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## “Reproducing the social”: contradictory interconnections between land, cattle production and household relations in the Besters Land Reform Project, South Africa

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Land redistribution policy in South Africa emphasises commercial farming as the legitimate use of land. This production-oriented framework fails to take into account the intertwined but unstable relationship between the production of market value and social reproduction, and how this shapes social differentiation. Drawing on a case study of the Besters Land Reform Project in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, the paper shows that land and cattle are not simply moments in the production of beef but material and discursive resources in (re)making the social conditions of the household. Cattle are used in drawn-out ceremonies that occur in specific spaces and stitch together families and communities pulled apart by rising inequality, making land constitutive of identity and belonging as well as of capitalist value production. Until land reform policy recognises the multi-functionality of land and cattle, and the contradictory relationship between functions, agricultural production will be a limited indicator of “success” or “failure.”

As políticas públicas de redistribuição de terras na África do Sul enfatizam a agricultura comercial como o uso legítimo da terra. Essa abordagem orientada para a produção deixa de levar em consideração a conexão, ainda que instável, entre a produção de valor de mercado e a reprodução social, e como isso molda a diferenciação social. Com base em um estudo de caso sobre o Projeto de Reforma Agrária de Besters (Besters Land Reform Project) na província de KwaZulu-Natal, o artigo mostra que a terra e o gado não são apenas etapas na produção de carne bovina e, sim, recursos materiais e discursivos na (re)construção das condições sociais de existência das unidades domésticas. O gado é utilizado em cerimônias prolongadas que ocorrem em locais específicos e reúnem famílias e comunidades separadas pela crescente desigualdade, fazendo da terra um elemento constitutivo da identidade e do pertencimento, bem como de produção de valor capitalista. Até que as políticas públicas de reforma agrária reconheçam a multifuncionalidade da terra e do gado, e a relação contraditória entre suas funções, a produção agrícola será um indicador limitado de “sucesso” ou “fracasso.”

**Keywords:** cattle; differentiation; hybrid farming systems; land reform; poverty reduction; social reproduction; South Africa

### Introduction

Land redistribution policy in post-apartheid South Africa has seen significant shifts over time. Policy currently offers a narrow view of what redistributed land should be used for, namely large-scale commercial farming; legitimate beneficiaries are viewed as black South Africans with aspirations to become commercial farmers; and beneficiaries are offered leases from the state, which owns the land, rather than freehold ownership (Hall 2015; Hall and Kepe 2017). In contrast, early post-apartheid land redistribution policy permitted multiple uses of land, in recognition of the role of land in rural livelihoods, was aimed at benefiting the rural poor, and gave beneficiaries registered land ownership.

These shifts represent the persistence and deepening of the “modernist” view (Hebinck, Fay, and Kondlo 2011) that the only legitimate economic activity on redistributed land is farming,

which must meet criteria of “commercial viability” (Cousins and Scoones 2010) in order to be sustainable. However, the “trickle-down” approach to poverty reduction that underpins current policy stances cannot be reconciled with increasing evidence of the role of large-scale commercial farming in the “jobless de-agrarianisation” of rural South Africa (du Toit 2018). Furthermore, the fact that South Africa’s growing population of labour now appears to be “surplus to the needs of capital” (Hart 2002) calls into question the notion that capitalism will eventually re-gear a landless peasantry into an urban working class able to reproduce itself from wage labour alone.

As a result of the growing precariousness of wage work, many poor households construct livelihoods that straddle rural and urban spaces (Neves and du Toit 2013; Zhan and Scully 2018). This raises the question: if land redistribution is to contribute to poverty reduction on a significant scale, should policy not return to an expanded view of who should benefit, and a wider view of legitimate types of land use? Should policy not return to the “foundational logic of land reform” (Hall and Kepe 2017, 2) in which small-scale farmers, farm workers and the rural poor<sup>1</sup> are placed at the centre of efforts to redistribute land?

However, refocusing land redistribution on assisting the rural poor and supporting their multiple livelihoods strategies, and away from the narrow current focus on aspirant black commercial farmers, may not in itself resolve the contradictions of rural poverty in post-apartheid South Africa. This article argues that these questions are best explored using concepts from materialist political economy centred on the contradictions between accumulation and social reproduction in capitalist social formations, as well as more nuanced approaches to social reproduction than older traditions of Marxism were able to offer.

Drawing on a detailed case study of the Besters Land Reform Project, located in KwaZulu-Natal south of the border with the Free State and close to Ladysmith, this paper aims to contribute to an emerging literature on the role of land and farming in social reproduction in developing countries (Cousins et al. 2018; Naidu and Ossome 2016; O’Laughlin 1996). Redistributed farmland and hybridised cattle farming systems in Besters help to anchor a range of actions and interactions that constitute a complex set of social reproduction strategies. Cattle production for market sales and in multiple-purpose systems (including slaughter in ceremonies of various kinds) provides a measure of regularity and continuity in kinship and other social relations — a form of social “glue” for relations that are otherwise subject to fragmentation and decay through migration, precariousness and inequality. However, land-based cultural repertoires are also imbricated in processes of social differentiation, or class formation, including accumulation through cattle production. They thus simultaneously recreate, bind and disturb the social body through the (re) production of inequality. The livestock economy contributes to “reproducing the social” in two contradictory ways: (a) underpinning identities and relations based on marriage, family and kinship ties, as well as communication with ancestors; and (b) providing a material basis for increasing inequality along lines of class, a key feature of contemporary social realities.

