

Were there large states in Southeast Africa before the rise of the Zulu Kingdom?

In a rare coincidence of popular and scholarly enthusiasm, historians of Africa have paid even more attention to the Zulu state than the hiphop gangs of Chicago and the Bronx. Texts of the colonial era took Shaka and his kingdom as the paradigm of savage despotism. After decolonization, historians in tune with African nationalism reversed the image, promoting Shaka as a creative statesman who proved that Africa's nation-building capacities owed nothing to European stimulus or example. Even after the gloss had begun to wear off the image of post-independence African leadership, historians studied the Zulu in the hope of learning how large states were constructed and sustained. "The rise of the Zulu state" became a staple of undergraduate teaching and graduate research.¹ Distrustful of explanations based on individual genius, scholars looked for environmental, economic, demographic and social forces that might explain the emergence of Shaka's kingdom along with other less famous states in the same region. The search continues into the twenty-first century.² Over fifty years of research one assumption has gone unquestioned: the Zulu kingdom was not just a new state, it was a new kind of state – one of several that arose about the same time, some of the most prominent being the Swazi, the Ndwandwe, the Gasa, and the Ndebele. This article challenges that assumption, arguing that there is little if any evidence to support it. On the contrary, there are good reasons to suspect that states similar in structure predated those kingdoms. Tracing the process by which the picture of Zulu originality was constructed has a larger importance for historical studies because it illuminates linkages between the colonizer's favored versions of the past and the projects of "scientific" history in the mid-twentieth century.

While the military reputation of the Zulu grew and grew, especially after their unexpected success in the first battles of the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, there appears to have been no attempt made to single out Shaka's kingdom as a novel form of political organization until the twentieth century. The groundwork for change was laid by colonial historians who argued that the ancestors of the people who composed the Zulu kingdom had only lately arrived in Southern Africa. This hypothesis rested on a slender base of linguistic, oral and archival evidence. A vital first step in its formulation was Wilhelm Bleek's discovery in the 1860s that from the Congo River basin to the Cape of Good Hope farming populations spoke closely related languages. He named these the Bantu languages because of their use of prefixes to indicate plurals (man = Ntu, people = BaNtu). A self-taught South African geologist, George W. Stow, used Bleek's work in 1880 to support his theory that all the Bantu-speaking groups had recently migrated from Northeastern Africa, pushing into territory formerly dominated by the "Bushmen tribes."³ Stow plainly owed much to Max Müller

¹ Insert D. Edgecombe et. al. *The Debate on Zulu Origins*.

² Jenny Weir, (Ph. D. dissertation, University of Western Australia 2001).

³ George W. Stow, *The Native Races of South Africa*, edited by G. M. Theal (London, 1905).

and other mid-Victorian champions of the Aryan and Indo-European lingua-racial models. Following the contemporary European practice of representing the ancient migrations of Huns, Slaves, Wends, Goths and Vandals by colored arrows, Stow illustrated his work with a luridly colored foldout map purporting to show the migration routes taken by the forefathers of the Zulu, Sotho and other Bantu-speaking groups at unspecified times.⁴ Twenty years after Stow's death in 1882, his unpublished manuscript came to the attention of George McCall Theal who had already begun his multi-volume history of South Africa, a work which for several decades would be regarded as magisterial and definitive.⁵ It was a timely discovery because Theal had been at work on his own migration hypotheses. While his 1878 *Compendium of the History and Geography of South Africa* treated all the peoples of the region as aboriginal inhabitants, by 1890 he had drawn a map showing that in 1500 the Bantu-speaking farmers only occupied a fraction of all the land lying below the Limpopo River. After producing his edited version of Stow's *Native Races of Southern Africa* in 1905, Theal further revised his dates for the hypothetical mass migrations. By 1919 he had pushed the dates for all the migrations forward to the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries.⁶ He attempted to buttress the argument with oral evidence, wildly generalizing that "the legends of all the tribes now living south of the Zambesi river, none of which can be more than a few centuries old, point to a distant northern occupation."⁷ Using Portuguese records of the sixteenth-century he extended his migration theory by identifying the ancestors of the Zulu with the "ferocious Zimba" who had attacked Portuguese settlements on the East African coast. This was the linchpin of the argument because it dated the migrations. If readers accepted the dubious identification of the Zimba and Abambo of East Africa with the Mbo south of the Limpopo then the case for a late-sixteenth century migration to southeast Africa could be linked to documentary evidence. Theal regarded Shaka's Zulu kingdom as a typical African savage despotism, not much different from those that moved down from the north two centuries earlier. The Portuguese records, he observed,

tell of no golden age of peace and happiness disturbed by the intrusion of white men, but of almost constant strife and cruelty and misery. From them we learn that long before the time of Tshaka despots as clever and as ruthless as he spread desolation over wide tracts of land, that cannibalism

Stow died in 1882 without finding a publisher for his work. His manuscripts were eventually sold to the eminent student of Bushman lore, Lucy Lloyd, who brought them to the attention of G. M. Theal.

⁴ For the use of colored maps to show ancient migrations and invasions in Europe see Jeremy Black, *Maps and History* (New Haven, 1997), 79-81.

⁵ On Theal's work as an historian see Christopher Saunders, and D. M. Schreuder, 'The Imperial Historian as "Colonial Nationalist": George McCall Theal and the Making of South African History', in G. Martel, ed., *Studies in British Imperial History: Essays in Honour of A. P. Thornton*, London: Macmillan, 1996?.

⁶ G. M. Theal, *Ethnography and Condition of South Africa Before A.D. 1505* (London, 1919), 181-96. Theal seems not to have noticed that his title was in conflict with his migration dates.

⁷ G. M. Theal, *History and Ethnography of Africa South of the Zambesi from the settlement of the Portuguese at Sofala in September 1505 to the Conquest of the Cape Colony by the British in September 1795. Vol I. The Portuguese in South Africa from 1505 to 1700* (London, 1910), 55.

as practised in the Lesuto and Natal during the early years of the nineteenth century was no new custom with sections of the Bantu race.⁸

The arguments of Stow and Theal possessed an obvious utility for white colonial power.⁹ If the Bantu-speaking peoples were recent immigrants, they too were intruders and could not claim the land on the basis of aboriginal occupation. It was their propensity for ruthless warfare that had cleared the land of inhabitants at the very moment it was required by white settlers. In 1891 Theal produced a map showing “territory almost depopulated by the Zulu Wars before 1834,” which included all the known gold fields along with the farming lands of the Transvaal and Orange Free State.¹⁰ Once enshrined in Theal’s volumes, the theory of recent Bantu migrations was elevated to the status of historic fact, accepted by the best authorities for decades to come. Eric Walker’s influential *History of South Africa*, continued to assert it in the third edition of 1962, “As if to break the hearts of the handful of Portuguese marooned in East Africa there came waves of Bantu invaders from the north, the Abambo and Amazimba, fierce men, cannibals on occasion.” New tribes arose “out of the chaos produced by the incursion of the Abambo and Amazimba into what are now Zululand and Natal.”¹¹ Isaac Schapera’s chapter on “The Native Inhabitants” for the second edition of the South African volume of the *Cambridge History of the British Empire* (1963), identified the “Nguni (ancestors of the modern Xhosa tribes and others)” as “part of the Zimba hordes that during the sixteenth century devastated the country between the Zambesi River and Mombasa. The Mbo, remnants of tribes then living in the Lower Zambesi valley, fled before the Zimba, and some of them, cutting their way through the Tsonga and eastern Shona, ultimately crossed the Limpopo River and, pushing south, settled in Natal (c. 1620). Here they broke up again into their original elements (including, among others, the ancestors of the Modern Mpondo, Mpondomisi, Bomvu, Bomyana, Xesibe and Swazi).”¹² The second edition of Monica Cole’s historical geography, *South Africa* (1966) asserted that

When the first Europeans arrived in South Africa great movements of population within the sub-continent were in full swing. Before the advancing Bantu the Hottentots had retreated to the southern Cape and the Bushmen to the Kalahari. The Bantu were sweeping southwards across Southern Rhodesia where they divided into two main streams, one moving across the low plateau of eastern Bechuanaland and the other and more powerful one entering the foothill belt below the Drakensberg escarpment. . . . During their southward movements the many tribes comprising the Bantu group formed and re-formed largely as a result of intertribal wars and, later, wars with the Europeans. Most important was the havoc wrought by Chaka . . . He drove the neighbouring Angoni and

⁸ Theal, *The Beginning of South African History* (London, 1902), 29.

