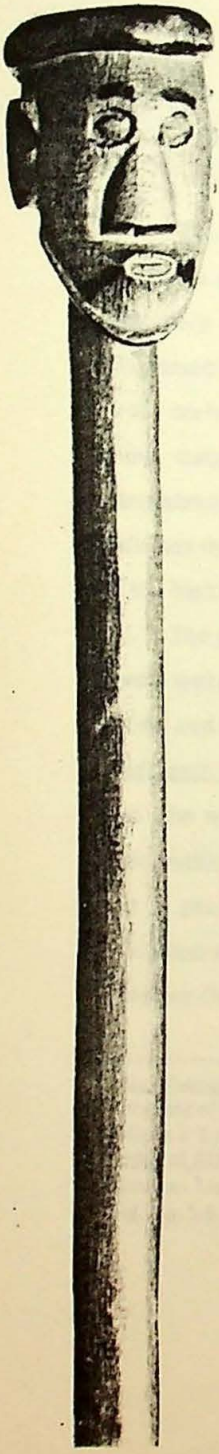

THE 'MFECANE' AFTERMATH

towards a new paradigm

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ORIGINS OF THE 'MFECANE' –
an ecological perspective

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ORIGINS OF THE 'MFECANE'--
AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

The appearance of Shaka's Zulu kingdom between 1816 and 1828 marked a season of migration, famine, and human suffering. Scholars in the twentieth century have characterized the Shakan era as the mfecane, translated conventionally as "the crushing." According to Julian Cobbing, the word derives from the Xhosa ukufaca, which means "to be weak; emaciated from hunger."[1] Unmistakably, the period witnessed human tragedies throughout Zululand, Natal and the Transkei. Furthermore, the dispersal of refugees during this epoch provoked chaos among the Sotho-Tswana peoples of the highveld interior as well.[2]

The mfecane era is not synonymous with Zulu state formation, as this study seeks to demonstrate, yet the most ambitious work to date on the period and its aftermath muddles the distinction. In The Zulu Aftermath: A Nineteenth Century Revolution in Bantu Africa,[3] John D. Omer-Cooper writes that "the wars and migrations of the Mfecane were the by-products of a socio-political revolution towards larger communities and wider loyalties. It was a genuine process of nation-building."[4] As a social and political revolution as well as a process of state formation, the mfecane, according to Professor Omer-Cooper, gave rise to "socio-political communities [that] have

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[1] Julian Cobbing, "The Case Against the Mfecane," unpublished seminar paper, University of the Witwatersrand, March, 1984, p. 1.
[2] William F. Lye, The Difaqane: The Mfecane in the Southern Sotho Area, 1822-1824. Journal of African History, vol. 8, no. 1 (1967): 107-31.
[3] (London: Longman, 1966).
[4] Ibid., pp. 5-6.

in many cases survived into modern times.[5] He includes among the mfecane's progeny the Basuto kingdom on the highveld, forged by Moshoeshoe in the 1820's and 1830's and surviving to reach independence as Lesotho; the Swazi kingdom of the Dhlamini-Ngwane founded by Sobhuza in the 1840's and the basis for Swaziland; the Ngoni kingdoms in Malawi, Zambia and Tanzania; Sebetwane's Kololo kingdom on the upper Zambezi River; and Mzilikazi's Ndebele kingdom, migrating northward from the Transvaal in the late 1830's to southern Zimbabwe.

The demographic impact of the mfecane, according Professor Omer-Cooper, conveys even greater contemporary relevance. In his words, the depopulation of the highveld interior during the mfecane

> directly influenced the expansion of the South African white community. Population pressure and angry feelings against the philanthropic leanings of the British Government found a vent in mass emigration into the vacuum created by the preceding Bantu movements. The line of Boer advance, deflected from its natural route up the east coast by the Xhosa resistance, turned northward and poured into the gaps newly created in the Bantu settlement pattern.[6]

According to this interpretation, the mfecane not only facilitated the movement of trekker communities into the highveld, it "directly influenced" this expansion. In one bold paragraph, Omer-Cooper links the mfecane directly to the Great Trek, the central event in Afrikaner historical mythology.

With all due respect to a distinguished historian, the mfecane cannot hold this much historiographical baggage--it is a term that more properly

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[5] Ibid., p. 7.
[6] Ibid., p. 5.

describes a phase of warfare and human suffering in the Shakan era. The essence of pre-Shakan state formation is rather more than the battles and famines of the 1820's and 1830's. Further, Omer-Cooper's emphasis on the contemporary relevance of the mfecane is even more problematic. Citing Cobbing again: it was not only the mfecane that produced Basutoland--the invasions of the Griqua and Boers forced the southern Sotho into the mountains of the southwest Drakensbergin the 1820's and 1830's, and British annexation in 1868 prevented its absorption by the surrounding white states.[7] Similarly, the Swazi state did not evolve naturally from the Shakan wars, but was crafted in the 1840's in response to land pressures from surrounding white communities.[8] Lastly, the dramatic depopulation of the highveld is not beyond doubt, which is of contemporary relevance, since this apparent by-product of the mfecane serves to sustain a teleological interpretation of Afrikaner expansionism. "At no time," writes Cobbing, "was transorangia empty of people, or anywhere near it. No serious attempt has yet been made to analyse Sotho population densities during the period 1810-28."[9]

