



CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION: THE SHADES OF REALITY

The title of this chapter is a deliberately chosen play on meaning. The word "shades" is used in two senses. On the one hand it is used to denote nuances in colouring, in the sense that events are coloured by a particular interpretation to highlight specific aspects that are considered significant to the interpreter of these events. On the other hand "shades" is employed in the sense of benevolent or malevolent deities - Gods or demons that have been created alongside the road from the past to the present, that through their benign or malign influence have affected travellers along this route, and, perhaps more importantly, have directed the destination of the road to the present. Depending on whether these "shades" are for good or evil the observance or avoidance of their teachings is practised.

Throughout the course of this dissertation and the sources that have been utilized this double meaning of "shades" has been apparent. Firstly the "conventional wisdom" that created specific images of the past in the different ages and schools of South African history writing has been questioned and, if found wanting, rejected. Similarly the normative forces in society, the deities, have been subjected to scrutiny. And if they have been found to have led to aberrations then they were rejected. Thus it was found, for example, that the relatively explicit faith in a liberal ethic was gradually replaced by an outright rejection of it. Liberalism was rejected because it was held that far from providing a solution to the present it was part of "the problem". Similarly economic systems, educational standards, Christian values, Western civilization, the origins of racialism, nationalism and enculturation were placed under the microscope. Frequently the ideas that held these forces together were perceived of in an entirely different context to those in which the "conventional wisdom" had placed them.



It can be argued that the sources consulted do not constitute "scientific history". Therefore they cannot be considered to be history writing, but rather the highly subjective and personalized interpretations of the past by a number of individuals - Individuals whose interpretation was informed by any number of subjective influences. As far as possible writers, commentators, critics and politicians were chosen from the broad spectrum of Black life to represent the nuances in interpretation. Equally important was to have writers of different eras dealing with the same themes. This was done to show that interpretations varied according to the ideological responses to contemporary conditions and the time in which they were written. Because the different generations of writers represented different constituencies it can be said that they reflected the changing Black perceptions of the past.

It is freely admitted that these were highly subjective perceptions, but this did not make them any the less significant. For the writers to have advanced the views that they did meant that they believed that they were speaking for a specific constituency, and that they were articulating the views of those they claimed to represent. To them the primary concern was not to satisfy any empirical criteria. It was important to mirror the perceived past to motivate and justify current ideological directions.

While one can agree with Smith's objections to the concept of a "Black school" of history writing because of the ideological implications of such a development, one would be foolish to ignore what has become apparent during the course of this dissertation. That is that much has been written about Blacks in South African history, but little has emerged on how Blacks themselves experience and perceive that past. It is one thing to broaden one's scope of enquiry to include Blacks or even make them the focus of the investigation as has been the trend in recent historiography, but it is another thing entirely to give expression to how Blacks perceived this history for themselves.



The stated perception of the past has made it clear that there is a need to include the viewpoint of Blacks in any comprehensive exposition of the South African past. If it is argued that the recognition of a "Black school" would add another "pigeonhole" to the "pigeonhole philosophy" that dominates South African thinking then it would be as well to consider the obverse of the coin. By ignoring Black perceptions one is justifying further distantiation between Black and White history writing. Blacks could, with justification, say that "mainstream" history writing does not allow for Black perspectives and therefore they will have to write their own history to correct this imbalance. If these are the broader conclusions that have been reached what of the more detailed results that have become apparent in this dissertation?

Several facets became apparent during the course of this research which will now be dealt with in some detail. Firstly there is that of chronology. It should be mentioned that the chronological divisions employed for chapters two to six could be further subdivided, although the broad categorization would still apply. Nor would the logic that led to the chronology adopted be invalidated. For the purposes of this review, however, the broad divisions will be retained. It was also clear that while the perceptions found in the sources justified the chronological divisions this did not mean that the various periods were seen as being divorced from one another. Instead it was apparent that there was a strong sense of continuity of developments, and it seemed that this continuity was a deliberate construction to underline the ideology that the writers embodied. In the light of this some attention can be given to the individual periods that were discussed.