⁹ Shula Marks, “South Africa: ‘The Myth of the Empty Land’,” *History Today* (January, 1980): 7-12.

¹⁰ Theal, *History of South Africa 1795-1834* (London, 1891) facing 328.

¹¹ Eric Walker, *A History of Southern Africa*, first published 1928, 3rd ed. (London, 1962), 20, 110.

¹² Isaac Schpera, “Chapter II: The Native Inhabitants” in *Cambridge History of the British Empire; Volume VIII, South Africa*, (2nd ed., Cambridge, 1963), 36-37.

Shongaans [sic] northwards to carry destruction through the eastern coastlands behind the Portuguese settlement in Mozambique, and then stabbed his way through Natal.¹³

The importance of the recent migration theory extended beyond its political expediency. Anthropologist Max Gluckman may have been the first to recognize that it opened the way for a new interpretation of Shaka's Zulu state. In 1940, while accepting that "the Nguni family of Bantu-speaking people who later formed the Zulu nation migrated into south-eastern Africa about the middle of the fifteenth century," Gluckman argued that in the early stages of the occupation there would have been practically limitless land open for occupation. He further reasoned that such circumstances favored political fragmentation. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries people

lived in scattered homesteads occupied by male agnates and their families; a number of these homesteads were united under a chief, the heir of their senior line, into a tribe. Exogamous patrilineal clans (men and women of common descent bearing a common name) tended to be local units and the cores of tribes. A tribe was divided into sections under brothers of the chief and as a result of a quarrel a section might migrate and establish itself as an independent clan and tribe.¹⁴

Eventually, Gluckman realized, the moving frontier of free land would reach its natural limits, inhibiting the ability of dissatisfied chiefs to found new tribes.¹⁵ In those circumstances forces of consolidation would arrest the progress of fragmentation.

By 1775 the motives for war changed, possibly owing to pressure of population. Certain tribes conquered their neighbors and small kingdoms emerged which came into conflict. In this struggle Shaka, head of the Zulu tribe, was victorious; by his personal character and military strategy, he made himself, in ten years, master of what is now Zululand and Natal, and his troops were out campaigning far beyond his boundaries. He organized a nation out of all the tribes he had subjected.

By postulating a sequence through which "*tribes*" were merged into "*small kingdoms*" and then into "*a nation*", Gluckman laid the basis for future scholarly debates on "the rise of the Zulu." If Shaka had created a nation where none existed before, he had not just made a bigger state, he had made a new kind of state. It must be emphasized that Gluckman's theory depended absolutely on his acceptance of a late date for Bantu migrations to southeast Africa. Early nineteenth-century travelers had reported thickly peopled coastal regions which,

¹³ Monica Cole, *South Africa*, (2nd ed., London, 1966), 97.

¹⁴ Max Gluckman, "The Kingdom of the Zulu of South Africa" in M. Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *African Political Systems* (London, 1940), 25-26. This book hugely influenced the nascent field of African studies, being reprinted no fewer than eleven times between 1941 and 1967.

¹⁵ Gluckman may well have had Fredrick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis in mind, for it had been influentially invoked in relation to colonialism in Africa by three recent books: Eric Walker, *The Frontier Tradition in South Africa* (Oxford, 1930); W. K. Hancock's *Survey of Commonwealth Affairs, Vol. 1* (London, 1937), I. D. MacCrone, *Race Attitudes in South Africa* (Oxford, 1937), 98-99.

on Gluckman's assumptions, would have been virtually empty in the fifteenth century. This clearly suggested a population explosion. If the migrations had happened centuries or millennia before, the population pressure argument would collapse for want of evidence.

Other important influences on Gluckman's thinking came from outside the academy. When he conducted his initial fieldwork in Zululand in 1936 he had the benefit of three recently published historical works based on African oral sources. Magesa M. Fuze's *The Black People and Whence they Came: a Zulu View*, was written shortly after the turn of the century and privately published in 1922.¹⁶ J. Henderson Soga's *The South-Eastern Bantu (Abe-Nguni, Aba-Mbo, Ama-Lala)*, was published as a special number of *Bantu Studies* in 1930.¹⁷ Most influential of all was Arthur Bryant's *Olden Times in Zululand and Natal*, which appeared in 1929. All three bore the strong impress of mission Christianity. Fuze had been a mission printer and close associate of the first bishop of Natal; he could draw not only on his own memory but on the memories of significant figures in the Zulu Royal House.¹⁸ Soga was the grandson of a Xhosa chief and attended Glasgow High School in Scotland in 1870-73. Though he was born of a Scottish mother and married a Scottish wife, Soga was a thoroughgoing Xhosa patriot with good local sources of information. Bryant had been a missionary before immersing himself in the study of Zulu history and culture; his chief sources were the oral testimonies of nineteenth-century men collected by James Stuart of the Natal Native Affairs Department. Fuze, Soga and Bryant all countered Theal's account of savage Africa with Edenic visions of peace and prosperity.¹⁹ According to Fuze, in pre-Shakan Zululand there had been no deadly wars.²⁰ Bryant's portrayal of the old times was even more romantic. "The Zulu daily life of a hundred, perhaps a thousand years ago was precisely that which it is to-day".²¹

Dotting the landscape on every hillside lie quaint human habitations, each consisting of a circle of beehive huts enclosed within a fence, and themselves surrounding a central cattle-fold — each such circle the homestead of a single polygamous paterfamilias, each hut the one-roomed residence of a single wife and family....within each kraal were many huts, each with its separate family of mother and marriageable, or married sons, the nucleus of further homes, and each holding its allotted rank within the family circle, all being ruled by a common head, at once father and kinglet,

¹⁶ It is now available in a second edition: Magesa M. Fuze, *The Black People and Whence they Came: A Zulu View*, trans. H. C. Lugg, ed. A. T. Cope (Pietermaritzburg, 1979).

¹⁷ J. Henderson Soga, *The South-Eastern Bantu (Abe-Nguni, Aba-Mbo, Ama-Lala)* (Johannesburg, 1930). He had the benefit of having read Fuze's book in the original Zulu (*Abantu Abanmyama*); see 387-88.

¹⁸ Jeff Guy, *The Heretic: A Study of the Life of John William Colenso, 1814-1883* (Johannesburg, 1983), 242.

¹⁹ The intellectual antecedents of the missionary thinking about African Eden and degeneration are explored in Richard Grove, "Scottish Missionaries, Evangelical Discourse and the Origins of Conservation Thinking in Southern Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 15 (1989): 163-87.

²⁰ Fuze, *The Black People and Whence they Came*, 25.

