CHAPTER 8

Objections and Objectives: SANAC, the Tsewu Case, and the Land Act

Fixing a National Landscape

The drives to discern, enumerate, and modify African landscapes that ener - vated the policies of South Africa's precursor states did not abate in the wake of the South African War, when Britain finally exercised authority in all parts of the country. As we have already seen, British colonial policies pushed ahead with the same imperatives, although government and geographical archive tended to act in closer accord than they had in the Boer Republics. However, suzerainty over the entire region permitted the British to envision a union of the four colonies—as would happen on 31 May 1910—and their handover of a unified body of knowledge with, theoretically, a consistent policy for managing African lands and societies. The period between the end of the South African War in 1902 and the enshrinement of the Natives Land Act (No. 27) in 1913 was consequently one of struggle between groups of people with a wide array of identities and philosophies, ironically at the same time that govern - ments charged towards eventual merger in 1910. The struggle between segrega - tionists and assimilationists in questions of African landholding and labor was a major fracture, and one that created wide variances for local policy within the states that would form the Union of South Africa. Even though the Cape remained resistant to the full enshrinement of segregation, the broad contours of a dominant policy emerged in the Natives Land Act of 1913. That Act pre -scribed a legible state landscape, wherein objectively bounded and deeded ter -ritories formed units that could be mobilized for social, political, and economic management on an unprecedented scale. As was the case before 1913, however, the reality on the ground was very different, and it would remain a fugitive landscape of local meanings and negotiated settlements.

The first major inquest specifically regarding the future of native policy across South Africa paid a great deal of attention to Africans' position within the territorial and legal bodies of the state. The commission charged with the inquest, the South African Native Affairs Commission (the Lagden Commission or simply SANAC), held hearings in various towns around the subcontinent between 1903 and 1905 under the chairmanship of the Transvaal Commissioner for Native Affairs, Godfrey Lagden. The commission's inception in September
1903 followed on an inter-colonial conference held in Bloemfontein earlier in 1903, and specifically envisaged “the coming Federation of South African Colonies” including Basutoland and Rhodesia. SANAC expected to consider six key areas, the first of which was “the lines on which natural advancement should proceed,” and the second of which was African land tenure and the state’s obligations regarding it.1 The primacy of detailed questions relevant to African land and ownership indicates their centrality to the colonizers’ search for knowledge and control, true to Cohn’s description of survey and enumerative modalities in India.2

A comprehensive analysis of SANAC and its procedure is beyond the scope of the present study, but the varying level of involvement of administrators, surveyors, and key African witnesses in providing evidence to the commission in 1903 and 1904 is well worth noting.3 No surveyors or survey officials from the Transvaal tendered any evidence to the commission or were asked to do so, though one member of the postwar Location Commission did give evidence in his capacity as Resident Magistrate. In the Cape Colony, on the other hand, both the Assistant Surveyor-General (A.H. Cornish-Bowden, who later became Surveyor-General himself) and the lead location surveyor, E. Gilbert Hall, testified regarding surveys under the Glen Grey Act. Agitators for African land rights testified in Transvaal and at the Cape, including editors John Tengo Jabavu and Solomon Plaatje, and most came from the mission-educated elite. Others were invited to give evidence but could not, including Max Jurisch, the Cape Surveyor-General, and a few members of the Eastern Cape’s prominent Soga family.4 The majority of the evidence came from European officials and mission-educated Africans, while the average African farmer was entirely absent—underscoring the colonial belief that ‘native opinion’ was something intangible and knowable only through the mediation of trained specialists or outsiders with long acquaintance.5 A variety of opinions nevertheless entered the record.

At the Cape, the questions turned heavily on the Glen Grey Act and the social and material progress of the people. Veldtman Bikitsa, that great

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4 No reasons for their inability to appear are given. See List of Witnesses Alphabetically Arranged, in SANAC, Annexure No. 6, 133–26.

5 Ashforth, Politics of Official Discourse, 34.