpose of economic wellbeing and stability.

According to section 2 of the Natives Land Act of 1913, long established tenancy patterns were to be curtailed. The provision of this section prohibited black Africans from occupying and/or using the so-called white land (Letsoalo 1987:41). Such a prohibition intensified the impoverishment of the natives. For many African people, it meant that their source of income was eliminated. Thus, poverty became a harsh reality for them. Furthermore, African tenants were evicted from the white-owned land (Maylam 1986:143). This means that black people not only lost their source of income which was caused by the renting of land, they were also made poor.

The third element of the negative impact of the Natives Land Act of 1913 was the prohibition on sharing crops. Prior to this Act, black South Africans could sow on the basis of shares. Both white and black people could share the profit from the agricultural activities. Such an arrangement enabled black people to provide economic efficiency to their households and community. According to Feinberg (1993:69), section 7 of the Act declared share-cropping or sowing on shares as illegal (cf Sachs 1990:114). As a result, the existing contracts of share-cropping between the white landlords and the black African people were terminated. Such termination had a negative impact on the socio-economic livelihood of many black South Africans, in that they lost their means of living. Moreover, this termination also pointed to the Natives Land Act of 1913 as an engine of poverty among black South Africans. Having lost the source of income, black South Africans were forced to consider other means of accumulating money. As such, labouring for the white farmers became an option. This brings us to the fourth element of the impact of the Natives Land Act of 1913.

Feinberg cites that the Act of 1913 promoted agricultural labour (1993:66). Limitations to his contribution are visible in that he does not tabulate the implications of agricultural labour as legislated by the Act under discussion. Furthering the view that labouring for the white farmers, as enacted by the Act, had a negative impact on the livelihood of black South Africans is worthwhile. The implication of working for the white farmers was that black Africans lost the economic independence that they had enjoyed prior to the legislation of the Natives Land Act of 1913. To this end, their wealth possession was reduced to poverty for some and economic survival for others. Labouring for the white master also meant that black South Africans became dependent and controlled by their employers. In addition, working for white farmers could have either meant that they were underpaid or fairly paid. It is therefore clear that the white colonist farmers gained control and power over their black counterparts through the 1913 Natives Land Act. The colonist white farmers not only attained control over land and productive resources, but also over the lives of black people.

A critical engagement with the key scholars on the subject of the Natives Land Act of 1913 proves to be pertinent. It reveals that such an Act historically contributed to the poverty rate among black people in South Africa. Black people were self-employed and economically viable in that they could feed themselves and sell the surplus locally and internationally.<sup>5</sup> What is disappointing is that the Natives Land Act of 1913 changed this efficiency. The introduction of this Act forced them to leave their homes and land to work on farms and in diamond and gold mines. This turned them into poor workers in their own country. Nonetheless, the perpetrators of land dispossession of black Africans might not only be the white farmers and government. Did the churches have a role in the past dispossession of land and its socio-economic injustice in South Africa? A portrayal of the South African churches' reception of the Natives Land Act of 1913 is pertinent. If the issue of poverty as foregrounded in the discourse of land and within the ecclesial discussion is engaged from a historico-ecclesiastical perspective, could the discourse provide a valuable contribution towards poverty alleviation in South Africa? The reception of the Natives Land Act of 1913 by the South African churches is now investigated.

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<sup>5</sup> The arrival of the white people in South Africa was economic and commercial in nature; there was international link to trading with African farmers. The opening of the diamond mines enlarged the market for food and labour and brought further prosperity to South Africans in general and the Southern Sotho in particular. They sold their products through the agricultural market.

### *The South African churches and the Natives Land Act of 1913*

As discussed, there is apparent evidence of land ownership by the South African churches prior to the 1913 Natives Land Act. Such evidence is found in the scholarship by Maylam. He finds that in 1874, about five million acres of land owned by colonists were rented by black South Africans (Maylam 1986:86). This leasing allowed many black Africans to benefit economically from land production and the wealth of South Africa. Where do churches feature in the leasing of land to black South Africans? Approximately 475 mission stations were allocated areas of land, often amounting to between 6 000 and 8 000 acres for each station, which were then made available to black Africans for occupation and use (Maylam 1986:86). Furthermore, Sachs (1990:107) argues that black land, was state-owned and controlled. Access to such land was governed by systems of grants, rigid laws of succession and supervision by government-appointed or recognised chiefs. Occupiers could grow food on this land, erect houses and churches and (subject to controls) keep livestock on it. In addition, the missions controlled 175 000 acres in Natal. Maylam's contribution is commendable as it reveals positive and empowering contributions of South African churches to the livelihood of black Africans. Thus, one can be of the view that the involvement of the churches to some extent alleviated poverty.

