

# “Allowed such a state of freedom”: Women and gender relations in the Afrikaner community before enfranchisement in 1930

Hermann Giliomee<sup>1</sup>  
*University of Stellenbosch*

## *Samevatting*

Hierdie artikel argumenteer dat Afrikanervroue gedurende die eerste twee eeue van die nedersetting aansienlik meer regte geniet het onder die Romeins-Hollandse reg as wat die geval was met vroue wat onder die Engelse regte sorteer het. Hul posisie is verder onderskraag deur die stelsel van ras-gebaseerde slawerny, toenemende segregasie in die kerk, en die belangrike funksies wat die boervrou op die plaas gespeel het. Afrikaanse vroue kon nie stem nie en ook nie ampte in die politieke stelsel of kerk beklee nie, maar hulle het hul stempel op die samelewing afgedruk. Hulle het 'n leidende rol gespeel in die besluit van talle grensboere om die kolonie te verlaat. Onder die vroue wat die Groot Trek meegemaak het, het vurige anti-imperialistiese sentimente ontwikkel, wat uiting gevind het in sterk ondersteuning vir die Transvaalse opstand in 1880-81 en die Bittereinder-fase van die Suid-Afrikaanse Oorlog. Van die laaste kwart van die negentiende eeu is die sterk posisie van die Afrikaanse vrou ondergrawe deur verreikende veranderings in die erfreg, verstedeliking, wat haar rol dikwels tot die huis beperk het, en die toenemende invloed van sowel Viktoriaanse as nasionalistiese opvattinge oor die ondergeskikte rol wat die vrou behoort te speel. Afrikaanse vroue het eers laat op die stemreg aangedring omdat hulle dit as hul prioriteit beskou het om die eerste gesin en die gemeenskap se belange te bevorder. In die eerste 250 jaar van blanke vestiging aan die Kaap het hulle 'n deurslaggewende rol gespeel in die ontwikkeling van daardie eienskappe wat vandag as kenmerkend van die Afrikaner-identiteit beskou word: godsdienstigheid, 'n bepaalde vorm van huislike lewe en die kultuur van die plaas- en landelike lewe.

**Keywords:** Afrikaners; Women; Gender; Suffragettes; Roman-Dutch law; Slavery; Cape Colony; Great Trek; South African War.

---

<sup>1</sup> Hermann Giliomee is Research Associate, University of Stellenbosch. He wishes to thank the following for valuable comments and suggestions: Sarah Duff, Eve Fairbanks, Albert Grundlingh, Margaret Lenta, Louis Harms, Sandra Swart, Elize van Eeden and Andreas van Wyk.

## **Introduction**

Despite a significant advance in gender studies the history of women before the extension of the vote to white women in 1930 remains a neglected field. This is particularly true of Afrikaner women.<sup>2</sup>

The main reason for the lack of attention to women is the absence of diaries, letters and other written records at a time when rates of literacy were low generally and extremely low for women.<sup>3</sup> Historians have not deliberately suppressed the role of women in the history of the Afrikaners, but because of the absence of documentation they have missed a lot. Significantly it was not a trained historian but Karel Schoeman, a novelist, who, in a series of biographies of extraordinary woman, highlighted the important role of women in pre-industrial South Africa.<sup>4</sup>

This article analyses the status of Afrikaner women with particular reference to institutional factors such as the law of inheritance, slavery, and church membership. It also discusses the role Afrikaner women played in the rise of racial domination and anti-imperialism in pre-industrial South Africa. It ends with a brief discussion of the responses of Afrikaner women to the campaign for the vote for women in South Africa.

The article sketches only the broad picture. For a full picture new primary research on themes such as divorce and manumission is needed.

## **English and Roman-Dutch law**

An investigation should start with a brief comparison between the English law of inheritance and family law, and Roman-Dutch law.

---

2 From the late eighteenth century the term Afrikaners was widely used for colonists of Dutch, German and French descent. During the nineteenth century the term was sometimes restricted to white Dutch or Afrikaans-speaking people living in towns, while the farming population was called Boers. To simplify matters, I refer to all white colonists that spoke Dutch or a form of Dutch as Afrikaners. See "Dagboek van Oskar Hintrager", *Christiaan de Wet Annale*, 2, 1973, p. 28.

3 For an analysis of the extant documents written by women in the Cape Archives see EH Raidt, *Historiese Taalkunde: Studies oor die geskiedenis van Afrikaans* (Johannesburg, University of Witwatersrand Press, 1994), pp. 1750-216. It finds that women, compared to men, wrote in a much more 'natural', unforced and chatty style (*geselsig*).

4 K Schoeman's biographies include: *Olive Schreiner: 'n Lewe in Suid-Afrika, 1855 – 1881* (1989); *Die wêreld van Susanna Smit, 1799-1863* (1995); *Dogter van Sion: Machtelt Smit en die 18de-eeuse samelewing aan die Kaap, 1749-1799* (1997) and *Armosyn van die Kaap: Die wêreld van 'n slavin, 1652-1733* (Cape Town, Human and Rousseau, 2001).

### ***English law***

Marriage in English law was all about property, with the husband becoming the owner of the wife's moveable property. The wife lost all claims to it even if she survived him. A recent study states bluntly that English women enjoyed a status only a little higher than slaves. A husband could beat her as long as the stick was not thicker than his thumb.<sup>5</sup> The historian Edmund Morgan formulated the position of women in the American colonies as follows<sup>6</sup>:

Women were excluded from any share in formal public power and even in the privacy of the family. A woman's very identity was subsumed in her husband's; any property she brought into the marriage was his, any debt she owed was his, almost any tort she committed was his.

Under the rule of primogeniture, applied in England and her colonies, the eldest son inherited everything. People in England did, however, have testamentary freedom, and they could leave money and estates to daughters if they so wished, provided that there was no entail. But there was a strong tendency to favour males. What Jane Austen refers to as "a daughter's share" was characteristically a small proportion of the total estate.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Roman Dutch law***

The Roman Dutch Law, applied in the Netherlands and also at the Cape, went further than other legal codes in recognising that all free people -- men and women -- had rights. In the words of the great jurist Voetius, it preserved equality and bound the citizens equally. This "legalized egalitarianism" had profound social and political consequences. Among its expressions were a lack of respect for the aristocracy and officialdom; a weakness of ecclesiastical authority; and the absence of clearly demarcated hierarchies.<sup>8</sup>

---

5 M Waller, *The English Marriage* (London, John Murray, 2010) back cover.

6 E Morgan, "Subject women", *New York Review of Books*, 31 October 1996, 67. Morgan discusses here the following books: C Berkin, *First generation: Women in colonial America* (New York, Hill and Wang, 1996) and MB Norton, *Founding mothers and fathers: Gendered power and the forming of American society* (New York, Knopf, 1996).

7 I wish to thank M Lenta for some of the points in this paragraph. A recent biography of J Austen (1775-1815), author of *Pride and prejudice* and other novels, is by D Nokes, *Jane Austen: A life* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998).

8 J Israel, "A Great, Neglected Victory", *New York Review of Books*, 8 April 2010, p. 44. See also S Schama, *An embarrassment of riches: An interpretation of Dutch culture in the golden age* (London, Fontana, 1987), pp. 405-06.

Although Britain became master of the Cape Colony early in the nineteenth century, it did not abolish Roman Dutch law, except for some amendments to the criminal law. Roman Dutch Law was virtually the only legal system in Europe that retained universal community as the basis of matrimonial property, with each partner's portion merging into the common property. The rule of partible inheritance, applied when one of the partners died, stood in stark contrast to the primogeniture rule. Under partible inheritance, the surviving partner retained half the estate and each child, regardless of sex, inherited an equal portion of the rest. These inheritance portions could be changed in a will but this rarely happened, and no spouse or child could be disinherited of more than half his or her "legitimate portion". The British authorities disliked it but because the Dutch colonists at the Cape considered partible inheritance as an intimate part of their culture, they were reluctant to change it.<sup>9</sup>

No farm could be subdivided under the loan farm system that held sway under the Dutch East Indian Company, but the surviving spouse and the children received their share of the property, including the slaves. Afrikaner women normally outlived their partner and many widows gained control over substantial amounts of property consisting of both land and slaves.<sup>10</sup> It gave rise to what has been called a "widowarchy". A widow who had been left half the estate of a farmer could consider the options for a subsequent marriage just as an astute modern investment manager today would. Many widowed Cape women remarried several times, accumulating a small fortune.<sup>11</sup>

The Roman-Dutch law of inheritance also had another important effect. Since each child, regardless of sex, had to receive his "legitimate portion" parents were compelled to divide the farms among them. The subdivision of farms into uneconomical units was widespread. Many families ended up in chronic debt as a result of mortgaging of land in order to pay out the younger sons and daughters. Often entire farms were sold and the proceeds divided, forcing sons to seek new land elsewhere or become *bywoners*.