Omer-Cooper's Zulu Aftermath serves as a useful point of departure for an examination of the origins of the Zulu kingdom. "As his conquests continued," Omer-Cooper explains," Shaka constructed a new type of state. Its primary purpose was to maintain an efficient fighting . . . force [emphasis mine] completely loyal to its leader."[10] This brief passage expresses a bias in the historical literature that begins with the first scholarly accounts of Zulu

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[7]Cobbing, "Case Against the Mfecane," pp. 10-12.
[8]Ibid.
[9]Ibid., p. 12.
[10]Zulu Aftermath, p. 33.

history, and continues in popular works like Donald Morris's compelling The Washing of the Spears: The Rise and Fall of the Zulu Nation[11] That is, western observers as a rule have admired the martial virtuosity of the Zulu kingdom and, like Morris, display a special fascination for the dramatic campaigns of the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879. Feature-length films, such as "Zulu" and "Zulu Dawn," depicting the battles at Rorke's Drift and Isandhlwana respectively, have transferred the military imagery to popular culture. What accounts for this western fascination for Zulu warfare? One explanation is that the Zulu state possessed a military sophistication that earned it the respectability of westerners who might normally view African societies with disdain. Although Omer-Cooper and Morris do not view African societies in this way, they have helped perpetuate the bias by emphasizing the military "essence" of the Zulu kingdom.

In addition, by focusing on the dramatic outbreak and course of the Shakan wars and the military innovations that ensured its expansionary success, these conventional accounts embrace at least two methodological deficiencies. First, they are ahistorical--if one views the formation of the Zulu kingdom as a revolutionary outburst among the northern Nguni one may overlook more subtle processes of change. Second, they are myopic--the tendency to study Zulu state formation as a phase of military history betrays a social as well as economic dimension that may tell us a great deal about the essence of the Zulu kingdom.

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[11](New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965).

A reappraisal of pre-Shakan state formation that takes a longer socio-economic perspective, might begin with botanist J. P. H. Acocks' work on pre-Shakan ecology. In his Veld Types of South Africa, Acocks pieces together evidence to construct a hypothetical Zululand vegetation map for ca. A. D. 1400. According to his research, large tracts of forest and scrubforest with scattered areas of bushveld characterized Zululand in the early fifteenth century. In contrast, the map he constructs for A. D. 1950 reflects little forest or scrubforest. It does suggest a continuation of bushveld and thornveld, with the exception of northern Zululand, where excessive burning has converted marginal bushveld into grassveld. These changes, according to Acocks, reflect the impact of shifting cultivation over time.[12]

Selected grazing with domesticated livestock over the past five hundred years has yielded similarly dramatic ecological changes. According to Acocks, good grazing grasses are eventually destroyed and replaced by less useful species in wetter areas, and not replaced at all in drier regions. In either case, topsoil depletion facilitates water run-off and wind erosion, and delays, in some instances permanently, the recovery of vegetation. Increased run-off also deposits silt into the rivers, which in turn smothers vlei vegetation and deepens channels. Consequently, the waterway overflows its banks and "dongas start eating back."[13]

Acocks' research has prompted scholars to explore the role of ecological disquilibrium in contributing to the formation of the Zulu state. Historian Jeff Guy, for example, argues that a process of continuing environmental degeneration in eighteenth century Zululand, which

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12J. P. H. Acocks, Veld Types of South Africa (Pretoria: Government Printer, Botanical Memoirs No. 28, 1953), p. 13.
[13]Ibid., pp. 10-11.

culminated in the disastrous Madhlathule famine in the early 1800's, heightened competition for scarce resources among powerful chiefdoms. According to Guy, this struggle, accompanied by significant social change, resulted in the Shakan wars of the 1810's and 1820's.[14] Geographer J. B. McI. Daniel finds a pattern of conflict similar to that described by Guy among powerful pre-Shakan societies contesting favored ecological zones in the early nineteenth century.[15] Arguing that progressive deterioration occurred in the Zululand upland environment, but that instability is not evident elsewhere before the 1790's, archaeologist Martin Hall, the leading expert on ecological transformations in pre-Shakan Zululand, renders the ecological argument somewhat more problematic.[16]

In contrast to the view that ecological disequilibrium is behind the rise of the Zulu kingdom, several historians, most notably Alan Smith, Henry Slater, and David Hedges, have examined the role of trade.[17] Smith, drawing upon the journals and letters of Portuguese traders and missionaries, argues

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14Jeff Guy, "Ecological Factors in the Rise of Shaka and the Zulu Kingdom," in Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa, eds. Shula Marks and Anthony Atmore (London: Longman, 1980), pp. 102-19. On the Madhlathule famine see the evidence of Lunguza in The James Stuart Archive of Recorded Oral Evidence Relating to the History of the Zulu and Neighbouring Peoples, vol. I, eds. C. de B. Webb and J.B. Wright (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1976), p. 342.

15J. B. McI. Daniel, "A Geographical Study of Pre-Shakan Zululand," South African Archeological Bulletin, vol. 55, no. 1 (1973): 23-31.