The ecclesiastic community not only made land available for renting to the South African indigenous people, it also influenced the practice of black African land purchase. Because of such influence, land purchased by black Africans became more evident in 1880 (Maylam 1986:86-87). The indigenous people collectively benefited from the contribution of the South African churches in land accumulation, use and poverty alleviation. Thus, we can safely deduce that very few black South Africans experienced poverty prior the 1913 Natives Land Act due to possession and effective utilisation of land for survival. The collective benefit of black Africans is confirmed by Maylam's view that some African buyers operated as individuals while others organised themselves into syndicates (Maylam 1986:86-87). These are the footprints of the South African churches' participative contribution in bettering the lives of black South Africans. Nonetheless, such a contribution unsettled many white colonists. This contribution probably caused the emergence of the later 1913 legislature on land. In our view, the land ownership by the South African churches implicates the ecclesiastic community in the land dispossession of black South Africans and their poverty.

Based on Sachs's (1990:106) postulation, the Dutch Ordinance of 1893 was used by the colonial regime to prevent the majority of black South Africans from owning land in their ancestral motherland. This ordinance not only prevented black South Africans from either owning or leasing land, but also granted the white churches a dispensation to buy or lease land for black churches in black people's areas (Sachs 1990:106, 114). In essence the South African churches dispossessed land from the black South African citizens through their financial strength and legal support from the government. As permitted by the Natives Land Act of 1913, the colonial state and white colonist farmers colluded to gain access to fertile agricultural areas in the form of mission land owned by the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), Moravian Church and Anglican Church (Claassens 1991:55-56). Black South Africans benefited from this land. It therefore makes sense to presume that black South Africans lost their source of income and economic welfare in the process of white farmers acquiring land from the South African churches.

Drawing light to the examples and/or evidence of white farmers' acquiring land from the missionaries is necessary. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of South Africa in KwaZulu-Natal, displaced blacks under the Natives Land Act of 1913 without state prodding (Everingham & Jannecke 2006:547). Similarly, the Berlin Missionary Society sold its mission land to white farmers, who then evicted black mission tenants (Everingham & Jannecke 2006:548). By the same accord between 1909 and 1926 the DRC working together with the colonial state replaced the black community on the Ebenhaeser mission land (Western Cape) with a white community (Everingham & Jannecke 2006:548). The practice displayed in the above examples clearly shows a tendency among South African churches and/or mission stations of permeating dispossession of land that black South Africans used for their economic wellbeing. As such, the land used by black people was sold to their white counterparts. The sale had an impact on the eviction of indigenous people from the land owned by the churches. Thus, it can be deduced that the poverty of black South Africans was also caused by the churches. It seems reasonable to conclude that the South African churches' inclination to and use of the Natives land Act of 1913 caused the poverty of many black Africans in the country.

The provision of the Natives Land Act of 1913, which coerced white South African churches to sell the land to the white buyer is evident. In that year the Governor-General of the Union of South Africa approved the deletion of a clause in the Deed of Grant that stated Elandskloof must be used for "missionary purposes" only (Everingham & Jannecke 2006:549). As a result, on 24 July 1961 the DRC later sold the mission station and the adjacent farm to the Smit brothers for R34 000. The Elandskloof case reveals the way that the DRC supported and subscribed to the Natives Land Act of 1913. The fact that the DRC did not take into consideration where black people would live after the sale of such land is perturbing. In addition, the church did not take into account the economic factors attached to the occupation of the land by black South Africans. To this end, black Africans

lost the land they were cultivating as well as their source of income and economic viability. Thus, once more we can view the reception of the Natives Land Act of 1913 by the South African churches to have resulted in socio-economic injustice in terms of poverty.