---

9 L Guelke, "Freehold farmers and frontier settlers", R Elphick and H Giliomee eds., *The shaping of South African Society* (Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 1988), p. 81.

10 W Dooling, *Slavery, emancipation, and colonial rule in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2007), pp. 31-41.

11 Tannie Sannie, a crass character in Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African farm*, had inherited a farm from her deceased husband, and was planning to marry a young man in a loveless match. See also R Shell, *Children of bondage: A social history of the slave society at the Cape of Good Hope* (Johannesburg, University of Witwatersrand Press, 1994), pp. 289-292.

The divorce law that was applied in most of the Netherlands and also at the Cape strengthened the position of women. It provided for several legitimate reasons for divorce or a separation of table and bed, which effectively annulled the marriage. Among the reasons were adultery, malicious desertion and gross physical cruelty. In the case of divorce, the wife received half of the estate. The wife could also recover the moveable assets donated by a husband to a concubine.<sup>12</sup>

The status of women under Roman Dutch law should not be exaggerated, as is revealed by the indignant reaction of Petronella van Heerden, perhaps the first Afrikaner feminist, who came of age just after the South African War. She wrote: "She is classified among children and idiots, when she marries she becomes a minor; she has no control over her things and children, and she could do nothing without the permission of her husband."<sup>13</sup>

While hyperbolic, it is not devoid of some truth. A woman who married within community of property in most respects acquired the status of a minor and was subject to the authority of her husband. A father had the final say over the children. There were indeed few legal limits on a husband to dispose of common assets or to discharge debts out of the common assets during the existence of the marriage.

### **First generation women**

The married European women of the first generation were primarily drawn from the Netherlands and their numbers were later supplemented by Huguenot refugees from France. In addition, manumitted slave women made up a sizeable proportion of married women during the seventeenth century.

### ***Dutch women***

Women in the Netherlands could sign commercial contracts and notarised documents and could carry on a trade, business, or profession without the express consent of their husbands. They were closely involved with their

---

12 AH van Wyk, "The power to dispose of assets of the universal matrimonial community of property: A study in South African law with excursions on the laws of Brazil and the Netherlands" (PhD., Leiden University, 1976), pp. 110, 195-213, 262.

13 P van Heerden, *Die sestiende koppie* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 1965), p. 7.

husbands' jobs, particularly if he was in business or commerce, often enjoying full recognition for their role.<sup>14</sup> Many of the first Dutch women at the Cape were from orphanages, but they were not unaware of the relatively strong position of women in the Netherlands. Women could not hold what was called a burgher office, like that of *heemraad*, or an ecclesiastical office, like that of a minister or elder, but when they married burghers they shared the general status of burghers. Their children were considered burghers as well under the Roman Dutch law, which decreed that women enjoyed the status of their husband.

European women at the Cape quickly became active in the hectic trade that characterised the port city. Women received licenses to keep guesthouses or taverns or to engage in any other business. C.P. Thunberg, who visited the Cape during the 1770s, wrote: "If the father does not trade, but carries on some handicraft business, his wife, daughter or son must."<sup>15</sup> Some European travellers to the Cape were shocked by the rough methods lower class women used to escape from poverty. One wrote: "Many of the evil burghers and burgher women (who had come out in male attire as stowaways) milk the poor sailors not only of every penny they own, but when cash runs short seize on anything else they possess."<sup>16</sup>

### ***French women***

There is no evidence of a distinctive influence exerted by French Huguenot women but they had behind them a traumatic history of religious persecution and political struggle. It was likely to make them more fiercely determined to resist an unjust authority. Without a fatherland to which to return, the Huguenots had to take root or go under. Simon van der Stel, governor at the Cape, soon became disenchanted with the French immigrants, describing them as insolent and inclined to plotting.<sup>17</sup>

The Huguenots greatly strengthened the pattern of white endogamy that was becoming established. When the first party arrived at the Cape in 1688 there was still a severe shortage of European women in the settlement, prompting

---

14 K Schoeman, *Armosyn van die Kaap: Voorspel tot Vestiging, 1415-1651* (Cape Town, Human & Rousseau, 1999), pp. 251- 254.

15 CP Thunberg, *Travels at the Cape of Good Hope, 1772 -1775* (Cape Town, Van Riebeeck Society, 1986), p. 36.

16 F Valentyn, *Description of the Cape of Good Hope, 1726* (Cape Town, Van Riebeeck Society, 1971), p. 209.

17 P Coertzen, *Die Hugenote van Suid-Afrika* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 1988), p. 94.

many men to take half-caste slaves as brides or a stable partner outside of wedlock. The Huguenots, by contrast, were generally already married when they arrived, and their daughters young and fecund. A cursory glance would show that a surprisingly large proportion of the established Afrikaner families had a Huguenot as *stammoeder*.<sup>18</sup>

Between 1705 and 1707 women were prominent in the struggle of the farming burghers against the governor, Willem Adriaan van der Stel, and other high officials. In violation of the firm Company policy some officials farmed for the market, increasingly squeezing the burghers out. Discontent and rebelliousness became rife in the Cape district and Stellenbosch district. The *landdrost* Johannes Starrenburg, a well-read and well-travelled man who knew his Cicero, Cassius and Grotius, was deeply disturbed by what he saw as the open contempt the burghers displayed towards the government. He was most upset by a demonstration in 1706 in the town where some burghers danced around him, vowing that they would not abandon the struggle. He took refuge in his house, where he wrote to Van der Stel: “[The] women are as dangerous as the men and do not keep quiet.”<sup>19</sup> The stiff resistance persuaded the Company directors in the Netherlands to recall Van der Stel and other officials.

### *Slave-born women*

Although there was a correspondence between legal status, colour and religious identity, there was no rigid racial division, particularly during the first seventy-five years of Company rule. People of mixed racial origins were prominent both as burghers and free blacks and did not appear to suffer any racial discrimination. The frequent racial mixing was due in the first place to the huge gender imbalance in the white population. By 1700 there were in the Cape district twice as many men as women in the adult burgher population, and, in the interior, the ratio was three to one. Marriages between white men and fair-skinned non-white women were common during the first seventy-five years. Many stable mixed liaisons occurred outside wedlock, and there was also large-scale sex miscegenation in the form of casual sex, especially

---

18 E-mail communication of author with HC Viljoen, Chairman of the Huguenot Society of South Africa, 5 August 2010. A fairly comprehensive list of South African *stamvaders* and *stammoeders* (available at: <http://www.stamouers.com/>).

19 GD Scholtz, *Die ontwikkeling van die politieke denke van die Afrikaner* (Johannesburg, Voortrekkerpers, 1967), vol. 1, p. 241.

in the slave lodge frequented by local European men as well as sailors and soldiers.

JA Heese, a genealogical researcher, has estimated that seven per cent of Afrikaner families have a non-European *stammoeder* or progenitress.<sup>20</sup> During the early years the situation was fluid enough for some children born from unions of non-Europeans parents to be accepted into the European community. There were two particularly striking cases. The slave Armosyn Claasz was born in 1661 at the Cape. Her mother was presumably a slave from the west coast of Africa, the identity of her father unknown. She gave birth to the children of four different fathers in the Company's slave lodge, some described as *halfslag* (half-caste), which means that the father was white. Many of these children and their descendants were absorbed in what became prominent Afrikaner families, like the Volschenk, Coorts, Du Plessis, Pretorius, Horn, Myburgh and Esterhuyzen families.

The other case relates to the liaison between Louis of Bengal and Lysbeth van de Caab, both considered non-European. Three daughters were born out of this liaison, and Lysbeth had two daughters from another relationship with a European. All the children entered into relationships, either marital or extramarital, with Europeans, and most of their descendants were absorbed into the Afrikaner community of today. The families most directly involved were the Brits, Van Deventer, Slabbert, Fischer, and Carstens families.<sup>21</sup>

Genealogies include a few instances of European women marrying non-Europeans. The most striking case was that of Marguerite de Savoye, the daughter of Huguenot parents, who in 1690 married Christoffel Snyman, who, according to oral tradition, made a living from pruning vineyards. He was the son of Anthony of Bengal and a similarly non-white mother. The well-known Snyman family is descended from them. Another case was that of Maria Roos, who, in 1794 married David Simon Hoon, the son of a slave from Madagascar and his wife, Rachael, of Indian descent. Other "coloured" males entered "white" society, including the progenitors of the Antonissen, Jonker, Jacobs and Serfontein families.<sup>22</sup>

---

20 JA Heese, *Die herkoms van die Afrikaner* (Cape Town, Balkema, 1971).

21 HF Heese, *Groep sonder grense: die rol en status van die gemengde bevolking aan die Kaap, 1652-1795* (Bellville, University of the Western Cape Institute for Historical Research, 1984); JL Hattingh, 'Die blanke nageslag van Louis van Bengale en Lijsbeth van de Kaap', *Kronos*, 3 (1980), pp. 5-51.

