

THE PEOPLE OF RIEMVASMAAK AND THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF LAND REDISTRIBUTION: HISTORICAL ANALYSIS 1995–2013

The people of Riemvasmaak and the socio-economic impact of land redistribution

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ABSTRACT

In terms of apartheid policies, the people of Riemvasmaak were forcefully removed in 1973/74 to Namibia and the Eastern Cape. Efforts to bring the people of Riemvasmaak back to their land gained momentum in 1993. Finally the decision to give the entire 74 000ha back to the people was taken in February 1994, and Riemvasmaak was registered as a Presidential Launch Project, one of the first land-restitution projects in post-apartheid South Africa. Most of the original residents returned to their land at the end of 1995 and in 2002 the people of Riemvasmaak received the title deeds to the plots on which they were living. While this is a noble project, the people of Riemvasmaak originally faced serious problems such as abject poverty, poor soil quality, no secondary schools, no tar roads, poor access between settlements, inadequate transport and limited access to water. However, in the last eighteen years, a great deal of impetus has been placed on agrarian transformation, rural development and land reform, which included improved economic and social infrastructure. This oral research study will therefore undertake to analyse the everyday lives of the people living in Riemvasmaak, the improvement in quality of life in the area as well as what regaining their land has meant for these people if seen against the backdrop of the history of forced removals in South Africa.

Keywords: Riemvasmaak, forced removals, land restitution, Presidential Launch Project, challenges, local municipality

INTRODUCTION

Riemvasmaak (pronounced *reem-fuss-mark*) is a vast arid area covering approximately 74 000 hectares and is bordered by the Orange River in the south, the Kalahari in the north and Namibia in the west. A dry section of the Molopo River, which forms a large part of the border between Botswana and South Africa, runs through it (Drive Out 2013). The literal translation of Riemvasmaak is ‘to tie with rawhide’. The name supposedly dates back to the early 1900s, when some Bushmen who lived in the area were caught stealing

the local community's livestock. They were tied to a large boulder in the Molopo River with rawhide thongs (called *rieme* in Afrikaans), but they escaped. From that time on, the area is said to have been known as *Riemvasmaak* and the community members as the Riemvasmakers. An alternative explanation of the origin of the name is that it simply refers to tying one's horse up to a hitching post. Yet another theory is that it refers to the tying of oxen with leather thongs to an ox wagon. It seems that tying things up was a common preoccupation of people in the region, because a nearby locality is called Bokvasmaak, which translates into 'tie up the goat'.

HISTORY OF RIEMVASMAAK

The history of the area dates from the end of the nineteenth century; in the 1870s families of Damara, Herero and Nama origin trekked to the Cape Colony to escape conflict in what is now known as Namibia and it is believed that some of the founders of Riemvasmaak originated from these groupings. The founder of Riemvasmaak was Dawid Dawids, also known as Koning (King) Dawid. He is believed to have been an *omuHerero* (Dierks 1999: 10), who fled Namibia and it is believed that he settled in Riemvasmaak because the white farmers would not allow him grazing land for his flock of sheep. Dawid's grandson was born in Riemvasmaak in 1903. These early settlers were joined by pastoralists and Xhosa people south of the Orange River. In 1923 a Catholic priest by the name of Father Fages requested the Upington Magistrate for a place where the community could reside permanently and permission was granted for them to settle in Riemvasmaak.

In 1933 the Minister of Land Affairs made the area available to the Department of Native Affairs for the use of the natives. Dicey (2007: 1) states that eventually, in 1934, Riemvasmaak was declared a temporary Native Reserve. Prior to their removal from the land in the early 1970s, the Riemvasmaak community embodied the concept of a rainbow nation, where people from different ethnic groups – including the people of Damara, Nama and Herero origin, as well as Xhosa and coloured people – lived together in unison. They all lived in harmony and spoke Afrikaans as their lingua franca and, in many cases, as their home language. The land was accessed and used communally according to shared rules established over time through customs and practices. The land was regarded as a treasure by the people of Riemvasmaak, since agricultural and livestock farming was the main sources of their livelihood and income. There also appeared to be a high level of social organisation within the community itself, as clearly evinced by the fact that they had regional committees known as the *voormanne* or headmen.

