BRITISHNESS IN SOUTH AFRICA

SOME REFLECTIONS

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‘Britishness’ is a relatively newly coined term. When running a spell-check after drafting this paper, my word-processing programme did not know the word and wanted me to substitute ‘Brutishness’ instead. Though that would have produced interesting results, I continue to use the term Britishness in this paper, meaning by it a sense of being British, an identification with Britain. Not surprisingly, given the enormity of the topic, and the difficulties of giving it a precise definition, no one has to date attempted an overview of Britishness across the whole of South African history. Here I can do little more than suggest some themes that need to be explored in greater depth.

When one considers Britishness in South Africa, or elsewhere, two major questions loom — these are the ones I wish to address here briefly. First: what forms did it take? In other words, what did it mean to different people? I will attempt to illustrate some of the immense variety of forms it took in the South African case for three main groups of people. One should break these groups down, and discuss sub-groups, but here I will mainly

discuss Britishness in terms of, firstly, those I call the English, people of British ancestry or descent who settled in South Africa and spoke English as their first language. Secondly, I consider the Afrikaners, who, except in Natal, have always been a majority of whites. Descendants of the Dutch at the Cape before the British arrived at the end of the eighteenth century, they can in some ways be compared to the French Canadians, though the latter lost their majority position among whites as Canada united. Thirdly, I discuss black people of various kinds. The San hunter-gatherers and the Khoi pastoralists were the South African equivalent of the Aborigines of Australia or Canada’s First Nations. It is the descendants of the mixed farmers, who arrived later and whom the Dutch and then the British encountered as they penetrated the interior of the sub-continent, who today are usually known as black Africans. Many people of mixed descent, today known as Coloureds, and of Indian origin were also oppressed under apartheid and also came to call themselves black. In South Africa, of course, unlike other British settler colonies, the indigen-

ous population did not die out in the face of colonial penetration but remained a majority in the population as a whole.

Having illustrated through a few examples some of the vast array of different forms of Britishness, I conclude with some reflections on *why* people identified with Britain, especially those not from Britain. Why did particular kinds of Britishness emerge?

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I shall not discuss here say, Jewish people who immigrated from Lithuania or Portuguese-speakers who moved to South Africa in large numbers from the Portuguese colonies in southern Africa, or Greek or Italian immigrants, though how and to what extent such people became anglicised is an important question. Those who came, or whose ancestors came, from Great Britain were mostly from England; relatively few identified primarily as Welsh or Irish and even a separate Scottish identity tended to merge into a broader British identity.¹ Unlike the immigrants from elsewhere in Europe, the Afrikaners and blacks, these English did not have to be anglicised; they were British because their roots were in Britain, but their identification with Britain and the Empire took varied forms at different times and in different situations. Some identified politically with Britain, which represented for them order, progress, civilisation, modernisation, philanthropy. For others, Britain meant aggressive imperialism based on self-interest or meddling interference. Yet even those English-speakers who were very critical of the British government and its agents in South Africa usually retained their cultural ties with Britain. So cultural

and political Britishness did not always go together.

Britishness was most intense in Natal, sometimes called 'the last outpost of the British Empire',² where the English were, after the Afrikaner trekkers left in the 1840s, the majority of whites. There in the 1920s, 90 per cent of children who were asked to write on 'winter' wrote of an English winter of ice and snow, and a General Knowledge examination in 1935 asked such questions as what was the Flying Scotsman, and what was meant by the King's Silver Jubilee. Royal occasions were celebrated all over South Africa, but with special and exaggerated fervour in Natal.³ The English in Natal voted in 1909 against entering the Union of South Africa, and in 1960 almost all of them rejected the idea of a republic. However, along with other English people, their identifications with Britain faded as Britain and the Empire/Commonwealth seemed to them to go into decline and when Britain reacted with hostility to Rhodesia's Unilateral Declaration of Independence in 1965.

