

Land claims: finding a third way in Bosparadys

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Many of South Africa's white commercial farmers see the land-claim process as an attack. For black claimants fighting to get back land stolen by the apartheid government, it's about being made whole again. On Bosparadys farm in North West province, the two groups are trying to find a third way.

William Khourie's eyes are rheumy with age and tear up easily as he stares across fields dotted with baled hay, the tears a symptom of late-life diabetes. The idling engine of his bakkie purrs as he rolls to a stop in the middle of a bumpy dirt road. A lamb gallops alongside for a few moments before heading back to the pasture from which it has just escaped. "I need to eat soon," he says, a propos of nothing. "I can feel my blood sugar dropping."

The sky is cloudless and the day has warmed since he began work at 02h00, when his dairy cows were brought to the milking shed. The farm's 1 200 cows provide him with 50 000 litres of organic milk a day. It is then either bottled and shipped to market under the farm's Bosparadys label - the name means "bush paradise" in Afrikaans - or made into yogurt, cheese or amasi.

"I built this farm," he says, the satisfaction clear in his voice. "When I came here there was nothing. Mud huts for the workers - I built real homes. I dug new dams and stocked them with fish. I put up new fences and cleared away rocks from the fields. Today we can compete with the big dairies but its taken years of blood and sweat."

A resilient business

Everything Khourie owns today has been paid for with almost two decades of gruelling work. Bosparadys is a 1 200-hectare dairy farm just over the Gauteng border in North West, just outside the town of Koster. Khourie has owned the land since 1997, when he bought a bankrupt farm on auction and built a thriving dairy, and raised sheep, pigs and chickens.

A recent drought has made life tougher for farmers in the region, but Bosparadys has been able to ride it out because of the diversity of the business. It makes a healthy profit in the good years and is stable enough to survive the bad. Between himself and his three sons, Khourie runs a dairy, an egg business and a piggery, and raises flocks of sheep.

Two hundred hectares of his land is given over to herds of game. His dams are popular weekend fishing spots teeming with barbel, carp and black bass.

"With my sons helping out we are able to build and manage a big business," Khourie says. "My sons have been brought up on a farm and they drive the business with the same dedication I have. I've been blessed with sons that like the smell of the soil when it's ploughed - and that's priceless."



"Mechanisation is cheaper, but fewer jobs means more crime. A hungry person is bound to steal," William Khourie. (Image: Sulaiman Philip)

The hovering threat of land claims is making his neighbours sell land and cattle as they struggle to adapt to new realities. Those with children are pushing them away from an uncertain life on the land, into careers indoors and at desks. "No one wants their children to pour their heart into something that can just be taken away. It is easier to work at a computer than take care of the land and cattle."

What Khourie does worry about is the cost of diesel, the quality of his milk, the market price of his crops and, of course, the weather. He worries about the electricity bill, and the quality of education his employees' children are receiving.

Mostly, though, he is uneasy about the future of his farm, which is part of a larger land claim by the Bakubung ba Ratheo. Where the land claims have drained his neighbour's spirit and made them pessimistic, Khourie labours along, talking up plans he has for his farm. Beyond buying new equipment to expand his dairy and his egg business - which employs the wives of the farm labourers - he wants his employees to be paid a living wage and live in decent accommodation.

Clarity on the future

"It's important that we find work for the people around us, so I am holding off buying equipment. For someone whose biggest concern is where his next meal is coming from, theft is not a crime. The more people we can help, the more successful we are as a community.

"When I received notice of the land claim we already had all these plans in place. Until I know my workers will be the ones to enjoy the new homes I won't go forward. I talk to chief of the claimants; they know my position. There are improvements I want to make that will build this business but I need some clarity on the future."

Khourie's rural idyll was bought with the immense suffering of his neighbours, he knows. Most of the remaining farmers cling to their old conservative mindset, but Khourie is not one of those. He does not regard change as a betrayal. He understands it is inevitable.

Beyond his boundary fence lies acres of Bakubung land, 7 000 hectares of rich soil as far as the eye can see. He recalls a time when teams of 14 oxen were strapped to ploughs turning the soil, getting the land ready for a new crop. To a lifelong steward like Khourie, land left untended to bake in the sun is a tragedy.

It is this fear that lies at the heart of Khourie's dilemma. He says he believes in redressing the wrongs of apartheid but fears for the future of the productive farm he has built.

At the edges of his land, outlined by expensive game fencing, Khourie expertly navigates between deeply dug watering holes and curious herds of game. One hand on the wheel, he turns in his seat to point out a trench dug out along the length of the fence - a cheap barrier to stock thieves. In his 17 years he has lost just a single ewe to theft, but thinks it may become a problem.

On the other side of the fence are healthy fields of maize, an extension of his farm planted on land leased from the Bakubung. This could be a solution if he loses his farm to land claims. He could lease the business back and pay the community a fee.

"I am an old man. I should take the money and set my sons up on new farms somewhere else, but what happens to the people who have worked for me? I am a farmer, I know nothing else. When I think of what could happen to what I have built here ..."

A century of stolen land

Khourie's farm, like those of his neighbours, was born out of a shameful law passed over 100 years ago. The Native Land Act of 1913, a cornerstone of apartheid, legislated areas where the black population could live and own land. This amounted to just 13% of the entire land mass of South Africa. The act also decreed that black people could only own land communally, under the guardianship of a traditional leader. This robbed small-scale subsistence farmers of the opportunity to borrow capital against the land they farmed. Whole communities were moved off their land, without compensation, to make way for commercial operations the size of principalities, owned and run by white farmers.

