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CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MORE SUCCESSFUL BLACK FARMER

by

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INTRODUCTION

During my research on cultural factors determining effective agricultural practices in Lebowa, with special reference to the residential area of the Bantwane (Coetzee:1977), one of my findings was that there is definitely a nucleus of Black farmers who follow Western agricultural practices with varying degrees of success. Because there are not many such Black farmers in the homelands, one is justified in asking if these people have any characteristics in common which differentiate them from the less successful Black farmers. In this regard De Wilde (1967, Vol. 1:13) notes that: "We also found that many of the progressive farmers, who usually had followed only part of the advice tendered them, were frequently able to throw a revealing light on the factors that led them to adopt some and reject other changes. Moreover, interviewing a disproportionately large number of 'progressive' farmers enabled us to determine more clearly whether these shared some identifiable characteristics". In the case of my research, the following aspects concerning the more successful Black farmers on trust farms, tribal farms and private plots may be mentioned (Coetzee:1977:392 et seq.)

AGE

The average age of these farmers is relatively high (around 59 years). This is the general trend in the homelands nowadays. However, a possible differentiating factor is that all these farmers have been farming full-time for about 17 years. This indicates at least that they all began farming more or less in their forties.

SCHOOL EDUCATION

As far as formal school education is concerned, only private farmers have a high percentage of literacy (65%). The same applies to these farmers' wives. On the trust farms only 6% had a school education and on the tribal farms this figure was 40%. Literacy therefore cannot be taken as a characteristic which these more successful farmers have in common. Weidemann and Smith (1970:39) came up with the same finding on irrigation schemes. Although literacy is therefore

not a general characteristic of these more successful Black farmers, it may, however, be deduced that formal education enables Blacks to use their own initiative to gain more knowledge concerning farming practices and to apply these practices successfully. This deduction is confirmed by the fact that the entire agricultural extension action in the homelands is more purposefully aimed at planned farms than at unplanned private plots. It was also found that, in contrast to farmers on tribal farms and trust farms, 80% of whom had had previous agricultural experience with White farmers, only 29% of private farmers had had such experience. Their level of literacy therefore enabled them to find out more about Western farming practices and to apply them on their own. It was, for example, found that 41% of them regularly read agricultural magazines and that 53% of them regularly listened to agricultural programmes on the radio.

EXPERIENCE OUTSIDE THE HOMELANDS

The finding of De Wilde (1967, Vol. 1:168) regarding more successful farmers in Kenya could also be considered valid for the entire research area: "In general they apparently shared some sort of experience which had broadened their horizon and increased their knowledge or skills. Such experiences were quite varied. In some instance it was formal education. ... In the great majority of cases it was experience in paid employment whether in private enterprise or in the government. It was obvious that employment on a European farm had often significantly increased receptivity to change".¹ Although the plot owners, beside their education, had never worked on White farms, in one hundred per cent of cases they had worked for various establishments in the White area. Apart from working on White farms, farmers on tribal farms and trust farms had also worked elsewhere in the White area. I would, however, class literacy and/or experience on White farms as the most important characteristics of successful farmers in the research area.

FAMILY PLANNING

Family planning is definitely not a characteristic of more successful Black farmers. In this regard there was also little difference between tribal farms, trust farms and private plots. The average number of children per family was 5,2 on tribal farms, 7,6 on trust farms and 7 on private plots.

PRESERVATION OF TRADITIONAL CUSTOMS

Although the attitude and the receptiveness of these farmers to improved Western techniques are very positive, it is remarkable to what extent they still preserve certain traditional practices. Here one thinks of the high incidence of polygyny (in excess of 20 %), the one hundred per cent tribal education of the farmers on tribal and trust farms, the high incidence of cattle as *bogadi* (91 %), the open acknowledgement of belief in magic (33 %), certain ceremonial customs, the position of women as regards the handling of cattle, the dominant role of the man in decision making, etc. (Coetzee 1977:394 et seq.).

AGRICULTURAL IMPLEMENTS

A definite characteristic of these more successful farmers is, however, the fact that they own more and better tractive power, transport and agricultural implements than the less successful farmers. However, they had to work for these and as such they are rather a product of their industriousness than a reason for their success.

SUPPLEMENTARY INCOME FROM OUTSIDE AGRICULTURE

The high incidence of additional income from outside agriculture, especially in the case of private farmers (70 %), may be mentioned as a differentiating factor. This private source of income undoubtedly supplements their meagre income from agriculture and in this way enables them to purchase the necessary fertilisers and agricultural implements.