When navigating the role played by the South African churches in the reception of the Natives Land Act of 1913 and land dispossession, a two-dimensional view emerges. The reception of the Act of 1913 by the South African churches is both positive and negative. Based on the above discussion, we could deduce that the churches made the mission stations available for occupation and productive use by black people. The evidence that the DRC retained the mission station and its adjacent farm until 1961, points to the empowerment of poor black Africans by the Church, regardless of the Natives Land Act of 1913. Nonetheless, the DRC sold the land and evicted the black occupants as provisioned by the Act of 1913. However, the latter cannot completely rule out the possibility that other churches continued to provide land for black occupants for the purpose of socio-economic wellbeing. In spite of this possibility, the reality is that the majority of the South African churches subscribed to and executed the Natives Land Act of 1913. In the process, many black Africans became landless, lost their source of income and economic welfare and were subsequently plunged into poverty. In our view, the South African churches also contributed to the state of poverty that black South Africans experienced as engineered by the Natives Land Act of 1913. What do we then make of the above historical and ecclesiastical look at the issue of land in South Africa? An inquiry into the legacy of the Natives Land Act of 1913 in post-apartheid South Africa is thus relevant.

### **The legacy of the Natives Land Act of 1913 in post-apartheid South Africa**

The year 2013 in post-apartheid South Africa marks 100 years since the legislation of the Natives Land Act of 1913 was coined. This Act is no longer recognised given the egalitarian dispensation effected by the democratic elections of 1994 in South Africa. However, in the light of the reality and persistence of poverty as well as in view of the burning debate on land, an inquisition into the legacy of the Natives Land Act of 1913 in post-apartheid South Africa is fitting. The themes of land and the legacy of apartheid in today's South Africa have enjoyed the attention of a number of scholars both locally and globally.

The socio-economic realities of today's South Africa are viewed as having been inherited from colonial and apartheid land dispossessions, oppression and exploitation of black Africans (Helliker 2011:43-44; Hall 2010:18; Mngxitama 2006:41; Bradstock 2005:1979; Hendricks 2004:8; Carter & May 2001:1987). As explored above, it was during the colonial and apartheid past that black people lost their ownership and control of land. As with Mngxitama (2006:66), the emancipation for socio-economic justice as it relates to the land issue needs to be re-premised within the discourse of colonialism and apartheid. In our view, such a contestation, being viewed as offering a diagnosis of the present challenge of poverty inherited from the South African colonial and apartheid past, is empowering for the poor. It is empowering in that it provides a point of departure that needs to be addressed, that being the legacy of colonialism and apartheid. Mngxitama's is a contestation that recognises land as a major asset which when acquired and used productively could effectively alleviate poverty. We concur with him in that if the persistent challenge of poverty can be foregrounded in the discourse of land, and within the discussion of land dispossession in the colonial and apartheid past, a valuable contribution towards poverty alleviation in South Africa could be provided. Such a contribution in our view seeks to foster and argue for the intensification of agrarian reform such as land restitution<sup>6</sup> and land redistribution. Nevertheless, since the democratic dispensation the South African government has attempted to redress the provisions and the impact of the Natives Land Act of 1913 and the legacy of apartheid. To this end the following attempts are put forward.

The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) policy, the White Paper on South African Land Policy and the most recent Green Paper on Land Reform, have bearing on attempts to redress the legacy of colonialism and apartheid. A common factor in all the preceding policies is the "willing buyer, willing seller" approach. Mngxitama (2006:52) rightfully problematised such an approach in that it has failed to empower poor black Africans and alleviate poverty. To this end, a valid concern is that the poor were unable to acquire land at market prices without assistance from the state (Bradstock 2005:1989-1990; DLA 1997:17; Minnaar 1994:31). The lack of capital limits poor black South Africans from acquiring productive assets, such as land. As a result the poor continue to be trapped in poverty. In this case, the poverty that was predominantly engineered by the Natives Land Act of 1913 is still persistent, regardless of the political freedom enjoyed by South Africans today.

South African theologians and biblical scholars have also grappled with the challenge of land and poverty. A key contribution that receives our attention is Tsele and Butler's (1999:43-44) balanced significance of land which denotes the spiritual, theological and socio-economic value of land (cf. Maluleke 1999:62). In this sense the pursuit of economic sustainability and human dignity is placed at the centre of the discourse. In

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<sup>6</sup> Restitution is the process by which land and other property that were forcibly removed from their owners are restored or compensation of equivalent value is provided.



engaging their contribution, one understands God's preferential option for the poor which consequently advocates for the redress of socio-economic injustice. Tsele and Butler are, however, reluctant to contest that poverty alleviation can take effect only when land redistribution and restitution are intensified so as to redress the legacy of the Natives Land Act of 1913. Nevertheless, we are not surprised by the limitation of their scholarship. They have managed to divorce the discourse of land from the colonial and apartheid past of South Africa as it relates to the Natives Land Act of 1913.

