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REVITALIZATION THROUGH EXPANSION IN SOUTHERN AFRICA,
c. 1750-1840: A REAPPRAISAL OF THE 'MFEKANE'

The University of Nebraska - Lincoln

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PREVIEW

REVITALIZATION THROUGH EXPANSION IN SOUTHERN AFRICA, c. 1750-1840:
A REAPPRAISAL OF THE MFECAN

by

James O. Gump

A DISSERTATION

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Under the Supervision of Professor Leslie C. Duly

Lincoln, Nebraska

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TITLE

REVITALIZATION THROUGH EXPANSION IN SOUTHERN AFRICA, c. 1750-1840:

A REAPPRAISAL OF THE MFEKANE

BY

James O. Gump

APPROVED

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REVITALIZATION THROUGH EXPANSION:
A REAPPRAISAL OF THE MFECANE

One of the most remarkable events in the history of southern Africa, and one still mired in controversy, is the rise and consolidation of Shaka's Zulu empire between 1818 and 1828. The Mfecane (literally, "the crushing") is the Zulu term used to describe the conflict generated during the Shakan wars of the early nineteenth century among the northern Nguni in what is now the northern half of Natal Province. The Mfecane is no less a watershed for the African peoples of southern Africa than the Great Trek is for Afrikanerdom.¹ In fact, the significance of the latter event dwarfs in comparison to the impact of the dispersal and redistribution of African ethnic groups during the course of the Shakan wars. Without the disruptions originally provoked in Transorangia by the Mfecane, it is unlikely that the Boer trekkers would have been able to move into their embryonic Orange Free State and Transvaal in the late 1830s with such facility.

1. In 1835 Afrikaner families moved northward from the Cape Colony across the Orange River to escape what they perceived to be a burdensome British administration. Since the late nineteenth century this migration has been referred to as the Great Trek. See Leonard M. Thompson, "Co-operation and Conflict: The High Veld," in The Oxford History of South Africa (hereinafter cited as OHSA), vol. I, eds. Monica Wilson and Leonard Thompson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 405-24.

A problem that continues to trouble scholars is how Shaka, leader of the relatively obscure Zulu clan, was able to convert a highly decentralized political system into a major kingdom in such a short period of time. Even more puzzling is how the principal "offshoots" of the Shakan wars were able to recreate the Zulu model with similar efficiency. For example, Mzilikazi, leader of the Khumalo lineage, forged the powerful Ndebele state from migrant Nguni and proximate Sotho peoples in the space of a decade. Zwangendaba, leader of a section of the Ndwandwe, assimilated a cultural amalgam into the Ngoni kingdom of east-central Africa. And Soshangane fled northward with his migrant Nguni lineage to establish the Gasa kingdom in eastern Mozambique.

More staggering than these difficult questions is the general demographic significance of this phenomenon. The reverberations of the Mfecane were felt throughout southern, central, and eastern Africa. After establishing an extensive kingdom south of the Limpopo River on the highveld, Mzilikazi's Ndebele moved northward in 1837 to create a similar polity in southern Zimbabwe. The Ngoni, following their destruction of the Monomatapa empire in southern Zimbabwe, moved northeastward to create a variety of kingdoms in Malawi, Zambia, and Tanzania, one thousand miles from their original home in Natal. The Dhlamini-Ngwane were displaced from their homeland along the Phongolo River by the Ndwandwe during the incipient stages of the Mfecane, and under the leadership of Sobhuza created the

boundaries of present-day Swaziland. Across the Drakensberg Mountains to the west, the disruptions provoked by the Mfecane launched Sebetwane's Kololo kingdom which eventually settled on the upper Zambesi River. Finally, the power vacuum created on the highveld was filled by Moshoeshoe, perhaps the most capable leader in southern African history. Absorbing desperate refugees during the 1820s and 1830s, Moshoeshoe combined diplomatic skill with a genuine humanitarian impulse to lay the foundations of modern Lesotho.

Many of the conventional historical accounts of the Mfecane focus largely on 1) the great leaders involved in the event and 2) the military and political institutions created during the rise and consolidation of the Zulu state.² In this view, Dingiswayo, leader of the Mthethwa confederacy from c. 1780-1818, was principally responsible for inaugurating the major social and political changes associated with the Zulu empire. For example, Dingiswayo allegedly abolished the traditional initiation rite of circumcision for young men, an institution long practiced among the Nguni, and replaced it with military service to the Mthethwa chiefdom. He then conscripted young men into a standing army, organized on the basis of age rather than the traditional territorial organization. These so-called

2. The best example here is J.D. Omer-Cooper's highly-regarded The Zulu Aftermath: A Nineteenth Century Revolution in Bantu Africa (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969). More balanced yet similarly directed is Leonard Thompson's "Co-operation and Conflict: The Zulu Kingdom and Natal," in OHSA, vol. I, pp. 334-64.

