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978-0-521-51794-2 - The Cambridge History of South Africa, Volume I: From Early Times to 1885

Edited by Carolyn Hamilton, Bernard K. Mbenga and Robert Ross

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THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF SOUTH AFRICA

VOLUME I

From Early Times to 1885

Reflecting on South Africa's achievement of majority rule, this book takes a critical and searching look at the country's past. It presents South Africa's past in an objective, clear, and refreshing manner. With chapters contributed by ten of the best historians of the country, the book pulls together four decades of revisionist scholarship to present a detailed overview of the South African past, from the Early Iron Age to the eve of the mineral revolution on the Rand. Its findings incorporate new sources, methods, and concepts, for example, providing new data on the relations between Africans and colonial invaders and rethinking crucial issues of identity and consciousness. This book represents an important reassessment of all the major historical events, developments, and records of South Africa – written, oral, and archaeological – and will be an important new tool for students and professors of African history worldwide.

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For Jessica Kuper

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In addition to the support of our own institutions, and from Cambridge University Press, we specifically want to thank the National Research Foundation of South Africa for their funding of a workshop in Cape Town at which drafts of some of these chapters were discussed. The comments of the various contributors to the two volumes, at this workshop and on other occasions, and of the Press's reviewers, also, we hope, strengthened the work, and for this we are very grateful.

NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

With regard to the orthography of words, primarily ethnonyms, deriving from Bantu languages, we have followed what is becoming the standard South African practice. When the words are used adjectivally, they do not have prefixes; in words from Nguni languages the root is capitalised, but not the prefix; and in words from Sotho-Tswana languages the prefix, but not the root, is capitalised. Thus “amaZulu”, but “Basotho” and “Zulu and Sotho households”.

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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

This volume is the first of two, covering the history of South Africa from about 2,000 years ago until the first democratic elections in 1994. Volume I is concerned with that history until the mid-1880s; volume II continues the story in the subsequent eleven decades.

During the period covered in this, the first, volume, South Africa was what is conventionally known as a “geographical expression” and had no status as a unit of government. For this reason, we do not limit ourselves to the modern boundaries of the Republic of South Africa. There are good reasons to consider the region of which South Africa forms the core to be a useful category for analysis. However, in dealing with the period covered in this volume, it is necessary to expand the coverage to include Lesotho, Swaziland, parts of southern Mozambique and eastern Botswana. In other words, we are dealing largely with the area to the south of the Limpopo, plus, to a certain degree, that to the west of its upper reaches and in the west of the continent to the south of the Gariep (Orange) river. Even this cannot be a hard line. There were moments during which the Limpopo valley itself was the center of political and social developments, so any division between the north and the south banks would be totally artificial. There were other times when the polities centered on the Zimbabwe plateau exercised power to the south of the river. Equally, certainly in the twentieth century, but also earlier, the political and economic sway of what was becoming South Africa was exercised far to the north of the Limpopo and certainly of the Gariep. We have attempted to be cognizant of such matters. On the other hand, this volume does not provide any systematic coverage of the history of Namibia nor of Botswana.

The question of time is a trickier matter. People have lived in the region for as long as there have been people on Earth. Exactly how long that has been depends on which of the various primates should be considered to have been genuinely human. However, no matter what decision is made on this matter, South Africa can be considered part of the cradle of humankind.

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The criterion used to decide when these volumes should start was, in fact, not biological but economic. Approximately 2,000 years ago a major shift occurred, as for the first time in the history of South Africa men and women began producing food, both by growing crops and by tending animals, rather than, or in addition to, hunting game, gathering plant food and, where possible, shellfish, and fishing. From a global perspective, this was relatively late. In most other parts of the world where it was possible, this transition had long been made. As elsewhere, though, the transition entailed a major shift not merely in economic but also in social and political relations.

The division between the two volumes has been made on the basis of political and economic criteria. By the mid-1880s, virtually all of what was to become a quarter of a century later the Union of South Africa had been brought under the control of either British colonial government or of one of the Afrikaner republics. In other words, by then the last African polities had lost their independence, and nearly all the inhabitants of the region had become subject to one of these powers. At about the same time, not coincidentally, the industrialization of South Africa was beginning. The term “preindustrial” thus demarcates clearly the period the volume covers. However, we are alert to the possibility that such a term can be read as suggesting a teleological approach or as a signal of an evolutionary view, in terms of which “preindustrial” might be read as connoting “not yet” industrial. To signal our awareness of these possible meanings of the term we have elected to use the term without its customary hyphenation. We do the same with regard to the term “precolonial” for the same reason. The essays in this volume, we hope, demonstrate how both colonial conquest and industrialization emerged out of historical processes and were thus not the inevitabilities that a teleological view of South African history would assume.