FORCED REMOVALS OF RIEMVASMAAK RESIDENTS

Dicey (2007: 148) states that in 1957 the National Party government forced all Riemvasmaak residents to apply for Bantu identity books. Dawid Dawids, the grandson

of King Dawid, was among those who refused, facing a fine of R25.00 (Pfeffer and Behera 1997: 272), which was more than a month's wages. After 1960 the apartheid regime embarked on a programme of mass removals as it sought to consolidate the Bantustans and remove 'black spots'. However, Riemvasmaak was ethnically mixed and consequently did not fit the plan. Therefore the state had to offer alternative land as the pressure to move people increased in the 1960s. According to Harrison (2004: 70), by 1960 there were 318 households in Riemvasmaak. Although people protested, Mckenzie (1998: 60) states the protests of the Riemvasmaak people were in vain and the Riemvasmaak community was forcibly removed from their land, starting in July 1973 with the people of Xhubuxap being moved, with January 1974 set for the people from the mission station to be moved under apartheid-era policies. Pütz et al. (1990: 191) state that about 700 families were relocated from the Riemvasmaak area to Namibia to make way for the South African Defence Force (SADF), and later the Augrabies Falls National Park, administered by South African National Parks. A. Damarah (Interview 28 July 2008), remembers the 'SADF arriving in trucks to transport the people to the respective trains according to their skin colour'. Their houses were burned down to ensure that there was nothing left for them to return to. According to Erasmus (2003: 20), Maria Vas, one of the inhabitants of Riemvasmaak, said: 'I still can hear the cat screaming in the burning house.' Community members recalled that they 'chopped the houses with axes, the houses built with timber they burnt and put people in tents' (Erasmus 2003). According to testimony of one of the residents (Namibia Damara Legislative Assembly), 'When I carried out the last of my suitcases, my house was burnt down. Where there were brick walls, the people were appointed to break down those walls. That day Riemvasmaak was enclosed in a blue smoke and I had to leave the place.'

According to Erasmus (2003: 20), the first group to leave Riemvasmaak were the forty-five families who were declared Xhosa. People of Nama or Damara descent were forcibly relocated 1 300 kilometres away to Khorixas in northern Namibia, where they were initially housed in tents (Mckenzie 1998), and those regarded as Xhosa were removed to Welcomewood (a barren part of the Ciskei near East London) were paid compensation for their houses and given 4x4m plank houses, blankets and food (Nash et al. 1981: 56). According to Bosman, when they arrived in Welcomewood, they found small wooden huts built for them. In return, all they got from the former homeland of the Ciskei was a school and a clinic staffed by four nurses (National Land Committee 1990: 167). Finally, those who were classified as coloured remained in the areas surrounding Riemvasmaak, such as Marchand, Augrabies and Keimos. According to Mckenzie (1998), the government paid R68 000 compensation, of which R60 000 went to the Catholic Church for improvements of the land and R8 000 went to the victims of forced removal.

According to Mckenzie (1998), the SADF acquired occupation of the land in 1974, as they were engaged in a bush war at the time, and established a base at the Riemvasmaak

mission station. The South African Air Force (SAAF) also used Riemvasmaak for weapons testing: an area of 30 000 hectares was set aside for this. Armscor also used the area for weapons testing and the area was used as well as for training by eight South African Infantry Training Unit (8 SAI). The SADF retained the classrooms at the mission station, but the rest of the school buildings were destroyed in military exercises. Because these SADF bases were used for training, there was a high level of *unexploded ordnance* at Riemvasmaak, which led to serious and even fatal injuries.

Added to this, about 60 000 ha were jointly managed by the SADF and by SANparks in 1988 to run a black rhino breeding programme (Travel Stories).

According to Mckenzie (1998), the process of land restitution was a difficult one, in particular because it occurred so soon after the establishment of democratic rule, when the roles of the national and provincial governments had yet to be clearly established. However, as the first land restitution case, Riemvasmaak has a special place in the annals of South African history.