16"The Ecology of the Iron Age in Zululand" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1980); Settlement Patterns in the Iron Age of Zululand: An Ecological Interpretation (Cambridge Monographs in African Archaeology 5: BAR International Series 119, 1981); and The Changing Past: Farmers, Kings and Traders in Southern Africa, 200 to 1860 (Cape Town: David Philip, 1987).

17Alan Smith, "Delagoa Bay and the Trade of South-Eastern Africa," in Pre-Colonial African Trade," eds. Richard Gray and David Birmingham (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 265-89, and "The Trade of Delagoa Bay as a Factor in Nguni Politics, 1750-1835," in African Societies in Southern Africa, ed. Leonard Thompson (London: Heinemann, 1971), pp. 171-89; Henry Slater, "Transitions in the Political Economy of South-east Africa before 1840" (D. Phil. thesis, University of Sussex, 1976); and David W. Hedges, "Trade and Politics in Southern Mozambique and Zululand in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries" (D. Phil. thesis, University of London, 1978).

that a flourishing trade existed at the Mozambican port of Delagoa Bay between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. This trade intensified in the second half of the eighteenth century and, according to Smith, a significant share of it originated in Natal. How was the Delagoa-Natal trade network linked to Zulu state formation? In Smith's view, the key lies in the existing power vacuum in the Delagoa Bay hinterland in the late eighteenth century. The Mabudu kingdom, situated favorably with respect to the Natalian sources of ivory, rose to challenge the Tembe, the traditional middlemen of the Delagoa Bay region. The Mabudu-Tembe struggle displaced the Dhlamini-Ngwane and Ndwandwe, who moved southward to northern Zululand and sought to control the trading lanes through Mabudu. The Mthethwa joined in the trading competition according to Smith, because their chief Dingiswayo viewed the manipulation of the ivory trade as "an important factor in the consolidation of chiefly power."[18]

Slater advances Smith's position by arguing that the European demand for ivory at Delagoa Bay severely strained the pre-Shakan "feudal" social structure. The ensuing conflict over control of the means of production transformed a "feudal" mode of production into an "absolutist" one.[19] Hedges argues similarly that control of the ivory trade along the coastal lowlands between northern Natal and Delagoa Bay played an important role in the political consolidation evident in Zululand throughout the second half of the eighteenth century. However, in Hedges view, the conflict that ensued by the early nineteenth century did not arise from an increase in ivory exports, but from a change in the nature of the trade. Hedges suggests that

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[18]Smith, "Delagoa Bay," pp. 180-85.
[19]Slater, "Transition in the Political Economy," passim.

the volume of ship traffic at Delagoa Bay decreased, and the export of cattle, a valuable commodity in Zululand, replaced the trade in ivory.[20]

Trade might have played some role in pre-Shakan state formation, but not a principal one. The pre-Shakan economy pivoted around the production of cattle and crops. The option to exploit trading opportunities meant an agricultural economy capable of sustaining the increased demands placed upon it. Therefore, only those pre-Shakan chiefdoms producing or capable of producing more crops and cattle could engage in trade. The origins of the Zulu kingdom can be found in the dynamics of agricultural production, not in trading arrangements at Delagoa Bay.[21]

Consequently, this study explores the role of ecological change and attempts to advance the arguments put forth by Guy, Daniel, and Hall. Like Daniel, I think competition for select ecological zones constituted an important factor in pre-Shakan expansion. But the expansion of which he speaks antedated the 1790's, and it did not occur (in the manner characterized by Guy) in the Zululand uplands. Furthermore, Hall describes the uplands as the only region in Zululand to have exceeded the limits of its resource ecology prior to the late eighteenth century. How can these views be reconciled? What will this examination tell us about the origins of Shaka's kingdom?

The remainder of this paper seeks to answer these questions by: 1) focusing on the ecological dimension of pre-Shakan state formation, and 2) suggesting a more precise relationship between ecological change and the rise of the Zulu state. I assume that cultures can accommodate a range of

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[20]Hedges, "Trade and Politics," passim.
[21]James Gump, "Origins of the Zulu Kingdom," The Historian, vol. 50, no. 4 (August 1988): 525-27.

ecological conditions over the expectable limits of variation, but that when these limits are exceeded, significant socio-political transformations can occur. Often, these transformations occur only indirectly as a result of ecological disequilibrium.[22] For example, the upland peoples of pre-Shakan Zululand experienced ecological stress prior to the societies inhabiting the major river valleys and coastal lowlands, the regions in which significant socio-political change in the pre-Shakan era is evident. The upland peoples may have started these changes by grazing their herds in the more favorable grasslands to their east. Lowlanders, put on the defense, sought more effective control of transitional pasturage, defensible hills, and fertile croplands, and adopted disciplined amabutho (age-sets). Amabutho functioned as military "regiments" as well as a more efficient labour force.[23] When drought struck Zululand in the early nineteenth century, the lines of conflict sharpened among the most disciplined and expansive chiefdoms, such as the Mthethwa, Qwabe, Ndwandwe, Dhlamini-Ngwane, and Ngwane. Zulu leader Shaka (ca. 1787-1828) emerged in the midst of this conflict, strengthened the amabutho system, and from it forged a centralized kingdom.