22 HF Heese, *Groep sonder grense*, pp. 6, 20-1, 41, 45, 53-54.

## **Confident women**

From an early stage the European women at the Cape displayed a considerable degree of social self-confidence. Girls not only shared equally with their brothers in the estates of their parents, but also received the same primitive education. Women did not show undue respect to people in political or clerical office. Some of the visitors to the Cape expressed the view that they were more intelligent than the male burghers and better informed.<sup>23</sup>

The pattern of women acting as a strong force in the family became firmly established in the agrarian Western Cape rather than the port city. Slave owners on farms or small settlements allowed very little manumission and slave baptism in order to enhance their control over their slaves. Consequently the numbers of slave women that could compete with European women as stable partners of European men remained extremely small.

OF Mentzel, an astute German who lived at the Cape for most of the 1730s, considered the Cape Town women too glib and status-conscious. By contrast, the women in the patriarchal community of the rural Western Cape impressed him. He wrote that a girl was not pampered but often put to work in both the house and in the fields. She “looked everybody straight in the eye ... and [was] unabashed.” As married women they “understand more about their husband’s business than the latter do themselves; when this is not the case the affairs are seldom well conducted.”<sup>24</sup>

He passed this general judgement:<sup>25</sup>

In general, farmwomen surpass the men in nature and intelligence, good behaviour and ability to understand anything, wherefore they are almost always held in higher esteem by the Europeans than the women of Cape Town. They are unusually industrious, good housekeepers, and excellent mothers. They are not so ambitious as the townswomen; they do not quarrel over precedence, and it is immaterial to them whether they are seated at the table to the left or the right, or whether they were served first or last.

By contrast, Robert Semple, the son of a British merchant who visited the Cape in the early nineteenth century, expressed a favourable impression of the

---

23 K Schoeman, *Dogter van Sion: Machtelt Smit en die 18de-eeuse samelewing aan die Kaap, 1749 – 1799* (Cape Town, Human and Rousseau, 1997), pp. 51-56.

24 OF Mentzel, *Description of the Cape of Good Hope* (Cape Town, Van Riebeeck Society, 1944) vol. 3, pp. 58, 103, 112-13, 120.

25 OF Mentzel, *Description of the Cape*, vol. 3, p. 120.

women of the town. He wrote<sup>26</sup>:

There exists not at all at the Cape that marked difference in the manners of the two sexes that we find in Europe. In conversation the women are free and unreserved, and very often listened to, but make use of expressions by no means to be reconciled with English ideas of decency and propriety. They are not the disciples, they might be the models of, the school of Mrs Mary Wollstonecraft, they call everything by its right name, and seem in general to think that actions which men might perform with impunity ought equally to be allowed to themselves.

Often called the first British feminist, Wollstonecraft argued that women were naturally equal to men but only appeared to be unequal due to a lack of education. In her *Thoughts on the education of daughters* she argued that the mind was not tied down or dictated by gender, and that the pace of learning had to be adapted to each pupil, regardless of sex.<sup>27</sup>

Some of the Afrikaner women in Cape Town enjoyed considerable free time because they left the task of suckling and rearing a child to a slave woman.<sup>28</sup> A visitor wrote: "They [the Afrikaner women] seldom suckle their children, the most prevailing practice is to consign them over in a manner to a faithful female slave who suckles them, overlooks them, brings them up, and in a word becomes a second mother"<sup>29</sup> The practice made it possible for the biological mother to ovulate sooner and have children at shorter intervals. Thus wet-nurses and nannies shared the burden of the prodigious growth of the burgher population at the Cape. Wet-nursing was controversial and it was certainly frowned upon in Holland. Some historians argue that it was widespread at the Cape.<sup>30</sup> Analyses of the pattern of manumission show that it was European women rather than men who manumitted slave women who had been wet-nurses or "foster mothers."<sup>31</sup>

Slavery was not widespread on the frontier and life here was much tougher for women. A traveller offered a glimpse of what settling in the deep interior entailed<sup>32</sup>:

---

26 R Semple, *Walks and sketches*, pp. 31-32.

27 F MacCarthy, "The first feminist", *New York Review of Books*, 1 December 2005, p. 56. Wollstonecraft lived from 1759 to 1797.

28 R Shell, *Children of bondage*, pp. 289-329.

29 R Semple, *Walks and sketches*, p. 30.

30 A Bank argues that Shell exaggerates the incidence of wet-nursing. See his "Slavery without slaves", *South African Historical Journal*, 33, 1995, pp. 190-191.

31 R Shell, "'Tender ties': The Women of the Cape Slave Society", *Societies of Southern Africa*, papers presented at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London, vol. 17 (1992), p. 14.

32 OF Mentzel, *Description*, vol. 3, p. 120.

A soldier living in a tent during a campaign is not so badly off as a young couple who settle in such a distant wilderness isolated from all human society ... Imagine the situation when such a wife should in time become pregnant, and have no assistance other than that of a Hottentot woman, without being able to understand one another.

But except for the poorest households women could rely on servants to perform most of the mundane tasks of the household.

### **Marriage and divorce**

Parties who wanted to marry had to appear before the Matrimonial Court. The court, consisting of four commissioners (two officials and two burghers), sat in Cape Town. The court enquired the following of them: (i) if they appeared voluntarily (ii) whether they were perfectly free to marry (iii) if their parents were alive and had given their consent in the case of men under 21 years and women under 18, and (iv) if they were related to each other. If the Commissioners were satisfied the banns were published and the celebration of the marriage took the form of a religious ceremony in the church.<sup>33</sup>

The right under Roman Dutch law for a woman to file for divorce under certain circumstances protected women against an abusive husband. In the Netherlands both the state and the Reformed Church viewed marriage and the family as the bedrock of ordered society and neither was in favour of divorce, except in extreme cases. In the eighteenth century, however, there was an explosion of separation suits in the Netherlands.<sup>34</sup> It is not known what the divorce rate was, but a visitor to the Cape declared: "Most domestic quarrels have their set and fixed remedies provided by the law. If a husband and a wife disagree, it is easy [for them] to separate."<sup>35</sup>

At the Cape there were always married European men prepared to risk divorce by having sexual relations with slaves. There was the case of Willem Messink, a brewer, who early in the eighteenth century carried on affairs with slaves in the household. His wife was unable to get a divorce settlement.<sup>36</sup> However, this happened before endogamous marriages between Europeans

---

33 G Botha, *Social life in the Cape colony* (Cape Town, Struik, 1973), pp. 50-51.

34 S Schama, *Embarrassment of riches*, p. 406.

35 R Semple, *Walks and sketches*, p. 28.

36 N Penn, *Rogues, rebels and runaways: Eighteenth-century Cape characters* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1999), pp. 9-72.

had become the social bedrock of society, particularly outside Cape Town. A little more than a century later there was a quite different outcome in the case of Carel Greyling. His slave, Clara, gave birth to a child, believed by his wife to be Carel's. He tried to shift the blame to his son, but his wife left him immediately. She asked for, and received, an order for the dissolution of her marriage and a property settlement.<sup>37</sup>

A woman living on an isolated farm who did not enjoy active support from her parents or siblings would find it difficult to take on a husband who had sexual relations with slave women. Pamela, the wife of Galant, a slave who led a rebellion in the Koue Bokkeveld in 1825, had to sleep in the bedroom of Willem van der Merwe, his master. No mention was made in the court record of how Pamela or Van der Merwe's wife reacted to this. The rebel slaves killed Van der Merwe and a few other white men but did no harm to the white women.<sup>38</sup>

### **The Cape and Brazil compared**

To highlight the place of white women in Cape society it can for example be compared to another slave society, namely Brazil. The Portuguese law, applied in Brazil, recognized universal property as the basis of matrimonial property, but in the Catholic Church no divorce was possible. A European woman could do little if her husband wanted to bring the offspring of a liaison with a slave into the household and have them baptised in the church. In the words of the great scholar Gilberto Freyre, the family of settlers in Brazil was enlarged by great numbers of "bastards and dependants, gathered around the patriarchs, who were more given to women and possibly a little more loose in their social code than the North Americans were."<sup>39</sup> One has to allow for the fact that Freyre was engaged in the ideological project of making Brazilians proud of the heritage of racial mixture, but for at least some parts of Brazil, like Pernambuco, his description appears to be accurate.

During the first seventy years of the Cape settlement many European men married slave women who had been freed. As noted before, this had declined

---

37 J Mason, "Fit for freedom: The Slaves, slavery and emancipation in the Cape Colony, South Africa", (Doctoral diss., Yale University, 1992), p. 215.