### **Land: a site of production or a place to make a life?**

This section briefly reviews the key debates explored in this article, namely the political economy of social reproduction in rural South Africa. Marx (1976, 717–778) argues that capitalist production “produces and reproduces the capital-relation itself” and that the reproduction of the working class thus remains a “necessary condition for the reproduction of capital.” Marxist and radical feminists (Ferguson et al. 2016, 31; Laslett and Brenner 1989, 382) and current debates in political economy have extended the concept of social reproduction beyond the household to include other institutions and processes through which labour power is renewed. They view social reproduction not as an autonomous and non-commoditised social sphere, but rather an integral feature of capitalism that is deeply conditioned by the wider dynamics of capital-labour relations and their politics.

This perspective is now being brought to bear on economies in the global South where significant numbers of people engage in small-scale agriculture (Cousins et al. 2018; Stevano

2017). In rural Southern Africa, social reproduction includes the use of crop and livestock production and natural resources for domestic consumption and cash earnings. Production and reproduction in both non-commodified relations and in markets are seen to be as dynamically intertwined in agrarian societies as in developed capitalist economies but in distinctive ways (Chung 2017). Access to and control over land and natural resources, in conjunction with the labour required for production and gathering, emerge as key aspects of social reproduction (Naidu and Ossome 2016, 61).

Since cash income is generally required for many consumption goods, employment for wages (locally or further afield) is necessary, yet employment and levels of remuneration are gendered and unequal. Employment can both constrain own production (e.g., by drawing away labour, or providing an exit from the rural economy) or support it (e.g., by providing cash to survive or to purchase inputs). The need for cash has also contributed to reshaping households. Spiegel, Watson and Wilkinson (1996, 12) argue that migrant labour historically, and rising unemployment in post-apartheid South Africa, means that the household can no longer be viewed simply as a place of co-residence, commensality and productive co-operation but rather needs to be seen as a flow of concentrated income and expenditure amongst members of a group who may not live together for most of their lives. Such households are fluid and what Spiegel and his colleagues call “stretched” over rural and urban spaces.

Pressures on social reproduction in rural contexts arising from the class relations of capitalism generate class differentiation (Cousins 2010; Scoones et al. 2012). As “petty commodity producers,” small-scale farmers combine the two class positions, of capital and labour, within their enterprises (Bernstein 2010, 103): unlike landless workers they possess the means of production and are, in this sense, capitalists; but unlike capitalists who hire workers, they use their own labour. Some can begin to accumulate capital in agriculture and eventually become small-scale capitalist farmers employing wage labour; others succeed in successfully reproducing themselves; and others again drop out of farming and become dependent on wage labour, either formal or informal (Cousins 2010).

By combining the positions of capital and labour, petty commodity producers consequently also concentrate contradictory imperatives to secure both social reproduction and valorisation of their products. Bernstein (2010, 18–20) proposes that this is expressed in meeting the demands of four competing “funds”: first, a consumption fund for needs such as food, clothing and shelter, including for those too young or unfit to work; second, a replacement fund for productive capital (e.g., seed, tools, draught animals) but also for labour, through generational reproduction in childbearing and raising, as well as care of the old and unfit; third, a ceremonial fund for activities that “create and recreate the cultures and social relations of farming communities, such as rituals and festivities” (20); and last, a fund of rent, where farmers make payments to others, such as landlords, the state or moneylenders. Neves and his colleagues (2009, 97) suggest that new post-apartheid “practices of household-making” have emerged in South Africa. Rural members use social grants, savings clubs and informal credit mechanisms (Hull 2012), in addition to wage income, for generational reproduction, including the care of permanently or temporarily unemployed members, and to undertake farming for subsistence and profit.

Wolf (1966), who first proposed the notion of a “ceremonial fund,” suggests that social reproduction in agrarian contexts involves the reproduction of social and cultural relations, in addition to class and generational reproduction. A key aspect is how access to and control over landed resources is structured and governed. This involves socially and culturally defined identities and relations, and finds ideological expression in notions of “community” and “tradition.” The social thus has to include the structure of kinship, family, marriage and the ways that households are constituted; community membership, the cultural sphere and the ceremonial economy; and the character of property rights.

Applying these concepts in the analysis of production, livelihoods and social relations on land reform farms in South Africa, this article argues that reproduction as conceived of by Marx

involves two interlinked but contradictory dimensions: social reproduction and the reproduction of capital (which can involve expanded reproduction or accumulation).

### Research methods

Research was undertaken between 2010 and 2015 on six land reform farms that formed part of the Besters Land Reform Project. The project involved the redistribution of 13 farms, amounting to 21% of the commercial farmland of Besters district, to former labour tenants and farm dwellers in 2005, and appeared at that stage to be a rare success story (Binswanger et al. 2008). The case thus provided the opportunity to interrogate the dominant discourse within South Africa that land reform is failing, and to explore the underlying dynamics of production, livelihoods and social relations amongst beneficiaries on redistributed land.

The research design aimed to interrogate how social reproduction occurs on the Besters farms, the extent to which it involves social differentiation, and whether these processes account for the changes that have taken place in the farming systems. It combined both extensive and intensive methods (broadly equivalent to quantitative and qualitative methods; see Sayer 1992, 243).