²¹ A. T. Bryant, *Olden Times in Zululand and Natal*, (London, 1929), 72, 74, 79.

who governed all alike with unrestricted power of life or death, a benevolent despotism of protection, discipline and care on rare occasions misunderstandings did arise between clan and clan, and, peaceful efforts providing no remedy, recourse must needs be had to the arbitrament of arms.... A score or two of warrior youths — for single clans were mostly small before the union — bearing assegais and shields, marched proudly and gleefully forth, with as many women and girls to stand behind and cheer. No malice was there, no hateful intent to kill their neighbour, with whom but yesterday they had joined in merry beer-drink or love-dance; no longing to burn down his home or to destroy his herds; nought but an enthusiastic patriotism to safeguard their country's interests, and ambition to excel. . . .

In the missionary view it was Shaka's military innovations and wars of conquest that disrupted the primordial paradise. Although Fuze, Soga and Bryant provided no evidence that the Zulu state was a new type of political or social formation, they appeared to offer "authentic" African reinforcement for the notion that the rise of Shaka's kingdom marked the beginning of a new era in Southeast Africa. Until the publication of James Stuart's archive of oral testimony began in the 1970s, their works provided the principal repository of African evidence used by anthropologists and historians writing on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.²²

Different though they were from Theal in fundamental outlook, none of the three challenged his short chronology for Bantu migrations. On the contrary, Soga found it sat very comfortably with his belief in the Biblical account of human origins. Accepting the 6000-year history of the human race set out in *Calmet's Bible Dictionary*, he identified the "Bantu race" as the descendants of Canaan. He anticipated Gluckman's theory of population-pressure by explaining that "the principal cause of the Bantu tribes multiplying to so great an extent ... was the custom which produced a host of chiefs, namely *Polygamy*." It "filled the land with tribes without national unity, whose patriotism extended only to the limits of the tribe, and of which, consequently, each one maintained itself by authority of the assegai."²³ It is important to point out that the methodology employed by Fuze, Soga and Bryant limited their ability to date events. Their primary tool was genealogy, drawn from chiefs' oral recitations of their ancestral lines. Rough dates were calculated by estimating the average length of chiefly reigns. Soga used twenty-five years per generation; Bryant, eighteen.²⁴ This enabled them to

²² John Wright and Colin de B. Webb, eds., *The James Stuart Archive of Recorded Oral Evidence Relating to the History of the Zulu and Neighbouring Peoples* (Pietermaritzburg, 1976-2001). The monumental project of translating Stuart's interviews with African informants into English and printing that text beside the Zulu original was begun by John Wright and the late Colin Webb in the early 1970s. Since the appearance of the first volume in 1976, four additional volumes have appeared, the latest in 2001. For the background of Stuart's work see Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty*, xxx.

²³ Soga, *The South-Eastern Bantu*, 3, 31, 36; his italics.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 101; Shula Marks, "The Traditions of the Natal 'Nguni' : a Second Look at the Work of A. T. Bryant," in L. Thompson, ed., *African Societies in Southern Africa* (London, 1969), 128. On the problems of dating these kinds of oral traditions, see David P. Henige, *The Chronology of Oral Tradition: Quest for a Chimira* (Oxford, 1974).

align historic documents with chiefly reigns but not to penetrate beyond Theal's fifteenth-century starting date for Bantu migrations. For Gluckman and his fellow pioneer of anthropological history, Isaac Schapera, Fuze, Soga and Bryant offered heaven-sent African raw material from which to construct scientific theories of political change. Drawing on Bryant and Soga, Schapera wrote in the second edition of the South African volume of the *Cambridge History of the British Empire*, that "by the end of the sixteenth century' the 'three parent stocks' of the Nguni were established in Zululand and Natal." He then pinpointed a period of momentous evolution in political life.

The early years of the following [nineteenth] century saw the creation in southern Africa of several strong native states, when the many formerly independent tribes were amalgamated into single political entities. The process began at the end of the eighteenth century in Zululand, where there were more than one hundred small separate tribes. Dingiswayo, chief of the Mthethwa, began gradually to conquer his neighbours and absorb them under his rule. Under his successor, Shaka, originally chief of the Zulu tribe and a despot of outstanding ambition and military ability, the policy of conquest and amalgamation was carried to an extent hitherto unprecedented in Bantu history. ... His example was followed by several of his generals, who fled with their armies to found kingdoms of their own. ... Before the upheavals just mentioned, the Bantu were divided politically into very many different tribes, possibly more than a thousand in all. . . . Tribes varied greatly in size; some had as many as 20,000 members or more, others were very much smaller.²⁵

The work of Schapera and Gluckman appeared at a fortuitous moment. After World War II young scholars in tune with the spirit of African nationalism rejected colonial narratives and sought to write African history in a new vein. For the most part they embraced the latest models of objectivity in social science. Seeing African history as a partner in the larger project of African studies, they vigorously promoted interdisciplinary research. At Wisconsin, at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), at UCLA, Indiana and other centers historians worked hand-in-hand with linguists, anthropologists, archaeologists and political scientists in scholarly taskforces. By the early 1960s they were linking up with the exciting research being done in Africa at Makerere University of Uganda and by the so-called Ibadan and Dar-es-Salaam schools of history. At Wisconsin Jan Vansina appeared to have found a scientific approach to the use of oral sources that could be used by researchers seeking to uncover the history and structure of central African kingdoms.²⁶ Roland Oliver at SOAS assembled a formidable team bent on solving the problem of Bantu expansion identified by Bleek in the previous century.²⁷ Historian Leonard Thompson at UCLA and anthropologist Monica Wilson at the University of Cape Town led an interdisciplinary team charged with writing an *Oxford History of South Africa* that

²⁵ Schapera, "The Native Inhabitants", 38-39.

²⁶ Jan Vansina, *Oral History: a Study in Historical Methodology*, trans. H. M. Wright (London, 1965), and *Kingdoms of the Savanna* (Madison, 1966).

²⁷ See the preliminary report of conclusions: Roland Oliver, "The Problem of the Bantu Expansion", *Journal of African History* 7 (1966): 361-76.

would correct the errors and biases of settler historians — Theal chief among them.²⁸ All three projects contributed directly or indirectly to creating the “problem of the rise of the Zulu kingdom.” Vansina’s work suggested that the internal structure of African kingdoms could provide clues to the forces which brought them into being. Oliver’s group focussed attention on a question that Theal and the Southern African migration theorists had ignored: what were the internal or external forces that caused such large-scale movements of people? Population pressure was at the top of the list of logical suspects. Among other things, Wilson and Thompson aimed to show that change in African society could be internally generated (thus refuting racist claims about the incapacity of Africans to build nations) and that Theal’s assertions about sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth-century Bantu migrations into Southeast Africa work could not be sustained.

While Wilson and Thompson’s project was in progress, John Omer-Cooper, a South African historian then based in Nigeria, wrote a volume for Longman’s Ibadan African History series which neatly brought together most of the new trends in research. *The Zulu Aftermath: A Nineteenth-Century Revolution in Bantu Africa* used secondary sources to chart the rise and progress of what he called “Zulu-Type States”. Using the prevailing short-chronology, Omer-Cooper began by noting that “as late as the nineteenth century Bantu colonization was still incomplete”. As land free for settlement ran short, competition for advantageous situations led to armed conflict in which larger groupings had a decided advantage.

The beginnings of this development in Zululand can be traced to the eighteenth century when under pressure of land hunger and more severe intertribal conflict, the small tribe of the first settlement phase (little more than an expanded clan) began to give way to large multi-tribal blocs which competed for the allegiance of the remaining independent tribes. As this took place a process of institutional change also began, probably facilitated by contact between tribes belonging to the two major divisions of the Southern Bantu (Sotho and Nguni). Conflict between the new groupings increased the pace of change still further and between 1818 and 1828 it reached a revolutionary climax in the Zulu kingdom of Shaka.