"age-regiments" purportedly gave the Mthethwa a decisive military advantage over their neighbors, as Dingiswayo succeeded in creating a loose confederacy from proximate Nguni groups by conscripting young men from other lineages into the new military system. By the time of his death in 1818, Dingiswayo had succeeded in establishing Mthethwa supremacy over much of the territory between the Mfolozi and Mhlathuze rivers sandwiched between the coast and the foothills of the Drakensberg Mountains.

According to the conventional historical account, the initiative for state-making passed from Dingiswayo to Shaka during the second decade of the nineteenth century. Among the lineages absorbed during the course of Mthethwa expansion, the Zulu, residing along the upper basin of the White Mfolozi River, was one of the least significant. Shaka, one of the sons of the ailing Zulu chief Senzangakona, usurped control of the Zulu chieftainship from his own brother, the rightful heir. Soon thereafter Shaka accompanied Dingiswayo to a battle with Zwide, leader of the powerful Ndwandwe. Shaka allegedly betrayed Dingiswayo's position to Zwide, and the Ndwandwe chieftain summarily captured and executed the Mthethwa leader. Shaka's imperial ambitions were now blocked only by the Ndwandwe to the north. Once this obstacle was eliminated, Shaka attained complete mastery between the Phongolo and Thukela rivers in the corridor between the Indian Ocean coast and the Drakensberg Mountains. Shaka's territorial conquests

were purportedly achieved through his supplementation of Dingiswayo's organizational initiatives: replacement of the long throwing spear for the short-stabbing assegai; use of the winged battle formation; creation of female "age-regiments"; and establishment of a rigid hierarchy of civil and political officials subordinate to the king.

The conventional emphasis given to Dingiswayo and the "regimental" character of the Zulu empire is a legacy, I believe, of the European colonizing "mission." Unable to conceive of African societies initiating an event of such magnitude, European writers in the nineteenth century associated the Mfecane with the white presence in southern Africa. Much of the mystique surrounding Dingiswayo is associated with his alleged exile from the Mthethwa during his youth. According to most Mthethwa traditions, Dingiswayo returned to his homeland after an extended journey among a number of chiefdoms.³ Theophilus Shepstone, the British Secretary of Native Affairs in Natal during much of the latter half of the nineteenth century, speculated that Dingiswayo must have travelled to the Cape Colony during his journeys and observed British military formations. Thus inspired by the European's highly efficient regimental organization, Dingiswayo allegedly

3. A.T. Bryant, Olden Times in Zululand and Natal (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1929; reprint ed., Cape Town: C. Struik, 1964), pp. 87-95.

returned to Nguniland to reorganize the Mthethwa on a similar basis.⁴

Shepstone's purely conjectural theory is deficient in a number of respects. First, it is unlikely that Dingiswayo could have survived the one thousand mile round trip to the Cape and back. In response to Shepstone's story, a Zulu informant to Natalian administrator James Stuart remarked that the Cape, the only place where there were European troops, could be reached only by travelling through a number of hostile states.⁵ Second, there is overwhelming evidence that Dingiswayo did not invent the "age-regiment" system.⁶ As in the case of Mark Twain's proverbial death, the exploits of Dingiswayo have been highly exaggerated. The "white inspiration" model should receive an appropriate burial, but it lingers on to find its way into some of the most popular contemporary accounts of the history of the Zulu empire.⁷

A more promising historical approach to the Mfecane is therefore one which examines it within the framework of the internal dynamics of the Nguni themselves. Anthropologist

4. Cited in The Annals of Natal, 1495 to 1845, vol. I, ed. John Bird (Cape Town: T. Maskew Miller, 1888; reprint ed., Cape Town: C. Struik, 1965), p. 163.

5. Evidence of Johannes Kumalo in The James Stuart Archive (hereinafter cited as JSA), vol. I, eds. C. de B. Webb and J.B. Wright (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1976), p. 249.

6. See Chapter Five.

7. See, for example, Donald R. Morris, The Washing of the Spears: A History of the Rise of the Zulu Nation under Shaka and Its Fall in the Zulu War of 1879 (New York: Random House, 1965).