According to the Mayor of Port Elizabeth, in 1923 most English in South Africa were 'born and bred in feelings of fealty and loyalty to the Crown, and though sundered by distance, those feelings were even stronger than in the land of their birth'.⁴ 'God Save the Queen' continued as one of the two national anthems, and the Union Jack remained in the national flag until 1957. The King's Birthday and Empire Day were public holidays. Leading newspapers and schools promoted Britishness, which often went with an attitude to superiority that others bitterly resented.⁵ Afrikaners spoke of 'sout (for salt) piele', a scornful reference to men (women seemed not to count) who had one foot in

South Africa, the other in Britain, with the result that their penises dangled in the salt water of the ocean between.⁶

Britishness changed over time. Vivian Bickford-Smith has shown in detail how the English bourgeoisie who controlled local affairs in Cape Town in the late-nineteenth century became more aggressive and overt in their identification with Britain towards the end of the century.⁷ I turn to why this was in a moment. After Union was created in 1910, many British South Africans were able to combine their loyalty to the Crown and Empire, their pride in British achievements and the Imperial connection — the latter suggesting, in John Darwin's term, a 'Britannic' rather than British nationalism⁸ — with a broad South Africanism, meaning an identification with the country in which they lived. They hoped that Dutch/Afrikaners would join them in devotion to the Empire, and the pro-Britishness of the ex-Anglo-Boer War generals Louis Botha and Jan Smuts after Britain agreed to grant self-government to the former republics seemed to show that this was possible. Sir Keith Hancock wrote at length about how the Cambridge-educated Smuts, a member of the Imperial War Cabinet in the First World War, came to support the civilising mission of the British Empire.⁹

Loyalties to South Africa and to Britain and the Empire could be combined in a host of different ways, depending on the individual concerned and the time. Even those of jingoistic tendencies, who were active in the Sons of England Patriotic and Benevolent Society and continued to call Britain home, could at the same time identify as South Africans.

In his recently published memoir, entitled *A Patriot in Search of a Country*, the

historian Arthur Keppel-Jones describes how, growing up in Cape Town in the early years of Union of parents who had come from Wales and Ireland, he had two primary identifications: to South Africa, 'based on a bond with the land, the only land I knew', and to Britain. 'A photograph', he writes, 'shows me as a small boy holding a flagpole from which hung a Union Jack about as large as myself. My books about trains, ships and soldiers were mostly about British trains, ships and soldiers'. He played a card game based on the 10 counties of England, and as a boy he knew from which stations in London the trains ran:

Not only was the whole weight of family tradition thrown behind a British, even an English, patriotism, but the society around me added another kind of weight. Great prestige was attached to having 'been to England', so that I always felt jealous of people who had done that, until I had done it myself. There was even more prestige in being 'home born', rather than a mere 'Colonial'.

Keppel-Jones's two identities were linked in the British Empire. Through his favourite book as a child, *The Wonder Book of the Empire*, 'the Taj Mahal, the Kicking Horse Pass, the hot springs of Rotorua and the clove trees of Zanzibar seemed almost as much parts of my own country as Knysna and the Karoo'. 'We could never forget the Empire', he writes:

Pride in it was not a mere sentiment, and *civis Britannicus sum* was not an empty boast. Wherever we might go in the world, we would be protected by a real

power, which from time to time showed its teeth. The King's head was on coins and stamps, his monogram on mailboxes, and we regularly sang the national anthem ... At the end of every cinema show in Cape Town in the 1920s at least a few bars of God Save the King were played, while his portrait appeared on the screen.

When he went to Oxford in 1929, Keppel-Jones describes the thrill of coming in sight of England and realising that 'the people there were real Englishmen [sic]'. 'Anyone of my background', he continues:

though he had never seen England before, had been absorbing its influences all his life. They came from family talk, a father's and a grandmother's memories of the old country, from literature and history. Every rural scene, every flower and bird, had been celebrated by poets that one had read at school. Still more important was the relationship to the people: their kind of thinking and feeling, and mine, came from the same source.

The English (not British) history he studied at Oxford was 'my own history' and when he left England in 1931, 'I thought of it as home'. He nevertheless returned to South Africa, where he had been offered a teaching post, and was to remain in academic life in that country for another 27 years.¹⁰ And in one of the books he wrote in those years, he has a chapter entitled 'Divided Loyalties' in which he writes:

No one [he meant, of course, no whites] in Australia or Rhodesia is worried by 'divided loyalties'. The people of those countries are as deeply attached to Australia or Rhodesia as any other patriots. But they remain British, proud of their national origins and eager to share with other British countries the defence and the development of the common heritage.