The immediate stimulus to this development was military conflict and the logic of the process can be found in the adaptation of existing institutions along militarist lines and with a view to the incorporation of tribal aliens in an expanded fighting force. It resulted in the emergence of a large kingdom, with subjects drawn from many different original tribes, rigidly organized on military lines and with a tremendous concentration of power in the hands of the monarch: a system radically different in structure and spirit from the prototypes from which it had grown.

This process by its very nature could not be confined to its original centre of origin. It was accompanied by warfare on a scale hitherto unknown amongst the Southern Bantu which sent defeated tribes fleeing

²⁸ By the time Thompson moved to Yale in 1968 most of volume one (Oxford, 1969) had been completed.

from the storm centre²⁹

By adopting Gluckman's population-pressure argument and noting that the Zulu was the most successful of a number of similar new polities, Omer-Cooper raised the historical analysis of Southeast Africa to a new social-scientific level. Although Leonard Thompson believed that Omer-Cooper had prematurely endorsed "the population hypothesis as a fact ... without any fresh supporting evidence", he welcomed him as an adjunct to his research effort.³⁰ In the same year that volume I of the *Oxford History* appeared, Thompson edited a collection of symposium papers on *African Societies in Southern Africa* including papers on eighteenth and nineteenth century political change by Omer-Cooper, Shula Marks, Alan Smith, Monica Wilson, and David Hammond-Tooke. The authors of both books were unanimous in accepting the proposition that the Zulu kingdom was one of a number of new kinds of states that arose at the turn of the nineteenth century, but they pushed the question of causation beyond Gluckman's hypothesis. Thompson began cautiously with the statement, "We do not know precisely why the long-established equilibrium among the small autonomous northern Nguni chiefdoms rather suddenly collapsed."³¹ But it was clear that he preferred a theory based on trade rather than population pressure. His collaborator, Monica Wilson, had found trade to be a significant factor accounting for the rise of the Ngonde kingdom north-west of Lake Malawi. Thompson's student at UCLA, Alan Smith, had followed that hint in his Ph. D dissertation and elaborated an argument linking the origins of the Zulu kingdom to growing trade with Portuguese agents at Delagoa Bay.³² It helped that scholars working on west and east Africa had identified trade as a key factor in the development of states in the Sudanic and Swahili coastal regions.³³ Closer to home it had become generally accepted that the builders of the world-famous complex of ruins at Great Zimbabwe and Monomotapan state on the Zimbabwean plateau visited by the Portuguese in the sixteenth-century had been significantly involved in trade.³⁴ There was clearly scope for more research along the lines suggested by Alan Smith, and a number of graduate students began pursuing related dissertations at about this time.

For all their concern to counter Theal's "myth of an empty land" before

²⁹ J. D. Omer-Cooper, *The Zulu Aftermath: A Nineteenth-Century Revolution in Bantu Africa* (London, 1966), 2-3.

³⁰ Monica Wilson and Leonard Thompson, eds., *Oxford History of South Africa, Vol. I* (Oxford, 1969), 341n.

³¹ *Oxford History*, vol. I, p. 337.

³² Alan Smith, 'The Struggle for Control of Southern Mocambique' (Ph. D dissertation, UCLA, 1970), and chapter eight in Leonard Thompson, ed., *African Societies in Southern Africa* (London, 1969).

³³ Jan Vansina had helped launch the discussion with an influential article, "Long-Distance Trade Routes in Central Africa," *Journal of African History* 3 (1962), 375-90. J. D. Fage, *A History of Africa* (London, 1978), 69-70. The question of trade, politics and state building were canvassed in R. Gray and D. Birmingham, eds., *Pre-Colonial African Trade in Central and Eastern Africa before 1900* (London, 1970), which included a chapter by Alan Smith on Delagoa Bay.

³⁴ For the early consensus on trade and state building at Zimbabwe, see Richard Gray, "Historians and Central Africa" in J. D. Fage, ed., *Africa Discovers her Past* (London, 1970), 78 .

incursions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Wilson's and Thompson's *Oxford History* remained tied to a short chronology for Bantu migration. The best evidence they could offer for the presence of well-established Bantu-speaking farmers in the sixteenth century was the evidence of Portuguese shipwreck survivors who had made their way along the southeast African coast to Delagoa Bay. That much of this evidence had been translated and published by Theal made the case against his late migration theory even more damning. Monica Wilson emphasized that all reports showed a land filled with people whose languages and ways of life resembled in every particular those observed by nineteenth-century travelers to Natal and Zululand. The only difference was that the shipwreck survivors reported no large kingdoms.

Until the late eighteenth century Nguni chiefdoms remained small. A Portuguese chronicler of the sixteenth century ... specifically contrasts Natal, where "chiefs called Ancozes" were the heads of "three, four, or five villages", with the large chiefdoms north of the Lourenço Marques, and only in the time of Dingiswayo did the consolidation of chiefdoms begin in Natal. While the evidence of occasional shipwreck survivors scattered over two hundred and fifty years was a questionable base for so sweeping a conclusion about political consolidation, archaeological research was poised to deal a knockout blow to the short chronology. During the 1960s Roland Oliver's group working on Bantu migrations experienced a windfall of new data based on radio-carbon dating of archaeological sites in eastern and central Africa. This demonstrated beyond all reasonable doubt that people skilled in iron smelting, pastoralism and agriculture had established themselves in the savanna regions south of the Congo River system by the first century AD.³⁵ Surely these were the ancestors of the present day Bantu-speaking peoples. Radiocarbon dating came too late to assist the writers of the *Oxford History* for it was only in 1968 that a radiocarbon dating laboratory was established in South Africa. Within five years it had achieved revolutionary results. In Natal evidence of iron-working populations was dated as far back as the ninth century. Tim Maggs, who played a crucial role in this research, emphasizes the time lag between the new findings and the work of Thompson's *Oxford History* team.

I feel the need to stress that it was only in 1973 that this long chronology was installed. Leonard Thompson (1985 *Political Mythology of Apartheid*) has recently suggested that it was already known in 1960. Certainly the official line, that black settlement in South Africa coincided with Van Riebeeck's arrival at the Cape, was unacceptable from the start [because of the shipwrecks].... By 1970 a few radiocarbon dates had extended the chronology further.... In 1973 another 700 years were added to the local Iron Age sequence.³⁶

Research in other parts of South Africa generated radiocarbon dates going right back to the third century AD.

Though no one appears to have noticed it, the population-pressure

³⁵ Oliver, "The Problem of the Bantu Expansion".

³⁶ Tim Maggs, "Three Decades of Iron Age Research in South Africa: Some Personal Reflections," *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 48 (1993): 73.

argument with which Max Gluckman had launched debates on the rise of new kinds of states in Southeast Africa was instantly rendered untenable. The frontier of Bantu-expansion had reached the coastal regions a thousand years before the appearance of the Zulu kingdom. Since the ancestors of the Bantu-speaking farmers had been around about as long as descendants of Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Normans had lived in the British Isles, the idea that a closing frontier produced conflict and new states was absurd. But by that time a younger generation was already busily formulating alternative explanations for the rise of the "Zulu-type states."³⁷ Jeff Guy hypothesized that a decrease in the productivity of key areas of grazing land led to struggles for existence in which only the fittest military states could survive. This was an interesting variation on Gluckman's argument because it did not depend on the short chronology.³⁸ It did, however, require proof of an environmental crisis which the "Madlatule famine" at the turn of the nineteenth century seemed to supply. Henry Slater applied Marx's schema of sequential modes of production to the Zulu case, picturing the evolution of farming societies from primitive communism through feudalism to an absolutist mode of production.³⁹ John Wright and David Hedges pursued the trade theory on different lines from Alan Smith.⁴⁰ Instead of looking for a surplus derived from trade that supported a state apparatus, they argued that chiefs responded to Portuguese demand for cattle and ivory at Delagoa Bay by developing more efficient hunting methods. The organization of regiments (in Zulu, *amabutho*) of fit young men enabled enterprising chiefs to gather more ivory, push more wild animals off prime grazing land and acquire more cattle by raiding their neighbors. Once the regimental system had been institutionalized chiefs discovered that it could be put to other uses. Thus, the labor power of young men supplied the essential surplus required to sustain large states. The regiments formed an internal policing apparatus and agricultural workforce in peacetime, and an awesome military machine when kingdoms went to war. Finally, in a *con brio* intellectual synthesis, Philip Bonner brought all the new interpretations together. Asking why, after the crisis of the Madlatule famine had passed, "should society not have sunk back into its former condition" of political fragmentation, he argued that the regimental system developed to serve the needs of developing trade had permanently strengthened the power of Shaka the king *vis à vis* the heads of individual lineages.

