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The Making of Swazi Identity
Introduction

This paper attempts to trace the circumstances and the manner in which the Swazi identity has emerged. It does this by exploring two questions, namely, what were the parameters used to identify the amaSwazi from other Africans, and what was their geographical locality. These questions are pondered both from the perspective of the amaSwazi themselves and that of the Europeans who came to play a crucial role in shaping, codifying and redefining the history of Africans.

However, as a way of introduction, it is important first to situate Swaziland within the current historiography of southern Africa, particularly, that of South Africa. This necessity is due to the fact that Swaziland from its creation has been directly and indirectly affected by events which took place in South Africa. Taking a larger geographic perspective, this paper argues that the inception of Swaziland was shaped by events both in what is present day South Africa and on the Delagoa Bay during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Thus, any major development in the historiography of South Africa is bound to have an effect to some degree on the history of Swaziland.

Since the publication of an article by Julian Cobbing in which he challenged the uncritical acceptance of the 'mfecane' episode by South African historians, a number of works which reconsidered the 'mfecane' have emerged.¹ These works are of two kinds, namely, those which open a debate with Cobbing on the one hand², and those which reinforce his interpretation of the 'mfecane' on the other.³ The main contribution of Cobbing is not only his attempts to subject the 'mfecane' notion with its accompanying concepts like 'Nguni' to empirical evidence, but also his debunking of the Afrocentricism in the 'mfecane'. This Afrocentricism has the effect of obscuring the role of other factors in the so-called 'mfecane', which were not African

¹Julian Cobbing, "The Mfecane As Alibi: Thoughts on Dithakong and Mbolompo", Journal of African History, 29 (1988), 487-519.

²See Elizabeth A. Eldredge, "Sources of conflict in southern Africa, c. 1800-30: The 'mfecane' reconsidered", Journal of African History, 33 (1992), 1-35; Carolyn A. Hamilton, "'The character and objects of Chaka': A Reconsideration of the making of Shaka as 'mfecane' motor", Journal of African History, 33 (1992), 37-63.

³John Wright, "Political Mythology and the Making of Natal's Mfecane", Canadian Journal of African Studies, 23 (1989), 272-91; Norman Etherington, "The Great Trek in Relation to the Mfecane: A Reassessment", South African Historical Journal, 25 (1991), 3-21.

in nature. The point one is making here is not against Afrocentricism per se, but an unbridled Afrocentricism which focuses an undue attention on Africans as the solely actors. Such a perspective fails to consider a wide picture of events and as a result it produces a parochial view of the history of Africans during the colonial period. Other observers contend that Cobbing has gone overboard in substituting an Eurocentric explanation for an Afrocentric one, and a balance or combination is needed, for neither is sufficient alone.⁴

Similarly, by pointing out that concepts like the 'mfecane' and the 'nguni' were twentieth-century inventions by European scholars,⁵ Cobbing has led us to question to what extent the existing pre-colonial history in southern Africa is a European invention. In this way, he has gone beyond Shula Marks who has uncritically accepted A.T. Bryant's overstretching of the usage of the term 'nguni'.⁶ John Wright has pointed out that the term 'nguni' should be abandoned as a classification label since it has "no historical validity". He argues that this term has been used by South African scholars and administrators to impose a primordial ethnic unity of the African peoples of the eastern seaboard of South Africa, and thus allow them collectively to be portrayed by their European-descendants of recent immigrants, with no more historically established rights to the region's resources than the offspring of immigrants from Europe.⁷

Recently, Patrick Harries has argued that 'ethnic' classification of the Tsonga-speaking people in southeast Africa including the present day Mozambique was created by the Swiss missionaries who arrived in this region in 1873. These missionaries did not only invent an 'ethnic' classification for these African societies, but also reduced African languages into

⁴Eldredge, 'Mfecane', pp. 37-38; Hamilton, 'Mfecane', p. 2.

⁵Cobbing, 'Mfecane', 487-488.

⁶Shula Marks, "The traditions of the Natal 'Nguni': a second look at the work of A.T. Bryant", in Leonard Thompson, ed., African Societies in Southern Africa (London: Heinemann, 1969), p. 127.

⁷John Wright, "Politics, Ideology, and the Invention of the 'Nguni'", in Tom Lodge, ed., Resistance and Ideology In Settler Societies (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1986), p. 111. See *ibid*, p. 98, for the different uses of the term 'nguni' by Africans.

a written form which was more intelligible to them. In Harries's view, these missionaries were more concerned with unifying the diverse African societies in this region, along the same ways as in Europe, without incurring much financial costs.⁸

In this endeavor some of these linguistic and 'ethnic' builders claimed to base their classifications on 'scientific' criteria which derived their inspiration from "evolutionism". Thus,

Harries argues,

[Henri A.] Junod [one of the missionaries who worked among 'the Rong people' in the vicinity of Lourenco Marques] used the same schema to make sense of the complex and confusing African world into which he plunged. But to make African societies fit the European pattern, he resorted to pseudo-history by hypothesizing that at some time in the distant past, migrants originating from distant areas had imposed themselves on an earlier proto-Thonga people and had adopted their language.⁹

Thus, in Junod's view, by creating one language for these diverse African societies, it would be possible to unite "the Thonga as a 'tribe' or 'nation'".¹⁰ Similarly, the study of the emergence of the amaSwazi 'ethnicity' or identity reveals ambiguities in using language as one of the criteria for

⁸Patrick Harries, "Exclusion, Classification and Internal Colonialism: The Emergence of Ethnicity Among the Tsonga-Speakers of South Africa", in Leroy Vail, ed., The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), p. 86.

