

**Power and Public Discourse: Umvoti mission reserve and the politics of economic
experiments in nineteenth century Natal, 1860–1900**

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Introduction

When John Langalibalele Dube returned from his studies in the United States [WHAT YEAR?] full of energy and vision for transforming his homeland, he embarked on a journey to an old settlement—*emzini omdala ka Grout*, as it was commonly referred to among Isizulu-speaking people in Natal. He sought to know what might have happened to one of the leading African settlements in Natal. On his way to Umvoti, Dube was informed that the area had changed. The stories he heard told a similar ‘narrative of decline’. For some, the settlement had lost all its economic enthusiasm and promise. The second generation of mission station residents were blamed for having abandoned the pioneering spirit of their fathers. But Dube was not deterred; he wanted to establish the facts for himself. What he saw was a settlement full of promise and one that still inspired the current generation to move forward. Perhaps what Dube sought to do was to disturb an emerging ‘public’ discourse on land ownership and land use in Natal that eventually had far-reaching implications for politics in general.

This book seeks to tell the story of how and why Umvoti mission station became a symbol of African achievement and failure. This story has its origins near the banks of the Umvoti river, where Aldin Grout established a mission station in 1840, but its consequences extend beyond that place and time. To the colonial government in Natal, Umvoti mission station became a symbol of both African achievement and failure because of its residents’ endeavours in sugar cane farming. These economic activities did not only shape colonial administrators’ response to African farmers but embodied a parallel formation of identity in the farmers themselves. The case of sugar cane farming at Umvoti brings together the complex interaction of missionaries, African residents, and the colonial government. To examine the story of Umvoti is to examine the use of colonial economic experiments as a laboratory in which administrators’ opinions of Africans were tested and shaped. This book also considers the uniqueness of Natal politics while addressing its applicability to larger colonial projects. At the heart of this story lie the events around the establishment, working and decline of one of the first sugar mills in Natal—Umvoti sugar mill.

Existing knowledge

The growth of Umvoti sugar mill took place alongside the emergence of mission work in Natal. In 1880, the ‘Secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions

estimated . . . that the number of missionaries in Natal was proportionately greater than in any other community on the globe two or three times over'.¹ Why mission societies chose this region of Africa and the impact the large number of missionaries had on African societies are two themes which bear upon the story of Umvoti.

Scholars have suggested that most Christian mission societies were attracted to this region of Africa because of the existence of a centralised African state which was, at the time, the Zulu kingdom. This was especially true with regards to the American Board Mission for Foreign Mission (ABMFM) and the London Mission Society (LMS). Through the works of Reverend John Philip based at the Cape Colony, these mission societies heard and learnt about the political structures of African societies.²

Once mission societies became aware of the political structures of these polities, they devised strategies of how to penetrate these societies. In the case of the Zulu kingdom, American missionaries, who were in constant contact with the LMS, planned to introduce their missionary activities to the king. They hoped that, once converted, the Zulu king would in turn encourage his people to spread the Christian gospel throughout the continent of Africa. As the literature on nineteenth-century South Africa demonstrates, this sense of optimism never materialised, not only in the Zulu kingdom but in other parts of southern Africa. With the exception of the Basotho kingdom, where Moshoeshe worked with Catholic missionaries,³ the relationship between African kingdoms and mission societies in southern Africa was not cordial. All three independent Zulu kings—Dingane, Mpande and Cetshwayo—were never at ease with the presence of missionaries in the heart of the kingdom. In general, these kings saw missionaries as potential political rivals.⁴ King Mpande of the Zulu kingdom is often quoted to have said, ‘they cast off their allegiance to their king, and were of no use to me, and after a while the missionary with my people and cattle left the

¹ Norman Etherington, *Preachers, Peasants and Politics in Southeast Africa, 1835–1880: African Christian Communities in Natal, Pondoland and Zululand* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1978), 4.

² J. Dexter Taylor, *One Hundred Years of the American Board Mission in South Africa, 1835–1935* (S.L.: S.N., 1935), 8. [WHAT DOES SL AND SN STAND FOR?]

³ Joy Brain, “Moving from the Margins to the Mainstream: The Roman Catholic Church,” in *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social & Cultural History*, ed. Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport (Cape Town: David Philip, 1997), 198.