In short, what we see arising is a new tributary mode of production, replete

³⁷ All were either supervised by or closely in touch with Shula Marks at the School of Oriental and African studies. By 1971 her research had diverged from Thompson and Oliver. Her highly influential seminar series, "Societies of Southern Africa" greatly encouraged the development of materialist interpretations in the 1970s and '80s.

³⁸ Jeff Guy, "Ecological Factors in the Rise of Shaka and the Zulu Kingdom" in S. Marks and A. Atmore, eds., *Economy and Society in Pre-industrial South Africa* (London, 1980), 102-119.

³⁹ Henry Slater, "Transitions in the Political Economy of South-east Africa before 1840" (Ph. D. dissertation, University of Sussex, 1976).

⁴⁰ David Hedges, "Trade and Politics in Southern Mozambique and Zululand in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries" (Ph. D. dissertation, University of London, 1978). John Wright, (M.A. dissertation, University of Natal), xxx and "The Dynamics of Power and Conflict in the Thukela-Mzimkhulu Region in the late 18th and early 19th Centuries: a Critical Reconstruction" (Ph. D. dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, 1989).

with a new division of labour, the interruption of the homestead heads' control over reproduction and production, a new aristocratic class cohering around the king, and new ideological forms to buttress the new order. The Madlatule famine was the necessary but not the sufficient cause of the transition.⁴¹

For all their hard work and ingenuity, Bonner and the other young historians at work in the 1970s left one vital assumption unquestioned. Like everyone before them from Gluckman in 1940 through Wilson and Thompson in 1969, they took for granted that the Zulu and other large states were without precedent in the region. When, for example, they found evidence of *amabutho* existing in the mid-eighteenth century they did not revise their views of state organization. They would merely write that "as early as 1750" regiments had come into being in such-and-such a lineage. It is the assumption of novelty that now demands investigation. The prodigious research efforts of the 1970s had uncovered little new evidence. They relied on the same small body of sources that Gluckman and Omer-Cooper had used. By revisiting those sources and reviewing archaeological finds unavailable in the 1970s, it can be argued that we do not know that the kingdoms encountered by the first Europeans to reside in the region were new kinds of states. Moreover, there are good reasons for suspecting that chiefdoms built along similar lines predated the Zulu and may well have existed in the unknowable past before the arrival of record making outsiders. The historian who did most to open the way for a new view was David Hedges, because he systematically demonstrated that most of the innovations attributed to Shaka in the classic texts and popular histories were not innovations at all. Fierce fighting between barefoot armies carrying large shields and spears was reported in the shipwreck reports well before the eighteenth century.⁴² Shaka certainly did not invent the short stabbing spear. The most that could be said was that as far as we are aware, he was the first to insist that men went into battle carrying that weapon alone.⁴³ Most important, the organization of fighting

⁴¹ Philip Bonner, *Kings, Commoners and Concessionaires: The Evolution and Dissolution of the Nineteenth-century Swazi State* (Cambridge, 1983), 22.

⁴² Hedges, "Trade and Politics", 106-07.

⁴³ There is no point in which popular writing about Shaka is so filled with romantic nonsense, as on this issue of the long-bladed, short stabbing *umkonto*. Careful attention to the original sources generally cited on this question shows that no one credits Shaka with the invention of the weapon itself. An early report (1825) of F. G. Farewell stated that the Zulu "charge with a single *umkonto*, or spear, and each man must return with it from the field, or bring that of his enemy, otherwise he is sure to be put to death"; John Centilvres Chase, ed., *The Natal Papers: A Reprint of all Notices and Public Documents Connected with that Territory*, 2 vols. in one. (Grahamstown, 1843, reprint ed., Cape Town, 1968) 1:21. Andrew Smith was told in 1832, that 'Chaka was the first that introduced one hassegay [spear]. One day he sent for all his people about the kraal and called in all their hassegays. He put all, excepting one for each, into the fire and gave each one; ; P. R. Kirby, ed., *Andrew Smith and Natal* (Cape Town, 1955), 46. Nathaniel Isaacs, who knew Shaka, reported that he 'proceeded to introduce a new system of warfare. It had hitherto been the practice to carry several iron spears, and throw them at the enemy, besides the assegai or common spear . . . which he forbade under penalty of death'; N. Isaacs *Travels and Adventure in Eastern Africa*, ed. Luis Herman and Percival R. Kirby (Cape Town, 1970), 150. John Wright, "Dynamics of Power", 41, who places the Thuli migration to the

men into regiments existed long before he was born. When or where regiments originated, no one can say. In many areas, ceremonies marked the induction of teenage boys into regiments at a certain age. Sometimes these ceremonies were associated with circumcision of the penis as a mark of the transition from boyhood to manhood. In other places they were not. William Lye speculates that the practice of organizing regiments according to age began in the highveld country of the interior and was later adopted by peoples living on the south-eastern coast.⁴⁴ There were certainly regiments on the coast in the mid-eighteenth century.⁴⁵ They may have existed long before they were recorded in documents or oral traditions. The process of systematic forgetting in praise poems and chiefly genealogies that obliterated the memories of defeated chiefs and disintegrated political groupings would also have operated to erase the memory of ancient regiments. What must be stressed here is that no evidence supports the proposition that regiments were the invention of any particular individual or group. On the contrary, evidence does testify to the presence of formidable large-scale fighting organizations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A group of shipwrecked Portuguese, who arrived at Delagoa Bay armed with muskets in 1552, were confronted by a powerful African chief who was able to force them to hand over their weapons.⁴⁶ In 1686 a Dutch ship, the *Stavenisse*, ran aground on the Natal coast. The survivors could not prevent the local chief from breaking up the ship and salvaging its iron, because he commanded a force of "fully 1,000 armed men."⁴⁷ Anyone able to marshal that many soldiers must have been a powerful regional ruler.

southern side of the Thukela well before the beginning of the nineteenth century, cites Mazyana's recollection that "as the Thuli fought their way along, . . . they stabbed their opponents at close quarters rather than throwing assegais at them as was the practice in more restrained forms of warfare." It does not appear that Shaka's dictum was adopted by the chiefs who moved away to other parts of Africa. When Captain Owen encountered the Ndwandwe chief Soshangane at Delagoa Bay in 1822, he noted that attached to his shield were "his assagayes and spear; the only difference in these weapons is that the former is narrow in the blade and small for throwing, the later broad and long, with a stronger staff for the thrust;" Bryant copied this account into *Olden Times*, 450. William C. Harris reported that in 1836 Mzilikazi's soldiers rushed upon their foes, "stabbing with their short spears, of which a sheaf or bundle of five or six is taken when going to war"; *The Wild Sports of Southern Africa*, (London, 1837; reprint ed. Cape Town, 1963, 150). The use of the stabbing spear for warfare was widespread, even on the western slopes of the Drakensberg. A picture of a "typical" Tswana man drawn to illustrate T. Arbousset and F. Daumas's *Narrative of an Exploratory Tour to the North-East of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope*, trans. John C. Brown (Cape Town, 1846, reprint ed. Cape Town, 1968), 147, shows him carrying the short-handled spear. According to James Backhouse "the chief weapon of war among the Basuto is an assagai with a short handle, but they generally carry long ones with them;" G. M. Theal, ed., *Basutoland Records, Volume I, 1833-1852* (Cape Town, 1883, reprint ed. Cape Town, 1964), 1:28.

