

# The Politics of Evil

*Magic, State Power, and the Political  
Imagination in South Africa*

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**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain  
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa  
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*Typeface* Times 10/12 pt    *System* L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X 2<sub>ε</sub> [TB]

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Crais, Clifton C.

The politics of evil: magic, state power, and the political imagination in  
South Africa / by Clifton Crais.

p.      cm. – (African studies series; 103)

Includes bibliographical references (p. 280) and index.

ISBN 0 521 81721 8

1. South Africa – Politics and government.    2. Political culture – South Africa –  
History.    I. Title.    II. Series.

DT1798 .C73    2002

968 – dc21    2002017402

ISBN 0 521 81721 8 hardback

African edition ISBN 0 521 53393 7

# Contents

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<i>List of illustrations</i>	page x
<i>List of maps</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xii
<i>Chronology</i>	xvi
Introduction	1
<b>Part 1: Cultures of conquest</b>	
1. The death of Hope	35
2. Ethnographies of state	68
3. Rationalities and rule	96
<b>Part 2: States of emergency</b>	
4. Prophecies of nation	115
5. Government acts	145
6. Conflict in Qumbu	165
7. The men of the mountain	178
8. Flights of the lightning bird	209
Conclusion	220
<i>Notes</i>	231
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	280
<i>Index</i>	294

## Illustrations

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1. Chief with leopard skin	<i>page</i> 43
2. Xhosa homestead	46
3. Griqua, Basuto, and Pondo Treaty States	72
4. Trigonometrical survey and universal instrument	75
5. 1880 location map	77
6. Twentieth-century pass	82
7. Resettlement site	106
8. The devil	126
9. Men praying in the rain during the Pondoland Revolt	192
10. March on Bizana during the Pondoland Revolt	200

# Maps

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1. Southern Africa	<i>page</i> 14
2. The Eastern Cape region	16
3. The Transkei	54

# 1 The death of Hope

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He is the grain of the people,  
We are all given life's grain,  
We are all given life's grain  
He gives it to the favored ones!

Mdukiswa Tyabashe<sup>1</sup>

Fury said to a mouse, That he met in the house, "Let us both go to law: I will prosecute you.—Come, I'll take no denial; We must have a trial. For really this morning I've nothing to do." Said the mouse to the cur, "Such a trial, dear sir, With no jury or judge would be wasting our breath." "I'll be judge, I'll be jury," said cunning old Fury: "I'll try the whole cause, and condemn you to death."

Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (New York, 1989), 47

He held Hope in his hand. "Go on I will follow," the Mpondomise paramount chief told the British magistrate Hamilton Hope in the early days of October 1880. And "where you die I will die." As Mhlontlo spoke these words of unwavering loyalty the chief's wife lay ill not too far away, slowly perishing from a long disease. Mhlontlo looked up and out to the hills cascading down from the high mountains of Lesotho from whence the clouds and rains descended and turned the wintered landscape into green pastures and waving fields of sorghum. But the skies still refused to give up their rains. Drought, the worst to hit the region in almost a century, held the land hostage. The crops had failed. Cattle scrounged on brown scrub. In the north war had broken out. More was to come.

Mhlontlo had been busily organizing his warriors as the moon reached its fullness and showered the land with shadows, and then began to wane, and falling stars showered the night skies. Ritual specialists ministered magic to make the warriors strong, to protect them in battle, to vanquish their enemies. Hope expected the ritually strengthened warriors to be British allies in the colonial war against rebel Basotho. The white magistrate also had been preparing himself: forging alliances with African chiefs; amassing a considerable arsenal of modern weapons; and asserting in ways both banal and ritualized the political supremacy of the British Empire.

As October wore on and spring ripened and began looking to summer, however, Hope became increasingly apprehensive. The magistrate had been warned that he “was plunging blindfold into a trap laid for me by” the Mpondomise paramount chief. “I shall be rather amused,” Hope wrote, if the chief, “true to his reputation disappoints everybody’s expectations; if he does not I shall no doubt have convincing proof that everybody is right. My own opinion,” he concluded, aware both of the moment’s drama and contingency, “is that as in a game of cards, having led my King of Trumps if anybody in the game holds the Ace I lose the trick, if not my King wins.”<sup>2</sup>

Hamilton Hope departed from his offices in Qumbu, in the Transkei, on Wednesday 20 October 1880, for Mhlontlo’s location and the seat of the Mpondomise paramountcy at Sulenkama. The day before Hope had written that “I meet Umhlonhlo and his Impi tomorrow at Sulenkama, and take as many as I can with me from here [*sic*]; but though I go without hesitation, it is as well to provide for contingencies.” “I go strengthened,” he continued, “by the feeling that I am doing right, and that the Almighty will guide me . . . I have done my utmost to steer a straight and proper course in these matters, and if I fail, and have been deceived, I shall have shown that I backed my opinion.”<sup>3</sup>

Hope took with him three white officials, four African policemen, and a Khoikhoi servant. The nine men proceeded on horseback and on two scotch carts along the wagon road that stretched north to Natal and south to Umtata, the colonial capital of the Transkei. Just over 5 kilometers out from Qumbu the men turned left and on to the narrow path that led north into foothills and to Mhlontlo’s residence.