A demographic, income and asset survey of 84 (86.6%) households, together with a district database on cattle sales,<sup>2</sup> uncovered some of the common properties and general patterns of the land reform farm population. The intensive research methods included spending a total of 93 nights with five families from five different farms from October 2010 through to June 2013 to observe farming and household routines. During these visits, 125 semi-structured interviews were conducted in isiZulu.<sup>3</sup> These included the collection of life histories; detailed information on production<sup>4</sup>; the project history; and the understanding by household heads (for 32% of all households) of “traditional” farming systems [*ukuyandisa isithunzi*]<sup>5</sup> and their role in maintaining kinship relations. Interviews were also conducted with 21 farmers who had kept cattle registers in 2012 to monitor changes in their herds. The research revealed the existence of new kinds of hybrid cattle production systems, how they were implicated in unfolding processes of social differentiation, and how these affected different households, men and women, and different generations. One of the authors has since returned annually for shorter visits to two families who live on different farms, often to attend marriage or burial ceremonies.

### Land reform at Besters

The Besters Land Reform Project, completed in 2005, exceeded previous expectations of the pace, scale and scope of land reform in South Africa: within three years a substantial proportion of farmland, tractors and a large number of beef cattle were transferred to 13 communal property associations (CPA). The CPAs, which are juristic entities created to enable groups of households to own a single property,<sup>6</sup> were comprised of 170 former labour tenant and farmworker households, many of whom owned livestock. The mean theoretical allocation per household was 88 hectares, in a range of 37 to 149 hectares, but the figure is indicative only since different farm sizes and land sharing between households and CPAs meant that no household had exclusive use of the allocated land. Government’s investment of R 25.2 million in the project seemed to be paying off when, in 2006, a number of the CPAs began selling weaned oxen at local auction sales. This was a signal to some observers that “successful commercial cattle production” was taking place (Binswanger et al. 2008).

The rural economy of the region is based primarily on commercial agriculture, with beef the dominant commodity. As in other parts of South Africa, there has been a rapid decline of urban manufacturing, which contributes to rising unemployment. Consolidation of farmland and agricultural capital since the early 1990s, with fewer but larger farms, has resulted in the loss of permanent wage jobs on farms across the country and increased oscillatory migration in search of wage income, often in the form of temporary work (see Visser 2016). Land reform in the area is thus embedded in an underlying crisis of social reproduction amongst the rural poor (Cousins et al. 2018).

The constitutions of the Besters CPAs allow both households and CPAs to own cattle, which are farmed together in a variety of localised arrangements on each farm. Cattle ownership at CPA level was the outcome of commercial farmers and officials pushing for the establishment of “viable” commercial herds on the land reform farms. In contrast, the cattle owned by households had a historical footprint in labour tenancy contracts where own farming provided a key component for household reproduction. CPA production has thus intersected in complex ways with household production. Households raise cattle because “this is the way we live”<sup>7</sup>; their uses include sales for cash income, transfers for bridewealth [*ilobolo*] and slaughter for ceremonies and celebrations. CPA cattle production aims to generate profits and to provide members with heifers to boost their household herds. The income from CPA cattle sales is used to purchase agricultural inputs (e.g., labour, veterinary services, nutritional licks, fencing, diesel, tractors), to pay members annual cash dividends and, in one case, to cover the costs of a burial insurance for all members. In some CPAs, the inputs are used for both CPA cattle and household cattle, providing an important subsidy to household production. The CPAs, which are governed by constitutions approved by the members, elect committees that see to the day-to-day running of farms and report to members at annual general meetings. The committees, and often the committee chairperson, thus make everyday decisions about allocations of CPA income to production versus distribution to members, although in principle these decisions are subject to parameters agreed upon by the members. A constraint for member accountability at Besters is the low level of numeracy among the members, making financial accounting difficult.

By 2012, the CPAs were experiencing rapid change, often the result of acute contestation. Six of the original nine CPAs that had received cattle as part of their redistribution packages had distributed their herds partially or entirely to their member households. The herds of other CPAs had declined in size, and only one CPA was expanding its herd and selling cattle on an annual basis. The total combined CPA herd had been reduced by some 43% over the previous five years. Although fewer CPAs now owned cattle, the mean distribution per household of the CPA-owned cattle, in CPAs that continued farming cattle commercially, was more concentrated (see Table 1).

**Table 1:** Distribution and range of CPA cattle ownership in 2007 and 2012.

CPA	No. of households		No. of CPA cattle		Mean CPA cattle per household	
	2007	2012	2007	2012	2007	2012
Babanani	7	7	–	–	–	–
Ingula Kayishazwe	26	27	129	0	5	0
Inkuthu Kayishazwe	3	3	71	15	23.7	5
Izimpofu	3	4	0	0	0	0
Masibumbane	9	7	0	0	0	0
Masikhane	19	26	105	0	5.5	0
Mphuzanyoni	22	24	165	278	7.5	11.6
Nyaka-Nyaka Yomshini	16	10/16*	181	200	11.3	20
Phumzile	17	17	0	0	0	0
Shayamoya	14	12	151	0	10.8	0
Sizisizwe	13	10	56	36	4.3	3.6
Sokesibone	7	7	31	0	4.4	0
Zizamele	14	17	30	0	2.1	0
TOTALS	170	177	922	529	5.4	11.3

\*There are two figures for 2012 for the households in Nyaka-Nyaka Yomshini because the CPA split into two groups. The first, with 10 households, retained its share of CPA cattle as a collective. The second divided its share of the CPA cattle amongst its six members. The CPA cattle per household in 2012 thus excludes the second group.

The changes represented significant value. With weaners fetching approximately R 4 000 a head in 2012, the value of the CPA cattle can be calculated to have dropped from R 4.5 million to R 2.4 million between 2007 and 2012. Concentration at household level reflected a change in value from R 24 300 per household to R 50 850.