⁹Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁰Ibid.; See also Patrick Harries, "The Roots of Ethnicity: Discourse and the Politics of Language Construction in South-East Africa", Journal of African Affairs, 87, 346 (January 1988), 25-52. Harries's thesis is that "the delineation and codification of Tsonga as a written language was a product of nineteenth century European discourse rather than a reflection of local reality", p. 26.

classification (see below).

Cobbing's arguments although they are still a subject of debate, suggest a need for a careful reconsideration of the emergence of the amaSwazi identity. He has been criticized for his mishandling of evidence and inaccurate chronology.¹¹

Elizabeth Eldredge also takes issue with Cobbing's contention that missionaries were involved in their capacities as slave-raiders and slave-traders on the north-eastern Cape frontier.¹² However, both Eldredge and Hamilton do not disagree fundamentally with Cobbing's revisionist view. The degree to which Cobbing has made an impact on the South African historiography is revealed by a host of comments from various South African scholars.¹³ These comments also show the nature and complexities of the 'Mfecane' debate in the context of the South African history.

This introduction has briefly outlined the nature of current historiography in South Africa, particularly on pre and colonial history. The pre-colonial history of Swaziland, especially, that of the early nineteenth century must be viewed within the context of the events of the 'mfecane'.

Evolution of the Swazi Identity

¹¹Eldredge, 'Mfecane', p. 2; Hamilton, 'Mfecane', p. 37.

¹²Eldredge, 'Mfecane', p. 2.

¹³For these comments, see a special issue entitled, "The 'Mfecane' Aftermath", in the South African Historical Journal, 25 (1991).

If Swaziland is "grossly misunderstood and under-researched" as Philip Bonner has noted,¹⁴ then its pre-colonial history is equally difficult to reconstruct. The earliest history of Swaziland is traceable to the inception of the known royal line, the Dlamini, who belongs to a nucleus family of the Ngwane, mid-eighteenth century. Dlamini's origin is based on dubious ground, namely, that of "Embo Nguni stock".¹⁵ Embo or Mbo was one the terms that was first employed by A.T. Bryant to distinguish the Dlamini or Swazi 'Ngunis' from a number of 'ngunis' according to his classification.¹⁶ (The debatable usage of the concept 'nguni' has been pointed out above). Apparently, Dlamini once lived on south-west Delagoa Bay from where he migrated to establish his settlement in southern Swaziland (Lobamba) during 1760s and 1770s.¹⁷ The people who migrated with Dlamini to southern Swaziland identified themselves "as *Bantu Baka Ngwane*, [meaning] People of Ngwane".¹⁸ They referred to the

¹⁴Philip Bonner, Kings, Commoners and Concessionaires: The Evolution and Dissolution of the Nineteenth-Century Swazi State (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 2.

¹⁵Hilda Kuper, An African Aristocracy: Rank Among The Swazi (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965 reprint), p. 11.

¹⁶A.T. Bryant, Olden Times in Zululand And Natal containing Earlier Political History of the Eastern-Nguni Clans (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1929), p. 7.

¹⁷Bonner, Kings, p. 9.

¹⁸Partly quoted by Kuper, Aristocracy, p. 12. The term 'Bantu' as applied to Africans of southern Africa was first used in writing by Bleek, a philologist, Cape Town. According to Bleek, these Africans used this term to identify themselves from other "races", see Bryant, Olden Times, p. 4. For a detailed genealogy of the amaSwazi royal dynasty, see J.S.M. Matsebula, A History of Swaziland (3rd ed., Cape Town: Longman Penguin Southern Africa,

locality which was under Dlamini's political control as kaNgwane, which means Ngwane's country.¹⁹ This is the first form of identity by a group of people who later became known as the amaSwazi (see below). This identity was based neither on linguistic nor on cultural affiliation, but rather on Dlamini's 'clan' name (*tibongo*). It can be argued that this identity indicates the group's loyalty to its leader and does not necessarily convey an 'ethnic' classification of 'nguni' as the twentieth-century southern African historiography began to label these people.

The Dlamini descendants lived in the vicinity of Mozambique (Lourenco Marques) for more than two centuries. The narratives of the shipwrecks of the Portuguese point to the existence of a king named Angomanes (later identified to be Amangwane, as the Swazi had earlier referred to themselves) who settled west of Maputo in about the fourteenth-century.²⁰ For a certain period it seems that there were friendly relations between Dlamini's Ngwane and their neighbors, the Tembe people who also lived in the south of Mozambique. The degree to which Ngwane-Tembe

1988), pp. 18-19. See also Kuper, Aristocracy, p.232. Bonner has cautioned against uncritical acceptance of genealogies because they are vulnerable to manipulation. He pointed out that "even outright fabrication can sometimes occur, when societies are suddenly faced with the need to create a remote past which sanctions the present", see Kings, p. 9.