As a British South African, Keppel said, he resented being told by Afrikaner nationalists that he should not identify with Britain. Their appeal to him to give undivided loyalty to South Africa was 'a confidence trick'. He would not sacrifice himself for Table Mountain, in whose shadow he had grown up, but, he wrote, 'an Englishman dies for the freedom of parliament and the press, Habeas Corpus and the right to go to perdition or salvation in whatever way he pleases ... Loyalty to ... our kind of South Africa involves allegiance to principles of which Great Britain happens to be the principal exponent in the world.'¹¹

The First World War had contradictory results: it strengthened both Britishness, in that those who went to serve saw themselves as British soldiers fighting for the Empire, and South Africanism, for the terrible slaughter in the battle of Delville Wood in France in 1916,¹² the South African equivalent of Gallipoli, helped to strengthen ideas of white South African nationalism. While for most British South Africans there was no conflict of interest between Britishness and South Africanism, the rise of Afrikaner nationalism seemed to threaten both. Given that, it is not surprising that the year after J.B.M. Hertzog defeated Smuts and came to power in 1924,

with republican ambitions, the visit to South Africa by the Prince of Wales should have occasioned a vast outpouring of pro-royal sentiment.¹³ But while some English became more jingoistic in the face of the rise of Afrikaner nationalism, most, while retaining a sense of loyalty to the Crown, accepted that South Africa was no longer a British colony, and that Afrikaners would not become British. So long as Smuts and his party seemed to protect the position of the Crown and South Africa in the Empire/Commonwealth, however, they continued to support him, despite the 'growing tensions between Britishness and South Africanism during the 1930s'.¹⁴ When Smuts returned to office at the outbreak of the Second World War it was possible for English-speakers to think that 'Britishness and Dominion South Africanism' could again co-exist harmoniously.¹⁵

One other individual example: mine. Born in England of English parents who wished to escape Britain after the war, I was taken to South Africa at the age of four, and brought up in a home in which England was the main point of reference, though my father had arrived as a supporter of Smuts, to whom I was introduced in 1950 just before he died. Smuts's photograph long continued to adorn my father's study. When I first went to England, to visit grandparents, everything seemed as familiar as it had been to Keppel-Jones. As apartheid intensified, Britain seemed to represent the opposite of South Africa: a free, tolerant society based on the rule of law, justice and equality (it was not until I lived in England as a student in the late 1960s that I began to realise the extent of class inequality there). Growing up alienated by Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid, I did not develop a deep attach-

ment to South Africa, and in a vague way expected that at some time in the future I would probably return to England to settle. When I went to Oxford to study, I felt at once at home in Britain, and when I returned to South Africa to teach in the 1970s I was more deeply alienated from the country in which I lived because of the now more oppressive racial politics and the seeming inevitability of a bloody conflict as the Afrikaner government held onto apartheid in the face of growing resistance. To my surprise, along with that of others, those in power decided to abandon apartheid and seek a negotiated settlement. Only in the democratic South Africa since 1994 have I felt able to identify positively with the politics and therefore with the country itself.

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Secondly, let us consider more briefly the Britishness of some Afrikaners. While those who hated British rule moved into the interior in the 1830s and 1840s, where they retained their anti-Britishness, many of those who remained at the Cape were anglicised to some degree. Some, like Henry de Villiers, who ended his days as the first Baron de Villiers of Wynberg, became as British as those who had come from Britain itself.¹⁶ Living under British rule, these Afrikaners were subject to British cultural practices and laws and as a result of a long process of socialisation, especially in school, they came to accept these as natural, and to accept that British rule was benevolent and positive. By the last decades of the nineteenth century, a majority of Afrikaners at the Cape were loyal to the British Crown and Empire, and greatly devoted to Cecil John Rhodes, with whom they saw themselves as involved

on a joint colonial sub-imperial project, which often clashed with the desires of the British government and its officials in South Africa. Mottie Tamarkin, who has done the best work on these loyal Afrikaners, argues that even after their affection for Rhodes was shattered by the Jameson Raid, many remained loyal to the British connection. Only some became, like those in the interior, Anglophobic and anti-British. Tamarkin quotes the chairman of the Afrikaner Bond in a speech in 1898 saying, 'I thank the Lord that I am a British subject'; under no one else, he said, would the Afrikaners have enjoyed such freedom.¹⁷ Smuts, author of the most fiercely anti-British tract, entitled *A Century of Wrong*, published on the eve of the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War (1899), became, not two decades later, as we have seen, a member of the Imperial War Cabinet, despite the horrific new suffering the Afrikaners had experienced during the war at the hands of the British.

