KINGS, COMMONERS AND CONCESSIONAIRES

The Evolution and Dissolution of the Nineteenth-Century Swazi State

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE
LONDON NEW YORK NEW ROCHELLE
MELBOURNE SYDNEY

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011–4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

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First published 1983
First paperback edition 2002

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress catalogue card number: 82-4234

ISBN 0 521 24270 3 hardback
ISBN 0 521 52300 1 paperback

Contents

	List of maps	vi
	List of figures	vi
	Preface	vii
1	Introduction	1
2	The northern Nguni states 1700–1815	9
3	The conquest state 1820–1838	27
4	Factions and fissions: Mswati's early years	47
5	The balance tilts: Swazi–Boer relations 1852–1865	65
6	The deepening and widening of Dlamini power 1852–1865	85
7	Regency and retreat 1865–1874	103
8	Confederation, containment and conciliar rule: Mbandzeni's apprenticeship 1874–1881	126
9	The puff-adder stirs: Mbandzeni and the beginnings of concessions 1881–1886	160
10	The conquest by concessions 1886–1889	182
11	Conclusion	208
	Appendix	225
	Notes	230
	Bibliography	288
	Index	304

Maps

1 Modern Swaziland ix
2 Chiefdoms *c.* 1820 x
3 Swaziland – vegetation types (adapted from J. P. H. Acocks, *Veld Types of South Africa*, Pretoria, 1951) 15
4 Swaziland – relief 16
5 Swaziland – percentage better arable land by subcatchments (adapted from G. Murdoch, *Soils and Land Capability in Swaziland*, Swaziland Ministry of Agriculture, Bulletin No. 23, 3 vols., Mbabane, 1968, vol. 2, p. 315, Map 18, 'Land classes AS+BS by subcatchments') 18
6 Swaziland – drought hazard (adapted from Murdoch, *Soils*, vol. 1, 33, Map 4) 19
7 Transvaal (adapted from F. J. Potgieter, 'Die Vestiging van die Blanke in Transvaal (1837–1886)', *A.Y.B.* 1958, II, Pretoria/-Cape Town, 1959, facing p. 141) 55
8 Mozambique chiefdoms *c.* 1860 100
9 Transvaal districts 1873 (adapted from Potgieter, 'Vestiging', facing p. 77) 112
10 Disputed border area 1880 157
11 Swaziland – mineral concessions granted in 1880s (adapted from J. S. M. Matsebula, *A History of Swaziland*, Cape Town, 1972) 173

FIGURES

1 Marriage to a woman of one's father's mother's clan 35
2 Marriage to classificatory mother's brother's daughter 36

1

Introduction

Despite a relatively long tradition of historical scholarship, the historiography of nineteenth-century South Africa is uneven in quality and in places disappointingly sparse. Within the realm of specifically African history, large areas await serious academic attention, and while a new upsurge of interest has been evident for much of the last decade, only a small proportion of the resulting researches has yet appeared in print. Much of the published African material is therefore still framed within settler, Afrikaner or liberal traditions, and is disfigured in many instances by a strong albocentric slant. The dominant assumptions have been of the backwardness and stasis of African societies, to which is often added their incapacity to shape history for themselves. Liberal writing has been no more immune from this spirit than studies cast in the settler–Afrikaner mould. Settler historians like Theal or Cory may have inveighed against the barbarity of blacks, and framed their accounts in terms of African aggression and deceit, but they did at least devote considerable space to African activities from which the outlines of a history emerge.[1] Liberal historians by contrast have contented themselves with affirming the dignity and validity of African societies, and denouncing the violence and rapacity of whites, but almost invariably with the assumption that Africans were passive objects of history meriting little attention in themselves.[2] Only with the publication of *The Oxford History of South Africa* in 1969–71 was a more Africanist dimension injected into liberal writing, yet this, while an important milestone in southern African studies, has not been backed up by the range of monographs that it might have been expected to inspire.[3]