The men, carts, and horses lumbered up the path. The 30-odd-kilometer trip was going very slowly. The path they traveled was broken and uneven. Rain further complicated their journey. By now the great drought was finally coming to an end, replaced not by light rains but by furious downpours that turned rivulets into rushing streams and made the track on which the men were traveling slippery and unstable. They stopped and made camp for the night. Rain was not the only complication hindering their progress. For the men brought with them 51 Snyder rifles, 7,000 cartridges, percussion caps and gunpowder, in addition to a substantial provision of food. This was not an inconsiderable supply of weaponry. All told the men were transporting more than 1,000 pounds of weapons and supplies. A far larger quantity of weapons was in transit to Qumbu and arrived there by early Saturday morning.<sup>4</sup> Mhlontlo had requested the arms in return for agreeing to fight as allies of the British against the Basotho rebels in what became known as the Gun War of 1880–1. In return Mhlontlo assured Hope that he would assemble his warriors at Sulenkama, where chief and magistrate, ruler and subject, would gather in preparation for war.

Hope arrived in Sulenkama on the morning of 21 October. He was anxious to press on north to Matatiele. He was, after all, a conqueror in the great age

of British imperial expansion in South Africa and around the world.<sup>5</sup> Not to press on immediately to battle was for Hope to acquiesce to barbarism. But delays ensued. Hope suspected treachery. Were the warnings correct? Mhlontlo assured Hope that his army would gather on Friday. On Thursday evening the chief dined with the magistrate and spent the night sleeping under the scotch cart filled with ammunition.<sup>6</sup>

By Friday morning only some 400 men-at-arms had arrived. Hope “addressed a few words to them,” explaining his intention and his desire “to make as much haste as possible.” The chief intervened. “All his men were not present,” he told the magistrate. Mhlontlo suggested, and Hope agreed, reluctantly, to wait until the following day, Saturday, 23 October. On Friday evening the chief again dined with Hope, along with his brother and four other men. Chief and magistrate “had a long conversation.” Hope again explained to Mhlontlo the urgency of departing from Sulenkama on Saturday to make war on the rebel Basotho.

By Saturday morning the number of armed men had nearly doubled. The rains had stopped. The army, including the “principal men of the various clans,” formed a “great curve a short distance” from Hope’s encampment.<sup>7</sup> Warriors continued arriving during the day. In the early afternoon Mhlontlo “came to Mr. Hope and sat down in the Marquee with us all, and after partaking of a friendly glass of Brandy and water, asked us all to go up to the ‘Umguyo’” ritual celebrations that fused agricultural fertility and chiefship and “where he said it would be decided upon what number of men would be enrolled” to fight in the colonial war.<sup>8</sup>

Hope saw the event as affirming the political supremacy and power of the magistrate, another moment when Africans recognized the power and legitimacy of the British Empire. To garner so many warriors would unequivocally demonstrate the magistrate’s mastery over a chief who had too long resisted acknowledging the fact of colonial subjugation. Yet Hope could not overcome all the suspicions that swirled in his head. Might subversion be lurking behind this moment of ostensible submission? Might Hope’s apogee suddenly become his nadir?

The chief asked the magistrate to address the warriors, many of whom were then performing a war dance. Hope agreed. The men – chief, magistrate, Hope’s clerk and two other white men – entered the great curve. Hope and another official “seated” themselves “upon the rug” of Hope’s favorite horse. Another man stood behind them, while the last was “a short distance away watching the men as they danced and sang their war songs,” the warriors with weapons in hand pretending to stab their victims.<sup>9</sup>

Suddenly a great piercing whistle followed by a loud shout rang through the air. Everyone “stood still.”<sup>10</sup> “Pondomise there is no word from me,” Chief Mhlontlo told his people, “the words you will hear [are] from your Magistrate.” “We are Government people in the true sense of the word,” the chief continued.

