

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND
AFRICAN STUDIES INSTITUTE

African Studies Seminar Paper
to be presented in RW
4.00pm JULY 1984

Title: Descent Groups, Chiefdoms and South African Historiography.

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No. 151

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND
AFRICAN STUDIES INSTITUTE

African Studies Seminar Paper to
be presented at Seminar in RW 319
at 4,00 pm on Monday, 23 July,
1984.

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DESCENT GROUPS, CHIEFDOMS AND SOUTH AFRICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

W.D. Hammond-Tooke

A number of impressive historical studies by a group of young South African scholars has recently appeared, seeking to apply new insights in tracing the effects of the imposition of colonial rule over the indigenous peoples of the sub-continent (e.g. Slater 1976; Hedges 1978; Peires 1981; Bonner 1980, 1983; Guy 1979, 1981; Delius 1982, Hamilton and Wright 1984). Some of these authors, notably Slater, Hedges, Guy, Bonner, Hamilton and Wright, seek, as a starting point of their analyses, to establish the nature of the 'mutation' to chieftainship that must have occurred from a previous period in which there were no chiefs. These works focus mainly on the Nguni, especially the incorporative states of Zulu and Swazi; others, like those of Peires on the Xhosa and Delius on the Pedi, tend to assume chieftainship as given and take their analyses from there.

The difficulty of reconstructing a process that occurred before written records were available has driven these writers to the work of anthropologists and there is no doubt that their studies have gained a useful cutting edge thereby. This is particularly so in their realisation of the pervasive importance of kinship in these pre-colonial social formations, especially the way in which marriage can be used to create and maintain alliances that may have a more political referent. But anthropological concepts are tricky things to handle; a full appreciation of the social reality 'on the ground' would seem to be a sine qua non for real insights into the dynamics of social life (something historians lack through no fault of their own) and some of the attempts to apply ethnographic models to their data have been flawed, however anthropologically sophisticated

they may appear. This paper addresses itself to the crucial problem of the development of chieftainship among South African Bantu-speaking peoples from a hypothesised earlier stage and to the subsequent role of 'kinship' in their centralized polities. It does not purport to provide a definitive answer to these problems but rather to indicate where current theories and models are less than satisfactory. It also seeks to assess the usefulness of the (modified) form of the so-called 'lineage mode of production' concept used in particular by Hedges, Bonner, Harries, Hamilton and Wright as a theoretical answer to the problem.⁽¹⁾ A by-product of the paper will be to suggest a much earlier date for the mutation to chiefdoms throughout southern Africa than has been contemplated in the conventional wisdom.

II.

The main reason for the inability of South African historians to handle the above-mentioned 'mutation' adequately would seem to lie in the fact that they tend to use an inappropriate model of lineage systems. ———→
 ———→ A benchmark in the 'new historiography' was Slater's (1976) application of a rigid system of evolutionary 'epochs' (pre-feudal, feudal, absolutist and capitalist), each marked by structural discontinuities, to the data and the location of the Zulu state in the absolutist category. Apart from the fact that the Zulu (and Swazi) case is a radical departure from the typical Southern Bantu chiefdom, and is therefore at some remove from the origins of centralized chiefdoms, there are theoretical problems in his formulation. Hedges has warned of the difficulties of typing broad areas of social formations. As he says in his critique of Slater: "The applicability of such a paradigm to African history suffers a number of disadvantages; central to them is the absence of comparability in the modes of production in the sense of comparing surplus extraction relations and their reproduction or maintenance" (Hedges 1978:15), illustrating his point by referring to the extraordinary absence of general agreement as to what constitutes feudal relations in Europe. It is just as dangerous to presume that systems classified under the rubric of 'lineage modes of production' (or variants of the kinship theme) reflect a unitary concept. Hedges criticizes Sahlins for the same reason as he does Slater - but in this case because of Sahlins' 'universalising' the 'domestic mode of production' (Sahlins 1968). At this point in the argument it may be commented that Sahlins is possibly right and that the poles in the model are indeed chiefs, on the one hand, and homestead heads on the other, with wider intervening kinship groups being largely irrelevant to political incorporation. Certainly Kuckertz, in a recent

detailed study of Mpondo social organisation, stresses that the essential political contract, at least today, is between chief and homestead head, and that kinship and descent per se have little to do with political integration. Even Hedges (p 65) admits that the north Nguni 'village' (extended homestead) was "linked at the ideological and political level with the inkosi" (chief). These matters will have to be considered in more detail below.

Some writers, however, notably Godelier, Terray, Rey, Hedges and Harries, have refused to let matters rest at the domestic mode of production. Committed to finding exploitation, they look for wider structures in which to locate it - and find these in lineages. As Hedges says: "The significance of this standpoint for the analysis of African social structure is that if kinship is the form of social relations, the lineage cannot be dismissed simply as representing a particular mode of production such as the hunting band, in which tribute and exploitation do not appear; on the contrary, the configuration of the lineages within the social formations requires examination so as to describe the basis of the exploitation and tribute" (ibid p 21).