As a result the task of writing African history has often fallen to social anthropologists and amateur oral historians, who, while being by no means free of the prejudices of their time, were at least prepared to focus squarely on African society and to employ indigenous historical material (notably oral traditions), which orthodox historians shunned. Schapera, Wilson, Kuper, Gluckman and the Kriges, not to mention certain ethnologists like van Warmelo of the Ethnological Survey, each made significant contributions in this field, which in some cases have not been superseded today.[4] Yet,

they in their turn were not without blemishes of approach. The idea of stasis in African societies was if anything reinforced by the structural-functionalist school of analysis which ruled anthropology between the 1920s and 1950s, and which saw the various elements of African societies in mutually supportive (and by implication substantially changeless) equilibrium. Similarly, while many anthropologists in South Africa were remarkable for their awareness of the impact of industrialisation on the societies they studied, they did not translate these perceptions back into the pre-industrial era and see African societies as being transformed, even then, through a process of interaction with wider regional or sub-continental systems.[5] Analogous points could be made of the non-professional oral historians. While assembling invaluable collections of oral traditions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which serve in many cases as the foundation of studies today, their writings are pervaded with contemporary attitudes about the timelessness and primitiveness of African societies, which make it necessary to slice through their interpretative frameworks in an attempt to get back to the raw data they used.[6]

'White' history of the nineteenth century has been somewhat better served. A dense body of literature exists on the British and Dutch settlements in Natal and the Cape, on the development of the trekker states in the interior, and on the repercussions of the mineral discoveries in Kimberley and the Rand. Yet, once again, when it comes to charting the relationships of these societies with neighbouring or subject African communities, one encounters a void. Apart from a few sporadic frontier wars and the bald record of vagrancy laws and legislation concerning masters and servants, one knows remarkably little about the precise dynamics of the interaction that undoubtedly occurred. The point is particularly true of the trekker Republics in the Transvaal – the chief 'white' states considered in the following pages – where interracial interaction was particularly extensive and intense. After a brief flickering of interest in this subject in the early 1940s, the main post-war contributions have been those of van Rooyen and de Vaal, which themselves share the universal weakness of the rest of the literature, of not relating internal divisions within Afrikaner communities to different prescriptions for policy towards blacks and to competition over the resources involved.[7] To a large extent therefore, the typical approach is that captured in F. J. Potgieter's otherwise admirable study where he writes that although the Boers employed African labourers they remained 'something outside of him – something which he accepted as part of his environment, like the mountains, the grasslands and fever'.[8]

This study aims to redress part of that balance. It focusses on Swaziland, both because of its pivotal position in nineteenth-century south-eastern Africa, and because, even more than other African societies in this region, it is grossly misunderstood and under-researched. The absence of adequate historical analysis is the direct outcome of the wider historiographical tradi-

tion. Until recently, in common with much other nineteenth-century southern African history, the bulk of historical writing on the subject has had a strong Eurocentric slant, and comparatively little has been written on the Swazi themselves. Of the main contributors, Symington and van Rooyen concentrate on the relations of the Boer republics with the Swazi,[9] Watson and Boyce focus on concessions,[10] Garson confines himself primarily to the diplomatic manoeuvring between the South African Republic and Britain over the status of Swaziland,[11] and Perkins looks at missions.[12] Only Matsebula gives an account centred firmly on the Swazi themselves, and his is more of a survey than a detailed analysis, which only partly explores the data available from the archives and from oral tradition.[13]

Indeed, with the exception of this and two other much narrower studies by Swazi historians,[14] it is usually more rewarding to turn to the writings of social anthropologists.[15] Hilda Kuper's *An African Aristocracy*, in particular, provides an unrivalled insight into the functioning of Swazi politics, which is neither as synchronic nor as Dlamini-orientated as the date of its publication might lead one to suppose.[16] In addition to its introductory chapters it is exceptionally rich in historical allusions, as a glance at the subsequent notes will readily confirm, besides drawing on extensive regional data from the south and north-east. Nevertheless, *An African Aristocracy* does not purport to be an historical text. It contains no systematic exposition of the evolution of centre–regional relations, still less of their interaction with pressures from outside, and tends to view them for the most part from the perspective of the ruling group. Still more important, it implicitly adopts the position that oral tradition represents no more than an historical charter for the present, which thereby precludes it from using this source to grasp qualitative historical change.[17] For all these reasons there is room for a more broadly based historical contribution, and it is hoped that this study will partly meet that need.