Max Gluckman, an able student of Zulu history and culture, has provided an important hypothesis in this regard. According to Gluckman, the Mfecane was the resolution of a crisis precipitated by an expanding population in the narrow coastal belt of southeastern Africa. By the late eighteenth century, Gluckman argues, fissiparous Nguni political units had no where else to go, hence creating the urgent need for skillful strategists to reinvent the Nguni polity. Dingiswayo and Shaka were the primary actors in this regard, according to Gluckman, although Shaka got carried away by megalomania.⁸

European castaway accounts provide striking evidence of a fertile, populous country along the southeastern coast in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The survivors of the wrecked Santo Alberto noted in 1593 that the country between the Mzinkhulu and Thukela rivers was heavily populated, prosperous, and generously supplied with cattle and grain. Thirty years later, the survivors of the wrecked Sao Joao Baptista travelled northward along the coast from the Keiskamma River to Delagoa Bay and reported quite similar conditions. Between the Mbashe and Mzinkhulu rivers, for example, the castaways saw many valleys "intersected by rivers and smaller hills, in which were an infinite number of villages with herds

8. "The Kingdom of the Zulu of South Africa," in African Political Systems, eds. M. Fortes and E.E. Evans-Pritchard (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), pp. 25-55.

of cattle and garden-plots."⁹

The Natalian coast, unlike most areas of southern Africa, normally receives ample supplies of rainfall. Moreover, the Thukela-Phongolo region of present-day Zululand is largely free of tsetse fly and malaria. Gluckman's argument therefore has intuitive as well as some empirical validity, but remains deficient in at least two respects. First, it is certainly not beyond doubt that population growth had reached its critical stage by the late eighteenth century;¹⁰ second, a population crisis does not sufficiently explain the processes involved in the development of the Zulu state. Nevertheless, population pressure should not be completely dismissed, for it may have been a pre-condition for other state-making processes. African demographic history is still in its infancy, and northern Nguniland might be shown to be one example of an upward shift in the secular population cycle throughout sub-Saharan Africa during this era.¹¹

Since the late 1950s Africanists have been increasingly influenced by monographs emphasizing the importance of understanding the history of Africans made by Africans and not by

9. Cited in Records of South-Eastern Africa (hereinafter cited as RSEA), vol. II, ed. George McCall Theal (reprint ed., Cape Town: C. Struik, 1964), pp. 320-27; and The Tragic History of the Sea, 1589-1662, ed. C.R. Boxer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), pp. 214-15, 234, 242-43.

10. Leonard Thompson, "Co-operation and Conflict: The Zulu Kingdom and Natal," p. 341.

11. See C.C. Wrigley, "Population in African History," Journal of African History, vol. XX, no. 1 (1979): 127-31.

Europeans. Kenneth O. Dike launched this effort in 1956 with his Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta.¹² In his monograph, Dike used oral traditions and local archives to supplement the colonial sources, and demonstrated convincingly that Africans were primary actors in their conviction to maintain control of the Nigerian coast and its trade in the nineteenth century. In 1964 historian Jan Vansina produced his monumental Kingdoms of the Savannah, a work based almost entirely on oral traditions.¹³ By the late 1960s, several French anthropologists added a decisive Marxian slant to the "new African history." In her "Research on an African Mode of Production," Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch argued that class distinctions were no less apparent in precolonial African societies than in Western ones, but were rooted not on land control but control of the state and long-distance trade routes by the ruling elites.¹⁴ If conflict is rooted in the contest for control of the means of production, as Coquery-Vidrovitch or Marx would argue, then a reasonable scholarly focus for the origins of major socio-political change would be in the material basis of social and political existence.

The belief that the nature of the Mfecane can be best

12. (London: Oxford University Press).

13. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press).

14. Translated by Susan Sherwin in Perspectives on the African Past, eds. Martin A. Klein and G. Wesley Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1972), pp. 33-51.

understood by an analysis of the specific material conditions of the Nguni during the pre-Shakan era, particularly those factors related to trade, was first expressed by anthropologist Monica Wilson. According to Wilson, Natalian colonist and amateur historian Henry Francis Fynn pointed out during the first half of the nineteenth century that one of Dingiswayo's first acts as leader of the Mthethwa was to initiate trade with the northern port of Delagoa Bay. Wilson inferred from Fynn's testimony that a possible motive for the creation of the Zulu state was the effort to monopolize the ivory trade with the Europeans to the north.¹⁵

Historian Alan Smith has attempted to buttress Wilson's trade hypothesis, aided by the relatively untapped collection of journals and letters from Portuguese traders and missionaries housed in the national archives in Lisbon. Smith argues that it is plausible that there was a flourishing trade at Delagoa Bay between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. English, Dutch, Indian, French, as well as Portuguese traders frequented the bay during this period for the lucrative ivory trade. By the second half of the eighteenth century, it appears, the regularity and intensity of the trade was on the upswing. Smith convincingly demonstrates that a significant share of the ivory trade originated in Natal. Travelers, traders, and missionaries