Many Afrikaners fought on the British side in the Second World War — 50 per cent of all those in the army at that time were Afrikaners — though whether they joined up because of an attachment to the monarchy, as the title of Albert Grundlingh's article on this topic with its reference to 'the King's Afrikaners', suggests, is open to doubt.¹⁸ After the Second World War, with the rise of a more overt Afrikaner nationalism, identification with Britain among Cape Afrikaners faded away, though an intense interest in the Royal family survived even among those who were hostile to Britain.

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It is at first sight surprising that indigenous people should have become pro-

British, given the record of the British government and army in conquering and destroying African societies. The 'century of wrong' done to black Africans from the time of the British arrival at the beginning of the nineteenth century far outweighed that done by the British to the Afrikaners. Yet towards the end of the nineteenth century and into the early-twentieth century, the main discourse among educated black Africans was pro-British. At the Cape members of the small new educated elite took on board British cultures and way of life, and identified closely with the political system, in particular because of the qualified but non-racial Cape franchise, the origins of which they traced to Britain. Some who visited Britain rejected British ways on their return, but most continued to be staunchly pro-British. This could, as Andre Odendaal has shown,¹⁹ go along with a retention of adherence to traditional culture, but what is striking is the excessive loyalty to Britain the elite displayed, whether in collecting money for a memorial to Queen Victoria, who was seen as the epitome of justice and impartiality, or in the numerous petitions they addressed to the British government expressing their loyalty in obsequious terms.²⁰

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Why Britishness? Some explanations apply to all three groups, while others are specific to those not of British descent. Some of the Britishness of the English who settled in the nineteenth century Cape derived from the fact that they arrived in a colony in which the Dutch were the majority of colonists; they therefore had to assert their own identity *vis-a-vis* the Dutch.²¹ Some of their Britishness was in reaction to the imperial government,

whose policies they disliked and whom they regarded as interfering and meddling. The colonists saw themselves as the true representatives of Britain, an attitude taken to an extreme by Ian Smith and his Rhodesian Front when on 11 November 1965 they signed their Unilateral Declaration of Independence from Britain under a portrait of the Queen.²²

Vivian Bickford-Smith argues that Britishness become more aggressive in Cape Town in the late-nineteenth century because English dominance in the city was beginning to be challenged by the rising Afrikaner elite, and by new entrants to the city, black Africans from the east.²³ Britishness was most intense in Natal because in the nineteenth century, though the English formed three quarters of the whites there, whites formed only 10 per cent of the total population; aware of the precariousness of their position, they looked to Britain to support them in such a situation.²⁴ In the new Union of South Africa from 1910, the English in Natal found themselves dominated politically by the Afrikaners, and they asserted their Britishness for that reason: as a minority among whites in a Union dominated by Afrikaners, they clung to notions of British cultural superiority and of being connected to the power, might and prestige of Britain. As they were not a majority among whites in South Africa — that the English should be such a majority in South Africa had been Milner's goal in the aftermath of the Anglo-Boer War — they could see themselves as part of a broader community, through their links to the many British people in Britain itself and elsewhere in the Empire. I suggest, therefore, that where the English were most vulnerable their Britishness was most intense and

overt; they sought security from the threats of black or Afrikaner domination in the imperial connection.

Afrikaners became anglicised at the Cape in part because they were forced to live in a British-run system. They wanted to fit in, and that meant identification with the Empire. Advancement depended on becoming anglicised; British culture and practices 'determined what was right and acceptable in the political life of the Cape Colony'.²⁵ And this helps explain too why blacks identified with Britain, despite all that Britain had done to them in the nineteenth century. Britain was dominant in the region and the world, and was perceived to be the custodian of civilised values. When Britain did not live up to what it seemed to promise, there was a deep sense of betrayal. Pro-Britishness could also be a form of anti-colonialism: blacks appealed to Britain against the white colonists who were increasingly taking power into their hands. Britishness, then, seemed to offer potential rewards, even though the early twentieth century idea of a white South Africanism linked to the Crown and Empire had no place for blacks.