RETURN OF THE LAND TO THE PEOPLE

According to Harrison (2004: 70), *Riemvasmaakers* began agitating for the return of their land, and Riemvasmaak has since made its mark as one of the first successful cases of land restitution. The *Riemvasmaakers* first approached South African president F.W. De Klerk in 1990 on the issue of land restitution; the Department of Land Affairs announced the return of the land to the *Riemvasmaakers* in February 1994.

Ons gaan terug na Riemvasmaak toe. Die plek van ons vaders and voorvaders. Die plek van melk en heuning. Riemvasmaak ons geboorteplek [We are going back to Riemvasmaak. The place of our fathers and forefathers. The place of milk and honey. Riemvasmaak, the place of our birth].

These are the lyrics of the Riemvasmaak folk song that reverberated in the hearts of the people. Riemvasmaak Development Trustees spokesman Daniel Vass said 17 families would return after having spent more than 22 years in Ciskei. He said their return was voluntary and some people had decided to stay at Welcomewood. Welcomewood headman and former Riemvasmaaker Aaron Malgas said those staying behind saw opportunities in the Eastern Cape. He opposed repatriation because job prospects at Riemvasmaak were bleak (newsbrief). The Xhosa families that chose to return to the area, settled along the Orange River in Vredesvallei. Burger et al. (1996: 188) state that the Riemvasmaak relocation project was embarked upon by establishing a temporary town comprising 120 army tents, taps, pit latrines and a dumping site. According to South African Parliament (1996: 175), the costs for the relocation of the Riemvasmaak community was R7 010 637.77. By June 1995 as many as 96 families had returned to Riemvasmaak. Derek Hanekom, then Minister for Land Affairs, said that the 'Riemvasmaak case held political lessons for a free, democratic South Africa' (Riemvasmaak Community Land Settlement, Damarah 1994).

For Riemvasmaakers, their connection with the land is very deep. After 20 years of exile, many could not wait to return to the place where they were born and felt at home; to build a future in a land they love very much. Norbert Coetzee, the driving force behind Riemvasmaak's tourism project, is one of these people. 'I was nine years old when my family was expelled from its land. We stayed at a German mission near Etosha in Namibia, 1 900km away from home. When 20 years later an official visited us and announced: "Mandela said you can come back," I returned to my homeland' (Travel Stories).

Mckenzie (1998: 60) further states that in 2002 Riemvasmaakers received the deeds to the plots of land that had been restored to them. The Riemvasmaak Community Land Settlement was one of the first instances of land restitution after South Africa's 1994 democratic elections. In South Africa, the right to land restitution for land alienated because of racially discriminatory laws or practices is one that has constitutional protection; however, the Riemvasmaak Community Land Settlement occurred prior to the promulgation of both the Restitution of Land Rights Act 1994 and the new South African Constitution 1996. It occurred pursuant to a process overseen by the Commission on Land Allocation (CLA), which was set up in 1991 by the De Klerk government to allocate unoccupied state land to those who had been forcibly removed from their land. Pfeffer and Behera (1997: 179) state that Freddie Bosman and a small group of fellow Riemvasmaakers approached a lawyer from the Legal Resources Centre in Cape Town to find out what chance they had of reclaiming Riemvasmaak. On 28 August 1992 their lawyer advised the Secretariat of the government's Advisory Commission on Land Allocation (ACLA) that the Riemvasmaak people intended to apply for the return of their land in terms of the Abolition of Racially Based Land Measures Act (108 of 1991). This initiative was combined with mass action as the people of Riemvasmaak protested at the World Trade Centre in Kempton Park, where all political parties were negotiating the transition to democratic rule in South Africa. Demonstrators called their campaign 'Back to the Land' and said 'No land, no rural vote', and 'Ons sal lewe, ons sal sterwe, ons vir jou Riemvasmaak' [We will live; we will die for you, Riemvasmaak].