The state of our knowledge of the Swazi stands in inverse relation to their historical role. Swaziland occupied a pivotal position in south-eastern Africa throughout the nineteenth century. It was a critical group in the processes of Nguni state formation in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and greatly expands our understanding of the interplay of forces at work at this time; it played a central part in the political economy of south-east Africa in the middle decades of the century, illustrating the deep dependence of white societies on their African neighbours or hosts and the extreme fluidity of political relationships to which this gave rise; and it was one of the last African societies in South Africa to be subordinated to white rule, providing an unusually instructive case-study of the impact of mining capital in the most remote corners of the land. Lastly, Swazi history engages more or less continuously with virtually every other chiefdom or state in south-eastern Africa, and so acts as a kind of prism through which the broader processes and trends in the region can be viewed.

So much for the general significance of Swaziland in the nineteenth century. What exactly does this study set out to do? Obviously it concerns itself with the issues outlined above, but it also spreads itself more broadly and less thematically than these topics by themselves would allow. Around the unifying theme of Swaziland, or more specifically the development and functioning of this nineteenth-century African state, it attempts to show how thoroughly intertwined were domestic, political and economic processes with a whole host of forces from outside, and to get away once and for all from the 'apartheidisation' of this epoch of South African history, which stands in many ways as an historical charter to this political creed. At the same time, while recognising the historical unity of this area, it rejects the idea that for most of this period the unifying factor was in any decisive way 'white'. As Swaziland's experience quite emphatically attests, the white powers in the region were often no more than a secondary consideration, being consistently overshadowed in Swazi eyes by African states, and by the Zulu in particular. What is more, it was often Swaziland itself that was the axis around which major developments turned, something which has been as little understood by Zulu as by 'Republican' historians. For this reason alone, some closer attention to Swaziland is long overdue.

As set out so far, this study falls squarely within the Africanist tradition, emphasising the uniqueness and significance of the Swazi experience, and the dynamic role they played in shaping their wider political environment. But it does also attempt to transcend those particular concerns. In portraying the processes involved in the consolidation of the Swazi state, it documents the growing stratification of Swazi society, and the institutionalisation of various mechanisms of surplus appropriation, which it sees as the basis of a profound societal change. Here it draws implicitly on the work of Meillassoux, Rey and Terray.[18] Similarly it attempts to go beyond a purely diplomatic or political portrayal of Swaziland's relations with the outside world, and to consider the role of capitalist penetration, be it merchant or industrial, in shaping the environment in which the Swazi and their neighbours moved. The effects of the trade in ivory and wool are briefly considered, as is the significance of that vital but long-neglected topic, the trading in captives to the trekker republics of the Transvaal. Nearer the end of the century the effects of mining capital on the Rand are also examined, including its relationship to the concessionaire invasion of Swaziland and the diplomatic tussle over the country between Britain and the South African Republic. Here, once again, it brings new perspectives to bear.

As indicated earlier, the history of Swaziland touches on, or is touched by, virtually every development of significance in this part of nineteenth-century southern Africa. The *Mfecane*, the Great Trek, the establishment of the British colony in Natal, the formation of the South African Republic, the civil conflicts in the Transvaal, the slave trade, the expansion of the Shangane and Pedi states, the Sekhukhune wars, the Zulu War, the British

annexation of the Transvaal and the discovery of minerals on the Rand all affected Swazi history and were reciprocally influenced in turn. A host of historical actors consequently crowd onto the stage, with contemporaneous events in Zululand and the Transvaal often profoundly affecting one another, either directly or, at one remove, through those in Swaziland. It is with a view to capturing the richness and complexity and the continual movement of this interaction that a chronological arrangement of this study has been preferred. It is hoped, nevertheless, that it succeeds in standing back sufficiently often from the historical narrative to draw together thematic threads and for a more general picture to emerge.