This is not the first attempt to write a synthetic history of South Africa. In 1936, Eric Walker, at that time King George V Professor of History at the University of Cape Town and subsequently professor of imperial history at Cambridge University, worked as one of the editors of volume VIII of *The Cambridge History of the British Empire: South Africa, Rhodesia and the High Commission Territories*.¹ Valuable though this was in its way, and important as South Africa's imperial and colonial connections have been, as we stress in these volumes, the perspective that necessarily derived from such a project could not place in the foreground the developments going on within the country, except as part of the empire. In these volumes, we have attempted,

¹ E. A. Benians, A. P. Newton, J. Holland Rose (Eds.), *The Cambridge History of the British Empire*, 8 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1929–1959). Volume VIII, on South Africa, was originally published in 1936 and reprinted, in a new edition, in 1963.

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in so far as the available scholarship allows, to see the connections within the region that was to become South Africa not only as being imperial, though we would not deny the importance of those relationships, but also as transcending oceans and land borders in a much more diverse way than was possible in 1936. We also stress the connections across time between what went before and what came after colonial conquest, in a way of which Walker and his fellow editors could not conceive. Even more clearly, as was typical of the time, the original *Cambridge History* scarcely mentioned the actions and the agency of black South Africans. By 2009 such omissions are, thankfully, something of the past.

In the late 1960s Leonard Thompson and Monica Wilson edited the *Oxford History of South Africa*.² This work programmatically stressed the importance of the interaction between “peoples of diverse origins, languages, technologies, ideologies and social systems, meeting on South African soil.” The volumes came at the beginning of a florescence of South African history, much of which defined itself in opposition to the *Oxford History*. The major weaknesses of the *Oxford History* were a tendency not to recognize the fluidity of identities in Southern African history, thus making the interaction of “peoples” the core of its analysis, and also, certainly in Volume II, not providing a clear narrative of events. The attempts at synthetic narratives, on the other hand, of which there have been several,³ were, and are, implicitly or explicitly primarily concerned with the long-term establishment of apartheid and its effects. There was also the sense that these syntheses and much of the historical work on South Africa done between 1970, if not earlier, and the 1990s in its way attempted to fulfill Barrington Moore’s injunction that “if the men [sic] of the future are ever to break the chains of the present, they will have to understand the forces that forged them.”⁴ These works do not emphasize the period before colonial conquest, which we believe to be of particular consequence for the development of a history that addresses the needs and desires of post-apartheid South Africa.

The present volumes, then, conceived and written well after 1994, can take advantage of the post-apartheid moment of South African history. Nevertheless, there is a great paradox in doing so. How can the history

² Two vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968 and 1971).

³ E.g., L. M. Thompson, *A History of South Africa* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990); N. Worden, *The Making of Modern South Africa: Conquest, Segregation and Apartheid* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1994); W. Beinart, *Twentieth Century South Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); R. Ross, *A Concise History of South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); T. R. H. Davenport, *South Africa: A Modern History* (London: Macmillan, 1978. In subsequent editions together with C.C. Saunders).

⁴ B. Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 1966), p. 50.

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of the new South Africa be represented in what might be described as an imperialist, even a settler, format? A *Cambridge History* almost by definition emanates from the center of the British establishment and, in this case, is based on scholarship, although revisionist, radical, and drawing on African oral history, that developed primarily in the historically white, Anglophone South African universities and their British and American equivalents. Unavoidably, the political and social concerns, the linguistic abilities, and the European intellectual heritage of many scholars in these departments drove them in particular directions and closed off other avenues of approach.

These volumes are based to a great degree on scholarship that preceded the fall of apartheid, and as yet there have been limited signs of a blooming of new historiographies. This is especially the case in relation to Volume I. It is a paradox that cannot be denied; it has to be embraced. As Judge Albie Sachs of the South African Constitutional Court put it during a colloquium on a draft of Chapter 1 of this volume, "such a paradox is typical of our times and of post-apartheid South Africa." We – the editors and authors of these volumes – can only try to be thoroughly conscious of what is involved.