38 P van der Spuy, "'Making Himself Master': Galant's Rebellion Revisited", *South African Historical Journal*, 34 (May 1996), pp. 20-21.

39 G Freyre, *The Masters and slaves: A study in the development of Brazilian civilization* (New York, Knopf, 1956), p. 349.

sharply by 1730, but sex outside the marriage between European boys or men and slave women was rife. Writing about the Cape, Mentzel reported that European boys more often than not got entangled with a slave belonging to the household without incurring the wrath of their parents.<sup>40</sup> For a child born outside wedlock to be legitimised both child and father had to be present at the celebration of the marriage and the father publicly had to acknowledge that he had procreated the child. This rarely happened if the mother was a slave or a free black.

After 1730 there was fear among the top officials in and around Cape Town that the *trekboers* spread out over the deep interior would become dissolute. Mentzel observed that the frontier colonists had accustomed themselves to such an extent with “the carefree life, the indifference, the lazy days and the association with slaves and Hottentots that not much difference may be discerned between the former and the latter.”<sup>41</sup> The more affluent fellow burghers in Stellenbosch and Cape Town also expressed the fear that morals on the frontier could become “bastardised”, leading to a “completely degenerate nation”.<sup>42</sup>

These fears were unfounded. Between the 1720 and 1790s the settler population was transformed from one that had no firm racial boundaries and was far from strict in religious observance to one in which endogamous marriages were the norm throughout the colony and which put a premium on membership of a church that had become increasingly racially exclusive.<sup>43</sup>

## **Women and endogamous marriages**

What role did European women play in this? Before this question is addressed one must also look at some other factors at work. The first factor that was at play was the cultural influences. Like all colonizing peoples of the period, the Dutch were convinced of the superiority of their culture and religion. Cultural chauvinism was an important component of social attitudes. Even

---

40 OF Mentzel, *A geographical and topographical description*, vol. 2, pp. 109-110.

41 OF Mentzel, *A geographical and topographical description*, vol. 3, p. 115.

42 H Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a people* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2009), pp. 33-34.

43 R Elphick and H Giliomee, “The origins and entrenchment of European dominance at the Cape”, R Elphick and H Giliomee, eds., *The shaping of South African society*, pp. 521-566.

before 1652 the Dutch had shown a strong cultural aversion to Africans, attributing to them sexual licence, savagery and a diabolical religion.<sup>44</sup>

Secondly there was the legal factor. There was a high incidence of sexual intercourse outside wedlock between Europeans and slaves but, as we have seen, children born from such liaisons were not taken into the burgher's family, but were incorporated in the slave population. Another legal obstacle to the advance of women or children of mixed origins was the regulations covering marriages. It is a supreme irony that slave women, with their extremely low social status, were in fact very expensive to marry. The prospective husband first had to buy her from the owner. As part of the manumission regulations he also had to post a sum with the authorities as a guarantee that she would not become a burden on society. From the remarks of a traveller one can deduce that many a poor European male would have manumitted a slave and married her but for the price of 800 to 1 000 rixdollars that some fetched.

<sup>45</sup> For instance, in 1810 the burgher Willem Klomphaan was charged 950 rixdollars for his slave mistress and their twins –the price of some farms in Graaff-Reinet. He died after having paid 600 rixdollars.<sup>46</sup> By contrast, eligible European girls or women, thanks to the rule of partible inheritance rule, often had dowries.

Thirdly demographic forces were at play. The ratio between European men and European women stood at 260 to 100 early in the eighteenth century and declined to 140 to 100 by 1770. Mixed marriages began to decrease from the 1730s and men who could not find a European wife tended not to marry. A study of the 1731 census showed that 59% of Cape Town's European men and 51% in the rural western Cape never married.<sup>47</sup> In 1807 only five per cent of a sample of 1 063 children baptised in that year in the Reformed and Lutheran churches had a grandparent classified by genealogists as 'Non-European' (invariably a female). At this time the proportion of marriages that were obviously racially mixed in the Tulbagh and Graaff-Reinet districts was one and three per cent.<sup>48</sup> A rigid pattern of racial endogamy had been

---

<sup>44</sup> R Elphick and H Giliomee, "Origins and entrenchment of European dominance", R Elphick and H Giliomee, eds., *Shaping of SA Society*, p. 525.

<sup>45</sup> R Percival, *An account of the Cape of Good Hope* (London, 1804), pp. 286-292.

<sup>46</sup> H Giliomee and R Elphick, "The structure of European domination at the Cape, 1652 – 1820", R Elphick and H Giliomee, eds., *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652 – 1820* (Cape Town, Longman, 1979), p. 374.

<sup>47</sup> L Guelke, "The Anatomy of a Colonial Settler Population, 1657-1750", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 21, 3 (1988), pp. 462-463.

<sup>48</sup> For a further five per cent of the sample, one of the grandparents was of unknown (and possibly European) descent. See GFC de Bruyn, "Die samestelling van die Afrikaner", *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe*, xvi, 1 (1976) and personal communication; Heese, *Die herkoms van die Afrikaner*, and personal communications.

established in the course of the eighteenth century. The offspring of European men who had engaged in illicit liaisons almost all passed into the ranks of the slave or free-black community.

The church was indispensable in the rise of endogamous marriages and the strong position women acquired. The role of religion in the first century of the settlement is overstated, with Van Riebeeck's official prayer often cited as the evidence of the Europeans' piety. The fact is that for most of the period of Company rule the burgher community was not seen as devout. In 1726, only in the case of one-fifth of burgher couples in Stellenbosch were both partners confirmed members of the Reformed Church. In 1743, after touring the colony, the Dutch official G.W. van Imhoff noted "with astonishment and regret how little work is done with respect to the public religion." He added that the "indifference and ignorance in the frontier districts is such that they have the appearance more of an assembly of blind heathen than a colony of European Christians."<sup>49</sup>

It was women who took the lead in becoming confirmed members of the church. In the first fifty years of the Stellenbosch district three times more European women than men were confirmed. By 1770, 90% of the adult European women in the very large Stellenbosch congregation were confirmed members of the church against only one third of the male burghers<sup>50</sup>

By the end of the century the men had stepped into line. Observers now generally considered the burghers of the outlying districts to be devout. Couples travelled enormous distances, sometimes a journey of five to six weeks, to have children baptised in Stellenbosch and to partake of the Holy Communion. Henry Lichtenstein, one of the best-informed travellers, testified to this<sup>51</sup>:

[We] never heard from the mouth of a colonist an unseemly word, an overstrained expression, a curse, or an imprecation of any kind . . . The universal religious turn of the colonists, amounting almost to bigotry, is, perhaps, a principal cause to which this command of themselves is to be ascribed.

---

49 GC de Wet, (ed.), *Resolusies van die Politieke Raad vol 10: 1740-43* (Pretoria, Staatsdrukker, 1984), p. 226; *De Gereformeerde Kerkbode 1854*, pp. 11, 169.

50 AW Biewenga, *De Kaap de Goede Hoop, een Nederlandse vestigingskolonie, 1680-1730* (PhD, Vrije Universiteit, 1998), pp. 174-182.

51 H Lichtenstein, *Travels in South Africa, 1803-1805* (Cape Town, VRS, 1928), vol. 1, p. 116.

It had become the norm that a European man who wanted to marry had to find a European woman. Eligible European women or their mothers probably demanded that a suitor be confirmed in the church before giving their consent. Married couples accepted that it was their duty to baptise their children. A historian who closely analysed the data for Stellenbosch district remarked: “It is quite possible that pious people mainly sought a partner through the church, but we must seriously consider the possibility that marriage and family were important factors in finding the way to belief.”<sup>52</sup>

Why did women stress membership of the church so much? Two reasons suggest themselves. Church membership was virtually the only thing that set people in the dominant white community apart from those who served them and that connected them to the wider European world beyond the colony’s shores. The pattern of endogamous marriages limited membership of the family and the church to Europeans. A church that was racially exclusive was a major step towards a racially exclusive community that upheld and even idealised the status of white women.

### **Mistresses and slaves**

With her central place in the household assured by the end of the eighteenth century, a woman became the equal partner of her husband in the running of the household. According to PB Borchers’ account of Stellenbosch life the internal arrangements of the household were considered the wife’s department exclusively. Members of her household and several servants were “generally well employed” in needlework and other necessary tasks. He added: “The rest of the house, such as the bedrooms, nurseries, pantry, kitchen etcetera, was of course the exclusive domain of the mamma.”<sup>53</sup>

The dominant present image of life in the eighteenth century is that of the spacious and elegant Cape Dutch homes of the Afrikaner gentry in the western Cape, but in the newly settled regions conditions could be quite rough. Hendrik Swellengrebel wrote at the end of the 1770s that the houses in the area of Camdeboo (Graaff-Reinet) were sheds 40 feet long and 15 feet wide. Here “chickens, ducks and young pigs swirled around” and two or three families shared the house. An account of the same period of life in Sneeuberg

---

<sup>52</sup> AW Biewenga, *De Kaap de Goede Hoop*, p. 180.