In 1995 about 96 people originally from Riemvasmaak willingly returned to the area, where Nelson Mandela was present to welcome the indigenous people home (Riemvasmaak Community Land Settlement 2013). Mckenzie states that the Commission recommended that Riemvasmaak be returned to its rightful owners; 20 000 hectares of land on the eastern side of Riemvasmaak should remain for the use of the Defence Force; a trust should be established, as proposed by the Riemvasmaak community, to consider, in consultation with Riemvasmaakers, land use options and to prepare and implement development plans; the Catholic Church (the only building left standing after the forced removal) was to repay the amount of compensation paid to them, if they decided to reoccupy their former buildings; and the SADF should, as far as practically possible, clear the land of military pollution. The Riemvasmaak Community Development Trust was established on 28 March 1995. On 27 March 1996

the Riemvasmaak people were officially handed back 70 000ha of their land, and in 2012 an additional 4 500ha (part of the Augrabies National Park). However, there was insufficient preparation for the restitution, as was evident from the fact that people were reduced to living in tents. According to *The Journal of Rural Development*, the return of people of Riemvasmaak to their land was not coupled with a systematic strategy of planning for rural development services, especially coordination with different government departments such as the Department of Water Affairs. Also, as previously mentioned, the area was used for many years by the SADF and therefore it was deemed unsuitable for community use because it was littered with unexploded bombs and other potentially dangerous military debris. McKenzie argues that, although ecological damage had been minimal – with some people even arguing that the land had benefited from the military presence – military debris is a legacy with which the community will have to live for many years. The South African National Defence Force (SANDF) undertook a clean-up programme there, but said at the same time that it could not guarantee the land could be completely cleared (Institute for a Democratic Alternative for South Africa 1996: 14).

PROGRESSIVE INFRASTRUCTURAL DEVELOPMENT IN RIEMVASMAAK

Du Toit (2004: 93) wrote: ‘Riemvasmaak has turned into something of a disaster. It was one of the first land restitution projects in South Africa. There is no electricity or running water for the community, and the ground is full of shale and stones.’ However, while the above statements were true nine years ago, a five-year research study from 2008 to 2013 was conducted in the area of Riemvasmaak in terms of land infrastructure development since the people returned. According to Riemvasmaak beneficiary, Willem Damarah (Interview 27 August 2013), ‘infrastructure and basic living has improved vastly, especially in the last five years due to the initiatives of the provincial government, with all maintenance being provided by local government’. Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) housing was also provided by the local government to the people of Riemvasmaak (Pfeffer and Behera 1997: 283). Building commenced in 2005. These houses are modest, with two bedrooms but no bathroom. The pit toilet system is still being used, but there are plans under way to establish proper sanitation facilities in the area. It is reported that the Department of Water Affairs has set aside a budget of R13.5m for a water pipe line to service both Riemvasmaak and Vredesvallei.



Left: an example of an RDP house in Riemvasmaak. The primary form of transport is still a donkey cart.

Photographic source: Lauren Marx

The new National Department of Rural Development and Land Reform (DRDLR) was given the mandate by the President of South Africa to develop a Comprehensive Rural Development Programme (CRDP) throughout the country (Riemvasmaak Clinic Update 2013). To carry out this mandate, the DRDLR embarked on developing a fresh approach to rural development and a health clinic was built in 2010, complete with all basic equipment and a full-time attending nurse, who is a resident of Riemvasmaak, with a resident doctor from Kakamas visiting the Riemvasmaak community twice a month. Before this, the people had to rely on a mobile *clinic* visiting the area (The Committee 1990: 167).



Above and Top right: The Nelson Mandela Clinic was opened on 10 May 2011 in Riemvasmaak by the Northern Cape Premier Sylvia Lucas.

Photographic source: Lauren Marx



Sports grounds were built in 2010 complete with solar panels, which generate electricity to power the field lights as well as cloakrooms and grandstands for the public. This is hugely advantageous to the community and, according to W. Damarah (Interview 27 August 2013), the sports grounds are used extensively for athletics and netball and are seen as a valuable recreational area.