As is well known, the concept of 'lineage mode of production' stems from Meillasoux's work on the West African Gouro and has been elaborated by Terray (1972), Rey (1975) and Godelier (1960). It is thus based on social formations that have been classified by anthropologists as 'segmentary societies' in which integration derives from the political relations (often oppositional) of territory-owning descent groups whose relationships are calibrated on a genealogy and can thus be fairly precisely stated (despite manipulation of these family trees to conform to reality). Such societies are the Nuer, Tallensi, Tiv and the East African groups such as the Kikuyu, Kamba and those discussed in Middleton and Tait's comparative volume (Middleton and Tait 1958).

The point about these lineages is that they are corporate (although there is evidence that the anthropologist's model does not always accord very well with reality 'on the ground' - see Verdon's (1982) critique of Evans-Pritchard's Nuer analyses). They are also hierarchically arranged through specific genealogical connection and, in the absence of formal political office vested in one man (Maine's Corporation Sole), administrative and political leadership is vested in what have been termed 'elders'.

This is not the place to elaborate critically on the status of the lineage mode of production concept within Marxist theory, even were I competent to do so. South African historians seem to have intuitively felt that the model in pure form is perhaps inappropriate for their specific ends. But some at least, notably Hedges, Bonner, Hamilton and Wright, have selected two elements of the model in attempting their reconstruction of the pre-chiefly period, and even of the chiefly period. These are (a) the idea of a hierarchy of lineages co-existing with chiefs, and (b) the definition of elders as forming an exploitative class. Thus Bonner (1983:14) sees the emerging chiefdom as "the crystallization of lineage society with the dominant lineage guaranteeing both the reproduction of subordinate lineages under its sway" and, although he admits (*idem* p 23) that the control of the "lineage heads" over production thus becomes "drastically curtailed", he still conceives of the new form of polity as being strongly influenced by its lineage inheritance:

Eighteenth century society [in northern Natal] had typically employed the idiom of kinship in establishing the dominant lineage ascendancy. Lineages were conceived of as being linked by a descent from a single ancestor, and as being hierarchically ordered according to their genealogical distance from this source. Ideological authority thus became invested in the leader of the dominant lineage, by virtue of his capacity to intercede with the ancestors and guarantee the fertility and reproduction of the chiefdom as a whole.

(Bonner 1983:48)

Hamilton and Wright, while critical of Bonner's use of kinship, are with him in accepting Hedges' notion that the small-scale chiefdoms that existed in south-east Africa before the later 18th century "consisted of hierarchies of lineages whose political cohesion was maintained primarily through the ideology of kinship" (Hamilton and Wright 1984:8). They proceed to elaborate their model of these "small-scale chiefdoms" as follows:

In each chiefdom, we would argue, subordinate lineages were concerned to establish and maintain genealogical links, fictive if necessary, with the dominant lineage in order to be able to make claims upon the political authorities to which kinship entitled them. For its part, the dominant lineage would have encouraged them to make these links, as the main source of its political power lay in the ritual authority which it exercised over related lineages by virtue of its genealogical proximity to the ancestors. Given the absence of centralised institutions of social control in these polities, the dominant lineage had no sources of coercive power beyond those available to each of its subordinate lineages. Hence its political position was based primarily on the functions which its senior member, the chief, exercised in the sphere of ritual.

The kinship system, then, operated in polities of this nature to

bring about the political incorporation of the constituent lineages into the 'family' of the dominant lineage.

(Hamilton and Wright 1984:8)

There are some strange features of this model. One is the statement that the chiefdom is characterised by an absence of centralised institutions; another, that a chiefdom polity had no source of coercive power except ritual stemming from the 'dominant lineage'. What seems to be missing here is (a) any appreciation of the structural discontinuities that separate chiefdoms from other, acephalous, social formations, (b) a clear realisation of the basic opposition between chieftainship and lineage organisation (and, in passing, the role of 'elders'), and (c) an understanding of how lineage ritual (i.e. the ancestor cult) operates in practice. South African historians have been right to give 'kinship' its due: where they have gone astray is in applying too simplistic an understanding of the possibilities and limitations of kinship in the real world. The rest of this paper will look at these points in detail.

III

The root of the trouble, of course, lies with A.T. Bryant, the father of North Nguni historiography. His discussion of what he calls 'social organization' in Olden Times in Zululand and Natal (1929:71-3) is characterized by an inability to distinguish clearly between kinship and political structures, or at least to discuss adequately the relationship between them. (HA Junod has similarly cast a cloud of confusion on subsequent Tsonga studies - Junod 1927). Yet Bryant does say (p.72) that locally situated clansmen "in a single, easily demarcated neighbourhood" (e.g. a river valley) were "for the convenience of better government, grouped together under the supervision of a local headman, umNumzana, who functioned at once as petty magistrate and member of parliament, possessing authority to adjust all minor disputes and acting as the voice and ears of his people in the lower rank (or House of Commons) in the parliament of the clan". Ignoring for the moment the fanciful, and unhelpful, analogies with British practice, not to speak of the reference to the 'parliament of the clan', we have hints here of two important features of Nguni society, (a) that the effective local units of kinship were localized segments of clans and (b) the presence of an over-arching political system separate from the area of operation of clans. Bryant goes on to state that the supreme head of the chiefdom was the "chieftain" with his "chosen ministers". Yet, having established this, he abandons all reference to chiefdoms and speaks of the "more than fifty independent clans in Zululand, all descended from a single ancient common ancestor (ibid pp 72-3).