The pre-literate period, that is prior to 1652, is fairly self explanatory and coincides with that found in most South African historiography.

The second era, that of 1652 to 1870, deviates fairly markedly from that found in White South African historiography. Black writers tended to make little distinction between the various periods of administra-



tion. Instead they saw Van Riebeeck's arrival as the beginning of a period of change of traditional society that terminated with the discovery of minerals. It was only the early writers, such as Molema and Plaatje, who attempted to distinguish between the Dutch and British administrations. And then it was not so much to distinguish between administrations, but the colonists that came with these governments and the values they represented.

The third period of 1870 to 1936 in many respects was adopted for the same reasons as the preceding one. Generally little regard was taken of White political, constitutional, social and economic developments per se. Instead far more importance was attached to those facets that had a direct bearing on Black life. Furthermore there is no doubt that the legislative confirmation of their dispossession was of paramount importance. For this reason the enactment of the "Hertzog Bills" in 1936 was most often taken as the terminal phase of this era.

The fourth period from 1936 to 1960 appeared to be very short in relation to the preceding three. But it was also one of the most critical in terms of Black historical perceptions. It became clear that it was one thing to condemn the past, but without a well-considered alternative to the present based on past developments, no progress would be possible. Gradually this led to the realization that a far greater self-reliance was needed. The emergence of this realization also encouraged the idea that the perception of the past was not necessarily shared with Whites. Therefore the responses to the past and present had to take on new directions that increasingly reflected Black aspirations, rather than those of a broader community. An understanding of the past also showed that supplication made little impression on those in the position to change the status quo. It was felt that a more confrontational approach was needed. The climax of the first period of confrontation was reached with the Sharpeville shootings of March 21, 1960.



The final era, that of post-1960, had two major characteristics that distinguished it from the immediately preceding era. Firstly the violence of 1960 did not deter the advocates of confrontation. Instead those who had previously opted for constitutional and non-confrontational methods found the bases of their standpoints eroded. Secondly the schisms amongst Blacks became more and more pronounced. Essentially the factions divided into those who advocated a multiracial alliance to bring about their conception of an ideal society, and those who argued that only a national (Black) struggle could achieve the desired results. The latter concept was already clearly evident in the last decade of the foregoing age, and prior to that (in a more muted tone) in the 1930s, particularly in the writings of HIE Dhlomo. However its motivation through a reevaluation of the past became most apparent in the current era. Similarly those who advocated a multiracial front also delved into the past to show the folly of a racially-oriented approach to South African problems. It was only when it was realized that these divisions were diversionary and at times the cause of violence between Blacks that attempts were made to reinterpret the past to show that both the multiracial and nationalist interpretations were justified.

These then were the considerations that prompted the chronology used. What one must now look at is which themes were prominent during the eras that were studied. Although there was not always a direct criticism of current historiography present, it was frequently implied. Indeed as far as can be ascertained Kekana's work is the only one by a Black South African which specifically sets out to criticize a specific genre of South African historiography. The implied and occasionally explicit criticisms that were apparent in the various sources consulted will be brought to light in these concluding remarks.

The pre-literate period showed fairly divergent perceptions of the themes that directly related to the era in which they were written. Thus the attempts by Molema and others of his age to portray African societies as static and backward were increasingly rejected by modern



writers. Modern writers sought to portray a society that not only had its own dynamics but was also symbolic of solidarity amongst Blacks. This was necessary to counter the concept that until the advent of colonization Blacks were in danger of stagnating or even retrogressing into oblivion. Similarly the suggestion that the aborigines would have obliterated themselves through internecine wars unless Whites had fortuitously intervened is rejected. The need to demonstrate an early solidarity was needed to counter the interpretation of history in accordance with apartheid. The apartheid interpretation maintains that tribal animosities were and are so acute that the only way to avert genocidal conflict was and is to segregate ethnic groups from each other. Today most contemporary history writing concedes that the depiction of pre-literate society as one doomed to failure or extinction is invalid. Nevertheless there is a warning that the re-interpretation of pre-literate history should not be allowed to once again become a validation for ethnic divisions. Nor should it reflect "bitter contempt" and the "utmost sadism" for those who are being studied.