Zululand Ecology

Zululand is divided between the fertile lowlands and major river valleys (zantsi) and the less fertile uplands (enhla).[24] Unlike the uplands,

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22Elizabeth A. Eldredge, "Drought, Famine and Disease in Nineteenth-Century Lesotho, African Economic History, vol. 16 (1987): 61-93.

23John B. Wright, "Pre-Shakan Age-Group Formation Among the Northern Nguni," Natalia, no. 8 (December 1978): 22-30.

24Hedges, "Trade and Politics," p. 61.

the coastal lowlands as well as the Phongolo, Mfolozi, and Mhlatuze flood plains, all contain soils of high natural fertility. The period of fallow corresponds to the relative fertility of each region. Zantsi peoples might have short or no fallow, whereas enhla groups might fallow their fields for up to twenty years. In both areas, farmers burnt fields before planting to replace soil nutrients. The widespread practice of spring-time burning prompted shipwreck survivor Diogo de Couto to refer to Zululand-Natal in the late sixteenth century as the "Terra dos Fumos."[25]

The productive characteristics of soil are closely associated with temperature, topography, and rainfall.[26] In the coastlands and lower river valleys of Zululand, warmer temperatures and high rainfall (as much as fifty inches per year) permit a longer growing season than in the uplands. In the region above 4,000 feet, frost limits the growing season to nine months. The terrain between 500 and 3,000 feet above sea level normally receives thirty inches or more of precipitation per year. The high relief of the interior however, produces major variations in rainfall over short distances. Zululand as a whole experiences erratic seasonal rainfall distributions as well, bringing on floods and droughts in consecutive years.[27]

Pre-Shakan farmers adjusted to these conditions by adopting cereals with different production and harvesting characteristics. Prior to 1700, bulrush millet (pennisetum) and sorghum (amabele) constituted the most important staples. Of the two, pennisetum is the most drought-resistant and grows well in sandy soils. It matures relatively quickly, and can therefore

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[25]Ibid., p. 31; C. R. Boxer, ed., The Tragic History of the Sea, 1589-1662 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), pp. 69-70.

[26]John Phillips, The Agricultural and Related Development of the Tugela Basin and Its Influent Surrounds (Pietermaritzburg: Natal Town and Regional Planning Commission, 1972).

[27]Guy, "Ecological Factors," p. 105.

tolerate a short rainy season. Amabele is capable of flourishing in infertile soils as well, matures in eight to nine months, and can survive extended periods of drought. Sorghum grew extensively throughout Zululand and represented perhaps the most important cereal prior to the mid-eighteenth century.[28]

Maize replaced or at least co-existed with millet and sorghum in many parts of Zululand during the eighteenth century.[29] Sorghum and maize are similar crops--labour requirements for planting, weeding, and harvesting are also roughly the same, although it is easier to shell corn than thresh sorghum. One significant difference is that the grain of sorghum is carried on a loose head that is highly susceptible to damage by birds. The ear of maize, in contrast, is well-protected. Also, maize kernels and young seedlings are slightly larger than sorghum, thus improving the likelihood of good stands and reducing crop failure due to insects and weeds.[30]

Yet maize possesses degenerative as well as productive attributes. Although maize has a higher yield per acre than sorghum, it requires more rainfall. Also, the danger of the stalk borer prevents long storage above ground and necessitates consumption during the same harvest season. In contrast, sorghum and millet can be stored above ground in grain baskets for two to three years. Finally, maize's high nitrogen, phosphorus, and potash requirements drain soil fertility.[31] Conceivably, maize diminished crop

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[28]Hedges, "Trade and Politics," p. 41.

[29]A. T. Bryant, The Zulu People as They Were Before the White Man Came (Pietermaritzburg: Shuter and Shooter, 1949), p. 313.

[30]Ibid., pp. 41-42; Personal communication with Steven Eberhart, Vice-President of Research, Funk Seed International, 4 April 1980. Dr. Eberhart served as an agricultural adviser in Kenya in the 1960's.

[31]Marvin Miracle, Maize in Tropical Africa (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), p. 11.

versatility for Zululand farmers and contributed to the ecological disequilibrium most evident by the early nineteenth century. Its higher rainfall requirements could have contributed to economic stress--Hall's dendrochronological research points to a sharp decline in rainfall from 1789 until to the early nineteenth century.[32]

An analysis of pre-Shakan ecological stability must include the dynamics of cereal production, since it "absorbed massive amounts of labour time," and dominated "not only productive processes, but profoundly [affected] social life generally."[33] Yet crops represented only part of pre-Shakan agriculture--by the early nineteenth century, cattle likely exceeded the human population of Zululand,[34] and played a more vital role in the agricultural economy. In addition to serving subsistence needs, cattle materialized human labour. "The movement of cattle . . . in exchange for women, as tribute, gifts, or to establish clients," according to Guy, was in fact the movement of expended labour and potential labour power."[35]

Successful cattle-keeping in pre-Shakan Zululand required a variety of grassland ecologies. Sourveld predominates in the coastal regions and highlands, mixed grasses occupy most of the higher areas of the transitional zone, and sweetveld grows in the drier lowlands of the major river valleys. To make use of this grazing potential, herders shifted their stock among a variety of pastures when land was available. In the spring, cattle-keepers moved their stock to the sour mountain grasslands to graze for

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[32]"Dendroclimatology, Rainfall, an Human Adaptation in the Later Iron Age of Natal and Zululand," Annals of the Natal Museum, vol. 22, no. 3 (1976): 693-703.