As a result of the changes to the CPA herds, many households, their commercial farming neighbours and government officials now judged the project as failing. The head of Extension Services in the local office of the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, Mr Phikisa Gwamanda, believed the CPAs had erred in distributing their commercially farmed cattle to their members, because “households farm cattle not for profit but to improve their social status.” However, Mr Gwamanda’s unease also reflected the disjuncture between the policy assumption that a farmer is a single entity producing beef as a commodity for consumer markets and the reality that farming households are highly differentiated units of production and consumption deploying a multiplicity of livelihood strategies that span rural and urban spaces.

**Livelihoods on land reform farms in Besters — combined, differentiated and stretched**

The different livelihoods utilised on the Bester’s land reform farms and how household members combined them result in complex patterns of social differentiation. Households are large (nearly a third have 17 or more members),<sup>8</sup> multi-generational (ranging between 1 and 5) and frequently “compound” in nature, with multiple conjugal sub-units.<sup>9</sup> Wealth varies widely (see Table 2). The quartile of households that owns most of the assets also owns more than half of the total cattle stock<sup>10</sup> and has more income sources than asset-poor households. These better-off households are more likely to be male-headed. Female-headed households tend to be larger (a mean of 14 versus 10 members) and thus have more people sharing resources.

The main sources of income, ranked in order of importance by the respondents, were wage work (the income source for 54% of adults), social grants (38%), income from own farming (21%), remittances (14%) and dividend income from CPAs (5%).<sup>11</sup> The reasons for the ranking varied from amount of money secured to the predictability and regularity of the income. Income from cattle sales tended to be stated as the most important income source when other sources were few (e.g., a single old age pension) or unpredictable (remittances from adult children who often engaged in oscillatory migration between temporary jobs elsewhere and periods in the rural home).

Different sources of income generated different amounts of income. More than half the total income (52%) was generated from wage work, nearly a third from social grants, with a much smaller contribution (16%) from household farming. Income distributional inequality was apparent across all income sources, with a quarter of wage earners and social grant recipients receiving 54% of the total earned and a quarter of cattle farmers earning 71% from own farming. Despite the inequality, the distribution across sources confirms the importance of cash to household

**Table 2:** Demographic, income and farming characteristics of asset groupings. The four asset groups divide households hierarchically according to the total number of domestic, agricultural, communication and transport assets owned. AG4 indicates households with the highest number of total assets, AG1 those with the fewest. The differential value of these assets was not calculated.

Asset groups (AG)	Mean no. of assets	No. of households	Female-headed households as % of total AG	Mean no. of income sources	Mean no. of cattle	Total cattle
1	4.7	23	30%	3.9	9.6	221
2	9.3	20	40%	5.2	14.4	287
3	14.1	20	20%	5.2	19.1	382
4	24.3	21	19%	5.9	44	923
Total	13.1	84	27.3%	5	22	1813

reproduction and the role of migratory wage employment (to cities and commercial farms elsewhere) in generating it.

The fragmentation of wage workers as a class along gendered and generational lines is apparent in terms of who is employed, their form of employment and the remuneration received. Significantly more men than women are employed (114 as opposed to 66 women), men occupy 60% of the more secure, permanent jobs, receive higher overall rates of remuneration and are less likely than women to be self-employed in small survivalist enterprises. Despite the employment marginalisation of women, men occupy all the permanent jobs created by the CPAs. Only a third of young adults (18–30 years), who make up half of all adults, are in any kind of employment, with over half of these occupying marginal and less secure jobs. Whilst 47% of wage work was permanent, the remainder was made up of work on a contract, seasonal, part-time, self-employment and public-works-programme basis, confirming the shift to more precarious working conditions.

The gendered and generational dimensions of farm asset distributions within households, and of cattle in particular, are also sharp: pensioners (over 60 years) own nearly a quarter of the cattle stock and yet make up only 8% of the total adult population. More than a quarter of cash generated from monthly cattle sales in 2010 went to this pensioner group. By contrast, young adults (18–30 years) own 6% of the total cattle stock. The gendered dimensions of the farming economy was apparent in that men received nearly double the share of total monthly household farm income that went to women, with cattle sales making up 88% of this income.

The livelihood patterns at Besters thus confirm the view that designations that refer to “farmer,” “worker,” “trader,” “rural” or “urban” often over-simplify the multiple identities involved, with their gendered and generational aspects, and that many of the labouring poor pursue “their means of reproduction across different sites of the social division of labour: urban and rural, agricultural and non-agricultural, wage employment and marginal self-employment” (Bernstein 2010, 111). Furthermore, the combinations create new class dynamics, which are central to the claims individuals and households make on both household and CPA property, and the conflicts these claims generate.

### **Claims on the collective: when social reproduction of the household falters**

The successful social reproduction of households at Besters depends on members navigating a complex range and combination of strategies that span social, economic, spatial and moral dimensions. This section uses three life histories to illustrate how the CPAs mediate processes of social differentiation. These in turn (partially) constitute the field in which fraught and contested claims are made on the CPA’s beef producing enterprises.

In 2010, Themba Shabalala was a 58-year-old security guard at a construction company on a site near Sizisizwe CPA where he, his wife, daughter and two grandchildren had relocated in 2006 as a result of land reform. The relatively small, 218-hectare farm owned by the thirteen households that made up the Sizisizwe CPA has a single outer boundary fence with no internal grazing camp fence. It was thus a single grazing camp that provided fodder to both CPA and household cattle, as well as household goats, horses and some sheep. A technical government report in 2012 stated that the farm was overstocked (ADA 2012, 6). The CPA had been given 56 cattle in 2005 (a mean of 4.3 per household), which had declined to 36 (a mean of 3.6 per household) by 2010. In 2010, 11 households (88%) owned cattle. They had the lowest mean household herd size (14) and range (23). Although both the number of households owning cattle and the herd sizes are greater than amongst other small-scale farmers in the province (for example, 56% ownership of herds of about five to six cattle in Msinga),<sup>12</sup> they were lower than those of households on other CPAs (e.g., 100% ownership at Inkuthu Kayishazwe, Nyaka-Nyaka Yomshini and Mphuzanyoni where household herd sizes ranged from 14–66).