Despite the work of anthropologists such as Krige (1936), Hunter (1936) and Gluckman (1960), and despite the increasing anthropological sophistication of historical scholars, this picture continues to haunt the scene. What could be meant by independent clans or what does it mean to say that clans are descended from a common (if ancient) ancestor?

Perhaps the historians are not entirely to blame. As recently as 1956 Schapera had to stress the essential incorrectness of the popular image of so-called kin-based societies, when he pointed out that, even among food-gatherers, "the community seldom if ever embraces the whole of a person's kin" (Schapera 1956:4). He concludes that "It is therefore incorrect to maintain that 'political union' is based solely on kinship in primitive societies, and on 'local contiguity' in centralized societies" as Maine, followed by Durkheim, Hobhouse, Vinogradoff, Hartland and Davy, had insisted. As modern a sociologist as MacIver wrote:

Tribal government differs from all other political forms in that the territorial basis is not sharply defined. In its primary sense such a tribe is a community organized on the basis of kinship... and usually claiming to be descended from a common ancestor.

(MacIver 1947:158).

Yet, since the 1930s, all ethnographers of the Southern Bantu have stressed the political, non-kinship, nature of chiefdom governments, even if they loosely used the vague term "tribe" as coterminous with chiefdom. The unit of analysis always tended to be the social group united under a chief: in this sense it was 'bounded', but bounded by a very specific cognitive principle - allegiance to the chief. Kinship structures paled into insignificance beside this fact.

Despite this, Peires (1981:19) and Hamilton and Wright (1984:9), continue to speak of "genetically defined" or "lineage-based" chiefdoms. Hedges (1978), in particular, completely misreads the evidence, in his influential study, and has thus seriously misled a number of subsequent scholars. His main theoretical thrust is to try and locate 'kinship' firmly in the infrastructure, in his attempt to retain the viability of the lineage mode of production concept, and in doing so he relies heavily on Bryant (1949) and Reader (1966). This, in itself, is unfortunate as Bryant, as we have seen, is anthropologically naive and Reader's study is marred by occasional attempts to force Makhanya (Zulu) materials into a segmentary paradigm (derived from the classic Nuer and Tallensi models) which tend to obscure the facts. One example of Hedge's misreading must suffice. Hedges correctly stresses the primacy of the homestead (he calls it a "village") and, not surprisingly, he finds little exploitation in this

grouping. He has thus to find "other labour processes, closely related to the continuity of the lineage" which "were more directly under the control of the collectivity of elders" (*idem* p 72). He claims to have found these phenomena, following Rey, in hunting and defence. As far as hunting is concerned this was organized (he says) on a lineage basis, the "product of exchange value" being appropriated by the lineage elders. The trouble is that both his main sources state quite unequivocally that the Zulu hunt was organized by the ward headman, a political officer (Bryant 1949:683; Reader 1966:291; Krige 1936:203). The army was mobilized in the same way - on a local isifunda basis by local administrative officers (at least in those groups unaffected by the Shakan reorganization). Hedges chooses to ignore the clear implications of the sources in the interests of his theoretical preoccupations, preferring to stress the fact that there was a tendency for one descent group to be numerically dominant in a ward. The point is that numerical domination, in these social formations, did not necessarily mean political domination. It is important to realize that kinship authority is not the same as territorial authority. Kinship authority is effective only over kinsmen: political authority is exercised over all who live in a demarcated area, irrespective of kinship links. In segmentary societies proper they may coincide - but not in South African chiefdoms. Hedges' ingenuous deployment of the lineage concept thus collapses for want of evidence, and with it the image of powerful lineage elders who form an exploitative class (see below).

No functionalist anthropologist writing since the 1930s has ever suggested that the 'tribe' was a structure organized essentially on kinship lines, despite Hamilton and Wright's accusation that ethnographers during the period 1930-1970 had the notion of a Zulu tribe with "consanguineal unity" (Hamilton and Wright 1984:5). It is, in fact, hard to imagine what such a polity would look like.

The fact of the matter is that, whatever the form of polity before the establishment of chiefdoms, once they were instituted a major change was introduced. The whole basis of recruitment was changed. No longer was access to land dependent only on birth: rather did it stem from a specific contractual act of naturalization, expressed in the term khonza. Individuals gained membership of the social formation through an act of fealty to the chief, by being given permission to settle in an area acknowledged to be under the chief's sway. In return for fealty the chief provided protection and redistributed surplus in times of famine to those in need. The establishment of chiefdoms, then, is related to a fundamental change in ideology in which descent group autonomy gave way to a relationship essentially between family heads and chief.

