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VENDALAND HAS THREE DOCTORS TO
200,000 NATIVES.

By
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The blinded native boy's eye rolled wildly as with expert fingers the specialist pressed back the lid to show me the scars on the pupil. "We can make a little window there," she said. "It will give him some sight. Not much, but something."

she grasped the boy by his coat lapels and steered him back to a waiting nurse. The boy drifted away on spindle legs. He was one of a line-up of young syphilitics seated along a bench outside a ward of Elim Hospital, the Swiss Mission institution south-west of Louis Trichardt.

There were old men squatted there too, blinded by cataract. This part of the Transvaal, lush and green though it looks below the Zoutpansberg, is full of clinical material. Much of it comes to the doors of the Elim Hospital which has 210 beds for natives and 50 more for whites. Others make their way to the Donald Fraser Hospital 50 miles to the east in the heart of Vendaland. Thousands more are never seen for the proportion of doctors to natives is one to 150,000 in the Donald Fraser area.

Bilharzia, conjunctivitis, and malaria are the three prevailing evils among the Bavenda and Shangaan peoples who

make/

make up the bulk of the rural population of this corner of the Transvaal. Dr. J.A. Rosset, the medical superintendent at Elim and his wife (an eye specialist), in the course of a bilharzia survey a year or two ago in a group of native schools found that of 1,200 children examined 800 were suffering. Of these 600 agreed to treatment but only 400 carried on with the cure and even they dropped it after the first symptoms had gone.

A shy and secretive people are the Bavenda, the Shangans much less so for they are emigrants who followed the dynamic "Juwawa" Albasini, the Portuguese adventurer and hunter when he crossed over the border in the middle of the last century.

Mostly the Bavenda keep to the hills. In the hills have been their refuge from marauding impis in the past. They are deep-locked in magic and superstition, so much so that close on three-quarters of a century of scattered mission endeavour has not made much impression. Schools, other than their own "domba" dance initiation schools for girls and circumcision schools for boys, are not eagerly sought.

Parents are loath to encourage their children to be educated. Education spells discontent with the traditional tribal lot. They are suspicious of the outward signs of upliftment ----- clothes, for instance. They prefer their daughters who do go to school to wear still the distinctive salempore or cotton blanket rather than dresses.

"In their salempores we can see them," they x say, using the

word "see" in the wider sense it has to the native mind. Very few pursue education beyond the early primary stage. In the bush schools boys outnumber girls by ten to one, and the proportion of girls who succeed in passing Standard VI is negligible.

One of the biggest battles which the Donald Fraser and Elim Hospitals have had to wage is against this reluctance of parents to have their children educated sufficiently to qualify them as nurse trainees. Dr. R.D. Aitken, medical superintendent of the Donald Fraser comments: "It has been very truly said that if you educate a man you educate an individual: if you educate a woman you educate a family. The uplifting of the people of Vendaland will come only when we are able to bring enlightenment to the homes and families through the women."

The story of rural hospitals in South Africa (and the bulk of them are mission-founded and run) follows very much of a pattern. There is the initial suspicion of the tribesfolk to be overcome. But once this has happened the patients are greedy for the benefits of white medicine.

So it was at the Donald Fraser where Dr. Aitken won his spurs by the successful amputation of a fungus-eroded foot. So it was also, I remember, at St. Michael's Mission Hospital at Batharos near Kuruman where the sister Mary Cordon has been in charge for many years.

"There's some kind of spirituality about this place," an official said who used to visit St. Michael's fairly frequently. I have felt that in other similar institutions

remote from the towns where you meet highly skilled, intelligent, cultured people devoting themselves without great reward or any spotlight of recognition to the needs of thousands of poor, ignorant, magic-ridden black South Africans.

Missions come in for their share of criticism. They are often accused of sectional jealousies and scrambling for souls. Yet we would be a far more backward community without them. They have built and still run more than 90 per cent of the schools for natives in South Africa. They struggle along year after year on small budgets, battling constantly to be self-supporting and never quite succeeding because of the need to go on expanding as their good work makes more converts and more pupils.

Some of them started with money originally from overseas more than 50 years ago are still paying back loans which enabled them to begin. Theirs is a life of small, if any financial reward and a great burning-up of skilled knowledge which, if capitalised, could have given them material security in the cities.

Among educated Bantu opinion as expressed in the Natives' Representative Council there has been argument in favour of all mission schools being taken over by the State. One estimate of what this would involve the Government in is £20,000,000. That must be a very rough calculation and only deals with the actual purchase of land and the buildings erected on it. It takes no account of the

training of enough suitably qualified principals, the proper equipping of schools, and the ultimate goal of making education compulsory for all children of all colours.

Eighty per cent of our Non-European population cannot read or write, according to the Adult Education Committee's findings.

Distant though the objective is, it must be plain to every thinking citizen that until all education is State-controlled and put upon a compulsory basis we cannot hope to become a first-class country in charge of our own destinies and employing the full mental and physical energies of the nation.

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