Themba’s household survived on his wages of R 1 600 a month, two child grants, his wife’s sale of chips, and the occasional sale of cattle. Themba had three heads of cattle, for which he



received free mineral licks and veterinary inputs from the CPA. The CPA purchased inputs with income it generated from sales from its commercial herd and used them to benefit both CPA and household cattle. In 2011 Themba was retrenched, pushing his household into the poorest category of households at Besters. Drought combined with overstocking simultaneously affected the CPA's cattle production, bringing an end to inputs to household farming. Themba's heifer and young ox then died. He spent his savings to buy feed and medicine for his remaining cow and four goats, and sold the cow to purchase household food. By March 2012, Themba was holding out for his old age pension from the state. From time to time his daughter walked 20 km to a relative's house to get food. The household's narrow range of income sources and precarious productive capacity had received a serious shock with the loss of Themba's wages. The downward trajectories of both farming and livelihood options were mutually reinforcing, so that nothing but an old age pension and food transfers from kin could stop the vicious cycle.

Khethiwe Mthembu lived at Mphuzanyoni CPA and also had a narrow and thin livelihoods portfolio. Mphuzanyoni CPA, made up of 24 households, had a large 2 200 hectare farm with 15 fenced grazing camps that were allocated to household cattle, to rotating the CPA herd and to a lease to a neighbouring commercial farmer. It was a dry farm but the maximum stocking rates had not yet been reached, which mitigated the effects of the 2011 drought. The 2012 government report assessed cattle and the farm's rangelands as being in good condition (ADA 2012, 7). Khethiwe often felt socially isolated: she had been orphaned as a child, had never married in civil or customary law and had lost her partner some years before. In 2010, her household survived on a combination of nine child and foster grants and a remittance from a daughter's income as a part-time cleaner. However, Khethiwe was adding additional layers to her livelihood portfolio through new investments in cattle production. These were made possible by transfers of cash and cattle from the CPA's herd, which had grown from 165 head to 305 between 2006 and 2010. Between 2007 and 2012, Khethiwe received R 17 800 in cash dividends from the CPA along with six heifers. By 2009, the first of her heifers was annually producing a calf. She sold the calves to supplement the stock she received each year from the CPA, which she sold, using the income for food and education and the purchase of a car for her son in Ladysmith who, she hoped, would start a business. Khethiwe did not need farming skills or cash to run her small herd because the CPA provided labour and farm inputs to household cattle paid for from annual sales of the CPA's beef herd. Although her farming gains were reversible, being dependent on the fortunes of the CPA, she had nevertheless begun to accumulate breeding stock and to diversify a livelihood portfolio thus far heavily dependent on child grants.

Some households were able to expand their farm production. Boyi Ndlovu expanded his and his household's herd from just over 50 to 94 cattle between 2005 and 2010. Boyi lived in a compound household consisting of his unit (with his wife and five children), his mother's house (together with two adult grandchildren), and two brothers' houses. Both brothers were married with a child, and one brother's wife also had a child living with her from a previous relationship. Boyi grew the household herd by using transfers of cattle and input subsidies from the Inkuthu Kayishazwe CPA, his relationship with two brothers who found periodic migrant labour across the country, his wife's child grant contributions and his exploitation of an opportunity arising from an intra-familial conflict in one of the three CPA member households. Inkuthu Kayishazwe owns a 600 hectare farm, which has five fenced camps on which the CPA-owned herd and the household herds are run together. The CPA divided most of its cattle in 2011 and allocated 22 head of cattle to each of the three member households in an attempt to insulate the CPA from conflicts between member households. It retained a small herd in order to cover the annual collective costs of supplementary mineral licks, fencing material, veterinary inputs and tractor repairs. Although the CPA was successfully protected, the herd of the household in conflict declined dramatically over a short period creating a grazing surplus, which Boyi was able to exploit without causing the total cattle on the farm to exceed the state regulated grazing limits. The cattle expansion of Boyi's

household contributed to the excellent relations between Boyi and his brothers, and as a result they were able to co-operate to build a house for their mother and to electrify each of the homes in the compound household. From time to time Boyi's brothers gave him a head of cattle in recognition of his management whilst Boyi contributed some of his own cattle to support his brothers to complete their marriage ceremonies, in addition to his own, between 2013 and 2017. In 2019, the Department of Agriculture selected Boyi for support for improved beef cattle genetics and he was excited at the prospect of converting his herd into Beefmaster cattle.

Farming and livelihood trajectories can reinforce or run against one another. In Themba's case, selling cattle helped the household survive, but the downward livelihood trajectory could only be stopped by a state pension. In Khethiwe's case, farming boosted a vulnerable livelihood portfolio creating a positive trajectory although her regular sales of cattle stock limited the herd growth. In Boyi's case, farming and income from diverse sources reinforced one another, enabling both the herd to expand and the household to invest in building, education and ceremonies. CPA production and the support it can provide to household farm production mediates and cushions the trade-offs often made between a household's investment in production versus that in livelihoods. On those land reform farms where CPA production regularly subsidises and replenishes household farming through transfers of cattle and cash, social stratification is less extreme and the cattle poverty of poorer households not as dire as on farms where CPAs no longer support household farming.