There is much evidence for this. Both Beinart and Kuckertz have shown the importance of the homestead head/chief relationship for the Mpondo (Beinert 1982; Kuckertz 1984) and there are hints of this in Bryant's work. There is, in fact, little evidence, in these social formations, of economic structures wider than the homestead itself.⁽²⁾ Beinart (op.cit. p 18) believes that in the mid-nineteenth century "Communal activities controlled by the paramount receded in importance and production became increasingly atomized to the level of the homesteads" (p 11), but there is really no evidence that this was not the 'traditional' position in earlier Nguni groups. It is significant in this regard that, as Beinert points out (pp 14-15), a major method used by the Mpondo chief to forge political links with commoners was through the lending out of cattle to individuals under the ngoma system: "The traditions of the Mpondo paramountcy in the early twentieth century claim that in earlier times every man, both chief and commoner, could have cattle on loan from the paramount" (p 15). The importance of this for our argument is that the transaction was conceived of as being between chief and subject, with no reference to intervening structures such as putative 'lineages'. Kuckertz had great difficulty in conceptualizing an 'economic organization' at the level of chiefdom social life in his Western Mpondo community. Each homestead appeared to him to be 'independent' economically, although, today, locked into the wider capitalist system via migrant labour and trade. Wider economic interaction, as in work parties, typically involved neighbours, not kin. There was accumulation at the top in the past but this derived again from political affiliation to the chief. On the death of every homestead head tribute, in the form of death dues (isizi), a head of cattle, was sent to the capital where it joined the royal herd. This herd, also contributed to by cattle obtained by raiding (most chiefs had a group of young men called the 'chief's cattle raiders'), with the ngoma custom, represented the sole way in which wealth was accumulated and redistributed. Descent groups, either clans or lineages, played no part in wider economic activities: as we shall see, their wide dispersion would have made this difficult, if not impossible. It is perhaps significant that Kuckertz sees the nearest analogue to his Mpondo material in Gulliver's study of the Ndendeule in Kenya (Gulliver 1971), as well as in Hyden's reference to the "structural anomaly of Africa" according to which "small is powerful" (Hyden 1980:9). Hyden writes "Each unit is independent of the other and the economic structure is cellular. To the extent that there is cooperation among producers in these economies it is not structurally enforced but purely a superstructural articulation rooted in the belief that everybody has a right to subsistence. Consequently cooperation among peasants is temporary..." (ibid p 13). We shall return to this matter later.

Perhaps the most important point to make at this juncture is to stress the fundamental opposition between authority based on kinship and that flowing from a fully-fledged administrative system. Once territorially-based structures of government are established there is no room for kinship-based authority located in descent groups. It is rather like the opposition between fully-functioning judicial systems and the institution of self-help. No self-respecting government can share legal authority with subsidiary structures. Once chieftainship had been instituted any powers that clans or lineages may have possessed in the hypothesized earlier period were doomed. To understand this more fully it is necessary to look a little more closely at Southern Bantu kinship systems.

Much has been written on the incorporative potential in kinship. It is a useful corrective to realize that kinship in itself is divisive, particularly the family. (Hamilton and Wright note this point, although in another context - that of ethnicity). Family membership sets off family from family, members of a descent group from members of other descent groups, and so on. Obviously this divisiveness can be of political and other importance when it is utilized to attain specific ends, e.g. access to chieftainship. Kinship can also, of course, be incorporative, especially through the mechanism of marriage alliances. But kinship is not all of one piece. Comaroff has shown that agnatic kinship is essentially divisive, pitting brother against brother in competition for scarce (often political) resources to which both can lay claim by virtue of their membership of the same descent group. Among the Tshidi-Rolong, and other Tswana, alliances are typically made not with agnatic kin but with maternal kin, who are excluded from competition over descent group rewards - and precisely because they are so excluded (Comaroff 1974; 1976). It is thus of the utmost importance to specify what type of kin are involved in political manoeuvring.

A distinction must also be made between kinship and descent. Although related concepts, they are by no means the same thing. Kinship refers to the system of relationships that centres on the individual. It includes relatives on both the father's and the mother's side, and, also, affines. All societies have kinship systems in this sense. Descent, on the other hand, is more specific. It refers to the singling out of one side of the family for special emphasis, although patrilineal and matrilineal principles can be combined (rarely) in a number of ways. The salience of descent can vary from the simple inheritance of a name to the formation of fully corporate groups,

usually termed clans and lineages, which can have major functions, particularly in acephalous societies. Here, too, the so-called 'elders' may have considerable power, usually of a ritual nature. It is to a consideration of such descent groups in traditional South African societies that we must now turn. More specifically, what does it mean to say that South African chiefdoms are composed of hierarchically ordered lineages?

All evidence goes to show that, for as long as these societies have been observed by Western scholars and others, they have been governed by chiefs, with an associated administrative structure based on territorial authority. Chieftainship was vested in a royal lineage, calibrated on a genealogy that went back ten generations or more (commoner genealogies were much shallower). This genealogical depth is understandable in that members of the royal lineage were all putatively inheritors of the prized high office, and the ability to specify exact genealogical relationship to the ruler was one of absorbing interest and potential. As we shall see, it can be argued that only the royal descent line can be accurately described as a 'lineage'. The royal lineage was a segment of the royal clan, but most other royal clansmen were unable to demonstrate their inter-relationships with the royal lineage itself: they were respected for their patronym but, in the absence of genealogical demonstration, there was no way in which they could use it to claim high office. Royal clansmen, even those of the royal lineage, might be scattered throughout the chiefdom territory.