⁴⁴ William F. Lye, "The Sotho Wars in the Interior of South Africa, 1822-1837" (Ph. D. dissertation, UCLA, 1970), 48, 51. A visitor to the Tlhaping town of Latakoo in 1820 saw companies of soldiers "marching two and two as regularly as any trained regiment. Most of them were armed with four assagais or spears, and had also battle-axes, and shields made of the hide of an ox;" John Campbell, *Travels in South Africa*. (London, 1822; reprint ed. New York, 1967), 258.

⁴⁵ Bryant, *Olden Times*, 317, 641-42; Wright, "The Dynamics of Power," 33, 35, 164, 168; Hedges, "Trade and Politics," 153.

⁴⁶ Graham Mackeurtan, *The Cradle Days of Natal (1497-1845)* (London, 1930), 8.

⁴⁷ Chase, ed., *Natal Papers*, 1: 5; my italics.

At this point we encounter a classic problem in historical argumentation. Having shown that all the features of the states first encountered by literate observers in the early nineteenth century existed in a more distant past, what reason is there to continue assuming that no such previous states existed, or that there had been any “long-established equilibrium”? The short chronology on which the assumption initially rested had been exploded by radiocarbon dating in 1973. The other supporting evidence relied on what philosophers call the ‘argument from silence.’ Monica Wilson and Tim Maggs noted that apart from the encounter with a powerful chief mentioned in 1686, none of the shipwreck survivors who traveled northwards to Delagoa Bay reported any large states.⁴⁸ On the other hand, Maggs also recognizes the problematic nature of that evidence. The individual reports are widely separated in time. They were penned by people with no knowledge of local languages. It is difficult to say precisely where the shipwrecks occurred and what route the survivors took. Common sense suggests that people trying to reach a specific point on the coast, Delagoa Bay, would cling to the coast for fear of overshooting their mark. Since the Zulu and other large states documented in the early nineteenth century located their headquarters far from the sea, it might be argued that any similar states would have good reasons for choosing similar locations and would, therefore, have been missed by bedraggled parties of strangers threading their uncertain way along the coast.

The question might have rested there, unsolved and unsolvable but for another remarkable archaeological discovery in the late 1970s. Martin Hall, newly graduated from Cambridge, began work in association with Tim Maggs in the heart of old Zululand between the Thukela and Mfolozi rivers. Using aerial photography as well as ground surveys they found the area crowded with the remains of stonewalled cattle enclosures built in a single architectural style. Radiocarbon dating established that the building occurred continuously over a period from about 1000 to 1800 AD.⁴⁹ Just as archaeology had destroyed Gluckman’s model, this latest find destroyed Bryant’s Edenic picture of a thousand-year old Zulu way of life based on fragmented homesteads — a picture Hall called “The Myth of the Zulu Homestead.” Just to the west of Hall’s Nqabeni study area Maggs had drawn attention to a further large area of ruined stone cattle enclosures in the Natal uplands which bore a strong affinity to those which he had studied a decade earlier in the Orange Free State.⁵⁰ These had first been noticed by Francis Farewell in an expedition to the Natal interior in 1825 and later remarked upon by the Boers who trekked into the region in 1837. At that time “the remains of thousands of stone kraals” were taken as further evidence of Shaka’s brutal extermination of “a very dense population.”⁵¹

⁴⁸ *Oxford History*, 1:118-19; Tim Maggs, “The Iron Age Farming Communities,” in A. Duminy and B. Guest, eds., *Natal and Zululand from Earliest Times to 1910* (Pietermaritzburg, 1989), 38-40.

⁴⁹ Martin Hall, “The Myth of the Zulu Homestead: Archaeology and Ethnography” *Africa* 54 (1984): 65-79. See also M. Hall and T. Maggs, “Nqabeni: A later Iron Age site in Zululand,” in *Iron Age Studies in Southern Africa, Goodwin Series of the South African Archaeological Society* 3 (1979): 159-76.

⁵⁰ This formed the basis of his Ph. D. dissertation, published later as *Iron Age Communities of the Southern Highveld* (Pietermaritzburg, 1976).

While emphasizing that the new archaeological evidence contradicted the picture of timeless cultural homogeneity or a “long established equilibrium” in Zululand which pervaded previous scholarship, Hall did not venture beyond his expertise to speculate on the identity of those who built the stone cattle enclosures. Nonetheless, by showing that building and habitation had continued late into the eighteenth century, he opened a broad highway for further speculation. The dense settlements were located in an area far from the coastal paths taken by Portuguese shipwreck survivors. Their size and extent argues against the kind of political fragmentation assumed by all previous scholars. A substantial kingdom could have existed there without ever being noticed by occasional European visitors to the coast. The persistence of habitation right through the eighteenth century — until about the time of Shaka’s birth — raises questions that demand a response. That, of course, does not justify the historian in jumping to the conclusion that such a large political grouping did appear. The ruins cannot be made to speak. On the other hand, they clearly justify re-examination of the other available evidence on the nature of political organization before the last decades of the eighteenth century.

Now that Shaka’s supposed innovations in military organization, technology and strategy have been shown to have been long-established practices in the region, there is even less reason to suppose that the political and cultural institutions of the Zulu kingdom suddenly sprang into existence in the late eighteenth century. The foundation of the state was the ruler’s ability to mobilize the labor power of young males in peace and war. With or without regiments, chiefs throughout Southern Africa had since time immemorial been able to command young men’s labor power through their control of cattle and women. Without cattle young men could not make the required presents (*lobola*) to the fathers of their chosen brides. Through the organization of raiding parties, loans of cattle and other devices, chiefs and older men commanded the allegiance of young men. That is why cattle were physically located at the center of every homestead and every chiefly residence. The archaeologist Tom Huffman has demonstrated that what he calls the “central cattle complex” permeated Southern Africa from the Zambezi to Natal for a thousand years or more.⁵² Substantial states have been shown to exist at Mapungubwe in the Limpopo Valley, in the lowveld now occupied by Kruger Park and along the coast around Delagoa Bay in present-day Mozambique.⁵³ These suggest that the raw materials from which states were made had long been present and the principles on which they were based were well known. The central institution of all states, great or small, was chieftainship. It must be very old, because the name for chief is virtually the

⁵¹ Francis Farewell’s diary entry for 4 Sept. 1825, as read by Andrew Smith in 1832; Kirby, ed., *Andrew Smith in Natal*, 64. Henry Cloete, *Five Lectures on the Emigration of the Dutch Farmers from the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope and their Settlement in the District of Natal until their Formal Submission to Her Majesty’s Authority, in the Year 1843* (Cape Town, 1856), 83.

⁵² Maggs, “Three Decades of Iron Age Research,” 74.