¹⁹Alan R. Booth, Swaziland: Tradition and Change in a Southern African Kingdom (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1983), p. 7.

²⁰C.R. Boxer, ed., The Tragic History of the Sea, 1589-1622 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1959), pp.74-75.

relations were strong is conveyed in the modern Swazi state's view that "we [the amaSwazi] are one with the Tembe; their king, like ours, marries his sisters."²¹ The statement is significant because it sheds light on the possible link between the Dlamini and the Tembe. Up to now, the tendency among scholars is to observe strong Swazi 'cultural' borrowings from the 'sotho'.²² Although this observation might be valid one, it is equally important for us to ask new questions on Dlamini connections with people of south-east Africa as well if we are to grapple with the obscure pre-colonial history of the Dlamini. Their geographical proximity to Delagoa Bay should further serve as a sharpener in our quest for more questions. Kuper mentions that "intermarriage between the ruling Tembe and Dlamini was prohibited" until the Dlamini king Mbandzeni, 1875-1889, initiated remarriage.²³ However, Kuper does not explain why marriages were not allowed in the first place, and when they were discontinued if they ever existed before. It is partly by interrogating the sketchy evidence we have with vigorous questions that we will be able to have a better understanding of the Swazi history.

The reasons for a breakup of Tembe-Ngwane relations during the eighteenth century and the subsequent migration of the

²¹Kuper, Aristocracy, p. 12.

²²Bonner, Kings, p. . 'Sotho' is another problematic term in the same sense as 'nguni'. It is used to denote those Africans who speak SeSotho, SeTswana and SePedi.

²³Kuper, Aristocracy, p. 12.

amaNgwane to the south of the present day Swaziland remain obscure. Bonner speculates that the amaNgwane-Tembe crisis came as a result of the latter's need to dominate trade from the south.²⁴ During the eighteenth century the Tembe controlled the export trade south of Delagoa Bay. The amaNgwane exported ivory to the Delagoa Bay trade. In Alan Smith's view, it is highly probable that the Tembe were responsible for the eighteenth-century wars which erupted in this region as the amaNgwane were trying to break away from the Tembe trade domination.²⁵ However, it seems as if there is more in this than merely the Tembe competing against the amaNgwane. For example, in 1794, after Dlamini left the vicinity of the Delagoa Bay, civil war occurred among the Tembe. The Portuguese who were at Delagoa Bay at the time intervened in that war by reinstating the ruling chief. However, one section of the Tembe left and reorganized its independent chiefdom of Maputo.²⁶

Before moving away from the Delagoa Bay, it is important to

²⁴Bonner, Kings, p. 11.

²⁵Alan Smith, "The trade of Delagoa Bay as a factor in Nguni politics 1750-1835", in Leonard Thompson, ed., African Societies in South Africa (London: Heinemann, 1969), pp.180-181.

²⁶Ibid, p. 181. There is a need to reinvestigate the position of European traders in the Dlamini-Tembe strife. By re-examining the position of the British traders in Natal during the 'Mfecane', Cobbing has yielded new insight which challenged the afrocentricism of the 'mfecane'. Similarly, new questions regarding Dlamini-Tembe crisis may yield new insight. Probably, the Dlamini-Tembe crisis is indicative of the European net within which these groups were caught up, as Cobbing has pointed out in the case of 'mfecane' in Natal, see 'Mfecane', p. 519. However, such a suggestion falls outside the scope of this paper.

sketch out the origins of European traders who were there, particularly during the 1760s and 1770s when the amaNgwane were forced by Tembe to leave for what later became known as Swaziland. During the second half of the eighteenth century the Portuguese attempted to reestablish their trade establishments in Mozambique and at Delagoa Bay. At this time the French merchants started to visit the Delagoa Bay. The Dutch traders were still involved with trade there. The British merchants from India dominated Delagoa Bay trade by trading in cheap beads and cloth. In 1777 the Austrian Asiatic Company landed at Delagoa Bay. The main items that were exported through Delagoa Bay trade during this time were amber, rhinoceros horns and ivory.²⁷ Thus, the mid-eighteenth century witnessed the emergence of the "big business" in Delagoa Bay and it is impossible to conceive that such a trade did not affect local populations. For example, the Kosse²⁸ chiefdom of the middle Nkomati emerged as a powerful institution and dominated the interior trade in its capacity as an intermediary with Delagoa Bay. It established its powerful position by controlling the river routes and by forging good trade relations with the

²⁷Alan Smith, "Delagoa Bay and the Trade of South-Eastern Africa", in Richard Gray and David Birmingham, eds., Pre-Colonial African Trade: Essays on Trade in Central and Eastern Africa before 1900 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 277-279.

²⁸This seems to be one of mistaken identities or a indication of the Portuguese's failure to understand African languages. This might mean Nkosi, which means a king, a title which was substituted for 'chief' during the colonial era.