Also present in the territory were representatives of other clans. Some were reputed to be 'true' clans, descended from men who were with the eponymous chief when the chiefdom was founded. Other clans were regarded as being originally of foreign origin, deriving from other chiefdoms, but whose members were politically now fully part of the chiefdom. The clans might be foreign but the clansmen were not: they had been transformed into full members of the chiefdom through the act of naturalization mentioned earlier. Some of these foreign clans, over time, became accepted as 'true' clans of the chiefdom, despite their remembered provenance. Thus the Xhosa clans are grouped into (a) those believed to be offshoots of the royal Tshawe clan and (b) those who are of commoner stock, including "all clans of alien blood" ... "which have sought refuge among the Xhosa" (Soga 1930:22). Among the Mpondo, Hunter noted that forty-six clans could trace descent from the common stock of the royal Nyawuza clan, and twenty-one clans could not trace any

such connection (Hunter 1936:58). The point being made here is that, while one can perhaps talk of a 'hierarchy' of royal clans i.e. those split off from the royal lineage, a large proportion of the members of a chiefdom cannot be ranked according to the ranking of their clans. Others, of course, belong to small groups scattered throughout the chiefdom, the 'seat' of their 'home clan' being located in other chiefdoms. Present day research among Mpondomise, Bhaca and Mpondo show a great heterogeneity on the ground. It is not uncommon to find representatives of fifty or more clans living within one administrative ward, an area of three or four square kilometers (Hammond-Tooke 1968; Kuckertz 1984) and a similar pattern was found among North Nq as far back as the early 1930s (Holleman 1940; see also Reader 1966: 92-3). Felgat recorded 271 different clan names among 5189 Tembe-Tonga homesteads in the 1950s (Felgate 1982). Clans are not today corporate groups, their members never come together as a group and their main function is to define marriage through the exogamy rules. There are no clan elders. It is important to realize that there are also no clan genealogies, and therefore no way in which relative status within a clan can be established. The reason for this is simple. Without the availability of written records it is just not possible to retain the memory of long extinct genealogical connection, particularly of collaterals. As Iona Mayer pointed out in discussing the (segmentary) Gusii, effective genealogical memory peters out at about the level of grandfather or great-grandfather and this is the reason why genealogies of commoners tends to be four or five generations in depth (I. Mayer 1965). The present author collected genealogies from over sixty individuals drawn from the central Transkeian groups of Thembu, Bomvana and Mpondomise in the 1960s and found the average depth to be five to six generations.

The nature of clans is perhaps now well understood by historians of Southern Africa and the theoretical debate has tended to move to lineages as the more important vehicle for supposed 'kinship authority'. But this move does not succeed in removing the ambiguities in the interpretation of the data. Recent research on 'lineages', among both Cape and Natal Nguni (who may be supposed to exhibit descent group structure to a much greater degree than Sotho, Tsonga and Venda), have shown that lineages, in the form of corporate groups - a necessary assumption of the lineage mode of production theorists - do not exist among them (Kuckertz 1983; Hammond-Tooke 1984; Preston-Whyte 1984). It is true that informants can frequently trace genealogical connection back five or six generations, but this does not mean that the homestead heads whose names appear on their genealogy form a group of any kind or, indeed can be called at lineage in any meaningful sense of the term. Such members do

not necessarily, or even typically, form a group with specific functions. I have analysed the evidence for the Cape Nguni in detail (Hammond-Tooke 1984) as has Preston-Whyte for the North Nguni (1984): only the main points will be repeated here.

The nearest structure to a kinship group that can be discerned among present-day Nguni is the (usually small) cluster of agnates that inhabit a portion of sub-ward ('neighbourhood' in some reports) and who are thus in frequent contact with one another. Typically they are a group of men who have a grandfather or greatgrandfather in common, but it is distinctly unusual for all such descendants to be domiciled together. Dispersal could be due to movement to another chiefdom, or another part of the chiefdom, for a number of reasons. In any event, today at least, 80% of such agnatic clusters are made up of six homesteads or less. A cluster of twenty agnatic relatives is decidedly exceptional. There is evidence that this pattern goes back as far as the 1920s, at least. As mentioned above, Holleman found it among the Zulu in the 1930s, as did Hunter for the Mpondo and, as will be argued below, there is no evidence that any group wider than the agnatic cluster was ever a feature of Nguni social formations.

When we look at the functions of these 'bottom-line' descent groups we find them fairly exiguous. Members of these minimal descent groups do not own stock or goods in common nor do they typically own land, although there is evidence that some Natal groups today have limited control over their areas and their consent must be sought before the tribal authorities can allow new-comers to settle in them (Reader 1966: 91f; Preston-Whyte 1984). It is almost certain, however, that this is a recent development, brought about by increasing pressure on land. Cook (1930:156; see also Davies 1927:521) records that "The Bomvana insist on the fact that prior to the white man's coming a man never asked his chief for land. There was land in abundance, and what was required was simply broken up. But if a field was sown it belonged to the husband of the woman who cultivated it. It was his as long as he chose to work it". For the Mpondo in the 1930s Hunter states that "The extent of the areas to be cultivated is decided by the elders of each umzi (homestead)" (Hunter 1936:93): "Land to cultivate was not allotted (ukulawula), but each woman was free to cultivate where she chose within her own chief's district" (idem p 113). The pattern seems to have been widespread. The Lobedu (Sotho) district head was in charge of land distribution (E.J. Krige 1983:4) and Krige records a similar system for the Phalaborwa.