⁴ For further reading, see Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* Vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

country'.⁵ He said this after Reverend Grout and some of his followers had left the kingdom to settle in the Colony of Natal in 1842.⁶ It would take eight years for Mpande to change his stance on missionaries. This happened when a Norwegian Missionary, Hans Schreuder, introduced himself in to the king for the second time in the early 1850s.⁷

When missionaries realised that leaders of African societies did not want to allow their people to convert to Christianity, they focused their efforts in regions that had fallen under British rule. The Cape and Natal received the lion's share of missionary activities. Yet, even in these colonies, the relationship between settler governments and mission societies was not without tensions.

As settler governments consolidated their power with the aim of having total control over African societies, they came into conflict with mission station residents and mission societies. Disagreements ensued in the Cape Colony over the franchise.⁸ In Natal, mission station residents demanded fair treatment befitting of all subjects of the Queen, Victoria.⁹ Towards the end of nineteenth century, mission societies were well established—with the exception of the Free East Africa Mission¹⁰—and they owned vast tracts of land. In most parts of South Africa these lands were generally referred to as glebes, mission reserves or mission stations. Through the ownership of land, missionaries attracted a following of people who, for a variety of reasons, had fallen out of favour with their leaders. The gravitation of people towards mission stations in most cases antagonised missionaries against chiefs and kings. Tensions between African kings and missionaries sometimes became very acrimonious and extended into open confrontation. Certainly, this was true of Aldin Grout, an American Board Missionary, and king Mpande KaSenzangakhona, who ruled the Zulu kingdom between 1838 and 1872.

⁵ Cited in Etherington, *Preachers Peasants and Politics in Southeast Africa, 1835–1880*, 75.

⁶ Aldin Grout, "A Narrative of the Establishment of the American Mission in Natal" (Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society[WHICH SOCIETY?], Durban, June 13, 1856, 9–10).

⁷ M. Nzama, [INSERT TITLE OF MA THESIS]

⁸ Les Switzer, *Power and Resistance in an African Society: The Ciskei Xhosa and the making of South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1993), [INSERT PAGE NUMBER].

⁹ Vukile Khumalo, "Political rights, land ownership and contending forms of representation in Colonial Natal, 1860–1900," *Journal of Natal and Zulu History* 21 (2005): [INSERT PAGE NUMBERS].

¹⁰ Frederick Hale, ed., *Norwegian Missionaries in Natal and Zululand: Selected Correspondence, 1844–1900* (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1996), 12.

The influence of missionaries (now including Africans) was made more profound by the fact that they were literate. While a vast section of the African population continued to uphold and practice their religions, new communities emerged as more Africans converted to Christianity—communities centred on the bible as a guiding text. Literacy helped them to document and challenge colonial governments using letters and petitions. Not surprisingly, the propagators of segregation in nineteenth century Natal such as Theophilus Shepstone—a Diplomatic Agent to Native Tribes—never welcomed this political culture.¹¹

Furthermore, as South Africa shifted towards a capitalist economic system, mission stations became centres of economic experiments. In the early years of these mission settlements, *amakholwa* residents (Christian believers) became involved in farming and trading. Having capital and skills gave these groups of people the capacity to found their own newspapers, some of which became critical in shaping people's opinions at the turn of the twentieth century.

The twentieth century saw the appearance of a massive literature that sought to reassess the work of mission societies, much of which is ambivalent on the legacy of mission work. While scholars who have produced this literature acknowledge the fact that most missionary societies worked with oppressive settler governments, they also suggest that, perhaps, what is equally important is the fact that mission societies created a space where *amakholwa* could settle and use the resources of the mission stations.¹²

However, other scholars disagree. They argue that missionaries undermined and ultimately destroyed African 'culture' and that this disrupted social cohesion. Pitika Ntuli asserts that

¹¹ See Keith Breckenridge, "Power without Knowledge: Three Nineteenth Century Colonialisms," *Journal of Natal and Zulu History* 24 (2006); David Welsh, *The Roots of Segregation in Natal: Native Policy in Natal 1845–1910* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1971). For more on the twentieth-century advocates of segregation, see Saul Dubow, "The Elaboration of Segregationist Ideology," in *Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth-Century South Africa*, edited by William Beinart and Saul Dubow (London: Routledge, 1995), 145.