15. Divine Kings and the "Breath of Men" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), pp. 23-24. See also The Diary of Henry Francis Fynn, eds. James Stuart and D. McK. Malcolm (Pietermaritzburg: Shuter and Shooter, 1950), pp. 8, 10, 16, 47-48, 198, 231-32; and Bird, Annals of Natal, I, p. 63.

have provided much supportive testimony for this view, indicating that not only did the largest percentage of the Delagoa exports come from Natal, but that trade routes extended as far south as the eastern Cape frontier.¹⁶

How was the Delagoa-Natal trade network linked to the rise of the Zulu nation? According to Smith, the key lies in the power vacuum created in the hinterland of Delagoa Bay by the late eighteenth century. The autonomy of the Tembe, the traditional middlemen of the Delagoa Bay region, was challenged by the rising kingdom of Mabudu to the south in the late eighteenth century. The power of Mabudu was related to their favorable geographical position in relation to the Natalian sources of ivory in the south. During the course of the Mabudu-Tembe struggle, the Dhlamini-Ngwane and Ndwandwe, two late-arriving Nguni groups conspicuous for their state-making efforts by the turn of the century, probably moved southwestward from the Delagoa hinterland to establish supremacy north and south of the Phongolo River. In an effort to reassert their supremacy, in Smith's argument, the ruling lineages of the Dhlamini-Ngwane and Ndwandwe expanded from east to west in order to control the trading lanes through Mabudu. The Mthethwa confederacy allegedly joined in this

16. "Delagoa Bay and the Trade of South-Eastern Africa," in Pre-Colonial African Trade, eds. Richard Gray and David Birmingham (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 265-89; "The trade of Delagoa Bay as a factor in Nguni politics, 1750-1835," in African Societies in Southern Africa, ed. Leonard Thompson (London: Heinemann, 1971), pp. 177-80.

expansion for the same reason; Dingiswayo, according to Smith, viewed the manipulation of the ivory trade as "an important factor in the consolidation of chiefly power," and therefore "sought to monopolize the whole of the Delagoa market."¹⁷

The trade hypothesis has the appeal of linking the history of northern Nguniland to precolonial societies in east, central, and west Africa.¹⁸ As an over-arching explanatory device, however, the model suffers from several problems. First, the northern Nguni were primarily pastoralists and hoe-cultivators and only secondarily traders. One must therefore explain how the concern for the manipulation of the trading network could replace their primary economic activities. Second, one must explain why the southern Nguni, who conducted more consistent

17. "Nguni politics," p. 180-85. In a variation on this theme, David W. Hedges, "Trade and Politics in Southern Mozambique and Zululand in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries," (D.Phil. thesis, Univ. of London, 1978), supports the view that control of the ivory trade along the coastal lowlands between Delagoa Bay and northern Nguniland was an important factor in Nguni state-formation in the latter half of the eighteenth century. The conflict that ensued by the early nineteenth century, Hedges argues, was not as a result of an expansion of ivory exports, as Smith would suggest, but instead a change in the nature of the trade at Delagoa Bay. According to Hedges, the number of ships at Delagoa Bay decreased, and the export of cattle, a highly-valued commodity in Nguniland, was substituted for ivory. For general criticisms of both views see p. 10. See pp. 12-13, below.

18. For example, Gray and Birmingham, Pre-colonial African trade; and Claude Meillassoux, The Development of Indigenous Trade and Markets in West Africa (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).

and extensive trading relations with the Khoikhoi and Europeans in the eastern Cape, did not first embark upon this process of state-making. Third, one must explain why the Hlubi, ivory traders with Delagoa Bay and one of the largest pre-Shakan Nguni chiefdoms, did not join the Dhlamini-Ngwane, Ndwandwe, and Mthethwa, in the alleged expansion to control trade routes to the north. Fourth, the trade hypothesis comes perilously close to taking us back to the "white inspiration" model. That is, we are somehow to believe that the profound transformations that took place in northern Nguniland are directly related to the number of European ships that landed at Delagoa Bay between 1750 and 1820. Trade may have played a minor role in Nguni politics, but certainly not a primary one.