In what she calls the "old Bantu system of agriculture" (in "full swing" in the 1930s) "Land is plentiful and can be taken up at will by anyone" (Krige 1937:362). Webster found that among Mozambique Chopi land was still (in the 1960s) in "abundant supply", the system of land tenure allowing any man access to a virgin tract, or to the unused land of others (Webster 1975:121). There is little evidence here for the presence of a territorial base for descent groups.

In the literature on the Nguni there has been a tendency to think of all the homestead heads whose names appear on the shared genealogy as forming a lineage. Yet the genealogy is no more than a construct that allows members of the agnatic clusters to define their relationship to one another and to other related clusters. For defining the groups, though, they use only a part of the genealogy - that dealing with their immediate kinsmen, descended from a common great grandfather. The point is that all those whose names appear on the five to six generation genealogy do not interact as, or even conceive themselves to be, a group in any sociological sense; only those who live close together and who in fact can collaborate do; in practice, these are descendents of a common greatgrandfather. This pattern is remarkably uniform for the whole of the Southern Bantu area: the superficial differences are mainly due to the influence of different modes of settlement.

If the Nguni have no lineages, the same can be said for the Tsonga (Webster 1975:128), the Sotho (A. Kuper 1975) and, possibly, the Venda, despite Stayt's description of a form of double descent in this group (Stayt 1931:185).

What, then, are the functions of these exiguous descent groups? Again, we shall take the 'strongly patrilineal' Nguni as the locus classicus. In fact there are only two. The agnatic cluster (or clan segment) is under the control of its genealogically senior member who is responsible for presiding over a segment council at which the disputes between the members are arbitrated, as well as such matters as marriage negotiations and the performance of ancestor rituals. Such decisions are only binding on the members of the segments, and here we are indeed in the presence of descent group ('kinship') authority. The clan segment council is thus an important part of Nguni social life: if a dispute cannot be settled by the council and goes to the court of headman or chief, the first question asked is whether the imilowo, the clan segment, has discussed the matter and, if not, it will be sent back. Yet this is a far cry from the picture of powerful

'elders', forming an exploitative class, as conceived of by Harries, for example (Harries 1979; Hedges 1978). As we have seen, each group today typically consists merely of six or less members. These segments may have been larger in the past, especially because of more extensive polygyny, but the widespread folk model of 'descendents of a common grandfather' (often greatgrandfather), limiting effective tracing to two generations beyond Ego, would seem to have set very definite limits for expansion. Fission occurred when the groups became bigger than this.

The other function of the clan segment is to form a ritual congregation in the ancestor religion. If illness or other misfortune strikes a member the diviner might diagnose the cause as ancestral wrath due to neglect of custom. At the piacular killings, presided over by the segment elder (or, among the Cape Nguni, a 'ritual elder' defined by the wider 'lineage' genealogy - see Hammond-Tooke 1984), it is the clan ancestors who are primarily involved, through the calling of the name of the clan eponym, with his izithakazelo and praises. Thus the numerous little clan segments, scattered throughout the chiefdom territory, all worship the same pantheon of ancestral spirits - a 'community of (clan) saints'. Yet, and this is important, they do not do this as a collectivity, either as a clan or as a 'lineage', but merely as the small local group of agnates. This means that the ancestor religion is divisive. Although each segment invokes all the dead members of its particular clan at every ritual killing (through the symbolic use of its founder's name), the particular ancestor causing the misfortune is always drawn from the limited clan segment genealogy and is identified through exact genealogical connection and also, usually, known in life. The invocation of the clan ancestors, therefore, is an impersonal, liturgical appeal to a vast, essentially unknown, group of ancestral dead: the effective religious (emotional) involvement in ritual is with the known ancestors of the clan segment. The dead, it must be remembered, can only affect the lives of their own descendants, and they do this at two levels. In some vague, unspecified way all fellow clansmen are under the generalized care of the clan ancestors, but in everyday life each agnatic group is specifically under the influence of clan segment spirits. It follows, then, that one cannot talk of a 'tribal' or 'chiefdom' religion, at least in the 'normal' ancestor cult of commoners. The chiefdom is populated with literally hundreds of little cult groups. The significance of this for the present argument is that (presumably) religious institutions are far more resistant to change than are others and thus tend to reflect former states of affairs. If the effective cult group is so limited today, and if this is enshrined in how

ancestors are conceived, it would appear to support the assumption of limited descent groupings in the past.

The nearest one gets to 'tribal' ancestors are the ancestral spirits of the royal lineage who are directly responsible for its wellbeing; in carrying out this task, they are thus also indirectly responsible for the wellbeing of the chiefdom itself. They can only be approached by the chief or members of the royal family and, strictly speaking, only have influence over their own descendents. The main occasion on which they were approached on a 'tribal' basis (as opposed to domestic matters involving the royal family) was in rain-making for, if their own descendants prospered, so did the chiefdom. It thus will be seen that there were no powerful ritual elders. Clans were dispersed and there were no clan genealogies on which to structure 'hierarchies' of segments; the clan segments themselves were so small that the authority of their elders was severely limited. The only 'hierarchy' one can discern was an administrative one, and the continual reference to 'clan hierarchies' by some of the authors discussed in this paper wraps the whole discussion in a 'cloud of unknowing'.