[33]Jeff Guy, "Analysing Pre-Capitalist Societies in Southern Africa," Journal of Southern African Studies, vol. 14, no. 1 (October 1987): 29.

[34]Monica Wilson, "The Nguni People," in Oxford History of South Africa, vol. I, pp. 107-8.

[35]"Production and Exchange in the Zulu Kingdom," Mohlomi, Journal of Southern African Historical Studies, vol. II (1978): 105.

approximately four months. During the summer and fall herds moved to the transitional areas of mixed grasses for another six months of grazing. Herders shifted their cattle to the lowlands to take advantage of the palatable yet delicate sweetveld during the dry winter months. The presence of plentiful springs enabled herdsmen to move their stock within a twenty-mile radius in periods of normal rainfall, and slightly farther in times of drought.[36]

Pre-Shakan agriculturalists accommodated a range of environmental conditions provided they did not exceed the limits imposed by resource ecology.[37] But some Zululand chiefdoms surpassed these limits during the eighteenth century, and encountered ecological disequilibrium. The lowland peoples had adjusted successfully during much of the 1700's, but the population of the uplands, according to Hall, "had far exceeded the capacity of the high grasslands to support livestock and . . . as a result, the independent status of the economic system in this area must have been sacrificed for the sake of reliance on valley or coastal winter grazing [emphasis mine]."[38]

The Hlubi chiefdom, the major upland polity in pre-Shakan Zululand, probably adapted to its predicament in the manner described by Hall. Specifically, as their pastures progressively degenerated, the Hlubi sought access to a wider range grasslands. Hlubi expansion differed however, from that of lowland peoples like the Mthethwa and Qwabe. Their expansionistic drive between ca. 1750-1820's was characterized by major social change and

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[36]Guy, "Ecological Factors," pp. 105-9; Daniel, "Pre-Shakan Zululand," p. 30.
[37]Hall, "Ecology of the Iron Age," pp. 272, 274-75.
[38]Ibid., p. 274.

political consolidation. The Hlubi polity underwent few changes and grew increasingly unstable.

Of what significance is this Hlubi exceptionalism? It represents a key to understanding the relationship between ecological disequilibrium and the socio-political changes leading to the formation of the Zulu state. By ranging their stock into valley and coastal grasslands, Hlubi herdsmen strained the resource ecology of the zantsi peoples. The response by the major lowland ruling houses was initially defensive and therefore transformational--rather than sending herds over wider areas, chiefs worked human labour harder. These leaders gained greater control over the productive and reproductive potential of men and women--the most significant feature of the emerging amabutho system. Consequently, Hlubi access to adequate winter grazing steadily eroded. They adopted an offensive, instead of a defensive strategy, and expanded southward along the foothills of the Drakensberg Mountains. This process was non-transforming, in that it simply replicated existing strategies over wider areas. In contrast to the major lowland polities, changes to Hlubi amabutho occurred belatedly, and centrifugal tendencies prevailed right up to the time of Shaka. The basis for this argument rests on a more careful examination of 1) pre-Shakan socio-political change and 2) the role of Hlubi exceptionalism.

Socio-political Change and Hlubi Exceptionalism

The replacement of territorial-based circumcision sets with age-based amabutho became widespread in pre-Shakan Zululand. For example, Dingiswayo's father, Jobe, organized two amabutho on the basis of age during

his rule over the Mthethwa in the second half of the eighteenth century.[39] Members of the Ngoni kingdom reported the use of age-sets long before their departure from Zululand during the Shakan wars.[40] Natalian magistrate James Stuart's informants reported that two age-based amabutho existed among Khondlo's (1753-1813) Qwabe, and were used by Khondlo's son, Pakathwayo (d. 1818), who organized five of them. Magaye (d. 1829), leader of the Cele, formed five such amabutho; Zwide (d. 1824) of the Ndwandwe had four; and Matiwane (d. 1828) of the Ngwane used three age-based amabutho.[41]

The abolition of circumcision accompanied or followed shortly after the formation of disciplined age-sets, for the practice had fallen into disuse among the Mthethwa during Jobe's reign.[42] A number of European travelers who visited Zululand in the 1820's and 1830's reported that only the oldest Zulu men had been circumcised, confirming a widespread, eighteenth-century origin.[43]

The transformation in pre-Shakan age-groups augmented chiefly authority. Guy argues that the "acquisition, creation, control, and appropriation of labour power" represented the fundamental principle upon which pre-capitalist South African societies were founded. Such power was realized by men through the exchange of cattle for wives. According to Guy, the transfer of cattle from the husband's father's homestead to the wife's father's homestead served as "a transfer of labour power: the labour power