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Britishness took so many and different forms in South Africa that it is impossible here to illustrate the full range of the spectrum involved. Some Afrikaners and blacks chose to take over aspects of British culture, and associated Britain with values they ascribed to. Race and Britishness were probably more closely connected in South Africa than in other British colonies. If those who identified with Britain had combined across the colour line, who knows how South Africa's history might

have developed? Racial prejudice was too strong to permit that. There can be little doubt that the antipathy of some British people to the racial policies of Afrikaners intensified their Britishness.²⁶ Though most British were happy to accept racial segregation, and then apartheid, they saw such racial policies as being of Afrikaner origin, and could continue to uphold British values as superior. As apartheid intensified under an overtly anti-British government, this link between opposition to racial policy and Britishness might have been expected to grow closer, but by the 1950s Britain and the Commonwealth no longer seemed to hold much resonance, even for recent immigrants from Britain.

A full study will ask how Britishness compares to and interrelates with the growing Americanisation of South Africa in the twentieth century, so well sketched by James Campbell, who argues that some people came to identify with the United States in reaction to an identification with Britain.²⁷ United States culture became increasingly important, which helped undermine Britishness. Among the many questions to be asked in further research is this: to what extent did whites come to identify with 'the West' rather than with Britain, especially in the Cold War years?

Let me end with Nelson Mandela and the 'new South Africa'. In his wonderful autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom* Mandela confesses to being 'something of an Anglophile':

When I thought of Western democracy and freedom, I thought of the British parliamentary system. In so many ways, the very model of the gentleman for me was an Englishman ... While I abhorred the notion of British imper-

ialism, I never rejected the trappings of British style and manners.²⁸

That Mandela and others in the leadership of the African National Congress had such respect for British parliamentary institutions and values was not unimportant in shaping the transition to a liberal democratic order in South Africa in the early 1990s.

ENDNOTES

¹ The term those not from England used for themselves was English rather than British because the language they spoke was English. On the Irish, see esp. McCracken, Donal (ed), 1992, *The Irish in Southern Africa, 1795-1910*, Ireland and Southern Africa Project, Durban; on Scottish settlers, some of whom identified with Afrikaners, see the forthcoming book by John M. Mackenzie.

² Lambert, J., 2000, 'South African British? Or Dominion South Africans? The Evolution of an Identity in the 1910s and 1920s', *South African Historical Journal*, vol. 43, p. 207; Robbins, D., 1985, *Inside the Last Outpost*, Shuter and Shooter, Pietermaritzburg.

³ Thompson, P., 2001, 'Schools, Sport and Britishness', *South African Historical Journal*, vol. 45, pp. 229-30.

⁴ Lambert, J., 2000, p. 202. See also Lambert, J., 2005, 'An Identity Threatened: White English-speaking South Africans, Britishness and Dominion South Africanism, 1934-1939', *Kleio*, vol. 37, pp. 59ff.

⁵ On schools see esp. Randall, P., 2000, *Little England on the Veld: the English Private School System in South Africa*, Johannesburg, on the press and radio Lambert, 'An Identity Threatened', pp. 58-59, 63-64.

⁶ Lambert, J., 2000, p. 203.

⁷ Bickford-Smith, V., 1995, *Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice in Victorian Cape Town* (Cambridge). See also Bickford-Smith, V., 2003, 'Revisiting Anglicisation in the Nineteenth-Century Cape Colony', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 31, no. 2. While originally 'Anglicisation' was seen as the process of making people British, and related to the imposition of British ways by the Cape Governor Lord Charles Somerset in the early-nineteenth century and by the High Commissioner Alfred Milner at the beginning of the twentieth century, the meaning has been broadened to include what was

accepted involuntarily and informal transfers of culture. See also Hyam, R. and Henshaw, P., 2003, *The Lion and the Springbok*, Cambridge.