Europeans at Delagoa Bay.²⁹

It was during the 1760s and 1770s that Dlamini were forced by Tembe to leave the area of Delagoa Bay and migrated to southern Swaziland. They first established their settlement along the Pongola River, west of the Lebombo mountain, amid the Mdzimba hills. In Maylam's view, this area was suitable to the Dlamini's "mixed arable and pastoral economy."³⁰ Rather it is probable that they adapted their economic activities to conditions of the new environment, since they traded in ivory at Delagoa Bay. There is no evidence that the Dlamini had practiced "mixed arable and pastoral economy" on their earlier settlement at the vicinity of Delagoa Bay. Maylam's view has an effect of sanctioning the present pattern of geographical distribution in southern Africa as if it were done by choice on the part of African societies. Such a view distorts the major impact of the transformations in land distribution which occurred partly as a result of the advent of the Europeans in southern African region.

By the 1760s and 1770s the Dlamini or amaNgwane were under the leadership of Ngwane II. He established his settlement in southern Swaziland and named it Eshiselweni (present-day Hlatikulu District), which means the Place of Burning. This name signify the ruthless conquest of the people the amaNgwane

²⁹Ibid, p. 283.

³⁰Paul Maylam, A History of the African People of South Africa: From the Early Iron Age to the 1970s (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), p. 25.

found there.³¹ The people whom the amaNgwane found in southern Swaziland were of `sotho' and `nguni' origin. The amaNgwane referred them as the *Emakhandzambili* or "those found ahead". These people were less organized and disunited by internal strife, thus they were unable to withstand the encroaching Dlamini. After they were conquered they were either eliminated or incorporated with the Dlamini and required to pay loyalty to the Dlamini. After *Emakhandzambili* had pledged their allegiance to Ngwane, they were allowed to continue practicing their semi-political autonomy through their own `chiefs'. As time progressed, those who belonged to the `sotho' group and who stood for Dlamini interests were embraced as "true Swazi". They enjoyed the same status with the Dlamini group.³²

The parameter for acceptance into Dlamini identity as discussed here was allegiance to the new rulers. Language and culture were not considered as criteria for acceptance to Dlamini identity. The inclusion of `sotho' group reveals the heterogenous foundation upon which the evolving amaNgwane kingdom was built. Thus, Bonner observed, "their culture is literally clustered with Sotho borrowings".³³

Ngwane obtained from the *Emakhandzambili* fundamental tools that later proved extremely valuable toward the building of his

³¹Kuper, Aristocracy, p. 12.

³²Lord Hailey, Native Administration in the British African Territories: Part V. The High Commission Territories: Basutoland, The Bechuanaland Protectorate and Swaziland (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1953), p. 351.

³³Bonner, Kings, p. 24.

kingdom. These gains were new and powerful magic for rain making, cultivation and war. In this way the Dlamini aristocracy that was in the making strengthened its military expansion by widening its domain of rituals.³⁴ Probably, the Dlamini derived these magical powers from the 'sotho' group among those found in the Eshiselweni. It can be argued that these powers influenced the Dlamini to assign to the later queen mother a special position akin to that of the 'sotho' polity.³⁵ This is because among the Lovedu of the Transvaal, particularly, Mujaji, the divine queen and the Rain Queen was the one endowed with such powers. During the nineteenth century people like Shaka, Mzilikazi and others sent their envoys to seek sanctuary from Mujaji.³⁶ The significance of the newly gained magical powers, especially, that of rain making, is that once gained by the Dlamini rulers, they used it as a power to enforce political loyalty by their subjects.³⁷

Although there are different versions of the pre-colonial

³⁴Hilda Kuper, The Swazi: A South African Kingdom (2nd ed., New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1986), pp. 9-10.

³⁵For another speculation, see Maylam, History, p. 25.

³⁶J.D. and E.J. Krige, "The Lovedu of the Transvaal", in Daryll Forde, ed., African Worlds: Studies in the Cosmological Ideas and Social Values of African Peoples (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), pp. 55. For Mujaji's use of her magic powers against the Transvaal Boer commando during the 1890s, see T.V. Bulpin, Lost Trails of the Transvaal (2nd ed., Cape Town: Books of Africa, 1969), p. 357.

³⁷For example, queen mother and later queen regent, Labotsibeni wielded strong political power over and commanded obedience from the amaSwazi during the 19th and early 20th centuries by threatening that if she were disobeyed she would cause drought by withholding rain magical powers.

history of the Dlamini among the amaNgwane, Ngwane II is celebrated as the first king of the Dlamini, who later came to be identified as amaSwazi. Ngwane was addressed by his subjects as *Nkosi* (king) Dlamini.³⁸ He established a hereditary kingship for the Dlamini aristocracy. After his death in 1780, Ngwane was succeeded by his grandson, Sobhuza I. Sobhuza I, a renowned strategist, strengthened the position of the kingdom by marrying the daughter of his rival, Zwide of the Ndwandwe, one of the powerful groups in 'Zululand'. In this way, Sobhuza forged diplomatic ties with his powerful southern neighbors. He also offered two of his daughters to Shaka of the Zulu kingdom.³⁹ It was only after 1836 that Sobhuza felt confident enough to withstand a military challenge from the amaZulu. This was after the defeat of Dingane, Shaka's successor, by the Boers.⁴⁰ However, prior to Dingane's reign and his defeat by the Boers, Sobhuza had developed a foreign policy, particularly in dealing with the military powerful neighbors.