The processes of social differentiation, however, create complex farm politics in which the struggle for social reproduction puts the commercial production of the CPA up for grabs. Conflict in CPAs is regularly noted in government reports and is a primary reason why the former minister of rural development and land reform, Gugile Nkwinti, sought to do away with them, but these reports seldom analyse how struggles over resources are linked to the different capacities of households to reproduce themselves. Two men, both part of the wealthiest asset group and leaders of CPAs that disbanded collective production as a result of conflict, blamed the collapse of CPA production on the demands of poor households. Jabulani Khuzwayo was the chairperson of the Nyaka-Nyaka Yomshini CPA and head of a household of seven (wife, mother and four children) that combined above-minimum wage income with social grants and income from the sale of maize and cattle to create a robust livelihood portfolio and an expanding herd of cattle. He believed it was "those who are behind [poorer] who create the problems for the CPA. They have finished their own things and so now they cry for the CPA cattle. It is this that causes the conflict." Similarly, Bonginkosi Shabalala, chairperson of the Ingula Kayishazwe CPA, owner of a herd exceeding 60 animals in 2010 and in control of the CPA tractor, said: "It is those households who are battling that want cattle and money *today*. We try to persuade them to wait a few years so that we can grow the business and sell more in the future, but they cry that there is no work." For these two CPA leaders, social reproduction is not a daily crisis, enabling them to sacrifice short-term gain from the CPA cattle enterprise to secure a longer-term expansion of production and improved livelihoods.

For Siphon Khumalo, the daily pressures of social reproduction makes waiting for CPA dividends intolerable. He is one of 28 members of the Ingula Kayishazwe CPA, which owns a 1 529 hectare farm. Like others, he received four head of cattle when the CPA disbursed its entire herd in 2008 as a result of internal conflicts over the distribution of benefits. He disagrees with the chairperson, Bonginkosi, to argue that if the urgent demands of the poor in relation to benefits from CPA property are not met, their productive capacity is eroded and their livelihood security put at risk:

I often have to pinch money from my cattle and goats to educate and feed my children. So it ends up that sometimes the livestock dies because I cannot afford the costs for them when my children have needs. Those who are full do not see us who are still hungry.

These comments suggest that it is in the immediate interest of poorer households to disband CPA production and that wealthier households have the resources to hang in with CPA production for longer periods. However, CPA production can provide regular support to household farming through transfers of cattle or cash, and often enables poorer households to continue farming. In

the immediacy of the struggle to reproduce themselves, however, households with few livelihood options demand that the CPA provides greater and more regular benefits, and if benefits appear to be at risk — such as in times of drought — this demand can become compelling, resulting in accumulation deficits in the CPA's farm production.

The interests of wealthier households with respect to CPA production are more contradictory. Where CPA production supports household farming, wealthier households appropriate a greater share of input subsidy and rangeland and are able to expand their cattle stock. However, the expansion of household herds and rising total subsidy brings household production into tension with CPA production in terms of how rangelands are used and the rising cost of production on CPA profitability. As these contradictions push CPA and household production to the limit of expansion and accumulation, so transfers from the CPA to households is threatened, which makes the politics increasingly unstable. When this politics combines with other livelihood pressures (low wages, retrenchment, death of household head), wealthier households align themselves with poorer households to demand the disbandment of CPA production. The more chaotic social space created by these conflicts creates opportunities for some wealthier households to expand their farming through greater appropriation of the communal rangelands, which exacerbates the processes of differentiation. However, whilst cattle are a key ingredient in how social differentiation unfolds at Besters, they are also integral to processes that mediate the conflicts associated with differentiation.

### Cattle and ceremonies

Whilst aggregate sale data suggests the commercialisation of small-scale cattle farming in the Besters district,<sup>13</sup> cattle in African households are also a component of a web of social entanglement<sup>14</sup> (Ainslie 2013) in which their sale and slaughter during ceremonials is central. Wolf's (1966) notion of a "ceremonial fund" and the class differentials noted by Bernstein (2010) are relevant here.

The most important social events are drawn-out marriages and ceremonies relating to the dead. These are spatially and socially specific: they must take place at the father's home where the ancestors reside, must be presided over by the male elders (or representatives) of the extended patrilineage, impose obligations on household members to attend wherever they may be living, and demand the provision of food (including slaughtered livestock). These are moments that draw household members back together from across the spatial stretch that Spiegel, Watson, and Wilkinson (1996, 12) describe. They are also attended by other households that live on the CPA farms and people from the neighbourhood. At these moments of shared celebration or grief, people come together despite grievances they may harbour towards each other. Conversations involve catching up, gossip and detailed evaluations of the food, decor and dancing. Ceremonials are moments of consumption and social renewal.

Ceremonial cattle form part of the house property [*izinkomo zaBaba*] that a wife or son has inherited, and to which other lineage members continue to have claim. Even if the inherited cattle have been depleted, any responsibilities for which ceremonial cattle should be used nevertheless have to be fulfilled by the responsible senior male (and sometimes senior female) kin. Ceremonies thus "drain money,"<sup>15</sup> and the social-spiritual pressure to undertake them is immense,<sup>16</sup> rippling across kin relations as claims to house property, particularly ceremonial cattle, are made, contested and negotiated.