The conclusion is that there are no functional descent groups in South African social formations apart from what I have called clan segments - tiny local groups with authority and ritual interaction limited to themselves. Clans are far too dispersed to have acted as groups, and what has been called a 'lineage' is based on a reification of the wider genealogies that link (some) clan segments and (among the Cape Nguni) define the so-called 'ritual elder'. It is significant that the ritual elder has no authority outside the religious context.

IV

It may be argued that this still does not prove that, very far back in time, these Southern African societies were not of a segmentary type, with powerful clans dominating certain areas and under the control of 'elders'. All that can be said is that there is no clear evidence for this; on the contrary, the evidence seems to point equally to a bilateral or cognatic previous system as much as it does to a segmentary lineage system.

Recent research into the Nguni systems, discussed above, makes them look more and more like the systems of Sotho and Venda. In all groups local areas are defined by administrative structures. The main differences would seem to be that, among Sotho and Venda, the agnatic core is surrounded by kin (matrilineal and affinal) whereas among Nguni and Tsonga its immediate neighbours are typically

non-kin. More work needs to be done on this, especially with regard to the ancestor cult, but it is at least possible that Southern African societies developed from a 'cognatic' system more like those described for central Africa such as the Ndebele and Chewa. These societies are characterized by unstable village headmanships in which forceful personalities (c.f. the New Guinean 'Big Man') seek to attain, and maintain, political office by attracting around them a following of supporters utilizing kinship ties as a basis, and also charismatic influence (Turner 1957). It is much more likely that the emergence of a dominant ruling lineage should occur in this way, through the sacralization of an office already based on political (i.e. essentially non-kinship) principles, than on some fundamental change in the status of a putative clan or lineage. Once a royal line was established it was immediately ritualized to add supernatural sanction to its office. The communal rituals recorded for the Southern Bantu (Hammond-Tooke 1974) all stress this basic relationship of traditional government-chief and people. This theory is, of course, difficult to prove, but no more so than its lineage rival. It is presented here to historians tentatively as an alternative model to try against their data.

V

Southern African historians have tended to write as if the development of centralized chiefdoms was a comparatively recent event, dating back perhaps to the 15th century, although usually with the rider "or even further". There is evidence, however, that what I have called the 'mutation' to chieftainship goes much further back into the past, to at least the 5th century AD. The evidence for this is partly linguistic, but mainly archaeological.

The main linguistic evidence is in the very word for chieftainship itself. Most Southern Bantu social formations use a word that obviously either has a common root or which has been borrowed from a common source, inkosi (Ng.), kgosi (S), hosi (Ts), khosi (V). It thus presumably goes back a very long way, before the four groups split off from the common parent stem.

Archaeologically we are on much surer ground.⁽³⁾ Although the archaeological record is silent on many aspects of social organization and culture, some aspects of culture can be expected to have left their mark on the material environment. Such would be insignia of rank, such as staffs of office or gold or ivory ornaments; signs of wealth and power, reflected in large deposits of bovid bones or the dimensions of the stock enclosure; number of wives, reflected in the size and complexity of the chief's homestead; a large court, reflected in the size of the court midden, of the open space

next to the kraal, or in the positioning of the kraal size and agglomerative nature of the settlement, reflecting centralization of political power; position of the 'chief's' homestead within the settlement, with special reference to such spatial symbols as up/down (as in Venda capitals); the concentration of special resources such as copper, gold and ivory, or concentrations of foreign materials (beads, imported glass, cloth and ceramics) indicating trade. Evidence for centralized control of initiation schools would also point squarely to chieftainship. These criteria would certainly be important if the rest of the settlement pattern was widely scattered. If one can identify a nucleus with more complex design, then the presence of an untypically large stock kraal and evidence for centralized trade and initiation schools would be hard to interpret as reflecting a lineage based social structure which, from its very nature, would tend to be highly decentralized.

The archaeological evidence is admittedly patchy, but is accumulating, pointing to a first millenium origin of South African chiefdoms. It comes from recent work on Iron Age sites stretching from Botswana in the west, across the northern Transvaal to the eastern Transvaal.

In the Toutswe tradition in N.E. Botswana, Denbow (1982, 1983) has convincing evidence for chiefdoms. In the later part of the tradition (1000-1300) this is reflected in a three-fold hierarchy of settlement size with a few extremely large sites, some sites of the middle range and many smaller sites. The large sites, e.g. Toutswe Mogala, are on flat hilltops, resemble Mapungubwe, and have extremely large (50 m diameter 1 m thick) deposits of cattle dung. Pottery of foreign types has been interpreted as evidence for foreign wives. In the earlier part of the tradition, dating 650-1000, these large cattle kraals are still present. At Taukome the central kraal deposit was 70 m across and 1,5 m deep as the result of shifts in the siting of the kraal. The basal kraal at Taukome was ca 20 m in diameter with a date of AD 685±80. The reason adduced for the suspected rise of complex chiefdoms in later Toutswe tradition is the great natural increase in stock herd size.