In his domestic sphere he consolidated his power base by ruthless elimination of any opposition to his authority. It was during his reign that there emerged an innovation in the Dlamini politics, namely, that the mother of the Dlamini ruler be accorded a significant position in ritual ceremonies as well as in government affairs. Sobhuza's mother, Somtjalose of the

³⁸Kuper, Aristocracy, p. 12.

³⁹Kuper, The Swazi, p. 10.

⁴⁰Hailey, Administration, p. 351.

Simelane `clan', won for herself and for the future queen mothers in the Dlamini kingdom, the privilege of being co-rulers by having controlled her son's ruthlessness on his subjects.⁴¹ This was a significant achievement for the place of women from the royal ranks in being openly acknowledged as co-rulers. Once this dual leadership was crafted into the Dlamini polity, the subsequent queen mothers protected and redefined it against any attempts to nullify it during both pre and colonial times.⁴²

The preceding evolution of the Dlamini polity resulted into the formation of a dual monarchy in Swaziland.⁴³ This distribution of political power created "a delicate balance of powers, legal, economic, and ritual" between the king, referred to by his subjects as *Ingwenyama* (Lion), and the queen mother, with the title of the *Indlovukati* (Lady Elephant).⁴⁴ The delicacy of these powers is revealed in the manner in which these offices functioned. The *Ingwenyama* was in charge of the supreme court and he alone could pass the death sentence. The *Indlovukati* commanded the second highest court with the provision for her counsellors to be involved in the *Ingwenyama's*

⁴¹Kuper, Aristocracy, pp. 12-13.

⁴²The activities of Queen Regent Labotsibeni should be interpreted as one indication of how queen mothers protected and redefined their domain and the Swazi identity. These activities will be dealt with in later work.

⁴³Brian Allan Marwick, The Swazi: An Ethnographic Account of the Natives of the Swaziland Protectorate (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1966), p. 6. See also J.S. Malan, Swazi Culture (Pretoria: The Africa Institute of South Africa, 1985), p. 20.

⁴⁴Kuper, Aristocracy, p. 55.

court. Those who were condemned to a death sentence could seek sanctuary in her residence. Both had their own personal regiments. Although the *Ingwenyama* controlled the army, the command-in-chief could be exercised by the *Indlovukati*. He was responsible for the distribution of land. They shared the rain making ritual. She checked the actions of the *Ingwenyama* in handling the wealth of the nation, for example, the reckless disposal of the royal cattle.⁴⁵ She is the custodian of the sacred objects of the nation, but they are not effective without his co-operation in manipulating them. He represents the line of the past kings; she speaks to the dead in the shrine hut of the capital and provides beer for the libations....Together they are spoken of as twins, and when one dies the other must be more strongly fortified than for any other national or personal loss.⁴⁶

In this way a centralized political authority was established in the hands of both the *Ingwenyama* and the *Indlovukati*. This political arrangement does not only show the political sophistication which marked a profound change in the evolving Dlamini state, but also distinguished the Dlamini institution from the rest of the 'nguni' polity with which the Swazi came to be classified by the Europeans. According to other observers, "indeed, in common with other Bantu tribes of the south-eastern littoral of South Africa, there seems to be no

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 55.

⁴⁶Ibid.

trace of totemism among the Swazi, even in vestige form."⁴⁷ Clearly, these views indicate a need to abandon such a classification 'nguni' if we are to understand better the complex African institutions in the pre-colonial era. Labels such as 'nguni' only perpetuate a positivistic approach in studying African history. No 'sotho' polity had yet developed such a political machinery. This political restructuring by the Dlamini institution demonstrates their ability to adapt to the changing political landscape in southern African region as a result of the 'mfecane'. The profound significance of this distribution of powers between the *Ingwenyama* and the *Indlovukati* is that it was later difficult for European colonialism to destroy completely the amaSwazi political institutions both during the 1890s and the first half of the twentieth-century.

Sobhuza pursued a different policy in his dealings with his western and northern neighbors. He embarked on wars of expansion against these neighbors. Thus, by the time of his death in 1839 he had under his kingdom people from various backgrounds. He had extended the boundaries of his domain up to Carolina in the west, Barberton in the north, the Ubombo in the east, and the Pongola in the south.⁴⁸ However, the 'mfecane' upheavals which swept through southern African region during Sobhuza's reign made it difficult for him to establish an

⁴⁷Marwick, The Swazi, p. 7.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 14.

administrative machinery for his growing kingdom. Instead, like all other leaders of the time in this region, African or European, he devoted his energies to building militarily secure positions. Thus, in Philip Bonner's view, Sobhuza's administration looked more like "an army of occupation camped out in hostile territory than a settled administration."⁴⁹

Another important development for future events in Sobhuza's kingdom is that during his reign the European traders started to visit his domain and established sporadic and transitory contacts with him.⁵⁰ Subsequently, Sobhuza's successors were to deal with these Europeans on a more regular basis both within and outside the kaNgwane borders. The presence of the Europeans within the vicinity of the Dlamini kingdom affected the unfolding identity, to some extent. (This point will become clear as the discussion in this paper progresses.)