The ceremonial fund is a fund of considerable monetary and social value at Besters: the combined bridewealth [*ilobolo*] transfers and outstanding debts across the 84 households amount to between 550 and 1 400 cattle, with an estimated total value of between R 2.7 and R 7 million.<sup>17</sup> The cattle used in ceremonies can lead to a significant reduction in herd size (between one and four animals for 36% of households in 2010). This can put production at risk when animals are taken out of smaller herds.

These meat-laden ritual events rest on the integration of cattle, cash and moral economies, but

this integration creates contradictory socio-political dynamics: the expectation to put on a display that reflects and augments the social position of the household<sup>18</sup> helps increase the distribution of meat, food and drink, thus easing consumption pressures amongst poorer kin and neighbourhood households. The ceremonies also serve to bolster the social status and esteem of those able to provide a noteworthy display, placing pressure on all households to meet new standards. At a wedding in 2018, the master of ceremony created a ripple of excitement at the bride's home when he called up a well-known radio DJ who was seated at the groom's table, indicating high social status. The groom's brother told me later that he would have to slaughter another cow to add to the two already allocated for the *umabo* gift-giving proceedings the next day because the wedding had drawn so much attention that they now expected even more people to be present.

Those households able to meet and exceed the new standards consolidate and extend their long-standing social and kinship positions. Their improved social position with respect to others on the farm increases their influence over local farm politics, whilst those who experience a slipping social standing lose local power and are less able to assert their interests on the farm. As socially embedded moments of reproduction, ceremonials both highlight and intensify the larger-scale social transformations associated with post-apartheid inequality and marginalisation whilst providing the social thread that stitches families riven apart by these social processes together again.

### **Implications for land reform policy**

Farming for most households on the Besters land reform farms is only one of a number of income-generating strategies. Where households can successfully combine and synchronise a range of strategies across spatial divides and kin networks, they have been able to boost cattle production and expand their herds. However, for many households, different strategies tend to work against each other, and farm production declines as households confront social reproduction pressures (particularly cash constraints as a result of the death or retrenchment of a bread-winner), or overall livelihood status is jeopardised in order to sustain or expand production (such as delayed ceremonials or investments in housing and children's education).

Farm production dynamics at Besters thus follow a different rationale from the pure commercial production of beef cattle. The logics that drive the latter are accumulation and profit. For the land reform farmers, the primary calculus is balancing the social reproduction of the household and the reproduction of the conditions for continued production. This demonstrates clearly the relevance of a conception of social reproduction as deeply conditioned by capital-labour relations and the politics of accumulation. This is a shifting multi-factor calculus that includes managing and synchronising spatially stretched, diverse, precarious, fluid and fragmented livelihood strategies of household members whose livelihood possibilities are structured by gender and generation. It is frequently not co-operative and can involve bitter contestation over resources, both within and between households, and avoidance of obligations. Ceremonials are embedded in these social relations, reflecting social differences and their accompanying tensions, but also providing a social, emotional and moral glue that binds fracturing families and communities together. Land and cattle, together with social grants, are central anchors in this moral economy. In CPA contexts, the calculus includes trade-offs between short-term and long-term interests in relation to CPA production, and the different and often competitive household demands on the CPA resources that pit individual interests against the collective enterprise and its interests.

A land reform programme organised around the assumption that rural land is to be used only for commercial farming disregards the complexity of how this production calculus operates. Land and agrarian reform that recognises the hybrid nature of small farm production systems would be less concerned with rates of participation in formal markets, grazing capacities and particular herd structures than it would with broad access to communal land or commonage (including through CPAs), generalised veterinary services, inputs during seasons with nutritional deficits and timeous provision of fodder during droughts.

The Besters case study also illuminates policy inadequacies with respect to CPAs. CPAs have been deemed a failure because of paralysing conflicts between members. Besters shows that conflicts arise in CPAs as a result of social reproduction pressures on households, the dynamics of differentiation these can give rise to in land reform contexts, and how the interests of differently situated households are reflected in the contested trade-offs that must be made in relation to CPA production. Manenzhe (2015) identifies similar dynamics in strategic partnerships involving CPAs in Limpopo as does Bunce (2018) in joint ventures in the Eastern Cape, a model the government is encouraging in order to boost collectively owned commercial production in land reform contexts. The outcomes of these local forms of politics do not create static differences: the trajectories of households can reverse suddenly and unexpectedly, resulting in shifting alliances between members as their interests in relation to the CPA's land, cattle and cash changes. State support for CPAs as owners, enterprises and institutions needs to be directed at these material and strategic considerations rather than at procedural compliance with the CPA Act.

Three land reform policy recommendations arise. First, collective enterprises can make an important contribution to alleviating the social reproduction pressures arising from widespread unemployment at a relatively low cost to the state. However, this requires that land reform provides consistent and timeous inputs to collective enterprises in order to reduce the contradictory pressures on them. Second, those members of CPAs whose herds are rapidly expanding should be able to exit CPAs without losing their investments in housing and rights in land. Their exit would create more space for new "winners" to emerge, who should also be enabled to exit when their accumulation threatens CPA production. A constraint on this option is the availability of sufficient land at prices or rentals affordable to these farmers. Third, many CPAs struggle to produce transparent, accurate financial accounts. State support for independent bookkeepers to maintain CPA financials and report annually to members would give members the information they need to make informed, strategic decisions about allocations of earnings to operational inputs, expansions, cash dividends for members and transfers of cattle stock to members. Such information will not necessarily reduce the pressures on the CPA enterprise nor on shocks to households but would facilitate informed collective decision-making for short-term and long-term outcomes for both households and the CPA enterprise.