<sup>53</sup> PB Borchers, *An autobiographical memoir* (Cape Town, African Connoisseurs Press, 1861, 1963), pp. 196-197.

declared that houses “nearly all comprised a single low-walled room without any privacy.”<sup>54</sup>

In the ideology of paternalism the myth was propagated that slaves and servants were members of the household and even part of the extended family, consisting of the patriarch’s immediate family, some brothers or sisters and their families, one or more *bywoners* (white tenant farmer) families, Khoikhoi servants, and slaves. The master saw a slave and or a servant as part of his *volk* (people) or as “a sort of child of the family”.<sup>55</sup> The concept of a bonded extended “family” was emphasised by *huisgodsdiens* (family devotions). By the end of the eighteenth century it had become common practice for masters to admit their most trusted slaves and servants, usually squatting or standing against a wall, to the family prayers held every day. In the master’s mind the action of inviting the slave briefly into the inner sanctum of his family demonstrated his benign, paternal intent. This “benevolence” was a counterpoint to the violence inflicted on erring servants, and it boosted the burghers’ self-image of Christian colonisers of the land.<sup>56</sup>

Invariably, the most stable forms of paternalism were not to be found in the relationship between a master and a male slave but between a mistress and a female slave, particularly one born into the household. Slave women seldom did hard manual labour in the fields, as happened in many other slave societies. They had duties within the home, as wet-nurse, nanny, cook, cleaner and confidante of the mistress. A high official depicted African-born female slaves as “the favourite slaves of the mistress, arranging and keeping everything in order.” They were “entrusted with all that is valuable – more like companions than slaves; but the mistress rarely, and the slave never, forget their relative situations, and however familiar in private, in the presence of another due form prevails.”<sup>57</sup>

No slave system was ever humane and it would be a mistake to consider Cape slavery as anything but brutal. While slave women, especially, developed bonds of allegiance and trust with their “family”, they remained perpetual

---

54 PJ van der Merwe, *The migrant farmer in the history of the Cape colony, 1657-1842* (Athens, Ohio University Press, 1995), p. 166.

55 R Shell, “The family and slavery at the Cape, 1680-1808”, J Wilmot and M Simons (eds), *The angry divide: Social and economic history of the Western Cape* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1989), p. 24.

56 S Trapido, “Household prayers, paternalism and the fostering of a settler identity”, (LSE, London, 8 December 2000).

57 Anonymous [WW Bird], *State of the Cape of Good Hope in 1822* (London, John Murray, 1823), p. 74. The complex intimacy and tensions in the paternalistic relationship between a white woman and her servant during the apartheid years is sensitively portrayed in Marlene van Niekerk’s novel *Agaat* (2006).

minors who had to sacrifice an independent family life of their own. Slave women, moreover, had to endure the sexual advances of the master class. For them the suffering was most acute, exposed as they were to both the intimate and the harshest side of Cape slavery.<sup>58</sup> It was probably slave women who most often felt betrayed by the paternalistic relationship.

### **Paternalism challenged**

Except for the criminal records, we do not know much about what happened when things went wrong in the paternalistic relationship. The documentation is much richer in the case of the American South. Eugene Genovese, author of a masterly account of paternalist slavery in the American South, makes a plausible distinction between the responses of house slaves and field slaves. If a master and a field slave fell out the latter could, as Genovese puts it, “lower his eyes, shuffle and keep control of himself”. By contrast, the house slave lived cheek by jowl in daily close contact with the mistress and the master. The mistress knew them well enough “to read insubordination into a glance, a shift in tone, or in a quick motion of the shoulders.”<sup>59</sup>

Genovese is firm that no evidence suggests that house slaves more readily accepted slavery than the field slaves, while much evidence exists to suggest the reverse. Psychologically and physically the house slaves were much more dependent on the master and the mistress, but they were also much more aware of their weaknesses and flaws than the field slaves. Their masters’ dependence on their black slaves went hand in hand “with gnawing intimations of the blacks’ hostility, resentment and suppressed anger.”<sup>60</sup>

At the Cape slavery was much more widespread than in most of the other slaveholding societies. Half the colonists owned slaves. By 1770 approximately 70% of the burghers in Cape Town and of the farmers in Stellenbosch owned at least one slave. There were few very large farms with supervisors, and control was mostly very personal and direct. While there was no mass slave uprising at the Cape, apart from one in 1808, there were several cases of docile slaves suddenly erupting in a murderous rage.<sup>61</sup>

---

58 See particularly the studies of R Shell, *Children of bondage* and P Scully, “Liberating the Family?: Gender, labour and sexuality in the Western Cape, South Africa” (PhD, University of Wisconsin, 1993).

59 E Genovese, *Roll, Jordan. Roll: The world the slaves made* (London, Andre Deutsch, 1974), p. 364.

60 E Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 363.

61 R Shell, *Children of bondage*, p. 53.

The British, acquired the Cape early in the nineteenth century reformed slavery, first by ending slave imports and then by giving government far more power to protect slaves. In 1823 the government laid down minimum standards for food, clothing, hours of work and maximum punishments and in 1826 it made the recording of punishments compulsory and introduced a further limitation on punishment.

Slave women submitted many of the complaints to a newly appointed guardian of the slaves. On the eastern frontier some slaves took their mistresses to court. These developments represented a body blow to the whole paternalist order. Owners craved nothing so much as the gratitude of a slave or a servant. For a master or mistress a servant's withdrawal from a relationship presumed to be benevolent, let alone being accused in court of maltreatment, was almost impossible to comprehend, except in terms of instigation by malignant forces.

Developments on the eastern frontier produced a fury among frontier women against British rule that would not go away for many decades. For them there could be no compromise with the British, no willing subjugation to British rule. The trekker women had not left the colony as mere adjuncts of their husbands; the decision was one they had helped to make. In some cases it had been precipitated by what had happened to them personally. The Voortrekker leader Piet Uys did not become politically disaffected until after the arrest of his wife on charges that he considered malicious, brought by an indentured slave.<sup>62</sup> At least fifteen widows headed a family that participated as a group in the different trek parties.<sup>63</sup>

The government also intervened in ecclesiastical matters. As part of its attempt to do away with all status distinctions to achieve equality before the law the British government in 1829 abolished the widespread practice of Communion being served separately to people who were white and not white. Significantly, it was a woman, Anna Steenkamp, a niece of Piet Retief, who lodged the strongest protest. She complained that slaves were placed on an "equal footing with Christians, contrary to the laws of God, and the natural distinction of race and religion ... wherefore we rather withdraw in order to preserve our doctrines in purity."<sup>64</sup>

---

62 CFJ Muller, *Die oorsprong van die Groot Trek* (Cape Town, Tafelberg), pp. 371-73; JC Visagie, "Die Katrievieredersetting, 1829-1839", PhD., Unisa, 1978, p. 323; JC Visagie, *Die trek uit Oos-Rietrivier* (Stellenbosch, Private publication, 1989), p. 55.

63 JC Visagie, *Voortrekkerstamouers* (Pretoria, Unisa, 2000); Interview: JC Visagie, 7 August 2010.

64 'n Paar Samewerkers, *Die dagboek van Anna Steenkamp* (Pietermaritzburg, Natalse Pers, 1937), p. 47.

It was a woman, Olive Schreiner, who later would become one of the major feminists in England, who realised that the expression of racial superiority by British officials towards the Afrikaners on the frontier fundamentally alienated them from the government. As a governess on farms in the districts of Colesberg and Cradock three decades after the Great Trek she heard stories of how the trekkers had been estranged from government by overbearing government officials. She wrote<sup>65</sup>:

[What] most embittered the hearts of the colonists was the cold indifference with which they were treated, and the consciousness that they were regarded as a subject and inferior race by their rulers ...[The] feeling of bitterness became so intense that about the year 1836 large numbers of individuals determined for ever to leave the colony and the homes they created and raise an independent state.

The feeling of being scorned as inferior or ignorant incensed women in particular. They appeared to have had a leading hand in the radical decision of the Voortrekkers to sell up at a cheap price and take the huge risk of settling in the deep interior. A British settler on the frontier wrote while the trek was getting underway: "They fancy they are under a divine impulse', adding that 'the women seem more bent on it than the men."<sup>66</sup> The resentment of a section of Afrikaners women towards the British would cast a long shadow on history.