¹² These scholars include Norman Etherington, *Preachers Peasants and Politics in Southeast Africa, 1835-1880*; Peter Delius, *The land belongs to us: The Pedi polity, the Boers and the British in the nineteenth century Transvaal* (Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1983); Sheila Marianne Meintjes, "Edendale 1850–1906. A case Study of Rural Transformation and Class Formation in an African Mission in Natal" (PhD diss., University of London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1988); Switzer, *Power and Resistance in an African Society*; Vukile Khumalo, "'We have always planted but the difficulty has been in getting the case crushed': Sugar Cane Production at Umvoti Mission Station," *Journal of Natal and Zulu History* 18 (1998).

‘Christianity was used as a subtle battering ram to gain hegemony over the rest of the world. It portrayed a religious system based on perfection. A perfect God against pagan gods [. . .]. Where complementarity existed, binary thoughts were introduced’.¹³ The argument further suggests that the adoption of Christianity by the African ‘ruling’ classes corroded a long-cherished African oral tradition and distorted African indigenous systems of knowledge.¹⁴ Another view posits that the ‘long conversation’ between European missionaries and Africans produced hybrid cultures. Indeed, what European missionaries and Africans fashioned was a new world characterised by new signs or symbols that were entirely different from what missionaries intended.¹⁵

The book

This book looks at the complex new world that missionaries and Africans at Umvoti formed. This is a story about Umvoti sugar mill, but it is also a story of missionary involvement in Natal and its social and political consequences. As in the richest stories, the players in the colonial and missionary encounters acted not according to type but due to a range of motivations.

The first chapter introduces the reader to debates about the nature of colonial settlement and addresses the interaction of missionaries, settlers and Africans in Natal and the Zulu kingdom. As Ashforth reminds us, much of the story of colonial occupation and power lies in the ‘public’ performances of commissions of inquiry, three of which—the Locations Commission of 1846–47, the [FILL IN NAME OF SECOND COMMISSION] and the Native Affairs Commission of 1852–1853—are discussed. Chapter two looks at mission station settlements as places where mission residents experimented with new forms of ownership and, in a sense, formed hybrid identities. These mission stations included Umvoti,

¹³ Pitika P. Ntuli, “The Missing Link between Culture and Education: Are We Still Chasing Gods that Are not Our Own,” in *African Renaissance*, ed. Malegapuru William Makgoba (Sandton: Mafube Publishing LTD, 1999), 191. See also Nozipho Majeke (Dora Taylor), *The Role of the Missionaries in Conquest* (Cumberwood: APDUSA, 1952).

¹⁴ Ntuli, “The Missing Link between Culture and Education,” 191.

¹⁵ For further reading on recent works on how Africans interpreted aspects of Christianity in South Africa, see Hlonipha Mokoena, “Christian Converts and the Production of Kholwa Histories in Nineteenth-Century Colonial Natal: The Case of Magma Magwaza Fuze and his Writings,” *The Journal of Natal and Zulu History* 23 (2005); Ian MacQueen, “A different form of protest: The life of Bishop Alphaeus Zulu, 1905–1960,” *The Journal of Natal and Zulu History* 23 (2005): 151–178.

Indaleni and Edendale. Chapter three shows how the fortunes of Umvoti sugar mill reflected that of other business enterprises in the colony.

Chapter five tells the story of a widow who, after the death of her husband, found herself without land on which to live and farm. Nozingqwazi's decision to enter into the written discourse of the time is significant and relates to the themes of paternalism, patriarchy and the larger implications of the political culture that sprang out of mission reserves. Finally, in chapter six, I look at the consequences of the alleged failure of the Umvoti farmers and the subsequent hardening of racial attitudes among the colonial ruling elite in Natal. As this happened, other leading figures in the colony saw the Umvoti experiment differently: not as a failure but something that required more government involvement.

Land ownership and agricultural endeavours made Umvoti mission station residents active economic participants in the colony, but the government was not comfortable with the full civic participation their fledgling economic status would imply. The case of Umvoti mission reserve confirms the impact of economic experiments in Natal and their enduring consequences.