## **Conclusion**

Land reform at Besters has not produced large-scale commercial beef farmers engaged in production to generate profit. It has also not produced homogenous small-scale farmers using only household labour to maximise efficiencies (see Lipton, Ellis, and Lipton 1996) nor a sovereign community of new peasants bonded by reciprocity (see van der Ploeg 2008; McMichael 2006). Rather, the social dynamics of change that characterise the Besters Land Reform Project are the outcome of contradictory processes of social reproduction and accumulation at the different sites of production and reproduction (household and CPA) that have contributed to, if not caused, social differences to emerge along multiple lines. A labour class, fragmented by gender, generation and space, is composed of younger men and women migrating into towns and cities in search of work (Hornby et al. 2018), women remaining in the rural home and securing income from survivalist enterprises and social grants, and older men accumulating cattle stock through combinations of wage work, CPA cattle transfers and input subsidies. The livelihoods are diverse and combined in complex ways within and across households with footprints from farms to cities across the country.

The social cleavages and rifts, anchored in livelihood precariousness and the conflicts generated by social differentiation, feed the rumblings of discontent on the farms. The conflicts are centred on the cattle, cash and land of the CPA. Although the conflicts within and between households can be brutal and violent, they are nevertheless mitigated by a cattle production system that functions not only to produce cattle as commodities but also to recreating and binding kin,

households and neighbours in a context where growing inequality pulls them apart. A land reform programme that moves beyond a singular focus on accumulation and recognises these social dynamics is more likely to support access to land for a wide range of poor people, whilst providing for strategic management of the inevitable processes of social differentiation within capitalism. Only then will assessments of land reform “success” or “failure” make sense.

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### Notes

1. The terms “poor” and “wealthy” are used throughout this paper to refer to relative differences in income and assets.
2. The district cattle sales database was produced by the company that ran monthly auctions. It recorded how many cattle were sold by whom, over what period and what prices were achieved.
3. All interviews were conducted by the authors. The names and some details of respondents have been changed to protect their confidentiality, except for government appointees speaking in their official capacity.
4. The farmers were selected from “taxonomic groups” (Sayer 1992) constructed on the basis of total household assets, which were derived from the demographic and asset survey. Assets, in preference to income, were used as a proxy for wealth status because they are more likely to reflect historical accumulation.
5. *Ukuyandisa isithunzi* means “to augment one’s dignity or status.” Department of Agriculture officials claimed that the Besters farmers were not commercial farmers because they farmed in order to “*yandisa isithunzi*” and not to make a profit. Most land reform beneficiaries laughed at the proposition but acknowledged that there may still be households who farmed cattle for the purposes of status rather than primarily for income.
6. CPAs are established in terms of the Communal Property Associations Act of 1996 to enable groups of people to take ownership of land reform farms. They were designed both in response to groups of households choosing to live together as well as the low levels of state grants allocated to land reform beneficiaries to purchase farms on the open market. The grant allocations were initially R 16 000 per household and later increased on a sliding scale of R 20 000 to R 100 000 per individual depending on “own contribution.”
7. Interview with S. Shabalala.
8. Our study established a mean of 11 members per household on the Besters land reform farms, in comparison to 5.4 for the larger municipal area in which Besters is located (Emnambithi Municipality 2012). The difference may be that the integrated development plan for the municipality only recognised full-time residents as members of a household whereas we also included members living elsewhere.
9. Our survey counted a total population on the six farms of 904 people, of whom slightly more adults were women (30%) than men (28%), with the majority being young: 43% under the age of eighteen, and 67% under the age of thirty.
10. Land reform beneficiaries in Besters tended to own more cattle than residents of communal areas. For example, 94% of households at Besters owned cattle, with a mean herd size of 22 in a range of 0–154, compared to two wards in Msinga (around 100 km distant from Besters) where only 56% and 23% of households owned cattle and the mean herd size was 5.6 and 2.3 per household respectively (personal communication with researcher Bridget Letty, May 14, 2011).
11. The income sources come to a total exceeding 100% because many households received incomes from multiple sources.
12. Personal communication, Bridget Letty, May 14, 2011.
13. In 2010, black farmers in the Besters district sold 18% of all cattle sold at the formal monthly cattle auctions run by the farmers’ association; by 2012, the figure had risen to 28% of the total.
14. Cattle are involved in a range of ceremonials at Besters. Whilst, arguably, marriage and burials are the most important, other ceremonial uses of cattle include *umemulo* (when a girl reaches the age at which she can be courted) and *ukutwasa* (the completion of the process of becoming a *sangoma* [traditional doctor]). Increasingly, cattle are also slaughtered to celebrate an achievement or good year in an *umsebenzi* [an event].

15. Interview with Makhubalo Mpungose, 2012.
16. In one particular case, a widow whose livelihood strongly depended on child grants told me that she had just sold ten cattle to cover the costs her daughter's marriage would incur (interview with Nomsa Shabalala, 2012).
17. These values were calculated on the ilobolo transfers and debts in the case of 86 adult women who are either married or in the process of getting married. The calculation is based on a range of 5 to 15 ilobolo cattle per marriage, exact numbers depending on the outcome of family negotiations. The estimated total in this paragraph was calculated using the mean price of R 4 973 as received for cattle sold by black farmers at the Besters' stock sales between 2009 and 2013.
18. Smith (2004, 569) describes the "tremendous expectations for conspicuous consumption" at weddings in Nigeria. Whether the South African ceremonials are about "conspicuous consumption" is a moot point. However, constant and detailed comments about the display suggests that the ceremonials are an acute moment for observing and measuring social position.

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