“Government is our rock and shade.” If Hope found these words comforting, what the chief now said mystified the magistrate, reversing in his mind the very semantic logic of the chief’s declaration. “I am going to inform Sunduza [Davis, one of the white men],” Mhlontlo declared, “the words which *I wish* Mr. Hope to say.”<sup>11</sup>

The chief led Davis away from the magistrate, out of the great curve of assembled men. Some 30 feet from where Hope and the other whites sat the chief stopped and turned around. He pointed to Hamilton Hope, and cried out, “You Pandomise! There are your chiefs!”<sup>12</sup>

Six men, all ritual specialists, rushed upon Hope and the two other white men. Mhlangeni, who also served as one of the chief’s councillors, “seized” the magistrate by his long white beard and, “so drawing upwards his head, stabbed him in the breast.” Within minutes all three men were dead. The remaining white man, Davis, survived; Mhlontlo saved him because Davis’s father and now his brother served as missionary to the Mpondomise.<sup>13</sup> Mhlontlo, Davis reported, “was fighting only against the Government.”<sup>14</sup> “The English government,” Mhlontlo said,

has either entirely changed from what it was doing a few years ago, or it must be ignorant of what its Magistrates are doing. We are harshly treated. We came under the Government in order to gain peace and quietude, instead of which we have been in a continual state of unrest from the treatment we have received. Faith has been broken with us over and over again . . . Our cattle are to be branded; our arms are to be taken away; and after that our children are to be seized and carried across the water.

“I shall not be taken alive,” Mhlontlo ended, “and a man can only die once.”<sup>15</sup>

The chief later refused requests by Davis and his brother to bury the mutilated bodies. They were to remain there as fallen enemies, as carrion for birds and scavenging animals, their bones scattered to the winds; “the bodies must be eaten by birds, or their medicines would not act.”<sup>16</sup> That Saturday Mhlontlo organized an escort to bring Davis back to the Qumbu magistracy. There he packed his bags and fled to Shawbury mission station. The telegraph wire had been cut, a few poles destroyed, the telegraph stolen; rebels would destroy most of the telegraph wires that webbed themselves across the Transkei. Mhlontlo had confiscated the munitions that had arrived the day of Hope’s murder: 265 Snyder rifles and 15,750 rounds of ammunition. By 29 October 1880 the magistrate’s offices and jail had been destroyed by fire.

Before the destruction of the buildings Chief Mhlontlo briefly occupied the magistracy. He sat in Hope’s “great chair,” before the law of the man and empire that had ruled over him. The “great table from the house of trials (court-room)” lay before the chief. On it sat “that great book, the book of causes (criminal record book).” A man “turned over the leaves of the book and read aloud from it: ‘So-and-so charged with the crime of so-and-so; found guilty; sentenced to

so-and-so’.” “And then there would arise a great shout, and the armed warriors would rush upon the book and stab it with their spears, the while they shouted the death shout . . . the warriors exulted and laughed aloud and made mock of the Government, who, they said, was now dead.”<sup>17</sup>

Hope was not the only magistrate whose power was mocked in the great rebellion of 1880–1. In Thembuland to the west warriors looted and burned to the ground the magistracy of Walter Stanford, who later became chief magistrate for Griqualand East, a central member of the 1881 Native Laws and Customs Commission, under secretary for Native Affairs, and chief magistrate of the Transkei – in short, a man of exceptional status, to African and European alike. But first there was a “high festival in my office” overseen by the rebel chief Dalasile.

A blanketed warrior representing Ndabeni (myself) occupied the judicial bench. Another on a chair below was addressed as Lufele (Daniel). Then a mock prisoner was placed in the dock and the form of a criminal trial was mimicked with keen humour. Nor was Webb (Umquwu) the chief constable left out of the piece. At the conclusion of the dramatic entertainment, the offices, our houses, and the police huts, were set on fire.<sup>18</sup>

And, in a quite different spectacle of ritual, representation, and revolt, but still a reversal of power, in Tsolo magistrate Welsh and ten other trembling whites locked themselves up in the jail. Chief Mditshwa offered to escort them to safety, but they refused.

“I’m here Welsh! Come out, I’ll go with you to Mthatha [Umtata].”  
 “No, I’m afraid of you! You must come in!” “No, come out! I’ll go with you! But I won’t come in there!”<sup>19</sup>

### **Power, ritual, and representation on the edge of empire**

#### *Structures and symbols of political process*

Hamilton Hope died a ritual death, doubly so. Exalted yet destroyed, feared, and hated, the white magistrate and tempestuous colonial overlord became a central actor in the ritual reiteration of African political society and in the exploration of the colonial state’s power. Only somewhat conscious of his role in a larger African drama of power and polity on the edge of empire, Hope was less aware that he was participating in his own ritual, a liturgy of Logos, his own attempt to construct a colonial political order through symbol and speech, myth and mimesis, ontology and action, to create the subaltern by bringing them under Western modes of discourse, action, control. Here, then, was a collision and a conjoining of political rituals, the making of empire, the remaking of African polity.