PRIVATE OWNERSHIP OF LAND

The mere fact that a number of reasonably successful farmers are found on tribal farms and trust farms (in total as many as on private plots) refutes the statement that private ownership of land *per se* makes for a more progressive farmer. The numerous smallholdings (1618) in the Moutse District² are further proof of the search for security by Blacks who do not have cultivation rights on land on tribal or trust farms. However, one must agree with De Wilde (1967, Vol. I:169) when he states that "the buying of land is in itself often a sign of enterprise, and we noted that those who had used hard-earned cash to purchase their land were generally determined to get something out of it".

The successful farmers I questioned on private plots definitely confirm De Wilde's statement.

WOMEN FARMERS

Although I did not encounter any successful women farmers on private plots or on the tribal farms³ it was nevertheless significant that the few women who could be classified as progressive on the irrigation project at Elandsdoorn 56 JS were all widows with schoolgoing children.⁴

THE DESIRE TO BE A FARMER

The characteristics mentioned above give important clues to the characteristics that are peculiar to the more successful farmers and determine their success. However, while interviewing these people I also tried to get their opinions as to why some of them are more successful farmers than others. The reason mentioned to me time and again is so basic that in my opinion it should be considered the most important common characteristic of all the more successful farmers. They assured me that if you are not "a farmer in your heart" you will never really make a success of farming. And herein lies the reason why these people are prepared to make sacrifices in order to farm. In the case of owners of private plots this explains why they spent all the money they had saved during the years they worked in the White areas on paying for a piece of land on which they come to farm full-time as soon as they could. Not one of the farmers questioned owed anything on the land on which he was farming.

This desire to farm also explains why, in spite of their precarious existence, they are all still prepared to spend some of their earnings on agricultural implements and to buy fertiliser and pesticides whenever they can. With few exceptions, one definitely cannot yet speak of a profitable existence encouraging Blacks to make a living out of farming. Usually the opposite is true. Only those with a great desire to farm will, in spite of setbacks and their precarious existence, still see their way clear to try to make a living out of farming.

INITIATIVE AND ENTREPRENEURS' DARING

These people also showed initiative and entrepreneurs' daring. For example, one farmer had the insight and initiative to cultivate a traditional *morôgô*, namely *lerotho*, commercially. He also assured me that there was a reason why he regularly had a good maize crop. He took a soil sample to Pretoria personally and had it analysed there. The type and specific quantities of fertiliser he at present applies to his lands are based on the recommendations of this soil analysis. The success some private farmers have had with groundnuts instead of maize may be ascribed to advice a few of them were given by White farmers on the cultivation possibilities on their type of soil, bearing

in mind climatic conditions. The citrus orchards which a few private farmers have established are also the result of specific enquiries made of White citrus farmers in Nelspruit.

FUTURE PLANNING

I also found that these people have plans for the future. One of the farmers on a tribal farm told me enthusiastically about the large citrus orchard he intends to establish on his lands as soon as he has saved enough money to sink a borehole for irrigation purposes. According to him, an established citrus orchard would assure him of a fixed income in his old age so that he need not worry about what to plant every year. He also believed it would save labour. I also heard other enthusiastic future plans for irrigation, chicken farming, etc. Because some writers point to the absence of plans for the future among Blacks (Engelbrecht 1972:20), this characteristic of forward planning is definitely a characteristic peculiar to the more successful Black farmer.

However, I also came across cases of over-enthusiasm and over-hastiness, where in some cases proper planning and advice could have saved the farmer hundreds of rands. These lessons, learnt the hard way, were not without value, however. To a certain extent this links up with a statement made by Weidemann and Smith (1970:39) regarding Black irrigation farmers, namely that "those occupiers who had already explored foreign innovations showed more initiative and purpose in their production processes than the others". In view of the inadequate incomes of most of these people, such unnecessary setbacks are a serious hindrance to agricultural development in general. This indicates the necessity for the extension action to make case studies of this type of occurrence and to give more and more attention to this entrepreneurial element among Black farmers.

REFERENCES

1. Cf. also the same finding by Weidemann and Smith (1970:39).
2. The Moutse District is the southernmost district in Lebowa and is just south of Groblersdal.
3. Cf. also the finding of Weidemann and Smith (1970:40).
4. Cf. also the findings of De Wilde (1967, Vol. I:169).

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