What was also apparent from rehabilitating the pre-literate past was that Blacks were no longer prepared to wear their "national dress" with shame. They wanted rather to look at the bygone age with pride. Thus they would be able to deal with the present and future with confidence, and have no doubts about their ability to use the rights which they demanded for themselves. Today's writers are, however, careful not to suggest that this is a reversion to tribalism. Promotion of a tribal identity is seen as liable to abuse by apartheid ideology. Modern writers sought values that were universally applicable irrespective of race or ethnic affiliations. Thus the icons created from the pre-literate past were treated with some circumspection.

Very prominent in the period 1652 to 1870 were the concepts of colonization, imperialism and dispossession. Early writers were content to describe the arrival of colonial powers as a positive development that served to correct the ills that the colonists claimed beset pre-literate society. Colonization was seen as being the result of



Christianity that was bound to bring light to the "Dark Continent". When discussing the early loss of land some justification could be found in what was believed to be the innate inability to Blacks to properly husband their resources. British expansionism was also initially justified on the grounds that Britain sought to establish a sound government based on high ethical standards to advance and protect Blacks from the deprecations of the deviants from western norms, the Boers. Modern writers also saw colonization as the establishment of alien rule. Where they differ from their antecedents is that they discerned entirely different motives. Britain was driven into imperial expansion by manufacturing capital. She was obliged to assert her sovereignty to secure raw materials and provide markets for her burgeoning industries. Traditional society and that which had developed during the Dutch era were considered inimical to British economic interests. Thus extant structures had to be eradicated to make way for British-based capital.

By switching the emphasis away from the Boers a notable shift in perceptions had taken place. On the one hand those who believed that race was still a dominant force in history showed that racial oppression and exploitation were not the exclusive preserve of the Afrikaner but, with some exceptions, that of most Whites. An alternative viewpoint was that race was not the driving force at all, but the competition for control of resources was the prime determinant in the shaping of social relations in society. Thus in the first case the "shade" of race had been intensified. In the second case "race" had been relegated to virtual insignificance, to be replaced by material considerations.

Overall all writers were agreed that ultimately the major impact of colonialism and imperialism was that Blacks were dispossessed of their land, but this dispossession was given a far wider interpretation by the more recent writers who contend that by removing the economic basis of society its culture was also destroyed. Many writers might have welcomed this loss of identity but they also saw a deeper implication in this development. They argued that a people without an identity lost the will to regain their birthright, their land. Thus they saw



Christianity and education based on western norms as necessary adjuncts to dispossession. This argument was extended into the present to criticize contemporary policies such as Bantu education.

Here again there was a warning to those who interpreted the colonial era on the basis that it was a "necessary evil" on the road of the evolution of African society. In terms of the perceptions of colonialism and all that went with it, it had to be recognized as a corruptive force for which no excuses could be found. In terms of contemporary history writing this criticism does not appear to have much validity. But if one places the comment in the context of establishing independent norms for society then it regains some status. Implicit in the rejection of the values imposed by colonization is that Blacks must not evaluate themselves and their past in terms of alien values. Similarly goals for the future must be based on values that do not pander to the sensibilities of those who imposed exotic values in the first place the Whites. This holds considerable implications for those who attempt to evaluate the past in terms of what they believe to be universally applicable and immutable western oriented norms, because it questions the basic assumptions that underlie criteria used in Western civilization. Nevertheless it should also be remembered that Nkosi warned that the replacement of one set of values with another was not always advantageous, particularly if the new standards had not been well considered. New values could be just as defective as those that they were supposed to replace.

