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978-0-521-19603-1 - Popular Politics in the History of South Africa, 1400–1948

Paul S. Landau

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Popular Politics in the History of South Africa, 1400–1948

Popular Politics in the History of South Africa, 1400–1948, offers a newly inclusive vision of South Africa's past. Drawing largely from original sources, Paul S. Landau presents a history of the politics of the country's people, from the time of their early settlements in the elevated heartlands, through the colonial era, to the dawn of Apartheid. A practical tradition of mobilization, alliance, and amalgamation persisted, mutated, and occasionally vanished from view; it survived against the odds in several forms, in tribalism, Christian assemblies, and other, seemingly hybrid movements; and it continues today. Landau treats southern Africa broadly, with an increasing concentration on the southern highveld and an ultimate focus on a particular transnational movement called the "Samuelites." He shows how people's politics in South Africa were translated and transformed, but never entirely suppressed.

Paul S. Landau is an associate professor of history at the University of Maryland, College Park. He is co-editor of *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa* (2002) and the author of *The Realm of the Word: Language, Gender and Christianity in a Southern African Kingdom* (1995). Professor Landau's work has appeared in journals such as the *Journal of African History* and the *Journal of Religious History*.

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*University of Maryland,
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In 1624 our forefathers lived in South Africa as heathen under [their] own chiefs.... **our race was a mixed race even then.**

A. A. S. le Fleur, address to his followers, 1896, UNISA,
E. M. S. le Fleur Collection, A. A. S. le Fleur, “Short History,”
1896, handwritten notes made by the Griqua leader.

Gumpie [Daniel Kgompini] ... held meetings [in which he] informs those attending that he is a subject of Chief Samuel Moroka.... **his discussions being on Religion and Politics badly mixed up ...**

Captain’s report, South African Police, Oudtshoorn,
18 October 1921, Pretoria, SAB, JUS 528, 6515/29,
“Gumpie” (Kgompini), traveling the country
with his white employer, a salesman.

Many small tribes mentioned in tradition and history have lost their original cohesion and unity.... [T]he **diversity of peoples making up the membership** of a tribe is reflected in some instances in differences in custom.

Professor Isaac Schapera, *A Handbook of Tswana Law and Custom*, 1938, Oxford: IAI, 1938;
quotes are sequential and taken from 4–5.

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Preface: The Birth of the Political

This book weaves together several stories about popular politics in South Africa in the course of making the argument that those politics have been largely misconstrued. It begins, for all intents and purposes, with Chapter 1. Here, briefly, are a few of its most basic assertions for those who would like a preview. First, the case is made that the people of South Africa were historically well equipped to embrace and absorb strangers. Hybridity lay at the core of their subcontinental political traditions. Nineteenth-century European newcomers were different and attempted to repudiate mixing, politically and otherwise, albeit with only partial success. It was they who characterized, or mis-characterized, Africans as perennial *tribesmen*. Second, the book is about what happened to popular politics in the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. South African modes of self-rule comprised a venerable political tradition, one that deprecated skin color and language as barriers and elevated brotherhoods, rankings, and amalgamations. The tradition preceded tribes and survived through them and beyond them. Ultimately it fed into the politics of the twentieth century, informing South Africa's growing independent Christian churches, other hard-to-catalogue popular movements, rural resistance, and eventually, even the nationalism of the African National Congress.

Popular Politics in the History of South Africa, 1400–1948, offers a revised view of what happened to people's efforts to mobilize themselves in their own interest through much of the colonial era. Therefore it is also an explanation for previous representations of Africans and brown-skinned people. It is a study of politics in places and moments where politics were not usually said to exist, and it is an account of that omission. It is a history of suppression, violence, and warfare, and it is about how that history changed the meaning of what people were saying when they talked about their destiny and their heritage. The book charts the eventual defeat of the majority's ability to rule themselves on the land according to their own logic; and it marks from that catastrophe two effects: the production of ethnic identity, and the formulation among peasants of the religious domain. Both geneses erased the signs of their arrival, as if ethnicity and religious worship had always been there. *Popular*

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Preface: The Birth of the Political

Politics is about more than defeat, however; it is about the perseverance of a complex politics, often camouflaged or shadowed by other institutions: politics in attacking tribalist assumptions, and within assertions of tribal prerogatives; politics infusing Christianity and ancestrally motivated movements; politics that confounded, sometimes by design, the attentions of appointed “Native” experts. Granting the overwhelming impact of colonialism and state racism on people’s ability to mobilize, I argue that ordinary denizens of South Africa continued to find ways to tap their own store of knowledge and praxis. They were the inheritors of a flexible and adaptable political tradition, one that was very hard to smash.

* * * * *

Quite often in historical literature, Africans are depicted as prepolitical or as politically naive, mired in irrational beliefs, and they are imagined to have stayed that way until modern nationalism began to pull them free. They are either dignified with praises for their spirituality, or said to have lived in thrall to superstitions that divided them and rendered them ineffectual, but the common thread is that religion ruled their lives. In this book, everyone’s basic rationality is assumed. Threshers and winnowers, waged farm hands, colonial officials, cooks, plowmen, tailors, chief’s counselors, schoolteachers, agitators, and preachers are all shown to have struggled to act in sensible and effective ways; they demanded that their understanding of the terrain of action around them be treated as meaningful, and they adapted to the situations around them as well as they could. Under the most difficult circumstances, these people created genuine, if sometimes transient, domains of power. Imperial and state administrators fought against them, but they did not understand them, and most of the time they did not want to. This book argues that historians today must be willing to try to see what these administrators did not.