SOURCES

Our current state of knowledge on pre-colonial Swaziland is at least partly a reflection of the dearth of published primary material. Compared with the Zulu or Southern Sotho, or a number of other southern African chiefdoms, Swaziland has little in the way of traveller, settler or missionary accounts.[19] Similarly, as far as British Blue Books are concerned, or other official compilations, Swaziland figures only briefly and intermittently in the published account. Still more significantly, Swazi history has had no Bryant or MacGregor to make a systematic collection of its oral traditions.[20] Both Honey and Miller have gathered useful information, as did Stuart more briefly in his early Swaziland days, but for the most part these are unpublished or not readily accessible, and are not remotely as comprehensive as the other studies just named.[21]

The main sources for this study are therefore archival and oral. Archival records have been used mainly to document Swaziland's external relations, although they occasionally shed light on internal affairs. The Transvaal archives in particular have proved a valuable source. Beginning with the establishment of the Ohrigstad (later Lydenburg, later South African) Republic in 1845, they document the Republic's relationships with Swaziland and the various interests these expressed right up until the conclusion of this study in 1889.Substantially unexplored for the study of African societies, they represent a mine of information on patterns of interaction between black and white in and around the Transvaal. Their chief weakness lies in their relative thinness for the earlier period, and in the blind spots they exhibit in relation to African societies. In the early years of the republics, up until roughly 1860, administration was sparse, local officials showed little disposition or capacity to write, and many documents were lost (for example, the whole Zoutpansberg archive disappeared during the Anglo-Boer War). Later documentation is fuller and more continuous, and indeed undergoes explosive expansion from 1880 on, yet even here one encounters problems when trying to fathom what was happening beyond the authority of the Transvaal administration's writ. Local officials, whether through

inertia or the nature of their office, seem to have been profoundly uninquisitive about African societies, and such knowledge as they had they rarely committed to paper. As a result the most one finds, with the exception of the period of British annexation (1877–81), is the occasional spotlight on neighbouring societies, usually when refugees sought asylum from domestic upheaval and brought news of the conflicts which had caused them to flee. Those qualifications aside, the Transvaal archives still remain the most important source of documentary evidence on Swaziland for this period, and allow us to piece together a picture of external interaction and, sometimes, of internal change.

Elsewhere, the principal bodies of material relating to Swaziland are those housed in the Natal, the British Colonial Office, the Maputo and the Swaziland archives. Each yields predictable kinds of information. The Natal archives document Swaziland's relations with the Zulu and Natal, but also contain the Captain Garden and Shepstone collections which shed light on internal developments in the early 1850s and the 1880s respectively. The Maputo archives help unravel the tangled relations between Swaziland, the Shangane, the Tsonga and the Portuguese, while the Colonial Office and Swaziland records chronicle the colonial onslaught on Swaziland and the parallel conquest by concession.

Of more use in reconstructing Swaziland's internal development are the records of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, those of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (S.P.G.), and the James Stuart and Allister Miller collections in the Killie Campbell Africana Library in Durban. The Wesleyan and S.P.G. archives yield important information on the 1840s and on the 1870s and 1880s respectively, while the James Stuart collection contains crucial fragments of oral tradition bearing mainly on the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Allister Miller's collection, like those of Offy Shepstone and David Forbes (the latter being deposited in the Transvaal archives in Pretoria), is a key source for the 1880s, and helps us penetrate the murky world of concessionaire politics at this time.

The last archival source deserving of mention is the Eckstein collection in the Barlow Rand Archives in Johannesburg. This sheds completely new light on the concessionaire invasion and subsequent annexation of Swaziland. Like the letters of Offy Shepstone to his wife and to his solicitor, they are often shot through with a brutal cynicism and candour, and provide a powerful economic foundation to what have usually been regarded as purely diplomatic negotiations.