⁵³ M. Steyn, S. Miller and W. C. Nienhaber & M. Loots, “Late Iron Age Gold Burials from Thulamela (Pafuri Region, Kruger National Park),” *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 53 (1998): 73-85. Malyn Newitt points out that “large unified kingdoms” emerged “as early as the sixteenth century” around Delagoa Bay in close proximity to the territory which became Zululand; *A History of Mozambique* (London, 1995), 257.

same in all the Southern Bantu dictionaries: *inkosi* in Zulu and Xhosa, *kosi* in Southern Sotho, *kgosi* in Setswana.⁵⁴ There was no separate word for king in any of the languages, which argues that no new word was needed to describe the position held by Shaka in the Zulu kingdom. No new words were required to denote the regiments (*amabutho*), great men around the chief (*abatwana*), the enclosures of unmarried women at the headquarters of important chiefs (*isigodlo*), or any of the religious practitioners whose services might be required. The oral testimony embodied in the James Stuart Archive contains no description of the invention of new constitutional principles, forms or institutions. Travelers and traders who visited the kingdom in the 1820s and 1830s all remark on the extraordinary ceremonial richness of court life, the parades of color-coordinated cattle, the formal courtesies, the poetry, dance and ritual. Napoleon Bonaparte famously formulated rules for the *Comedie Française* while bivouacked in Moscow, but other examples of constitutional endeavor by generals on the march are rare. The idea that Shaka or his immediate predecessor Dingane could have devised such central state institutions while engaged in almost constant armed struggle with neighboring chiefs beggars belief. Oliver Cromwell's constitutional innovations were spare and simple by comparison. While this argument by inference cannot claim to be decisive, those who wish to maintain the proposition that large states of an unprecedented type sprang into existence fully armed in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries must shoulder a substantial burden of proof.

The task is not lightened by the considerable body of evidence which shows that very similar principles and central institutions which shaped neighboring states owed little or nothing to Shaka's example. John Omer-Cooper had argued that within a few years, Shaka's revolutionary methods had been copied by all his rivals.⁵⁵ The Swazi kingdom founded by Sobhuza, he said, used "the system of military organization which developed as a result of contact with the Zulu." Soshangane "employed the age-regiment system and Zulu fighting methods" in making the Gaza state. Zwangendaba of the Ngoni "drilled his followers in Zulu fighting tactics." Mzilikazi built the Ndebele kingdom on "military discipline and Zulu fighting techniques." It is not necessary to descend into detailed analysis of these states in order to show that Omer-Cooper's argument strains credulity. Although precise dates are not available, Shaka appears to have taken control of the nascent Zulu state in 1817 or 1818. By 1822 Shoshangane and Zwangendaba had moved far away. Mzilikazi had moved to the Magaliesberg hills of the central highveld by 1825 at the latest. Is it conceivable that revolutionary principles of state formation, ritual, pomp and circumstance, were instantly understood and adopted by those chiefs? Besides, as Hedges showed, practically all of Shaka's alleged "new fighting techniques" had long been known in the region. The one new technique which may have been Shaka's invention — the insistence that each soldier take only one short-stabbing spear into battle — was not adopted by any of his rivals.⁵⁶ Above all,

⁵⁴ The word was certainly in use by the sixteenth century when it first appears in printed records; *Oxford History*, 1:118.

⁵⁵ Omer-Cooper, *Zulu Aftermath*, 51, 59, 64, 131.

⁵⁶ See n. 51 above.

fighting techniques are not constitutions. Neither Omer-Cooper or any other believer in the revolutionary nature of the Zulu state offered any evidence of structural innovation.

The case can be inverted. It seems much more likely that Shaka, seeking to build the power of a previously insignificant chiefdom, drew on an existing heritage of statecraft known to his immediate neighbors. J. H. Soga implied as much when he used genealogical evidence to argue that the Zulu were an upstart group inferior in dignity and distinction to established chiefdoms in their region, for example, the Hlubi, Ndwandwe, and Dlamini lines.⁵⁷ A. T. Bryant, using different informants and genealogical charts, arrived at similar conclusions. The Zulu line — “a royal house of doubtful pedigree” — was very short in comparison to the Langene, Ndwandwe, Swazi and Hlubi lines. Using his standard formula of eighteen years per reign, Bryant calculated that the Swazi, Ndwandwe and Hlubi lines could be traced back to the beginning of the fifteenth century, while the eponymous chief Zulu had died at the beginning of the eighteenth century.⁵⁸ In the parlance of the time, Soga and Bryant called these lines tribes. In fact they have no ethnic meaning; they are simply lists of chiefs in order of descent. Every chiefdom had a name which was the name of an earlier chief. As new leaders gained renown, their names displaced those of their predecessors. Thus the name and fame of Mswati had by the mid-nineteenth century grown so great that people who had previously called themselves after his father, Sobhuza, or his ancestor Dlamini, chose to call themselves Swazi. The praise singers who recited the genealogies could give no information on the size and structure of the chiefdoms ruled by the long-dead *inkosi*. Such lines are difficult to check against other kinds of historical evidence and notoriously subject to revision in the interests of current dynasties.⁵⁹ What is interesting about the genealogies constructed by Soga and Bryant is that Shaka’s triumphs did not succeed in obliterating or diminishing the memories of his well-born rivals. The hypothesis that several states of a new kind arose about the same time does not take account of the contrast between the short line of Shaka and the long pedigrees of his most important opponents — especially the coalition grouped around his deadly enemy, Zwibe (d. 1822). The founders of the states which Omer-Cooper called “Zulu-type states”, including the Ndebele, the Gasa, the Ngoni and the Swazi, had all been closely associated with Zwibe. Instead of hypothesizing that they all chose to imitate Shaka, it is easier to imagine that he modeled his state on theirs. And as they stemmed from ancient families it is entirely possible that states of that type existed in a more remote past. Soga and Bryant related each of them to a larger grouping they called Mbo. That name now invites further elucidation.

Theal had almost certainly erred in identifying “the Abambo horde” encountered by the Portuguese on the lower Zambezi in 1570 with the AbaMbo met south of Delagoa Bay in the 1590s. But he had not made up the name. Several different kinds of evidence attest to the existence of a large Mbo

⁵⁷ Soga, *The South-Eastern Bantu*, vii, 401, and genealogical charts on unnumbered pages.

⁵⁸ Bryant, *Olden Times*, 35 and chart facing 314.

⁵⁹ Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty*, 56.

grouping. They appear in a Portuguese account of 1589 as Vambe [=abaMbo].⁶⁰ Survivors of the wreck of the *Santo Alberto* in 1593 were attacked by men belonging to chief “Bambe”, another form of BaMbo.⁶¹ A report of “VaMbe” south of St. Lucia Bay in modern Zululand in 1594 appears to refer to the same people. One of the *Santo Alberto* survivors reported that a single kingdom, the “Fumos” extended 30 leagues (i.e. 90 miles) inland from St. Lucia Bay (right into the heart of modern Zululand).⁶² Later Portuguese mapmakers routinely wrote Vambe or Hambona (=BaMbo) across the inland regions of southeast Africa. As late as 1846 commercial maps of Africa showed “Hambonaas” in that spot.⁶³ Survivors of a ship wrecked on those shores in 1686 who traveled widely in the region reported “five kingdoms, namely, the Magoses, Makriggas, the Matimbas, Mapontes and Emboas.”⁶⁴ The “Magoses” may confidently be assumed to be the modern Xhosa, the “Matimbas” are the Thembu, the “Makriggas” [in other reports, Mageryga] may possibly be Griqua and the “Mapontes” are the Mpondo. The “Eboas” [in another report, the Semboes] are the Mbo, the only one of these five groupings which does not survive in some form into the nineteenth century. Recorded African memories also attest to the existence of the Mbo. Until well into the twentieth century Thembu and Xhosa people commonly referred to Natal as eMbo – the country of the Mbo.⁶⁵ A Methodist missionary collecting evidence from Hlubi people living among the Xhosa was told in the 1840s that at one time 250,000 AbaMbo had lived on the upper Buffalo River Valley beneath the Drakensberg range in Natal — but that they had been dispersed in the wars of the early nineteenth century.⁶⁶ While the figure could not be taken seriously except as a way of indicating a vast number, the location named lies precisely within the region of extensive stone ruins identified by Maggs and Hall. The chiefly lineages who joined with Zwide in opposition to Shaka also claimed affiliation with the Mbo name. Bryant’s genealogical chart of the “Embo Tribes” linked the small nineteenth-century surviving Mbo chieftaincy to Zwide’s Ndwandwe and the Swazi kings through the name of a single chief, Langa, who died around the turn of the eighteenth century.⁶⁷

While it would be rash to use these fragments to compose a clear picture of a large seventeenth or eighteenth-century state, the range of evidence — archaeological, oral, genealogical and documentary — which testifies to the

⁶⁰ Bryant, *Olden Times*, 403; Wright, “Dynamics of Power,” 313.