## **Republican women**

The women on the Great Trek made their presence felt in 1838 when a British force briefly annexed Port Natal (later Durban), where a section of the Voortrekkers had settled. The British commander, Major Samuel Charters, wrote that among them there were families who had been living in 'ease and comfort' but were now reduced to squalid "poverty and wretchedness". However, they "bore up against these calamities with wonderful firmness, and, with very few exceptions, showed no inclination to return. They considered themselves as unjustly and harshly treated by the Colonial Government while under its jurisdiction and all they now desired from it was to leave them to their own resources and not to molest them again." The spirit of dislike to the English sway was particularly strong dominant among the women. Charters

---

<sup>65</sup> O Schreiner, *Thoughts on South Africa* (London, 1923, reprint: Johannesburg, Ad Donker, 1992), p. 235.

<sup>66</sup> EA Walker, *A history of Southern Africa* (London, Longmans Green, 1957), p. 200.

added: "If any of the men began to droop or lose courage, they urged them on to fresh exertions and kept alive the spirit of resistance within them."<sup>67</sup>

In 1839 these trekkers proclaimed the Republic of Natalia under a *Volksraad* (Assembly), but in 1842 the Cape government sent a force of 250 men to Port Natal to annex the territory. In their ranks was Henry Cloete, an anglicised Cape Afrikaner, sent out as a commissioner with the task of reconciling the trekkers to the occupation. He announced that the *Volksraad* would be allowed to administer the interior districts until the British government had made a final decision about its status. In July 1842 the *Volksraad* invited Cloete to Pietermaritzburg, and, while a hostile crowd gathered outside the building, deliberated with him, eventually deciding to submit to British authority.

After the meeting a delegation of women gave Cloete a baptism of fire, with the redoubtable Susanna Smit<sup>68</sup> playing a leading role. She headed the delegation that confronted Cloete. He reported that the women expressed "their fixed determination" never to yield to British authority. Instead they "would walk out by the Draaksberg [Drakensberg] barefooted, to die in freedom, as death was dearer to them than the loss of liberty." Angered by the men as well, they told Cloete that as a result of the battles they had fought alongside the men, "they had been promised a voice in all matters concerning the state of this country." Yet the all-male *Volksraad* was now submitting to the British despite the women's protests. The women's fury dismayed Cloete; he considered it "a disgrace on their husbands to allow them such a state of freedom."<sup>69</sup>

Clearly something exceptional had happened. A recent survey showed that during the nineteenth century, women on both sides of the Atlantic were denied the vote, either because they owned no property or were poorly educated, or because of a supposed natural inaptitude for public affairs. It was only in 1893, when New Zealand granted the vote to women, that a national or colonial state enacted women's suffrage in national elections.<sup>70</sup> It is against this background that Henry Cloete's bewilderment must be understood.

---

67 K Schoeman, *Die wêreld van Susanna Smit, 1799-1863* (Cape Town, Human and Rousseau, 1995), p. 113.

68 Susanna was the sister of Gert Maritz and Stephanus Maritz, who at the time was chairman of the *Volksraad*, and the wife of Erasmus Smit. He was not an ordained minister but a missionary-cum-teacher and the couple was in a precarious financial and social position.

69 This section on the meeting in Pietermaritzburg is based on K Schoeman, *Die wêreld van Susanna Smit...*, pp. 112-159.

70 J Markoff, "Origins, centers, and democracy: The paradigmatic history of women's suffrage", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 29(1), 2003.

Women were also at the heart of the early expressions of Afrikaner nationalism. The first was the uprising in 1880-81 of the Transvaal Afrikaners against the British occupation, leading to a crushing British defeat at Majuba and their withdrawal from the Highveld. Olive Schreiner wrote in the early 1890s that the war was largely a “woman’s war”. Women urged their men folk to resist the British authorities actively. “Even in the [Cape] Colony at the distance of many hundreds of miles, Afrikaner women implored sons and husbands to go to the aid of their northern kindred, while a martial ardour often far exceeding that of the males seemed to fill them.”<sup>71</sup>

In 1890, Schreiner painted her famous picture of the “Boer woman”. She noted that the ‘Women’s Movement’, as she called feminism, always desired nothing more and nothing less than to stand beside the man as his full co-labourer, and hence as his equal. The Boer woman on the farm had already attained this. Referring to the Roman Dutch law, she stated: “The fiction of common possession of all material goods ... is not a fiction but a reality among the Boers, and justly so, seeing that the female as often as the male contributes to the original household stock.”<sup>72</sup> On the farm all the domestic arrangements were her domain – slaughtering, cooking, making clothes, educating the children, and instructing them in the Christian faith and the Boer traditions.

Schreiner concluded that the Boer woman “retained the full possession of one full half of the labour of her race.” She had no intention of becoming the “drone of society” like upper-class women in Europe, leading a parasitic life in which she is “fed, clothed and sustained by the labours of others for the mere performance of her animal sex function”, and got others to raise her children. There was no mental chasm between the Boer woman and her male comrade, Schreiner concluded. She enjoyed a position of “intellectual equality with her male companions, a condition which seems to constitute the highest ideal in the human sexual world.”<sup>73</sup>

Thus the woman not only brought to the common household an equal share of material goods, but — and Schreiner thought this infinitely more important — “she [also] brought to the common life an equal culture.”<sup>74</sup> In

---

71 O Schreiner, *Thoughts on South Africa*, p. 176.

72 O Schreiner, *Thoughts on South Africa*, p. 175.

73 This is drawn from O Schreiner’s 1890 essay “The Boer Women and the Modern Woman’s Question”, *Thoughts on South Africa*, pp. 168-193.

74 O Schreiner, *Thoughts on South Africa*, p. 175.

her view there were few societies in which “the duties and enjoyments of life are so equally divided between the sexes” as in Boer society. The Boer woman even stood side by side with the man, facing death in fighting enemies. She remarked that it was the Boer woman “who still today [the 1890s] has a determining influence on peace or war,”

Ten years after she wrote these words Boer women, to use her phrase, did indeed play a major role in the *bittereinder* phase of the South African War. The republican forces had suffered some disastrous defeats in the first year of the war, and by June 1900 the Transvaal burghers were ready to surrender. Rejecting this option, President MT Steyn of the Republic of the Orange Free State propagated a war to the bitter end. So did many of the Boer women in the two republics.

The great suffering and privation that women were prepared to endure baffled the men, both Boer and British. They hid in mountains, forests or reed-overgrown rivers, or wandered across the land in so-called *vrouwen laagers*, all to avoid capture and being sent to concentration camps. Most insisted that their husbands and sons had to continue fighting, even to the death. Setting their houses on fire did not cow them. Some candidly declared that they preferred their houses to burn down than to see their husbands surrender. A British officer noted after two months of farm burning that, without exception, the women said that they would not give in.<sup>75</sup>

As early as March 1900 the historian GM Theal, who had written extensively about South African history, warned that Eurocentric gender stereotypes did not apply: “The women are the fiercest advocates of war to the bitter end. For independence the Boer women will send husbands and son after son to fight to the last.”<sup>76</sup> General Horatio Kitchener, Commander-in-Chief of the British forces, wrote just after assuming his post in November 1900: “There is no doubt the women are keeping up the war and are far more bitter than the men.”<sup>77</sup>

Women scorned men who had given up the fight. After the British had overrun the Orange Free State in mid-1900, a Boer woman noted: “[We]

---

75 H Bradford, “Gentlemen and Boers: Afrikaner nationalism and colonial warfare in South African War”, G Cuthbertson et al, eds, *Writing a wider war: Rethinking gender, race and identity in the South African war* (Cape Town, David Philip, 2002), pp. 44-55.

76 H Bradford, “Gentlemen and Boers...”, G Cuthbertson,et.al., *Writing a wider war...*, p. 47; A Grundlingh, “Hendsoppers’ en Joiners”, p. 142.