When Sobhuza died in 1839 he left behind his son and heir, Mswati, who was a minor at the time. His grandmother and a certain Dlamini uncle acted as regents. However, soon after the royal palace intrigues which involved a battle regarding the contested succession, Mswati and his mother, Thandile, were installed as *Ingwenyama* and *Indlovukati* in 1840. Neither of them had any experience in governance.⁵¹ Yet, it was during

⁴⁹Quoted by Booth, Swaziland, p. 9.

⁵⁰Christian P. Potholm, Swaziland: The Dynamics of Political Modernization (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), p. 9.

⁵¹Booth, Swaziland, p. 9.

their reign that the Dlamini identity was transformed to a more permanent usage.

However, first, a comment on European travellers' observation regarding the names of African leaders and their kingdoms is in order here. In his attempt to make sense out of the complex and to him confusing Tembe institution, Diogo Do Couto, a Portuguese, noted that "these Kaffirs as soon as one succeeds to the kingdom he is called by the name of that kingdom."⁵² The study of the emergence of the Swazi identity reveals the erroneousness of Couto's conclusion. It is significant to note such erroneous observations by travellers in order to tease out the records they left us with in our efforts to recast the history of Africans in the pre-colonial era.

If Mswati was lacking political experience as noted above, he quickly compensated that shortcoming by organizing a formidable military force which cut across 'clan' lines. He deployed this force mainly to the Transvaal and as far as to the present day Zimbabwe.⁵³ The existing interpretation regarding Mswati's military ventures is not convincing, at least to this writer of this paper, particularly in light of Cobbing's reinterpretation of the 'mfecane'. In Lord Hailey's view,

⁵²Diogo Do Couto, "Narrative of the Shipwreck of the Great Ship Sao Thome", in C.R. Boxer, ed., The Tragic History of the Sea, 1589-1622 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1959), p. 74.

⁵³Hugh A. Stayt, The Bavenda (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), p. 17.

Mswati's main purpose, "other than the normal appetite for plunder, seems to have been the extension of suzerainty rather than the actual acquisition of territory."⁵⁴ Hailey has argued that "when once allegiance was assured, [Mswati] restored the authority of the Chiefs of conquered tribes, and thus built up a widely extended system of rule which depended largely on the creation of ties of loyalty and friendship, fortified by a wide system of intermarriage."⁵⁵ Alan Booth, for his part, has noted that Mswati deployed "his power to dabble in the politics of succession in the Gaza kingdom" on the eastern side of the Lubombo mountains.⁵⁶

These interpretations portray Mswati as either an over-ambitious ruler who wanted to extend his suzerainty for the sake of winning the allegiance from the conquered people, or a reckless and an anarchist ruler. However, when weighed against his calculated and careful dealings, although with some failures, with the Boers of Ohrigstad-Lydenburg, these interpretations fail to stand up as a reasonable reflection of Mswati's character. In his dealings with the Boers, Mswati ceded some parts of his land to the Boers for their support against what he perceived as a threat from Mpande, Dingane's successor.⁵⁷

⁵⁴Hailey, Administration, p. 352.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Booth, Swaziland, p. 10.

⁵⁷T.R.H. Davenport, South Africa: A Modern History (3rd ed., Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), p. 163.

Probably, there were more serious issues underlying Mswati's military adventures than the two observers above have argued. For example, A.T. Bryant, mentions that Mswati presented the Boers with slaves in 1854 after the Boers had demanded them as compensation for their services in taking care of his cattle when his army was forced by the Mpande's army to retreat to the Mdimba mountains. In Bryant's view, "these [slaves] [,] Mswazi found little difficulty in plundering from his weak Tongo neighbours; and accordingly a batch of boys and girls was sent over to the Boers."⁵⁸ Clearly, this raiding for slaves by Mswati suggests a need for further research and explanation regarding his military ventures, which would give a fuller explanation than Hailey and Booth have offered. Neither can such slave raiding exercise by Mswati be merely treated as "a tradition" as Monica Wilson has done.⁵⁹ Even Hilda Kuper's attempt to disassociate the Dlamini from slave activities cannot be accepted as a statement of fact. Kuper has argued that "the concept of slavery, of regarding a person as a thing to be bought and sold on the open market, was, and is, alien to the Swazi [the Dlamini]."⁶⁰ Contrary to Monica's, and Kuper's views, Patrick Harries has contended that "the Swazi were involved in a

⁵⁸A.T. Bryant, A History of the Zulu and Neighbouring Tribes (Cape Town: C. Struik, 1964), p. 9.

⁵⁹Monica Wilson, "The Nguni People", in Monica Wilson and Leonard Thompson, eds., The Oxford History of South Africa: South Africa to 1870, Vol. I (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 121.

⁶⁰Kuper, Aristocracy, p. 68.

profitable trade in slaves with the Transvaal Boers."⁶¹ It is partly in the context of the Dlamini's involvement in slave trade that the explanation of their military ventures as far afield as the Gaza kingdom and what is now Zimbabwe can be sought.