The third era from 1870-1936 showed a considerable hardening of attitudes amongst all writers. Even among those who initially saw a philanthropic motive behind British intervention and expansion in the subcontinent. Those who had found mitigating factors in the earlier phases of colonization took a more jaundiced look at developments after 1870. If they found something laudable in the earlier phase, why had they changed their stance on the later era? It appears that they particularly emphasized that which they found praiseworthy in the preceding era to provide a contrasting backdrop for the scene(s) that evolved after



1870. In effect they were calling for a return to the values that they perceived to exist before 1870. The writers who condemned colonization from the outset merely saw justification for their interpretation in developments after 1870. They saw the processes of dispossession initiated by colonization confirmed by military subjugation. Early writers were still prepared to accept that the South African War was fought to establish British principles in the interior, although they were at a loss to understand why, if this was the motive for the war, Britain failed to implement its objectives.

Modern writers did not experience this quandary. They saw the war as a natural progression of earlier developments that aimed at the most effective exploitation of human and natural resources. In the light of this perception the Peace of Vereeniging, Union and subsequent discriminatory legislation that totally ignored claimed British objectives came as no surprise. Britain, at the behest of monopoly capitalism, could do nothing else but tacitly allow the legalization of dispossession to continue.

It was interesting to note that the notion of the relationship between access to land and labour coercion was not a "discovery" of the modern writers. Contemporary criticism of the land acts of 1913 and 1936 clearly showed an understanding of the causal link between land expropriation and labour coercion. This evaluation held true even for those writers who subscribed to a segregationist solution to South African problems. There is no doubt that the Natives' Land Act of 1913 was considered by all writers as a turning point in South African history. Together with the Natives' Land and Trust Act of 1936 it became the pivot around which subsequent developments evolved. A frequent allusion is made to what Tsotsi eventually came to describe as "wage slavery". The impact of the land acts was seen to effect every facet of Black life. Therefore it is clear that the frequently passing reference to these acts in South African historiography is being criticized. The criticism is aimed at the failure to realize the true significance of the acts.



The heading "Introspection and New Directions" was applied to the period 1936-1960. This title was chosen because 1936 had signalled a climactic failure. Blacks had failed in their appeals to moral principles that supposedly existed in the White community - principles that Blacks had sought to meet in order to gain acceptance in the white-dominated power structures of the land. The legislative and administrative processes that had culminated in the Hertzog Bills of 1936 had shown that the era of supplication had come to an end. But with this realization came an even more difficult awareness. If the values that had determined Black aspirations previously had proved void what was to replace them? To reject existing principles could leave them open to insinuations that they were reverting to the "barbaric" standards of pre-literate society. Alternately they could turn to some ungodly ideology like communism.

What was also noticeable was that the writers after 1936 also started to turn to leaders of the past and particularly those who had led resistance to White domination. Again there can be little doubt that this was prompted by the need to recreate a past that could be reflected on with pride - a past peopled with leaders who had had the wisdom to see that resistance to subjugation was the only alternative to dispossession. Similarly the nation-builders, like Shaka, were stripped of the opprobrium attached to them by many histories. Instead they were portrayed as people who had achieved much that could be emulated. From this, three conclusions can be drawn. Firstly armed resistance was increasingly being considered and the historical precedent for it had been established. Secondly the assumption of ethnic divisions was being rejected by showing that unity was possible as it had been attained previously. Lastly the creation of heroes was seen as necessary to a people who had been presented with an image of the past that denied them heroes. The denial of heroes was not accidental but deliberate, to reinforce the impression that Blacks were a defeated and humiliated people. While Blacks lived under this misapprehension they would not experience regret at their loss of independence. Equally little would they be inclined to emulate earlier leaders if they were led to believe that they were failures, and that therefore any attempts at resistance would be automatically doomed to failure.



Modern writers perceived this dilemma of their predecessors and thus argued that the success of colonialism depended on the ability of Christianity and western education to supplant traditional mores and values. By accepting these value-oriented systems and their bearers, the colonists, Blacks were finessed into accepting a subordinate situation. It is for this reason that many writers of the current age, particularly those concerned with "being-Black-in-the-world", argued in favour of "decolonising the mind". A mind untrammelled by externally imposed perceptions would far more readily realize the solutions to the present conditions.