77 SB Spies, “Women and the War”, P Warwick, ed *The South African War*, (London, Longman, 1980), p. 168.

think the men should be on commando instead of meekly giving up their arms to, and getting passes from, the English.”<sup>78</sup> In one camp the British authorities considered separating *hendsoppers* (Boers who had surrendered) and women. “The feelings between the families of men still on commando and those who have surrendered appears to be very bitter ... and the men of the latter class have to put up with a great deal of abuse ... from the women who call them slaves of the British and ‘handsoppers’.” In another camp a Hendsopper wrote of being “unmercifully persecuted by the anti-British sex”.<sup>79</sup>

JR MacDonald, a British visitor, concluded: “It was the *vrouw* who kept the war going on so long. It was in her heart that patriotism flamed into an all-consuming heat. She it is who returns, forgiving nothing and forgetting nothing.”<sup>80</sup> For many women and children the camp was a searing experience that stayed with them for the rest of their lives. When an English woman exhorted Boer children at Maria Fischer’s camp to develop a spirit of forgiveness and love for one’s enemy, Fischer grimly commented: “To my mind it is not only impossible but also undesirable.”<sup>81</sup>

Defeat in war also made women cling tenaciously to their culture. Indignation about British war methods prompted a Bloemfontein woman to wonder aloud whether she should continue letting her children speak English. Reflecting on what separated her from the English, another Free State woman came up with an answer: republicanism, history, the *taal* (language) and “hatred of the [British] race.”<sup>82</sup>

In the early stages of the war Milner remarked that the Boers loved their property more than they hated the British and would never fight for a political system, but the *bittereinder* stage of the war changed the course of South African history. At stake were the character of the Boer people, their republican commitment, and their willingness to pay the highest price for their freedom. It was the valour of the *bittereinders* and above all the grim determination of the Afrikaner women to persevere until the bitter end that won the Boers universal respect as freedom fighters. Smuts and General Kitchener observed that this stand had made a vital difference. It meant, as Smuts pointed out, that “every child to be born in South Africa was to have a proud self-respect

---

78 M Marquard, *Letters from a Boer parsonage* (Cape Town, Purnell, 1967), p. 78.

79 A Grundlingh, “*Hendsoppers’ en ‘Joiners’*,” p. 142.

80 JR MacDonald, *What I saw in South Africa* (London, The Echo, 1902), p. 24.

81 MA Fischer, *Tant Miem Fischer se kampdagboek, 1901-1902* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 1964), pp. 32.

82 H Bradford, “Gendering Afrikaner Nationalism”, unpublished paper, 10; M Marquard, *Letters*, p. 39.

and a more erect carriage before the nations of the world.”<sup>83</sup>

The Women’s Monument erected outside Bloemfontein is virtually unique in paying tribute to the sacrifice of women in war, particularly the deaths in the concentration camps. It was the manifestation of a deep sense of indebtedness on the part of the Boer leaders, who had it erected after consultation with women like RI (Tibbie) Steyn, wife of former President Steyn.<sup>84</sup>

The women’s resistance during the *bittereinder* phase is such an extra-ordinary event that the search for an adequate explanation will continue.<sup>85</sup> Here it is only noted that it cannot be understood without giving full weight to the extra-ordinary position an Afrikaner women enjoyed in the household as a result of the Roman-Dutch law, the partnership with her husband in running the farm, and the development of what Jan Smuts called “the Boers [as] an intensely domestic people.”<sup>86</sup> The violation of their domestic space and the wilful destruction of the farms made it impossible for women to conceive of defeat and subordination to British rule.

The women’s political activism did not subside after the peace treaty had been signed. When Union was formed in 1910 the nationalist leader, JBM (Barry) Hertzog, noticed the large number of Afrikaner women in his audiences. He concluded: They stood firm in “maintaining language, life, morals and traditions”. “They stood firm in “maintaining language, life, morals and traditions.” They “feel more than the men”, he remarked.<sup>87</sup>

After the Rebellion of 1914-15 Afrikaner women marched in protest against the jail sentence passed on General CR De Wet and other leaders of the Rebellion and the stiff fines that were imposed on many of their followers. Prominent Afrikaner women had initiated the protest, including Hendrina Joubert, wife of Commandant-general Piet Joubert, and FG (Nettie) Eloff, a grandchild of President Paul Kruger. They called on “mothers and sisters” to assemble in Church Square in Pretoria. Some four thousand women marched in rows of seven to the Union Building, where they presented a petition to

---

83 GD Scholtz, *Die ontwikkeling van die politieke denke van die Afrikaner* (Johannesburg, Perskor, 1978), vol. 5, p. 101.

84 A Grundlingh, “The National Women’s Movement”, *Writing a wider war...*, pp. 22-25.

85 H Bradford, For a stimulating experience from a gender perspective; G Cuthbertson, et.al, eds., “Gentlemen and Boers”, *Writing a wider war...*, pp. 37-66.

86 WK Hancock and J van der Poel, *Smuts Papers* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1966), vol. 1, p. 469.

87 *Hertzog-toesprake, 1900-1942* (Johannesburg, Perskor, 1977), vol. 3, pp. 232, 246, 257.

Lord Buxton, the Governor-general.<sup>88</sup> After the rebellion Hertzog declared: “Perhaps they were the greatest rebels.” He concluded with a warning: “If one ignores the voice of Afrikaner women, one would land this country in a political hell.”<sup>89</sup>

### **Women and modernisation**

South Africa entered its period of industrialisation with the discovery of minerals in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. There was a rapid growth of towns and cities, an increase of newspapers, books and journals, an expansion of trade and industry, and the education system was modernised. By the early 1870s three distinct categories of Afrikaner women could be discerned. The first were girls and women in affluent families who were educated in English and were increasingly using English in their correspondence. The second category was poorly educated women in towns who were unable to read or write properly in either English or Dutch. Thirdly there were large majority of women, living mainly on subsistence farms, who had little schooling and spoke only Afrikaans.

Afrikaner women were all profoundly affected by developments between the 1870s, when modernisation began to accelerate, and 1930, when white women received the vote. The most important was a change in the law of inheritance in order to promote stability of landowning and capital accumulation. In 1874 the Cape Colony government abolished partible inheritance, based on the rule of equal shares, and replaced it with primogeniture. Alfred Milner introduced primogeniture in the ex-republics after the Anglo-Boer War, despite considerable opposition.<sup>90</sup> Although the convention of equal shares persisted for some time, it was no longer obligatory to make the children equally share half the estate. Invariably the result was that the daughters received a smaller share than had been the case under the Roman Dutch law. Increasingly they had to move to the towns and cities in search of a livelihood.

Another development was the modernisation of education. Until the early 1870s the level of education provided to Afrikaner girls was very low, while that of boys, with the exception of two or three schools, was not much better.

---

88 A Grundlingh and S Swart, *Radelose rebellie: Dinamika in die 1914-15 Afrikanerrebellie* (Pretoria, Protea Boekhuis, 2009), pp. 63-64.

89 A Grundlingh, “*Hendsoppers’ en ‘Joiners’*”, pp. 142.

90 W Dooling, *Slavery, emancipation and colonial rule*, p. 36.

The leading figures in the Dutch Reformed Church interested in educational reform believed that an English-medium education was the only realistic option. Insisting that girls had a right to a proper education, NJ Hofmeyr, professor of the Theological School, in 1874 pleaded for government assistance in view of the fact that “the civilisation of a people depends more upon the culture of the women than the men.”<sup>91</sup>

The leading reformer of education was the British-born Andrew Murray, moderator of the DRC and minister of the Wellington congregation, who attracted excellent American teachers for private schools for Afrikaans girls belonging to his church. He also helped to found the Huguenot Seminary that opened in Wellington in 1874. This institution would later found Bloemhof High School in Stellenbosch and would also acquire a girls' high school in Paarl, later called La Rochelle, as a branch institution.

The Afrikaans journalist and writer MER, who was in high school in the early 1890s, argued that there was a clear difference between the British and the American female teachers sent out to teach in South Africa. American teachers would never break down a child's self-respect or view by viewing with contempt the language he or she spoke. British teachers, by contrast, were inclined to be status conscious and were quick to disparage Afrikaans.<sup>92</sup>

From the 1890s education for Afrikaner girls made rapid strides. Growing numbers enrolled for secondary school, and by the end of the century some were going on to college where they received the B.A. degree. With men reluctant to become teachers, teaching was the one career open to women. In 1905 the top official of the Cape education department reported: “In truth it has become the proper thing among the fairly well-to-do farming class that the daughters of the family on completing their education should go out and teach for three or four years.”<sup>93</sup>

Yet another development was the rise of nationalist organisations and publications. It is instructive to conceive of nationalism as built on the ideas of a patriarchal family and a fraternity or brotherhood of men. In this scheme of thought the traditions of the “forefathers” were passed down through the generations to young men who are deemed to be the heroic protectors of the

---

91 JF Joubert, “Die Geskiedenis van Bloemhof” (M.Ed. dissertation, University of Stellenbosch, 1945), p. 10.

92 University of Stellenbosch library, Manuscripts collection, ME Rothman, Papers, Speech given to Women's Enfranchisement League, 1926: MER, *My beskeie deel*, pp. 58-62.