The further consequence of the times in which these volumes are being produced is that all involved realize that what they have written cannot be seen as a master narrative to determine the course of historical writing for the foreseeable future. We are neither under the illusion nor do we pretend that what we have written will endure free from criticism. Indeed, we are certain that the changing composition of the South African historical profession and the inclusion in it of many people from backgrounds or orientations that were previously marginalized or excluded will lead to a whole variety of new emphases and approaches. South African scholarship is discarding its exclusive intellectual dependence on Europe and America, and the development of dynamic new south–south intellectual links are leading us to a variety of new emphases and approaches.

We are, however, confident that we are able to provide a reasonable summation of the current state of knowledge and that, at least in a number of places, we present fresh insights. We hope that what we have written has, above all, two main virtues. First, we expect it to provide an entry into South African history for those who come from the outside, that is to say, historians specialized in other areas of the globe, those with backgrounds in other disciplines who need a basis of historical understanding and those who are coming fresh into historical studies. Also, of course, we expect that those who are specialized in one period of South African history may use these volumes to illuminate those areas in which they are not specialists. Second, these volumes will, we hope, allow scholars to see where the hiatuses in the historiography of South Africa lie. They are thus intended to be both a summation of the current state of research and facilitative in

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the creation of new agendas for moving that research into places that, as yet, we cannot imagine.

At the moment at which the period covered by this volume begins, then, society in the region was homogenous in the sense that all its members acquired their livelihood as hunters and gatherers. The most crucial change away from this homogeneity came early, with the introduction of agriculture and stockbreeding, and then, in the last few centuries of the period, colonial conquest. Between them, as this volume shows, the shifting economic base of African society and the imposition of colonialism led, each in its own way, to the reorganization of the ways in which access to land and labor was organized. Thus, by the end, that society – a very different one, of course, in a variety of ways – was highly heterogeneous. Admittedly, conquest by the British or descendants of European immigrants had been more or less completed, but social or economic, let alone ideological, homogeneity had not been imposed, nor had all inhabitants been incorporated into a single economic or social system and hierarchy. There were hardly any dedicated hunters and gatherers still living within the borders of what was to become South Africa. Almost all the inhabitants of the region south of the Limpopo and the Gariep lived off agriculture, animal husbandry, or, increasingly, commerce and industry. The urbanization and later industrialization, which came with the discovery of great mineral wealth in the South African interior, were also under way.

The processes of settlement, of conquest, and of social transformation were not in any way uniform. In some areas, agriculture developed early; in others, very late. In some areas, colonial conquest occurred relatively early, from the mid-seventeenth century in the southwestern corner of the country; in others it was very late, and, in what is now Limpopo province and northern KwaZulu-Natal, conquest had scarcely been completed by the mid-1880s. Equally, certain material and immaterial elements of colonialism – for instance, the use of guns and, where they could be kept, horses – were taken on board well in advance of colonial conquest and indeed often delayed it, whereas others – monogamy, wage labor, and rectangular housing, for instance – were only accepted very much later. For this reason, even without its teleological implications, the description of periods of South African history as “precolonial” is fairly meaningless. This naturally has consequences for the organization of this volume, which must necessarily reflect this diversity across space and time. Although we have attempted to maintain a loose chronological order both within and between the various chapters, it is not feasible to be too strict in such matters. The processes of history are rarely as tidy as the analysts would make them appear.

Nevertheless, a number of constant themes recur throughout these chapters, and we can only signal them at this point. First, and fundamentally,

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until the very end of the period covered in this volume, South Africa was predominantly a rural region and, at least in the last thousand years, an agricultural and pastoral one. This had clear consequences for a variety of other spheres, most notably gender relations. The development of the homestead structure of the agro-pastoralists, and later of the farms of the colonists, froze the relations between men and women and ensured the subordination of the latter. The relations of production and reproduction were henceforth organized around the distinction between the sexes, and social ideology, and many institutions, developed accordingly. It is perhaps in the story of its domestic arrangements that South African history has been most conservative. What has changed is the visibility of women, and indeed of other subaltern groups, within the historical record, and the readiness of historians to look for them there.

The relative fixity of gender relations in Southern Africa contrasted with the considerable fluidity of other forms of hierarchy and the associated ideologies. Thus, second, throughout the last two millennia of the region's history, to the extent that this can be reconstructed, there have been attempts by the rulers to set the social and political relations between the various groups of society as firmly as possible. This was the case in the kingdom centered on Mapungubwe at about the turn of the millennium; in the large Tswana, Zulu, and other African states of the eighteenth and nineteenth century; and in the colonial society that emanated from the Cape from the mid-seventeenth century.