Above: Sports grounds built in 2010 in Riemvasmaak
Photographic source: Lauren Marx

The area surrounding Riemvasmaak is incredibly rocky terrain that resembles lunar landscapes. Up until 2011 there were no tar roads between Kakamas and Riemvasmaak, which made traveling very difficult. However, tar roads from Kakamas are in the process of being built and local government is using people from the Riemvasmaak and surrounding areas to assist in the projects. The upgrading of the 60km road in the

province has paved the way for social and economic activities. This has facilitated the transportation of goods in and out of the diamond-rich province. The road upgrade has also made it easier for the delivery of building material for RDP houses. This means that the local community benefits not only in terms of infrastructure but also financially, as they are remunerated for their work. There is also an element of ‘ownership’, as the people feel involved and have their say in the direction that their local community takes.

Below: A tar road being built between Kakamas and Riemvasmaak
Source: Lauren Marx



According to W. Damarah (Interview 27 August 2013), ‘electricity is now available to the people of Riemvasmaak and some homes even have satellite dishes with reception being very good’.



Above: Electricity poles in Riemvasmaak
Photographic source: Lauren Marx

With a mean annual rainfall of 124.4mm, water is *Riemvasmaak’s* most critical resource,

and *problems* are experienced with both quantity and quality (Reed 2006: 122). Riemvasmaak borders the Orange River but yet no running water was supplied to the people. Up until 2008 a water truck would deliver water once a week to the community. Jane Louw, who lives in a two-bedroom subsidised home, stated that in 2010 they went without water for days on end because municipal trucks stopped coming around to fill the communal tanks. However, in that same year local government established a water reservoir for the community whereby water is pumped from the Orange River through a filtration process and stored in water tanks in Riemvasmaak, with the Department of Water Affairs spending R4.05m on Riemvasmaak to provide clean drinking water. According to W. Damarah (Interview 27 August 2013), ‘the community does not experience water shortages and this has been a blessing to them’. The fact that water is now available is clearly evident from the green young trees that have been planted and that are flourishing in the gardens of locals’ homes.



Above: Water reservoirs were built in 2010

Photographic source: Lauren Marx

W. Damarah (Interview 27 August 2013) also stated that a ‘cellular phone tower has been built in 2009 in the area and reception is excellent in the area, particularly MTN service provider’. Up until 2008 any communication was out of the question as no communication tower was available.



Above: An MTN cellular reception tower built in 2010 in Riemvasmaak
Photographic source: Lauren Marx

It is also of interest that some of the residents of Riemvasmaak are engaging in tourism and entrepreneurial ventures by making use of the unique geological surroundings. One of the more enterprising residents of Riemvasmaak, Deon Basson (Interview 27 August 2013), ‘sells semi-previous quartzite stones, particularly fluorite, that are highly prevalent in the area to tourist that visit the area’.

Below: Tourism in Riemvasmaak
Photographic source: Lauren Marx



According to the Project Manager for the Riemvasmaak Festival, Ben Vass (Interview 27 August 2013), ‘a cultural festival has been planned in mid-December 2013 in order to place Riemvasmaak firmly on the map as a cultural and tourist destination. This festival includes local dances, food, performances, and other entertainment.’

One finding that was quite unusual is that the Xhosa people who previously lived in the area before the forced removals have returned to the area, but live out of their own free will in Vredesvallei at the bottom of the valley. According to A. Damarah (Interview 27 August 2013), there appears to be a ‘mutual understanding between the two communities that peace and order will be maintained if they live separately. Although one will find *Riemvasmakers* in Vredesvallei and vice versa, they typically live separately but jointly through history and the cooperation and understanding of local government.’

According to local caretaker Benjamin Simoen (Interview 27 August 2013), ‘crime is absolutely minimal, with the worst offence being robbery’. There is, however, a local police van from Kakamas that patrols the dirt roads of the area and the people feel very safe where they are.

EXISTING CHALLENGES IN RIEMVASMAAK

Daniel et al. (2003: 339) state that Riemvasmaak has become emblematic of the hardships sometimes caused by good intentions.

Two former office bearers of the Riemvasmaak Community Development Trust were sentenced to six years behind bars after the Kakamas Magistrate’s Court convicted them of stealing R650 000 from the trust. The trust was placed under administration by the Northern Cape High Court in April 2009 after the abuse of trust funds was uncovered (*The New Age* 19 February 2013).