⁸ Brown, J. and Louis, W.R. (eds), 1999, *The Oxford History of the British Empire, The Twentieth Century*, Oxford, p. 71.

⁹ Hancock, W.K., 1968, *Smuts. The Fields of Force*, Cambridge.

¹⁰ Keppel-Jones, A., 2003, *A Patriot in Search of a Country*, Kamloops.

¹¹ Keppel-Jones, A., n.d., *Friends or Foes? A Point of View and a Programme for Racial Harmony in Southern Africa*, Pietermaritzburg, ch.VII, quotation from p. 86.

¹² See, for example, Uys, I.S., 1986, 'The South Africans at Delville Wood', *Military History Journal*, vol. 7, no. 2.

¹³ Turley, C., 1926, *With the Prince Round the Empire*, London; Adcock, S., 1926, *The Prince of Wales' African Book: A Pictorial Record of the Journey to West Africa, South Africa and South America*, London.

¹⁴ Lambert, J., 2005, p. 58.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 69.

¹⁶ Walker, E., 1928, *Lord de Villiers and his Times*, London. Other Afrikaner families who became anglicised included the Cloetes and the Van der Byls.

¹⁷ Tamarkin, M., 2000, 'The Cape Afrikaners and the British Empire' in Lowry, D. 2000, *The South African War Reappraised*, Manchester, esp. pp. 130ff (quotation from p. 134). The best overview of the loyalty of the Afrikaners is now in Giliomee, H., 2003, *The Afrikaners*, Cape Town.

¹⁸ Grundlingh, A., 1999, 'The King's Afrikaners: Enlistment and Ethnic Identity in the Union of South Africa's Defence Force during the Second World War, 1939-45', *Journal of African History*, vol. 40, no. 3, October.

¹⁹ See esp. Odendaal, A., 1984, *Vukani Bantu! The Beginnings of Black Protest Politics in South Africa to 1912*, Cape Town; and Odendaal, A., 1983, 'African Political Mobilisation in the Eastern Cape, 1880-1914', PhD thesis, University of Cambridge. In 1914 and 1919 delegations of the South African Native National Congress went to Britain to appeal to the British government against legislation passed by the South African Parliament. Only after the second delegation returned empty-handed did disillusion grow, but even then pro-British sentiment remained strong among the black African educated elite.

²⁰ Saunders, C., 2000, 'African Attitudes to Britain and the Empire Before and After the South African War' in Lowry, D. (ed), 2000, *The South African War*

Reappraised, Manchester; Limb, P., 2003, '"No People Can be Expected to be Loyal Under Such Difficulties": Ambiguities and Identities of Early African National Congress Leaders in South Africa', *Social Dynamics*, vol. 29, no. 1, esp. pp. 6-17. Cf. also Walshe, P., 1970, *The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa*, London. For Britishness among Coloured people in the Cape see esp. Nasson, B., 1991, *Abraham Esau's war*, Cambridge; and on Gandhi's loyalty to Britain see Naidoo, J., 1989, 'Was Gandhi's South African Struggle Inspired by Race, Class or Nation?', in Naidoo, J., 1989, *Tracking Down Historical Myths*, Johannesburg.

²¹ Ross, R., 1999, *Status and Respectability in the Cape Colony, 1750-1870*, Cambridge.

²² Smith dismissed the significance of this when asked about it by David Dimbleby of the BBC: 'Smith, Mugabe and the Union Jack', broadcast on BBC2 on 25 June 2000.

²³ Bickford-Smith, V., 1995.

²⁴ Thompson, P., 2001, p. 223.

²⁵ Ross, R., 1999, p. 43.

²⁶ This is seen in, say, the eminent historian William Macmillan: Macmillan, W.M., 1995, *My South African Years*, Cape Town.

²⁷ Campbell, J., 2002, 'The Americanization of South Africa', in Offenburger, A. et al (eds), 2002, *A South African and American Comparative Reader* (n.p.).

²⁸ Mandela, N., 1994, *Long Walk to Freedom*, London, esp. p. 360. When Mandela visited Australia in the early 1990s, he at first said he did not want to meet any Aborigines; see Limb, P., 2003, p. 19.