Mswati made some significant strides toward redefining the Dlamini identity. He abolished the circumcision rite. The reasons for Mswati's abolition of circumcision ritual remain unexplained and this matter needs a separate paper in which to be addressed. It suffices to point out that Mswati's ending of this rite meant that he was the last Dlamini king to undergo it.⁶² Up to Mswati's reign the ritual of circumcision was adhered to closely by the Dlamini aristocracy to an extent that they regarded it as a prerequisite to the assumption of powers of kingship. For example, up to 1844 Mswati was debarred from exercising political power as king until he passed through the circumcision rite in 1845. Prior to 1845, the active political actors were his mother, Thandile; Malambule and Malunge, the senior regents.⁶³ Clearly, by doing away with such an important rite for both kingship and the subjects, Mswati eliminated one of the significant parameters for identity within this kingdom.

⁶¹Patrick Harries, "Slavery, Social Incorporation and Surplus Extraction; The Nature of Free and Unfree labour in South-East Africa", Journal of African History, 22 (1981), 314. The Dlamini's involvement in slave trade needs to be researched, if we are to have a better understanding as to who the Dlamini are, and how their identity has evolved over time.

⁶²Bonner, Kings, p. 88.

⁶³Ibid., p. 51.

By doing so, he brought about a change in the cosmology of the Dlamini aristocracy and its subject people. This marks a change over time regarding the evolution of this society. Once the traces of circumcision disappeared over time, one can argue that this society would have different perception on those societies which still practiced this ritual. This indicates that identity changes over time.

Another long-lasting parameter of identity which was brought about by Mswati was the adoption of a new name of Swazi for both the Dlamini aristocracy and its subject peoples, after the name of Mswati.⁶⁴ Henceforth, these peoples collectively referred to themselves as amaSwazi and their country later became known as Swaziland. However, the adoption of this new label of identity did not mean that they discarded completely their earlier forms of identity. For example, in gatherings it remains common to hear people addressed as follows: "*Nina ba kwa Ngwane* ('you of Ngwane') would invariably be used rather than *Nina emaSwati*. A [mSwati] will also refer to his country as *kwa Ngwane* rather than *eSwazini*."⁶⁵ In this case the new parameters of identity co-exist and can be used interchangeably depending on the nature of the circumstances. Henceforth, the name amaSwazi instead of Dlamini is used in this paper. One important point to note before moving off from Mswati's era is that during his reign the South African political landscape

⁶⁴Hailey, Administration, p. 352.

⁶⁵Marwick, The Swazi, p. 7. Italics on the original.

underwent major transformations due to the European penetration into the interior. The Transvaal and the Orange Free State Boer Republics achieved their independence in 1852 and 1854 respectively. Subsequently, the British from Cape Colony and Natal followed the Boers to the interior. The penetration of these two groups into the interior meant that region became another theater for their old feuds which were until this time confined to the coastal regions. Now, their conflicts were to involve invariably African societies in the interior.⁶⁶ As those African societies became increasingly drawn into the Anglo-Boer vortex, additional parameters of identity were introduced by those Europeans on those societies. One of the parameters introduced by the Anglo-Boer presence in the interior was the notion of a boundary which was conceived in European terms. It is to this that the discussion now turns, with specific reference to the amaSwazi.

Creation of the boundaries of the amaSwazi domain

Present-day Swaziland is situated between Mozambique and the Republic of South Africa. It is somewhat larger than the state of Connecticut.⁶⁷ The boundary between Swaziland and South

⁶⁶For example, the Anglo-Boer destruction of the BaPedi kingdom with the collaboration of the amaSwazi. See Peter Delius, The Land Belongs To Us: The Pedi Polity, the Boers and the British in the Nineteenth-century Transvaal (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984). On the amaSwazi collaboration with Anglo-Boer alliance against the BaPedi, see Bonner, Kings, p. 141; C.W. De Kiewiet, The Imperial Factor In South Africa: A Study in Politics and Economics (New York: Russell & Russell, 1966), pp. 100-101.

⁶⁷Booth, Swaziland, p. 1.

Africa remains a disputed issue. The origins of this border dispute dates as far back as 1860 when the Transvaal Boers encroached upon the lands of the Swazi when they beached off the Transvaal-Swaziland border line.⁶⁸ That boundary remained fragile until 1866 because up to that time the Boers were still in a weak position, militarily to enforce the amaSwazi to observe that border. In addition, Mswati (1840-1865⁶⁹) was in a precarious position within his kingdom, a condition which required that he should have friendly relations with the Boers. He was faced with royal intrigues within his domain and a foreign threat from the `amaZulu' in Zululand. It suffices to mention that when Mswati died in 1868 he had extended his domain to include Ermelo in the west. He also extract loyalty from the inhabitants of what is now Lydenburg District, who paid tribute to him.⁷⁰

This study is not concerned with the history of boundaries, rather it only attempts to trace their implications on forging identity.⁷¹ Patrick Harries has aptly started his paper on the

⁶⁸Matsebula, History, p. 278.

⁶⁹There is a discrepancy regarding the date of Mswati's death. According to Bonner, and Booth, he died in 1865, whereas Kuper, and Malan mention 1868.

⁷⁰Hailey, Administration, p. 352.