According to local residents of Riemvasmaak, there are still many challenges facing the community, the largest one being economic hardship. Jobs are scarce in the area and when jobs do become available, they are mostly of a seasonal nature. Local employment is erratic and wages are low. The majority of households (76.7%) live below the poverty line, and the average net household income is R650 a month.

The main source of income is wage labour at nearby commercial farms, some income from livestock rearing and supplementary income from remittances or social grants to the elderly and for children. Most of the community members still rely heavily on social grants. In addition, although tar roads are in the process of being built, the local community is still very poor and does not have access to any vehicles. Therefore, they have become reliant on people coming from surrounding areas such as Keimos and Kakamas and local areas to deliver what they require. Taxis are available for the people of Riemvasmaak, but come at a hefty price of R120.00 return fare from Riemvasmaak to Kakamas. Schooling is also a challenge as Riemvasmaak has only a primary school, with the closest secondary school being in Kakamas, 53 kilometers away. At present 94 children attend the school and there are three teachers who teach on alternate school days. This essentially means that children do not receive secondary education because of a lack of funds and transport problems, which in turn translates into unemployment and poverty.

Simoen (Interview 27 August 2013) also stated that ‘drugs and alcohol are a problem in the area, but not to the point where intervention by government is required’. Also, the ‘harder’ types of drugs have not yet infiltrated the community.

RIEMVASMAAK INTO THE FUTURE

The Siyanda District Municipality realised the importance of tourism in the area at a very early stage and set up a broadly inclusive plan for the region. According to Spicer and Nepgen (2005: 47), the world famous Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park is in this region and attracts thousands of tourists to the region on an annual basis. The Riemvasmaak Ecotourism Project is a community-based project, started with the aim of providing work for the locals and to open up this fascinating area for tourism.

RVM 1 Hydro Electric Power (Pty) Ltd wishes to construct a 40 Megawatt (MW) hydropower station on the Orange River, on the farm Riemvasmaak (Riemvasmaak Hydropower Project).

A company led by Cape-based CitroGold, which develops high-quality fruit cultivars through its holding company, BioGold International, will lease up to 700ha of high-quality land from the beneficiaries. This will be developed into a high-volume horticultural concern producing citrus, grapes, pomegranates and figs, mostly for export. The estimated R200 million investment will pay for vine and orchard establishment, farm infrastructure including dams, pump houses and a road network, as well as processing facilities such as state-of-the-art packing houses. This is expected to create 200 permanent and 400 temporary jobs, and will serve as a catalyst for commercial agricultural production in the district. The community will hold an indirect stake in the company paid for by the Industrial Development Corporation and a majority stake in goat-rearing operations on surrounding land. The consortium has also set aside a portion of development costs for an education fund that will train locals in skills, ranging from supervisory to scientific work. This must provide the expertise to run the project once CitroGold exits after 20 years.

CONCLUSION

According to oral testimonies of the local residents of Riemvasmaak, it becomes apparent that the majority of people are satisfied with returning to their land and, although infrastructure development in the area has been slow and occurred on an ad hoc basis, generally they feel the government is doing its job in terms of creating a safe living space for the community members and providing them with basic amenities and infrastructure. According to oral testimony of J. Basson (Interview 28 July 2008), the people feel a ‘spiritual connection to the land and feel that this was and always will be home’. McKenzie states that when people first returned to Riemvasmaak, a woman knelt on the ground, scooped soil into her hands and rubbed it onto her face, wetting it with her tears. Dawid Malgas says he was ‘overjoyed to return in May to his ancestral

land for the first time in 20 years' (A Human Face). He was among a group of about 200 people who held a celebration at the old Roman Catholic Mission there. Members of the community danced to traditional Nama music and visited the neglected graves of their family members nearby (A Human Face).

Although the land restitution process to return the land to the people of Riemvasmaak was originally poorly coordinated and executed, it has become a success story because of the drive of the original inhabitants, the Trust, and the local and provincial governments.

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