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[39]A. T. Bryant, Olden Times in Zululand and Natal (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1929), pp. 99, 641.
[40]Margaret Read, The Ngoni of Nyasaland (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 52.
[41]Cited in Wright, "Pre-Shakan Age-Group Formation," p. 26.
[42]Bryant, Olden Times, p. 99.
[43]See Hedges, "Trade and Politics," p. 196.

of the wife herself in the homestead and the land attached to the homestead, and the labour power of the children which she produced as wife and mother."[44]

The emerging amabutho system derived from this principle. As part of an age-set regiment, men (and by the Shakan era, women) laboured for the chief for fifteen to twenty years, during which time they could not marry. They provided military and policing service, made cattle-raiding expeditions, and managed their chief's homesteads, herds, and crops.[45] The system not only accorded the chief control over his men's labour for about one-third of their productive lives, it also gave him control over the reproductive potential of his chiefdom. By postponing marriage in this way, the chief could "delay the whole process of homestead formation," and control the rate of resource exploitation.[46]

Reconstituted amabutho, and hence a more disciplined military and labour force, enabled chiefs to expand grazing and cropland potential, defend hilly regions, appropriate cattle from neighboring communities, and "force the active adult males under their authority out of the business of producing for their own homesteads and into the business of performing labour for the [chiefdom]."[47] If the amabutho system developed as a defensive response to upland incursions, it soon generated an internal dynamic for expansion. An offensive pattern, for example is evident among the Mthethwa and Qwabe in the eighteenth century.

During the second half of the eighteenth century the Mthethwa gained control of most of the lower Mfolozi River valley in the region below 3,000

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[44]Guy, "Pre-Capitalist Societies," pp. 21-22.
[45]Bryant, Olden Times, pp. 98-99.
[46]Guy, "Production and Exchange," pp. 102-3.
[47]Wright, "Age-Group Formation," p. 25.

feet. By the time of Dingiswayo (ca. 1780-1818), the Mthethwa advanced farther north and west. Because of the wide coastal plain, nearly sixty miles of rich lowland soils separate the coast and 3,000 foot contour. Much of this terrain is also covered with Zululand thornveld, offering excellent grazing and an exceptional environment for mixed farming. Jobe, Dingiswayo's father, defended the terrain by constructing royal kraal sites midway between the Mfolozi and several defensible hills.[48]

Under Dingiswayo the Mthethwa expanded over the hill range between the Mfolozi and Mhlatuze rivers. Dingiswayo established his major kraal, oYengweni II, near the headwaters of the Mvamanzi River, in much higher country than Jobe had occupied, and progressively gained control of the western uplands. During this phase of expansion, the Mthethwa absorbed the Zulu, an inconspicuous chiefdom on the White Mfolozi. Control of the mid-ranges of this river valley was completed by the subjugation of the Khumalo chiefdom.[49]

The Qwabe advanced over a wider ecological range as well during the 1700s. By the mid-eighteenth century, the Qwabe chiefdom controlled most of the region from the mid-Mhlatuze River to the sea, and between the Mhlatuze on the north and the Thukela River on the south. During this phase of expansion, the Qwabe displaced several smaller chiefdoms, including the Ngageni, Cele, and Luthuli, and achieved almost total mastery over a region encompassing over two thousand square miles.[50]

During the eighteenth century the Qwabe also gained control of the Ngoye hills, a spur dividing the Mhlutuze and Thukela basins. The Ngoye hill

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[48]Hedges, "Trade and Politics," pp. 178-80; Daniel, "Pre-Shakan Zululand," p. 26; Bryant, Olden Times, pp 86, 89, 113.

[49]Hedges, "Trade and Politics," pp. 186-87; Bryant, Olden Times, pp. 63, 95, 101, 164, 172.

[50]Bryant, Olden Times, pp. 499, 537-38, 545.

region and adjacent lowlands receive as much as forty inches of rainfall per year. The water-retaining alluvial soils of the Mhlatuze flood plain are ideally suited for multiple-cropping, and are particularly important for the cultivation of maize. The Ngoye hills also provide access to the uplands, where Ngongoni veld is available for intensive year-round grazing.[51]

During the second half of the eighteenth century, the Qwabe advanced southwestward into the Mpapalala flats, and northward to just south of the present town of Melmoth. The strongest base of Qwabe control remained, however, in the Ngoye hills and the adjacent uplands. It was from this point that Pakathwayo (1783-1818) ruled his powerful Qwabe chiefdom during the Shakan wars.[52]

The centripetal and expansionary tendencies thus described occurred widely in pre-Shakan Zululand, but as John Omer-Cooper points out, even after the rise of Shaka, "the possibility of cleavage along traditional segmentary lines remained very much in existence."[53] The Hlubi represent a case in point. Centrifugal tendencies among the Hlubi persisted into the Shakan era, as they continued to lag behind other pre-Shakan societies in adopting the amabutho system. The Hlubi, in fact, were the last major chiefdom in Zululand to organize age-based amabutho; they did not abolish circumcision; and prior to the Shakan wars, the Hlubi probably failed to

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[51]Hedges, "Trade and Politics," p. 172; Bryant, Zulu People, p. 313; Acocks, Veld Types, pp. 36, 46-48.