⁷¹For a discussion regarding the establishment of boundaries by the British and the Transvaal Boers, see Matsebula, History, chapter seventeen. See also Hugh Macmillan, "Nation Divided?: The Swazi in Swaziland and the Transvaal, 1865-1986", in Lerol Vail, ed., The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 289-323, for a discussion on amaSwazi's ambivalence toward reunifying themselves.

roots of 'ethnicity' by quoting F. Braudel who stated that, "the question of boundaries is the first to be encountered, from it all others flow. To draw a border around anything is to define, analyse and reconstruct it."⁷² In the case of Swaziland, its borders in the European sense, came into being on March 1881 when the king of the amaSwazi, Mbandzeni, 1875-1889, after a long discussion with the British and the Transvaal who drew a border between the Transvaal and Swaziland, signed a document by which he accepted the borders. Although Mbandzeni signed this document, he contested without success, the division of his subjects. Henceforth, many of the amaSwazi were placed on the Transvaal side.⁷³ Despite Mbandzeni's protest against this arrangement, a new phenomenon was established by the Europeans, namely, to divide what was regarded by the amaSwazi rulers as unity. This arrangement in the long run brought about the ambiguity of the parameters for identity. Clearly, in drawing the border between the Transvaal and Swaziland, the Alleyne Border Commission, mainly constituted by the British and the Boers, did not consider the linguistic aspect as one of its criteria in defining and reconstructing the Swazi identity.

In the Conventions of Pretoria and London in 1881 and 1884 respectively, which were signed by the British and the Transvaalers regarding the former's withdrawal from the Transvaal, was included a clause in which they pledge to

⁷²Harries, "Ethnicity", p. 25.

⁷³Matsebula, History, pp. 278-279.

recognize and to guarantee the independence of Swaziland.⁷⁴ These countries' formal acknowledgement and their pledge to guarantee the amaSwazi' independence within the borders drawn by them solidified the Swazi identity which was still evolving and expanding, until these European powers contained it within fixed boundaries. By doing so, the British and the Transvaalers provided the Swazi identity with rigidity and permanence as we know it today. After the words, Swaziland and amaSwazi were committed on paper on which the Anglo-Transvaal pledged to recognize the amaSwazi independence, the Swazi identity within the borders of Swaziland assumed a more permanent form. Henceforth, the labels amaSwazi and Swaziland took a more permanent forms.

Conclusion

The amaSwazi do not neatly fit into the 'nguni' classification in spite of the fact that they are linguistically and culturally categorized under that term. The amaSwazi as a social group were formed by the coming together of various 'nguni' and 'sotho' people during the nineteenth century.⁷⁵

⁷⁴Booth, Swaziland, p. 12; Bonner, Kings, p. 159. For a fuller interpretation of these Conventions regarding their implications on the independence of the amaSwazi, see Manelisi Genge, "Law and the Imposition of Colonial Rule in Swaziland, 1890-1898" (M.A. thesis, Ohio University, 1992), pp. 41-44.

⁷⁵Shula Marks and Anthony Atmore, "The Problem of the Nguni: An Examination of the Ethnic and Linguistic Situation in South Africa before the Mfecane" in David Dalby, ed., Language and History in Africa (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1970), p. 120.

Therefore, I suggest that the label `nguni' be abandoned in its general usage, and specifically its applicability on the amaSwazi, if we are to succeed in our attempts to recast the amaSwazi' pre-colonial history. To abandon such classifications as `nguni' and `sotho' will set in motion one significant move toward rescuing African history from colonial legacy which still pervades it to a large extent.

In this paper I have traced the evolution of the Swazi identity. I argued that language was not a centripetal force in the construction of the Swazi identity by either the Dlamini aristocracy and later the Europeans. The discussion in this paper reveals the manner in which the Swazi identity continued to evolve within fluid African `borders'. However, that evolution of the Swazi identity within moving `frontiers' came to an end with the advent of the Anglo-Transvaal border commission (the Alleyne Border Commission) which delineated the first boundaries in the European sense of what is now Swaziland. Upon the drawing of such borders, the evolving Swazi identity assumed a more rigid and permanent form.

I attempted to explore other parameters which molded the Swazi identity. These were loyalty to the Dlamini or Ngwane aristocracy, and a need for security. I have traced the origin of the Dlamini aristocracy from the south-west of Delagoa. This study reveals that parameters of identity change over time as new circumstances emerge which new forms of adaptation in order to survive. The evolution of Swazi identity has been examined within a regional context, rather than with a parochial view.

This approach is influenced by the belief that the making and changing of an identity happens as a result of multiple forces that might be at work at once or at different times. Hence, a broader view attempts to encompass the sum of these forces that influence the evolution and transformation of the parameters of identity. This study has identified the deployment of military force as one of the instruments which were used by the Dlamini aristocracy to forge a sense of identity from the conquered peoples.

In its sum, this paper has attempted to broaden our criteria to determine the making of identity. It does this by moving beyond linguistic and 'cultural' signposts which at times do not yield convincing evidence, but rather obscure the past. Instead, this paper has explored other parameters such as rituals, loyalty and a need to survive which played a significant role in molding, refashioning, and in influencing the direction to which the Swazi identity emerged.