In S.E. Botswana, at the site of Moritsane dated to the 11th century and belonging to the facies called Eiland, which stretches across the Transvaal to Tzaneen and the N.E. Lowveld, there is a cattle kraal which is 50 m across and nearly a metre deep (Denbow 1981). Similar deposits were found at Bambo Hill near Pietersberg by J. Loubser (1981).

Contemporary with these developments, in the far northern Transvaal and in S.W. Zimbabwe, is the Leopard's Kopje tradition. It is divided into southern and northern facies and, in each area, into two phases.

K2 (900-1000 AD) is a key site for a major transformation that takes place during its occupation (Huffman 1982). At the start of occupation the site had a central cattle kraal and an adjacent court with a ring of houses round it. The kraal was then displaced sideways and the court midden grew to vast proportions. There is much ivory at the site and huge quantities of glass beads, some of which have been remelted to make 'garden roller' beads. It seems that a chiefdom existed here at the beginning of the period and became increasingly more powerful, possibly through the development of foreign trade in which ivory was exchanged for foreign goods. This development reached its apogee at Mapungubwe where, Huffman (1982) suggests, a state developed which was the direct forerunner of Great Zimbabwe and which was organised spatially in the same way.

There are several other sites of K2 and Mapungubwe type in the southern area of the Leopard's Kopje tradition which can be regarded either as separate chiefdoms or as provincial governorships, e.g. Mapela Hill (Garlake 1968).

If K2 represents a chiefdom at the beginning of its occupation and which then experienced massive development, it follows that the phase that K2 was derived from, a generation or two earlier, probably also had that system of organisation. Huffman (1978) has shown that the Leopard's Kopje and Gumanye traditions, both of Zimbabwe and both ancestral Shona, derive from the Klingbeil phase of the Lydenburg Early Iron Age. This phase dates to c800-900 AD and unfortunately all we know about it is something of its ceramics and that the sites cover 10-15 ha. We know much more about the previous phase - Lydenburg - dating from c450-800 AD. Four sites here are important because they indicate dense settlement patterns and/or evidence for initiation. The key site is Langdraai (Evers 1981) which can be shown to be a close-knit agglomeration of homesteads, each with a separate cattle kraal (up to 12 m in diameter and 40 cm deep) covering a total area of c16 ha. There is room at the site for 40-50 of these homesteads, judging from the spacing of known kraal deposits. In the Langdraai excavations a phenomenon known as a 'pit field' was found just down slope of the stock kraal. It is known that groups of pits are associated either with the kraal or with the court, so that the pit field may indicate the approximate position of the court. In the dung deposits some ash lenses with food refuse and broken crockery were found suggesting that rubbish, presumably from the court, was thrown into the kraal.

Other sites, like Doornkop, Klipspruit and the Lydenburg Heads site, also show evidence of pit fields. The Lydenburg Heads themselves are presumably associated with initiation ceremonies and, together with the agglomerative village structure, seem to point to chiefdom-organized initiation schools as practised by the Sotho (Hammond-Tooke 1981). The size of these sites and their agglomerative nature suggests that (a) they were not occupied merely by simple kin groups and (b) that the concentration of homesteads in one settlement probably reflects a fairly strong political system. Reasons of defence against San can probably be discounted as this settlement system persisted for two to three hundred years. The Lydenburg Heads site dates to c500 AD and Langdraai and Doornkop to c750 AD.

From Zimbabwe to the far northern Transvaal, prior to the arrival of the Leopard's Kopje and Gumanye traditions, we have the Zhizo phase of the Gokomere tradition (Zhizo is also the earliest phase of the Toutswe tradition). Near Mapungubwe, Hanisch (1980), has excavated a Zhizo site called Schroda which has massive kraal deposits and numerous figurines, often in groups, which presumably are connected with initiation. Schroda has 9th century dates. Figurines have also been found at a number of earlier Early Iron Age (prior to 700 AD) sites near Harare and Maggs (1980) has found parts of heads in the large beaks from the Tugela Valley dating to the eighth century. It is likely that these are all indicators of a centrally-organized initiation.

There is much evidence, then, that chiefdoms have been a basic feature of Southern Bantu social formations for at least a millenium. Even the most extensive chiefly genealogies fade out long before this, a further reminder of the essentially pragmatic (and political) nature of these cultural artefacts. It also raises serious caveats as to the uncritical application of anthropological and/or Marxist models, derived from other ethnographic areas, to South African data. Extrapolation from present-day ethnography also holds dangers, but at least there is wisdom in moving within a single cultural tradition.

FOOTNOTES

- 1) Although Guy (1979; 1981) is often considered the main protagonist of this approach he is not as guilty of the tendency I am referring to as are some of the other authors. Although he starts his analyses by presenting graphic models of clans and lineages, derived from anthropological studies of acephalous, segmentary lineage societies, he does not, in fact, make much use of these concepts in his actual discussion of pre-Shakan social formations. They are more a gloss to his page: he himself claims that the "diagrams" were drawn to overcome his "boredom" (1981:28), which would seem to put the matter in perspective.
- 2) The only non-administrative structures between the localized descent groups and the chiefdom as a whole are the 'hospitality groups' or 'mat associations' found among the Cape Nguni (Hammond-Tooke 1963; Kuckertz 1984).
- 3) I am most grateful to Mr. Mike Evers of the Department of Archaeology, University of the Witwatersrand, for references and discussion on this

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