The land policies we have had so far favour the minority at the expense of the majority. Whites have been helped while blacks have been unsettled by said policies. In democratic South Africa, this injustice has to be overcome through restorative justice. The South African churches, in particular, claiming to be custodians of truth and steward of justice, have a moral and pastoral responsibility to deal with the issue of socio-economic injustice and land, since a human being is made of God and land (Makula 2005:1). The past is not considered in order to return to it, but to give us a better understanding of how best to prepare for the future. The story of how the problem of land injustices or imbalances started has been well documented in the above exposed historical records.

An intense scrutiny of denominational land, which began in the 1990s, by ecclesial, academic, state and non-government agencies, is evident. Various denominations embarked on land reform projects, in conjunction with non-governmental organisations. The Church of the Province of Southern Africa (CPSA) convened a land summit in 2002 that was facilitated by the Church Land Programme. Another followed for non-South African dioceses in 2004. The CPSA investigated the extent of its own land ownership, and designated Bishop Rubin Phillip of the Diocese of Natal as "Liaison Bishop for Land in the CPSA". The Methodist Church of Southern Africa in 2004 also commissioned the Community Organisation Resource Centre to audit its land in KwaZulu-Natal and in the Eastern Cape with the aim of redress. The Catholic Church was to follow suit in 2005. Denominations with the largest percentage of church land, including the Moravian Church which held property in the Deeds Office under 11 names, also initiated audits and designed related programmes. The Moravians signed the Genadendal Accord with the Minister of Land Affairs to improve tenure rights of people on its land.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church intended to redistribute farmland on "most" of its 17 mission farms, including a "large portion" of the original Hermannsburg Mission founded in 1854 at Kranskop in KwaZulu-Natal (Everingham & Jannecke 2006:552). The (mostly white) DRC's 2002 synod claimed that "the church does not have enough ground available" to significantly contribute "to land reform". The synod did ask DRC bodies to record their land ownership and to consider making land available for redistribution. In spite of the efforts by the South African churches in post-apartheid South Africa, poverty is still a harsh and disturbing reality in the country.

Apart from the dimensions of the legacy of colonialism and apartheid that can be put forward, such as inequality in terms of race,<sup>7</sup> we have mainly focused on poverty. Given the discussion on chronic poverty as well as the reality of poverty that is revealed by Stats SA and premised in the theme of land dispossession in colonial and apartheid South Africa, a deduction that today's poverty of previously disadvantaged black Africans is caused by the legacy of colonialism and apartheid might not be far-fetched. This being the case, first and foremost, the Natives Land Act of 1913 entrenched and intensified the poverty of black South Africans. In our view such an Act engineered poverty. Also, the present harsh and perturbing reality of poverty in post-apartheid South Africa is ascribed to the Act under discussion. Thus, poverty can best be viewed as a legacy of colonialism and apartheid especially because poverty is not only a product of such an Act, but is also inherited from it.

## Conclusion

Given the persistent challenge of poverty in South Africa and the frustration caused by the unresolved issue of land, the main question posed by this article was: if the issue of the poverty, as foregrounded in the discourse of land, and within the ecclesial discussion, is engaged from a historico-ecclesiastical perspective, could the discourse provide a valuable contribution towards poverty alleviation in South Africa?

First and foremost, the contribution by the present study is not that which presents a new and decisive strategy towards resolving the challenge of land and providing solutions to attempts at alleviation of poverty. That is just one limitation of this article. However, the present contribution has been that which, from a historico-ecclesiastical perspective, finds a possible root cause of the present poverty in which black South Africans are trapped. To this end, given the minimal poverty prior to the Natives Land Act of 1913 as well as the prohibition of land leasing, crop-sharing and land dispossession which entrenched poverty; this article finds that poverty is a legacy of such an Act. The revelation of this finding affords South Africa an empowering

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<sup>7</sup> See Terreblanche's contribution titled *A history of inequality in South Africa, 1652–2002* for a diagnosis of inequality as being inherited from the colonial and apartheid past of South Africa.

possibility in that it provide a foregrounded cause of poverty, one which when viewed as a focal point to delve into in an attempt to redress inherited land dispossession, might effectively contribute to poverty alleviation.

The aforementioned limitation of this article provides room for further research. Redress of Plaatje's awakening, is miles away from being attained in South Africa. Nonetheless, further contributions, such as the present one, are necessary.

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