[52]Hedges, "Trade and Politics," pp. 174-75; Evidence of Mmemi ka Nguluzane, James Stuart Archive, vol. III, p. 259; Bryant, Olden Times, pp. 186, 499, 537.

[53]John Omer-Cooper, "Political Change in the Nineteenth-Century Mfecane," in African Societies in Southern Africa, ed. Leonard Thompson (London: Heinemann, 1969), p. 217.

adopt the novel Zulu fighting tactics.[54] All these factors contributed to their catastrophic dispersal in 1822. How did this situation arise?

Amateur ethnographer A.T. Bryant linked the Hlubi[55] with the "Mbo-Dhlamini," and claimed they migrated southward from the hinterland of Delagoa Bay to upper Zululand and Natal during the period 1550-1650.[56] Most oral narratives suggest the Hlubi came from the uBombo Mountains, a range extending from northern Zululand to the Swaziland-Mozambique border. Hlubi royalty claims to have descended from Ngcobo, son of Dhlamini. They retained this appellation until the days of their chief Thluibi, from whom they adopted their permanent name.[57]

According to Stuart's informant Mabonsa, the Hlubi fled from the Swazi and settled along the foothills of the Drakensberg Mountains near the upper Mzinyati River. Apparently, civil wars plagued the Hlubi even at this time. Two lineages split off and moved west highveld, settling along the banks of the Elands River. Mapeli, brother of Sotho chieftain Moshoeshoe,

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[54]Evidence of Mabonsa, Killie Campbell Africana Library, James Stuart Papers (hereinafter cited as KCL SP), vol. 59, 27 January 1909.

[55]On the pre-Shakan Hlubi see the evidence of Mabonsa ka Sidhlayi, op. cit.; George Stow, "The Intrusion of the Stronger Races," Africana Collection, South African Public Library, Cape Town; John Ayliff and Joseph Whiteside, History of the Abambo (Butterworth, 1912; reprint ed., Cape Town: C. Struik, 1962); Msebenzi, History of the Mativane and the Amangwane Tribe, trans. N. J. van Warmelo (Pretoria: Department of Native Affairs, 1938); Moloja [written by J. M. Orpen], "The Story of the 'Fetcani Horde' by One of Themselves," Cape Quarterly Review, vol. I (1882): 267-75; Dick Simanga [written by William C. Scully], "The Amahlubi and the Mangwane," Parts IV and V of "Frangments of Native History," The State, vol. II (1909): 284-92, 435-41; Gumede, "Statement as to His Grandfather, Mativana," MS, Killie Campbell Africana Library; Platje Mhlangu, "An Aged Fingo," Cape Monthly Magazine, 2nd. ser., vol. XIV (January-June 1877): 248-52; and John Wright and Andrew Manson, The Hlubi Chiefdom in Zululand-Natal: A History (Ladysmith: Ladysmith Historical Society, 1983).

[56]Bryant, Olden Times, pp. 147-48.

[57]Mabonsa in James Stuart Archive, vol. II, p. 11; Stow, "Intrusion," p. 144.

claimed that these Hlubi emigrants dispersed widely across the plains in present-day eastern Orange Free State.[58]

The Hlubi dominated the uplands between the Thukela and Phongolo basins, and apparently established peaceful relations with their neighbors. They gained a reputation for being superb hunters, taking advantage of the large populations of buffalo, rhinoceros, kudu, zebra, lion, and waterbuck in the forests of the upper White Mfolozi basin. They also traded in the Delagoa Bay-Natal ivory network and with the Sotho to the west.[59] By the late eighteenth century the Hlubi represented one of the largest chiefdoms in pre-Shakan Zululand, and inhabited an extensive upland territory. One narrative says the Hlubi "were as numerous as the blades of grass spreading over the hills and filling the valleys." By another estimate, obviously exaggerated, the Hlubi numbered 250,000 in 1800.[60]

Given this rosy picture, why did the Hlubi become major victims during the Shakan wars? The answer, in part, is that they failed to fully incorporate the amabutho system. Whereas age-set regiments emerged among the Mthethwa, Ndwandwe, Qwabe, Cele, and Ngwane by the late eighteenth century, none existed under Hlubi chief Bungane, who ruled from 1782-1800, and only one is evident under his successor Mthimkhulu (d. 1822). According to Mabonsa, Mthimkhulu's ibutho was not based on age. Further, the Hlubi did not abolish circumcision, again in contrast to every major chiefdom in pre-Shakan Zululand.[61]

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[58]Mabonsa in James Stuart Archive, vol. II, p. 25.
[59]Ayliff and Whiteside, Abambo, p. 4.
[60]Ibid., p. 9; Scully, "Amahlubi and Amangwani," pp. 286-87.
[61]Evidence of Mabonsa, KCL SP, vol. 59, 27 January 1909.