For all the value of these and other archival collections, they leave crucial areas of Swaziland's internal politics opaque. Swazi oral traditions make good this lack. These represent arguably the richest body of oral historical tradition still extant in South Africa, and a few words of explanation are necessary to account for the situation, and to indicate the way in which they

were used. In the pre-colonial era Swaziland was a large centralised state which imparted to its traditions a certain chronological depth.[22] Subsequently, under colonial rule, its political structure was not disrupted to the same degree as other southern African kingdoms, which lent a vitality and relevance to its traditions rarely encountered elsewhere. In a society in which there were few formal mechanisms for the transmission of history, the daily living of historically structured relationships ensured a continuity and stability to oral traditions well into modern times.[23] Under the impact of social and economic change engendered by the modern era in South Africa, the situation has slowly changed, and one often hears Swazi elders bemoaning the lack of interest of the modern youth in the traditions and customs of the past. Nevertheless there are still many of the older generation conversant with the traditions of their forebears, and from the lips of such people much of the present study derives.

If Swaziland's traditions are marked by their depth and stability, they are also notable for their diversity and breadth. The reasons lie once again in the structure and evolution of the pre-colonial state. Swaziland was a conquest society twice over, expanding in two waves of conquest and incorporation in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Welded together over a number of generations from a great range of cultural and political stock, it came to comprise a mosaic of the elements that jostled together in south-eastern Africa in these turbulent times. The staggered and differential incorporation of its various cultural and political components endows Swaziland with an exceptionally rich corpus of historical tradition. Each group that was absorbed into the Swazi kingdom carried with it the historical memory of its incorporation and of the changes of status that it subsequently underwent. Much of what Roberts has to say about the central African kingdom of Kazembe could therefore apply equally well to the Swazi:

> The subject groups, now co-ordinated in a single polity through a common principle of hierarchy, the kingship of Kazembe, proceeded to seek honour and influence in terms of their relationship with this kingship. Thus the unity afforded by the kingship also served to perpetuate the diversity of the kingdom, for the kingship and its reflected glory became a stimulus to competition and rivalry.[24]

Local clan and chiefdom histories also shade off into another category of tradition coloured by primarily regional concerns. Each region of Swaziland was faced with specifically regional problems with which their histories became disproportionately infused. Southern Swaziland, for example, was much more exposed than other regions to Zulu encroachment and attack, and sought insurance in the form of marriage and other quasi-political links. Its traditions therefore reflect this particular preoccupation, as do those of other regions their specific regional concerns.

Few of these local or regional strands of tradition have as yet been

systematically explored. With one or two notable exceptions, the main focus has been on the traditions of the royal family and royal capitals, which, while justifiable to a degree for the post-1870s when a more dominant royal tradition reflects a more stable and integrated Swazi state, does not capture the complexity and flux of the earlier years.[25] The relative poverty of local researches has both advantages and disadvantages for the oral historian: advantages because the problems of feed-back from published work do not assume the same proportions as elsewhere,[26] disadvantages because the very richness and freshness of Swazi traditions make their study a truly monumental task.

Researchers from other areas would no doubt gladly exchange these difficulties for theirs, but they still needed to be confronted and resolved. The approach I adopted when facing this situation was to attempt a broad survey of the traditions of each important chiefdom or clan in an effort to build up a picture of local and regional, as opposed to royal, traditions. Both the methodology and its execution left much to be desired. Some areas, owing to human and vehicular frailties, were only patchily researched, a notable example being south-eastern Swaziland. More serious from a methodological point of view, I had little option, given the time at my disposal, but to conduct many of my interviews with groups. The dangers of this procedure have been amply illustrated by Vansina. An 'official' view is easily reproduced and variant traditions cannot be recovered to establish an unassailably authentic historical core.[27] The best that I could do in these circumstances was to employ the same procedure at a more general level, that is, by reconstructing the histories of regions and groups through a comparison of the histories of individual chiefdoms and clans in neighbouring localities. Clearly what my oral researches have achieved is no more than an initial mapping of some of the more important local and regional traditions. The arduous task of collecting variant traditions within each chiefdom still needs to be tackled. It can only be hoped that this study will contribute to that end.