A more promising avenue for materialist research is that which examines the changing nature of the Nguni agricultural economy during the pre-Mfecane era. The Nguni agricultural existence was far from static. As African agriculturalists, Nguni were part of a tradition that had begun thousands of years before with the domestication of plants and animals. The advent of agriculture for African societies was in fact revolutionary:

Agriculture provided more assured supplies of food; it made possible the creation (and appropriation) of a surplus; it stimulated a degree of urbanisation and specialisation; and it permitted an increase in population, since the maximum size no longer depended on the numbers that could be supported at the leanest time of the year by hunting and gathering.¹⁹

19. A.G. Hopkins, An Economic History of West Africa (London: Longman, 1973), p. 29.

Agriculture was again transformed during the first millenium when the art of iron-making permitted the construction of more efficient farm implements. Moreover, as farmers and herders, the Nguni were continually adapting to new conditions: incorporating new crops, balancing the needs of hoe-cultivation with pastoralism, and responding to climatic changes in an often erratic environment--in short, changing and being changed by the ecosystem.

In this vein, historian Shula Marks has linked the Mfecane with the population growth resulting from the introduction and spread of maize in northern Nguniland during the eighteenth century.²⁰ Maize is the most efficient of all cereals in its ability to convert solar energy, carbon dioxide, water and mineral nutrients into foodstuff. Maize also matures in five months, whereas sorghum, the traditional staple in this region, requires eight or nine. This disparity is important, for it means that two yields of maize are possible in the same year. Moreover, maize is somewhat less labor-intensive than sorghum and more resistant to diseases.²¹ Because of its potential in creating conditions of subsistence affluence in a relatively short time, the growth and consumption of maize should indeed be an important consideration in understanding African population

20. "The rise of the Zulu Kingdom," in The Middle Age of African History, ed. Roland Oliver (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 85-89.

21. George W. Beadle, "The Ancestry of Corn," Scientific American, vol. 242 (January 1980): 112.

growth in the modern era.²²

Marks argues that maize not only boosted population growth, it probably accelerated the depletion of soil fertility as well. The culmination of population growth and soil exhaustion, according to Marks, could have sparked a military struggle among neighboring chiefdoms for land and cattle.²³ Maize's enormous grain producing capacity does, in fact, make a heavy drain on the fertility of the soil. Kraal sites with access to areas of rich alluvium in the larger river valleys would therefore have had certain advantages to other cultivators, particularly in times of drought or famine. The conflict that appears to have been widespread throughout northern Nguniland immediately prior to the emergence of Shaka, most particularly among the Mthethwa, Ndwandwe, Dhlamini-Ngwane, and Qwabe, may have been the effort by ruling lineages to extend their polities over the most favorable remaining ecological zones.²⁴

The role of a changing agricultural economy in the Mfecane will be explored in further detail in Chapter 3. The point I make here is that the demands of cultivation and cattle-keeping

22. This view is supported by Alfred Crosby, The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1972), p. 188; and Philip D. Curtin, The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), pp. 270-71.

23. "Zulu Kingdom," p. 87.

24. This interpretation is suggested by J.B. McI. Daniel, "A Geographical Study of Pre-Shakan Zululand," South African Geographical Journal, vol. 55, no. 1 (1973): 23-31.

on the pre-Shakan Nguni environment have not been sufficiently studied. The role of crops such as maize and the adjustments wrought by climatic²⁵ and ecological change, particularly during the eighteenth century, deserve more careful treatment in understanding the nature of the Mfecane.²⁶ Precolonial African societies were not "backward," static conglomerates, hopelessly bound to a passive existence in an unchanging environment, as some Western historians would have us believe.²⁷ Their activities as agriculturalists were an essential variable in a dynamic ecosystem, and it is only within this framework that we can consider their political and social responses.

An evaluation of the socioeconomic background to a controversial event such as the Mfecane has its pitfalls, yet the existing evidence leaves historians with plenty of room

25. The only tree ring analysis for the Natalian coast done to date indicates that from the late 1780s until the first few years of the nineteenth century there was a sharp decline in rainfall. These conclusions are only tentative, however, and somewhat controversial. See Martin Hall, "Dendroclimatology, Rainfall, and Human Adaptation in the Later Iron Age of Natal and Zululand," Annals of the Natal Museum, vol. 22, no. 3 (1976): 693-703.

26. Another line of investigation in this regard is Jeff Guy's study of vegetation types and cattle grazing patterns in pre-Shakan Zululand. Over-grazing in the relatively narrow corridor of northern Nguniland created an ecological imbalance between population density and existing resources, according to Guy, and contributed to the radical social upheaval of the early nineteenth century. See "Ecological Factors in the Rise of Shaka and the Zulu Kingdom," unpublished research paper, National University of Lesotho, August, 1977.

27. See, for example, Hugh Trevor-Roper, The Rise of Christian Europe (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965), p. 9.