The Hlubi also failed to successfully accommodate the demanding resource ecology of the uplands. The comparatively high rainfall (40-45 inches per year) of this region permits maize and millet cultivation, but also tends to leach the soils. Soil depletion may account for the evidence that Hlubi imported maize by the late eighteenth century. Excavations by Martin Hall and Tim Maggs at the later Iron Age site at Nqabeni (on the plateau between the White Mfolozi and Mzinyathi rivers) reveal extensive samples of maize.[62] Yet Stuart's informant Sivivi ka Maqungo reported that Hlubi grew only millet and depended on lowlanders for maize. In the words of Sivivi, "the coastal tribes laughingly said that in the early autumn we Hlubis were obliged to eat only [millet] and had to depend on them for [maize]."[63]

Cattle continued to play a significant role in the Hlubi economy, but as Hall points out, "although some winter grazing would have been available in the uplands . . . only a very low density of livestock could have been maintained on a perennial basis." In all likelihood, the Hlubi became "dependent of the resources of other areas."[64] Ironically, Hlubi incursions into river valleys and coastal lowlands in search of pastures may have sparked a process that led to their own demise.

A defensive response by zantsi peoples would have blocked the Hlubi from this region, and forced them to broaden their grazing regime in the foothills of the Drakensberg. A growing dependence on upland ecology and lowland exports likely contributed to the political conflicts tearing the Hlubi social formation apart. By the late eighteenth century, for example, a rivalry divided Bungane's sons, Mthimkhulu and Mpangazita. When Bungane died

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[62]Martin Hall and Tim Maggs, "Nqabeni: A Later Iron Age Site in Zululand," Goodwin Series of the South African Archaeological Society, no. 3 (1979): 170.
[63]Evidence of Sivivi ka Maqungo, KCL SP, vol. 62, 10 March 1907.
[64]Hall, "Ecology of the Iron Age," pp. 249,253, 274.

in 1800 Mthimkhulu led his faction to the Utrecht area, while Mpangazita's following located near present-day Newcastle.[65]

While internal schisms plagued the Hlubi, tensions mounted between the Mthethwa and Ndwandwe. Dingiswayo confederated a number of chiefdoms in the region between the Mfolozi and Mhlatuze rivers, and extended Mthethwa influence as far west as the upper White Mfolozi, where he compelled Donda's Khumalo to accept tributary status. In 1818 Dingiswayo's amabutho attacked Matiwane's Ngwane near present-day Vryheid. According to a number of informants, the Hlubi collaborated with the Mthethwa.[66]

The Ndwandwe feared Mthethwa expansion to the west. In order to protect his chiefdom's western flank, Zwide dispatched his age-set regiments against the Ngwane in 1822. The Ngwane in turn fell upon the Hlubi, killed Mthimkhulu, and forced his Hlubi survivors to flee south and west. A smaller section of Hlubi under Radebe fled southward to Gcalekaland in the eastern Cape. Mpangazita's people hurried westward through the passes of the Drakensberg and displaced MaNthatisi's Tlokwa. The difaqane ensued.[67] The Hlubi traditionally held their own against the Ngwane, but a weakened, divided polity cost the Hlubi dearly in 1822. Hlubi informants emphasize the massive scale of destruction: the confiscation of all Hlubi cattle and as many as 80,000 killed.[68] In the words of Mabonsa, "the whole Hlubi tribe collapsed like the breaking of a bottle to atoms."[69]

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[65]Evidence of Mabonsa, KCL SP, vol. 59, 27 January 1909.
[66]Bryant, Olden Times, p. 63; Scully, "Amahlubi and Amangwane," pp. 285-86; Ayliff and Whiteside, Abambo, p. 7.
[67]Ibid.
[68]Scully, "Amahlubi and Amangwane," p. 289; Ayliff and Whiteside, Abambo, p. 8.
[69]Evidence of Mabonsa, KCL SP, vol. 59, 27 January 1909.

Conclusion

In her article on the relationships between drought, famine, and epidemic disease in nineteenth-century Lesotho, historian Elizabeth Eldredge argues that drought frequently led to famine, not by causing absolute shortages of food, but indirectly, by "inducing migration, which intensified territorial competition and prompted open conflict in the context of an ongoing struggle for land."[70] Similarly, the mfecane wars of the early nineteenth century may represent the culmination of socio-political processes precipitated indirectly by ecological disequilibrium. State formation in pre-Shakan Zululand did not likely begin as an offensive measure to cope with progressive environmental degeneration, but as a defensive strategy to limit the incursions of upland pastoralists.

Uplanders like the Hlubi, not the lowland population, probably exceeded the limits of their resource ecology by the eighteenth century, and sought additional pastures to support their herds. To the misfortune of the Hlubi, this strategy backfired. Instead of abating their economic vulnerability they aggravated it. In response to Hlubi incursions, lowland chiefdoms transformed themselves for better defense and productivity. These transformations blocked the uplanders' access to the more promising terrain to the east. Their expansion southward across less productive grasslands represented an offensive, non-transforming process.

When the Madhlathule famine occurred in the early years of the nineteenth century, the ruling houses of the Mthethwa, Qwabe, Ndwandwe,

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[70]Eldredge, "Drought, Famine and Disease," p. 62.

and Ngwane, made use of highly disciplined age-set regiments to compete for desireable ecological zones. The Hlubi had not significantly transformed their society, internalized their political conflicts, and dissolved into factions. Consequently, they were shattered during the Shakan wars. Ironically, the Hlubi had given rise to means of their own destruction--the amabutho system made famous by Shaka.