Slow and uncertain land claims

In 1994 South Africa's first democratically elected government came into power, and almost immediately passed legislation aimed at repairing the damage done by the Natives Land Act. The Restitution of Land Rights Act of 1994 was the first piece of transformative legislation passed by South Africa's post-apartheid parliament. The question of land ownership became a symbol for a wide range of issues facing the country.

But given a century of injustice, land claims are slow to process. The uncertainty raised by claims and the long time it takes them to be settled has affected agricultural growth in South Africa. Food production, rural development and job creation have fallen off as farmers stopped investing in their farms and allowed their land to lie fallow.

But around Bosparadys Khourie has earned a reputation as a man always ready to offer a helping hand. He has aided the Bakubung community, despite their land claim against him. The community has also applauded him for continuing to invest in his farm despite the uncertainty.

Khourie's phone chirps, his ring tone an indigenous bird call. It is a local farmer needing advice. He talks as he expertly guides his bakkie around divots and holes. "Trust me, Japanese radish is your solution. It's cheap and nutritious feed for your sheep. You let them onto your field and they will eat everything down to the root."

This informal support system is unavailable to the Bakubung, who have had most of their land returned to them. The rich fertile soil lies fallow from a lack of equipment, knowledge and capital for investment. At some point they were given seed and a tractor, without any other support. The agricultural projects these were used in were spectacular failures.

'It is our land and we must get it back'



"We were never allowed to think that we could determine our own futures. That is what apartheid stole from us" Peter Mpho. (Image: Sulaiman Philip)

Peter Mpho owns the 200 square metre plot on which his RDP house stands. He is lean and fit, pride in his face as he pulls up a stool. The cloudless sky brightens the hills that sweep off in all directions from Molote City. His world is clean and brilliantly green.

As he speaks the words crash from his lips. "Talking to William [Khourie], I can learn in a day what it has taken him 20 years to learn. I would happily work for him, learn from him. But in the end it is our land and we must get it back."

In 1966 Mpho's parents and their neighbours were uprooted from this land, which they had tended and used to raise cattle for a century, and moved 100 kilometres away, close to Sun City. There, communal subsistence farming was replaced with hardscrabble labour on poorer soil. Their agricultural tradition soon began to die out as men drifted to the cities to find work on the mines and the women took up jobs in the tourist industry.

"When we were moved off the land a cycle was broken," says Mpho. "The knowledge of our grandfathers died when they went off to the city. For us, this land claim is about becoming whole again."

Helped only halfway up the mountain

Mpho and his community call Khourie an honest man, one always available to help or offer advice. With his support the community began a hatchery supplying Bosparadys with 200 eggs a day. For six months the business was successful, then in hard times the hens began disappearing into the cooking pots of the town.

With a shake of his head, Mpho admits there have been setbacks, short-sighted decisions that have heaped further suffering on a community that feels they have been helped only halfway up the mountain.

Sitting in his dusty yard, drinking water out of a tin can, Mpho talks about a way of life he yearns for but knows is out of step with today's world. In his community Mpho is a vanishing breed, a part of a farming tradition and all it stands for - humility, gratification from working the land and a reverence for what has gone before - that is slowly disappearing. With the vast fertile valley in their hands, there are too few people who care about farming to make it their lives.

"My grandfather used to plough this land. He raised cows here, and this is how we lived. Now, how many of us here have the knowledge? We were never allowed to think that we could determine our own futures. That is what apartheid stole from us."

A rutted dusty road divides the Bakubung land in two. On one side a failed meadow of sunflowers is dying in a field. The other side dotted with low-lying shrubs that reflect the sun. They are called "bankruptbush", a woody inedible shrub that pushes out grass species and multiplies in overgrazed pastures. The lower pastures of the Bakubung land is covered with the invasive plants. They push their way up through the cracks in the foundation of the idle hatchery.

"The government needs to come in and give us help, equipment, knowledge or we will make the same mistakes over and over again," Mpho says with a shrug. He looks down the hill toward Bosparadys, where 250 people are employed - a population that matches his village of Molote City.

Support and subsidies

He is not asking for a hand-out, Mpho says. "When this land was taken, the white government gave white farmers support and subsidies to help them establish the productive farms you see today. All we ask is that we are given the same opportunities."

Mpho has been studying environmental and agricultural sciences. He understands that his success will help alleviate poverty in his village, where under 10 % of the population works. "I don't want to go to the city so I can feed my family here."

The community's attempt to get restitution, by having the government buy Bosparadys for them, failed. The valuations produced by either side were separated by a chasm. Mpho holds out hope that the process, which began five years ago, will finally come to an end next year. "Willing-buyer, willing-seller did not work. Now we are looking at restitution and redistribution. We want William to stay on at least for a few years to teach us the business."

Mpho believes in the traditional model of land ownership, where the land belongs to everyone under the stewardship of a traditional leader. But he knows subsistence farming is not a solution to the problems facing his community.

Businesses like the hatchery, built on community land, and a productive farm like Bosparadys would give the people of Molote City and nearby Mathopestad a secure economic future. "There are people in our community who want to stick with the old ways. We quarrel, we argue that it is time to try new ways."

"I would like to see Khourie stay on for four or five years. We could learn so much from him. He could help us rebuild the future."

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