In its coverage the book aims to elaborate South Africa’s history broadly conceived, and for that reason it may serve as an initiating text. Geographically, it is mostly about the South African highveld, and especially one part of it, the neighborhood around the “Middle” or “Willow” River (Mohokare, also known as the Caledon), an area of intensive farming and grazing for centuries. Thematically, it is about how popular sovereignties and rural mobilizations grew and declined in the elevated interior of the country. The movements and modalities outlined herein are not, most often, treated all together, under one rubric; *Popular Politics* shows how they were indeed of a piece, and how, in addition, they were (mis)classified, undermined, and fragmented into *many* pieces. The book looks especially closely at people whose descendents today are called “Coloured,” Sotho, and Tswana; but the reader will see that the simplicity of even this triptych is deceptive, the end result of nineteenth- and even twentieth-century processes and enforced points of view. The designation “highveld” works better for historical purposes. As it is used here, “highveld” indicates arable and grazing land above 1,000 meters, along with whoever lived on it. Finally, the main narrative thread of the book connects the chiefships of the highveld in

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the Hart–Vaal watershed, the Caledon River Valley, and Thaba Nchu, with the “Samuelites,” a peasant movement so-named by the South African historian S. M. Molema. In considering the Samuelites, the general themes of the book are revisited in a concrete and approachable narrative.

The first chapters will show how a historical political praxis gave rise to the great mixed nineteenth-century chiefships on the highveld, and how the same forces helped create the Christian Griqua and filled the pews of the first large Christian churches. Later on, it will be shown that these continuing traditions, although deprived of much of their material basis, ultimately fed many of the peasant movements and organizations in the 1920s, and even some workplace-based associations, including not only the aforementioned Samuelites but also “Garveyism,” South Africa’s independent churches, and the massive International Commercial Workers’ Union or ICU.

The drive to cooperate, mobilize, and thrive in communities on the highveld did not survive unscathed. Instead, it was fractured and channeled into usable forms by peasants and by the state in the difficult circumstances of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Eventually policemen had to monitor public assemblies to keep proper distinctions in place: meetings had to be religious, or cultural, or tribal, but never political, never concerned with changing people’s situations in this world. For a brief period in the 1920s, as the alienation of the land in the fertile valleys and plateaus of the highveld was completed, the old tradition of heterogeneous mobilization surged back to life, dragging discursive fragments out of their places of exile. Like other contemporary movements on the highveld, the Samuelites, a focus here, moved young men to espouse a personal and inner commitment to change. They demanded a return to power over the land and rejected the tyranny of state-supported landlordism and tribal administration. Alarmed, the administrative bureaucracy acted to suppress them and, where possible, to obscure their contours and revise their message.

In telling the story of a South African logic, a popular politics never quite comprehended by empire, never fully engaged, it has been especially important to write entirely in English. Some works of social history that explore “emic” or insider perspectives are reticent to translate fully, relying on foreign terms to lend an irreducible concreteness to ideas. In most cases, however, foreign terms are opaque signs to the English-language reader. In telling history here, in bringing the processes described as much as possible to a wider readership, I translate everything that is spoken at first usage, including so-called tribal names in their pretribal incarnations. With English words as with African-language words, when they are offered, capitalization is avoided. This is to acknowledge the preeminence of speech as opposed to writing, in which no such distinction exists. Hence, to draw these usage guidelines together in a single set of examples, one will read court, or “kraal and court,” for *kgotla*; lords, not Lords, for *dikgosana* or *Makgosi*; chiefdom, not *moraf[h]e* or *kgosing*; crocodile and people of the crocodile, not *kwena*, or *Kwena*, or Crocodile, and so on. After their first appearance, court, chiefdom,

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crocodile, and other ordinary words are given further meaning by recovering the history surrounding their usage, not by explaining to the reader how they were used. An exception: *métis* is an exterior word, imposed to group together a range of people who did not designate themselves as a group. And, in addition, the names of persons are mostly left untranslated and are capitalized. By and large, however, the reader may count on seeing translated (English) terms and will be able to grasp the book's arguments by them. In the same spirit, this book refuses to "correct" the spellings of the past and to substitute modern ethnic labels for past, variable spellings. "Sechuana" is for instance used (and capitalized), rather than Setswana, which is a false synonym. The variety of indigenous spellings should not burden the reader, however, because – to repeat the point – he or she is not required to learn any of them.

Further conclusions emerge serially, in each of the six chapters of the book, although the impatient reader can skip to the very end, where I convert them into simple assertions. The first two chapters to follow will demonstrate, broadly, that the political was indeed born deep in the southern African past: it was not a stage that arrived with the demise of chiefs and chiefly loyalties, nor with the first European administrators, nor the coming of Cape-educated young men. Highveld herders and farmers jockeyed with one another to mobilize and mix in newcomers and to legitimate their preferred hierarchies and alliances, participating in a discernible tradition with a deep history. They spoke comprehensibly enough, beginning in the era when they were not yet ambiguous – not yet neither one thing nor the other, but still only they themselves.

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Acknowledgments

In all chapters to follow, I participate in a serial dialogue with others' interpretations, some acknowledged in the text or in footnotes, but not always. Many scholars whose work has colored my analysis and my choices of examples, or predicted my interpretations in aspect and tone, or paralleled key parts of my thinking, are noted only once or twice in the text, then left behind, even though my debt is ongoing. I owe as much to those whose work I criticize as to those with whom I agree: to the pioneering ethnographers, missiologists and otherwise, who created the world of knowledge in which I situate myself. As a historian, I owe a debt especially to anthropologists of South Africa, in South Africa, Britain, and the United States, and to their scrupulous and indispensable studies.

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