Successive regimes of widely differing backgrounds struggled to impose a level of domination over their subjects and to develop a fully hegemonic relationship over them, that is to say, to persuade them that the current order of things, whatever it may have been at any given time, was natural and unchanging. In this, they were invariably unsuccessful. No group from among the excluded would, in the long term, tolerate its total exclusion from the structures of power and certainly would not regard such exclusion as in some way inevitable and natural. Because political allegiances were always fragile and conditional upon the success of the rulers in bringing peace, prosperity, and, often, rain, this meant that the history of South African identities, in the long term, has been characterized by enormous fluidity.

Third, part of the project of colonial rule was to attempt to change this. British colonial rule, and less evidently the rule of the Afrikaner republics, required control over the population that the new regimes were attempting to administer and exploit and, in order to acquire such control, they had to categorize their subjects. "Modernity," as it was envisaged and imposed, could not cope with a fluidity of identities and attempted radically to simplify and freeze them. The designation of various tracts of South Africa

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as reserved for Africans, with the corollary that the rest of the country was for the rest of the population, was part of this process.

On the other hand, the very advance of the frontier of colonialism, defined in the loosest way, provided opportunities for those who, in the long term, it was to suppress. As a result, various of the identities South Africans adopted were fragmenting and new ones were being produced, whereas others were in the process of coagulation. Within this matrix, however, the colonists were attempting to harden the line between themselves and those under their rule. In other words, South Africa was well on the way to becoming a racist society.

The fourth theme relates to the third. Part of the reason for the development of this racist society was that it made impossible the forms of inclusive citizenship that prevailed in African societies. Because, in general, African rulers gained their power from the numbers of their followers, they were prepared to admit all who accepted their rule, although certainly not necessarily as equals. European traditions of rule, in contrast, saw incomers and subjects as laborers, or potentially as threats to property, and thus rejected strategies of incorporation. Europeans and their descendants were often more concerned about controlling material resources than people, in the belief that to do so would provide them with the necessary dominance over the population. The result was the commodification of land, which followed the imposition of colonial rule and which was one of the most salient processes in the period covered in this volume. Even within the colonial group, however, there was never unanimity about the categorization and treatment of the subject population, whether African or of slave descent. The line of unadulterated authoritarianism, although not at all uncommon, both among the military and among the settlers, could be tempered, both for reasons of humanitarian principle and of cost, by the acceptance of either African structures of rule or those Africans who were beginning to take on the education, and the religion, of the conquerors.

Fifth, what is clear and argued in the various chapters of this volume is that none of the objectives of colonialism were completely attained. Politically and economically, a degree of independence, and thus of agency, even within the colonial structures, was maintained by most South Africans. In terms of the ways in which families were organized, or the ways in which people tried to understand the world in which they lived and argued about why things were as they were, the processes of interaction between Africans and Europeans, and the influence they exerted on one another, only developed slowly. What was happening, as this volume shows, is that men and women were continually finding ways to adapt the old to the new worlds in which they found themselves, and to adopt, selectively and partially, what they found attractive in what was available. A variety of

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individuals – missionaries perhaps above all, but also colonial officials – saw themselves called upon to impose their own value systems on the Africans. The interaction this entailed forced them to confront African ways of thought and led some of them to accept rather more from this source than they had expected or at times were prepared to admit.

Settlers were concerned to instill their specific ideas of labor discipline and of a distinct ethos of private property. As against this, African chiefs found it necessary continually to rearrange their concepts of chieftdom in the light of the new circumstances. In particular, moreover, a whole variety of interstitial individuals, at home both in the colonial world and in that of the Africans, began to come to prominence. Some of them used their skills at straddling the two worlds to further their position within African societies; others attempted to claim acceptance into colonial society, often on the basis of their literacy, Christianity, and general “respectability.” It was from this group, first most clearly developed in those areas of the country that had been in longest contact, and, indeed, conflict, with the Europeans, namely, the Cape Colony, both western and eastern, that the colored and African elites, whose nationalisms were eventually to challenge European hegemony, first began to achieve prominence.

A further change from what has been written before, whether in the *Cambridge History of the British Empire* or the *Oxford History*, is that the current generation of scholars is much more explicitly aware of its own relative ignorance. Part of the advantage of knowing more is that we see what we do not know more clearly. This has affected the way in which this volume is structured. The first chapter, written by the editors in more speculative mode than is perhaps common for such a venture, discusses the ways in which the pre-twentieth-century history of what was to become South Africa has been produced, both at the time itself and subsequently. This does not merely reflect upon but also attempts to explain how these volumes have taken on the structure that they have, as, in their own way, the product of that history of developing and changing historical consciousness.

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