93 IH Weder, “Die geskiedenis van die opvoeding van meisies in Suid-Afrika tot 1910” (M.Ed. diss., University of Stellenbosch, 1938), pp. 104-105.

women and of the purity of the nation. The women were seen as the reproducers of the nation and the protectors of tradition and morality. Men had the obligation to shield them from public controversy and embarrassment, while women had to concentrate on the welfare of their husband and children.<sup>94</sup>

The architects of the first Afrikaner political movement were nationalists in this mould. In 1875 eight men, led by SJ du Toit, minister in the town of Paarl in the Western Cape, founded the *Genootskap vir Regte Afrikaners* (Association of True Afrikaners). The GRA published the Afrikaans paper *Di Patriot*, and several Afrikaans books, including a history and a volume of poems. From the outset *Di Patriot* refused to publish poems submitted in Afrikaans by women, which raises the question whether the decision was informed primarily by misogyny or the special circumstances in which the GRA operated.

Misogyny characterised the thinking of Du Toit, who wrote the following, citing the Biblical book Nehemiah 13 verses 23-28<sup>95</sup>:

Seduction and degeneration usually slips in by means of the woman. Virtually every heresy counts women among its first adherents and most fiery disseminators. When they could not eradicate our nationality openly in our church and the state they directed their fire at our families. They took our daughters and educate them in American and other schools, in order to denationalise the future mothers of our generation and their children.

Du Toit was influenced by conservative Protestant Dutch literature of the nineteenth century that was suffused with old-fashioned Biblical misogyny.<sup>96</sup> However, his comments must also be seen against the background of the GRA's objectives of elevating Afrikaans to the level of a literary language and of rehabilitating lower income white Afrikaans-speakers. Poems sent from Huguenot Seminary in the neighbouring town of Wellington were unlikely to serve any of these purposes. Almost all the girls came from upper class homes. At best they considered Afrikaans as a medium for light hearted fun; at worst they saw it as an impure language fit only for working class or coloured people.

The manifestation of an aggressive British imperialism in the Jameson Raid and the South African War shocked Cape Afrikaner girls who attended English-medium private schools. Among them were Petronella van Heerden,

---

<sup>94</sup> T Mayer, (Ed.), *Gender ironies of nationalism: Sexing the nation* (London, Routledge, 2000), pp. 1-24.

<sup>95</sup> SJ du Toit, *Nehemia as volkshervormer* (Paarl, DF du Toit, 1985), p. 19.

<sup>96</sup> E Britz and D Pienaar, "Die representatie van die vrou in die verse van die Eerste Afrikaanse Taalbeweging", *Stilet*, xvi, 2, 2002, pp. 217-238.

who would become a physician feminist, and M.E. Rothman, who would later write under the name MER. Later in their life they both gave an account of how they suddenly discovered that underlying these actions of imperialist politicians was a profound contempt for “Boers” or Afrikaners. Both of them turned to a variant of Afrikaner nationalism that rejected the misogyny of Du Toit and some of his allies.

During the South African War some ten thousand Cape Afrikaners became rebels by joining the republican forces but Afrikaner men in general were quiescent. It was Afrikaner women who organised and attended the fourteen protest meetings that took place during the war at which imperialism was denounced. After the war the women regrouped first. Well before men founded the first cultural organisations they established welfare organizations to address the needs of the poor Afrikaners. They were the Afrikaanse Christelike Vrouevereniging in the Cape Colony, the Oranje Vrouevereniging in the Orange River Colony, and the Suid-Afrikaanse Vrouefederasie in the Transvaal Colony. Women ran these organizations entirely separately from the Dutch Reformed Church’s all-male hierarchy.<sup>97</sup>

### **Women and the vote**

Although Afrikaner women held a strong and secure place in the family, particularly on the farms, their public position was weakened by a long history of discrimination. From the beginning of European settlement at the Cape a gendered definition of political rights and offices applied, with access to office in the state and church open only to European men. This continued under British rule. Women were excluded from the vote in both the liberal Cape constitution of 1853 and the constitutions of the Boer republics.

By the end of the century the opposition to women’s rights seemed to have grown. It was probably a response to growing assertiveness by women in other parts of the Empire.

---

<sup>97</sup> M du Toit, “The Domesticity of Afrikaner nationalism: ‘Volksmoeders’ and the ACVV, 1904–1929”, *Journal of South African Studies*, 29, 1 (2003), p. 175.

In 1898 laughter greeted a suggestion in the Cape Parliament that women be allowed to vote.<sup>98</sup> Paul Kruger never contemplated enfranchising the Afrikaner women, thus creating a clear electoral majority, which would have been a masterstroke against the efforts of Alfred Milner to provoke war. John X Merriman, a leading liberal politician, made what a historian called the “characteristic assertion” that women were quite unfit to exercise the vote.<sup>99</sup> Of all the leading politicians President Steyn stood virtually alone as a strong and outspoken champion of the vote for white women.<sup>100</sup>

By the turn of the century Merriman made an intriguing statement: “Oddly enough in South Africa the [Afrikaner] women have always exercised a great influence. I say “oddly” because they are so utterly opposed to the modern view of ‘women’s rights’.”<sup>101</sup> By the modern view he meant the views of suffragette movement that originated in Britain in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Frustrated by pervasive gender discrimination, the suffragettes formed a mass movement of predominantly urban, middle class women to win equal rights and opportunities for women.

Very few Afrikaner women joined when English-speaking women in South Africa began campaign for the enfranchisement of women early in the twentieth century. For the start they suspected that that the suffragettes in South Africa were above all interested in projecting the extension of the vote to women as part and parcel of a programme of imperial reform that had to serve as a justification for the war.

Afrikaner women only began pressing for the vote in the late 1920s Both Olive Schreiner and MER, who had become one the first full-time social workers, made revealing comments about the reason why women in some societies refrain from insisting on political rights for women. After telling the story of an illuminating conversation she had with a traditional African woman who stoically had endured polygamy and other disadvantages, Schreiner recorded this important observation: Women of no race or class would ever rise in a revolt or attempt to bring about a revolutionary adjustment to their situation in their community while the community’s welfare requires their submission. That stance would only end when changing conditions in a society made

---

98 J.L. McCracken, *The Cape parliament, 1854-1910* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 29.

99 L.M. Thompson, *The unification of South Africa* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1960), p. 344.

100 K. Schoeman, *In liefde en trou; Die lewe van pres. en mev. MT Steyn* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 1983), p. 124.

101 S.B. Spies, “Women and the war”, P. Warwick, ed., *The South African War*, p. 162.

women's acquiescence in the discrimination against them "no longer necessary or desirable".<sup>102</sup>

In 1922 MER wrote that Afrikaner women believed there were greater priorities than getting the vote. Of overriding importance were regaining the freedom of Afrikaners as a "conquered people", the *taalstryd* and addressing the impoverishment, "neglect and degeneration of Afrikaner people." The vote for women did not appear to be an important factor in addressing these grave crises. She added that the campaign to enfranchise women had been imported from Britain, and that in South Africa it had been propagated by English-speaking women who "cared little about the issues of vital concern to Afrikaners."<sup>103</sup>

Afrikaner women refused to join the suffragette movement in great numbers but many gave enthusiastic support to associations for women's rights founded within the framework of the Afrikaner nationalist movement. After the Vroue Nasionale Party had been formed its mouthpiece, *Die Burgeres*, remarked that the NP leadership did not anticipate the force it would unleash when it called on the women to organise their own political party.<sup>104</sup>

In 1930 white women were enfranchised, but this important step was soon eclipsed by Fusion in 1934 and the rise of a radical Afrikaner nationalist movement dominated by men. Men now led the struggle for the advancement of Afrikaans and the rehabilitation of the poor, leaving church membership, charity work and domestic chores to Afrikaner women. Between 1934 and 1994 fewer than ten Afrikaner women went to Parliament and Rina Venter, the first cabinet minister, was only appointed in 1989, the same year that the men in her party decided to give up exclusive white power.

## **Conclusion**

Along with other women on both sides of the Atlantic, Afrikaner women were denied public office and the vote for more than two centuries after the founding of the settlement.

---

102 O Schreiner, *Women and labour* (London, T Fisher Unwin, 1911) pp. 13-14.

103 JC Steyn, *Die honderd jaar van MER* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2004), pp. 177-180; MER, *My beskeie deel*, p. 226.

104 L Vincent, "Afrikaner nationalist women's parties", *South African Historical Journal*, 40, 1999, p. 84.

Nevertheless their legal position was probably stronger than that of any women in Europe or the European colonies. They could claim a fixed part of the estate and played a major role as a partner of their husband in the running of a farm. Their role was crucial in the forging of a racially exclusive Afrikaner people and a predominantly white church. Women demanded a share of the decision-making on the Great Trek. The last two years of the South African War was above all characterised by the unbending refusal of the republican women to surrender, something unique in the history of European settlement. However, from the 1870s several developments, especially the introduction of primogeniture and urbanisation, undermined their position. Afrikaner women, however, refused to join in the suffragette movement as a separate cause, because they considered the *taalstryd*, and the rehabilitation of the Afrikaner poor as more important than pushing for women's rights