⁶¹ *Oxford History*, 1:81.

⁶² C. R. Boxer, *The Tragic History of the Sea 1589-1622* (Cambridge, 1959), 70.

⁶³ See for example: “Africa” by James Wyld, FO 925/4255, Map Collection of the Public Record Office, London; “The Continent and Islands of Africa with all the Recent Explorations, delineated by John Purdy, 1824 edition, catalogue G69, Royal Geographical Society, London; and “A New Map of Africa” by John Cary, 1846, catalogue G.103, Royal Geographical Society, London.

⁶⁴ Chase, *Natal Papers*, 1: 8; Bryant, *Olden Times*, 290. See also E. Casalis, *The Basutos or Twenty-three Years in South Africa*. (London, 1861; reprint ed. Cape Town 1965), xvi.

⁶⁵ Eileen Krige, *The Social System of the Zulus* (2nd ed., Pietermaritzburg, 1950), 3.

⁶⁶ John Ayliff and Joseph Whiteside, *History of the Abambo, Generally known as Fingos* (Butterworth, 1912), 1-11.

⁶⁷ Bryant, *Olden Times*, chart facing 314. Beyond this point the historian cannot venture. As Hedges remarks in “Trade and Politics,” 162, “relations between the royal Ndwandwe central lineages and those of the related Gasa, Ncwaneni-Jere, Msane and parts of the Nxumalo lineages are shrouded in impenetrable mists.”

existence of a large Mbo chieftaincy cannot be dismissed as the invention of interested parties in the nineteenth century. How large is impossible to say, just as it is impossible to say how large the Zulu, Ndebele, Gaza or Swazi kingdoms were in the 1820s. Scholarly estimates of the number of soldiers Shaka could put in the field vary from 14,000 to 100,000.⁶⁸ Even the eye-witness accounts vary tremendously. Francis Farewell on his first meeting with the Zulu king in 1824 estimated the forces he could see at “eight or nine thousand” and estimated that “at a push” there might be another six thousand men held in reserve.⁶⁹ Nathaniel Isaacs and Henry Francis Fynn, who served as mercenary gunmen with Shaka’s army made estimates of 30,000 and 50,000 respectively. Faced with this conflicting evidence, Bryant guessed that Shaka could have summoned at most about 20,000 fighting men.⁷⁰ For all that has been written about the emergence of new large-scale kingdoms at the turn of the nineteenth century, documentary evidence of the size of the populations and armies of those kingdoms is scant or non-existent. Mzilikazi’s Ndebele kingdom is always reckoned among the “new formations” but a visitor to his capital in 1836 believed that the total male population between the ages of 15 and 60 numbered no more than 4000.⁷¹ When we consider that equally good documentation calculates that certain Xhosa chiefs could raise 6000 fighting men, and that Faku’s Mpondo chieftaincy (not included in conventional lists of “new large-scale kingdoms”) had a population of thirty-five to fifty thousand in the 1840s, the basis on which historians have distinguished new Zulu-type large states from old-style small ones appears highly questionable.⁷² To dismiss the Mbo chieftaincy – whatever form it might have taken – on the available evidence as a small, old style state would be rash. It was equally rash for twentieth-century historical scholarship to devise taxonomies of state types on the basis of fragmentary and inconclusive documentation.

To conclude, broadly speaking two positions are tenable. One is agnostic: we do not know and cannot know that no large states predated the Zulu, Ndwandwe, Swazi and similar kingdoms in southeast Africa. The more adventurous position would allow that the Zulu was a new state but deny that it was a new kind of state. This was roughly the position taken by Cetshwayo, Zulu King at the time of Anglo-Zulu War of 1879. He said that the Zulu chieftaincy before Shaka “made it a great nation” was “small tribe occupying the Emashlabatini country.” Cetshwayo did not state that only small chieftaincies existed before nor did he signal out any novelty in the structure of the kingdom, apart from the fact that Shaka had “established for the first time a standing

⁶⁸ Isaac Schapera cited the unbelievable figure of 100,000 in *Cambridge History of the British Empire, Vol. VIII, South Africa* (2nd ed., Cambridge, 1963) 38.

⁶⁹ Farewell to Somerset, 6 Sept. 1824, in B. J. T. Leverton, ed., *Important Cape Documents, Vol 4: Records of Natal, Vol. 1, 1823-August 1828*, 36-38.

⁷⁰ Bryant, *Olden Times*, 647. Leonard Thompson, more committed to a large-scale Zulu state, preferred Isaacs’ estimate of 40,000; *Oxford History*, 1:344.

⁷¹ Statement of Dr. Andrew Smith in Leverton, ed., *Important Cape Documents, Vol 6: Records of Natal*, 31.

⁷² *Oxford History*, 1:344; William Beinart, *The Political Economy of Pondoland, 1860-1930* (Cambridge, 1982), 11.

⁷³ C. de B. Webb and J. B. Wright, *A Zulu King Speaks: Statements made by Cetshwayo*

army.”⁷³ Interestingly, even after abandoning the implausible theory that new kinds of states arose in the late eighteenth century, there still remains a “problem of the rise of the Zulu kingdom.” Why were Dingiswayo and Shaka able to displace the rulers of the Ndwandwe and other neighboring kingdoms to become the largest regional power? Many of the hypotheses formerly used to account for the origins of new kinds of kingdoms could be redeployed to answer that question. Dingiswayo’s push to open trading relations with Delagoa Bay, struggles for better pasturage during the Madlatule famine, the attraction of Shaka’s leadership at a time when the external slave trade from Portuguese ports and British campaigns against the Xhosa chiefs were growing to unprecedented heights — all would merit consideration.⁷⁴

None of this will matter in the slightest to the Universal Zulu Nation, hiphop culture or the builders of warships of the “Zulu Class”. There will still be Zulu parades in New Orleans and Shaka will continue to be taken as the beau ideal of an African King, because the idea of the Zulu in popular culture has cut loose from its original historical moorings. Nor can it be fairly said that to question the novelty of the Zulu kingdom in any way damages the picture that Omer-Cooper painted of Africans as imaginative political innovators.⁷⁵ On the contrary, by pushing back the date at which large kingdoms emerged, that picture is reinforced and deepened. The heritage of statecraft on which Shaka drew reached back to a time long before Europeans appeared on the scene.

kaMpande on the History and Customs of his People (Pietermaritzburg, 1978), 2-7.

⁷⁴ This last hypothesis was first advanced by Julian Cobbing in a series of published and unpublished papers in the late 1980s; Cobbings’ theories were subsequently the subject of an important conference, whose proceedings have been published as *The Mfecane Aftermath*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton (Johannesburg, 1995).

⁷⁵ This was the issue which made some historians balk at accepting Julian Cobbing’s argument that violence emanating from the colonial state stimulated the formation of the Zulu kingdom. See *The Mfecane Aftermath*, xxx.