Although the call to decolonise the mind has several significant implications for the writing of history, there is one in particular that should be mentioned. Frequently South African history, inasmuch as it concerns itself with Blacks, creates the picture of an amorphous and virtually mindless proletariat subject to inanimate forces. Very little attention is paid to how Blacks experienced or responded to these forces, whether individually or collectively. Equally little attention is paid to what can be termed "intellectual imperialism" and the reaction to it. There is little attempt to show human beings with human reactions to their condition and how these reactions influenced their perceptions of the past.

The last period, after 1960, was in many respects a continuation and crystallization of trends that had developed in the foregoing era. Again there was a concern with the immediate, although this was seen as part of a continuing pattern of developments. What made this era particularly significant was that two definite ideological and theoretical directions emerged. These two directions could be classified under what are today known as the "progressive" and "black consciousness" movements. While it can be argued that their vision of the past is coloured by their ideology, their perspectives did make it clear that Black perceptions of the South African past are not uniform. There were definitely varying emphases noticeable as well as differing areas of concern, which in turn have implications for how the "shades" are viewed and represented.



Due to these divergencies one can agree with Smith that there should be no "Black school" of history. Implicit in the refusal to allow for such a "Black school" is that South African history writing can be based on universal philosophical and theoretical foundations to form a single "school". Until South African history writing recognises that there is such a thing as the "Black experience", and accommodates it, this will not happen. Many of the writers made it abundantly clear that being-Black gave a particular complexion to the past. In addition they argue that this experience is not expressed in most South African history. Perhaps, then, one could say that South African history, to be truly reflective of the entirety of the South African past, must include all perspectives. But if this is taken to mean that a complete history of South Africa should merely be a compilation of perspectives informed by different theoretical foundations then one would again be looking at South Africa through lenses formulated according to a "pigeonhole philosophy". Instead one hopes that the time will come when South African history writing will be approached synergistically, in the knowledge that the themes of this history will have a number of facets that refract the vision(s) into them in different ways, but nevertheless are still part of a greater whole.

On the question of sources for this type of study it is hoped that an adequate case has been made for the inclusion of many of the works used, particularly the creative writing. One feels that although these works have not been based on empirically verifiable facts, they are a strong indication of the "historical baggage" that Blacks have brought with them into today's world. This sense of the past undoubtedly does much to influence responses to the present. Therefore it was felt important to include this category of works because they add an important dimension to a more comprehensive understanding of the past, as an experienced past. As previously said, humans and their reactions to given situations form an integral part of history writing.

This dissertation set out to show that Blacks had an own perception of South African history that contradicted many conventional interpretations. It also aimed to show that these perceptions changed according



to the time in which they were conceived. A further aim was to show that the understanding of Black perceptions of South African history through sources other than "scientific history" was not only possible but also necessary. In fact one could go so far as to say that the literary expression of the perceived past was at times more vivid and insightful than many of the attempts at a "factual", albeit ideologically-biased, rendition of the past.

The scope of an historical work is determined by the nature and extent of the questions that are asked of the past, which in turn are largely determined by the theoretical and philosophical framework within which the questioner operates. With the conflicting and often contradictory perceptions that have become apparent in this dissertation it appears that the questions thus far phrased by historians were open to criticism on two points. Firstly some of the questions that should have been asked were not asked. Secondly the way the questions were phrased distorted the answers to meet subjective criteria. While none of the writers consulted specifically set out criteria for the wording of these questions or the direction they should take, it is clear that many of the comments made suggest avenues to be taken. In many instances the comments could be rephrased as questions that would broaden and deepen historical insight. South African history writing will have to ask itself whether it has given a proper account of the nuances the shades of the South African historical reality. It is hoped that this dissertation has contributed towards the search for answers to the latter query.