And Hamilton Hope has been apotheosized not once but twice. In late 1891 the British “had a suitable monument erected over the grave.” Ceremonies

ensued, attended by a few whites, but mainly by Africans. The assembled formed a great arch around the monument, reproducing the great arch of people that witnessed his ritual slaughter. During the ceremonies a group of Africans and their horses stood some distance from the event, in the precise place where chief Mhlontlo had sat that late spring morning in 1880.<sup>20</sup> Sir Walter Stanford, then chief magistrate of Griqualand East, presided over the ceremonies. In yet another strange twist Stanford, pointing to the European magistrates who now ruled over the region, borrowed Mhlontlo's words spoken at the moment of Hope's death: "Pondomise, there are your chiefs!"<sup>21</sup>

Memorialized, Hope remains in the hills around Sulenkama. In his death he became ever present and, in a sense, eternally exalted. This is the second apotheosis, the second elevation of the white magistrate within people's understanding of past and present. "The Government still holds Hope against us,"<sup>22</sup> people recalled in the 1950s and still today, explaining both their poverty and their oppression at the hands of whites. Go to Qumbu and people will want to show you Hope's memorial. His death marks their poverty. Hope's death also marks a central point in their historical consciousness of colonialism, ritual creating memory. For in the ritual death of a white man an act of resistance became also the moment of colonial subjugation, "the assumption of subaltern status."<sup>23</sup> As A. C. Jordan composed the past in his *The Wrath of the Ancestors (Ingqumbo Yeminyanya)*, the Mpondomise homeland, according to the fictional character Zwelinzima,

was no longer the land of heroes whose exploits used to fill him with pride and exultation. Today, alas, it was a land whose sun was dark, its light grown dim with the shadow of death. In this land the murmuring of bees he had so often heard with the ears of childhood had become the moaning of affliction, and the abundance of milk had become the bitterness of the *mhlontlo* juice. These legendary heroes whom he had so often seen in the dreams of childhood, armed with spears and shields, today became shadows in a strange wilderness, and their war-songs became the wailings of men in agony.<sup>24</sup>

I have lingered in the hills of Qumbu, where today there is so much violence and death, because in Hope's murder lay an exemplary story of encounter, conquest and culture – and the creation of boundaries, physical and mental, how they come to be marked with "sensible things,"<sup>25</sup> and the ways they can be safely crossed and dangerously violated. The death of Hope awakens a number of evidentiary and theoretical problems in writing about the edge of nineteenth-century empire. We know, for example, that Hope's was a ritual murder, and that parts of his body were used in making magical substances. The record, however, is silent on how these substances were made, or even precisely how people might have perceived the relation between Hope and occult forces, though we do know that people often imbued Western technology and technique with magical forces. Hope the colonial conqueror died at a ritual celebrating

the paramount chief and agricultural fertility, a ritual that both entailed threats to the leader and a re-expression of his legitimacy. What we do not know for certain is whether or not people may have understood him within the same discourse of power, production, and magic.<sup>26</sup>

These are only some of the most important evidentiary issues. They are compounded by theoretical and, ultimately, by interpretive challenges. Cross-cultural encounters entail the “misreadings of meanings, the transformation of meanings, and the recognition of meanings” as “native and intruding cultures are conjoined.”<sup>27</sup> Understanding this conjoining in the context of ritual moments is doubly difficult. As “signifying practice,” ritual both “defines and authorizes,”<sup>28</sup> and thus is central to the making and remaking of the world, the drawing-up of boundaries both mental and physical.<sup>29</sup> But ritual, as in the *mguya* Hope attended, is more than making sense of the world. Interpretive moments, rituals, are ways of exploring and of exerting control over a world in motion, a world of contingency, conjuncture, contradiction. On the edge of empire people “resolved into indigenous concepts” the Europeans who came among them, including colonial officials.<sup>30</sup> But just how deep did this resolution go? To what extent were people able to speak across their differences?

Hope’s death at the *mguya*, a celebration of authority and fertility among Mpondomise that in this instance was timed with the arrival of spring, calls attention to a deep history and common tradition of political symbol and process. The association of power and production, authority and fertility, is an ancient one in Southern Africa, as it is elsewhere on the continent. In the precolonial period rituals and sacred emblems of authority – for example the *mguya* and leopard skins – manifested this association. Colonial conquest, however, ended a common tradition of political society begun over a millennium ago in epic and in small localized migrations of Bantu-speaking agriculturists who farmed sorghum and herded cattle. This early history has disappeared into the soils and into the languages people have used to describe and to give meaning to their world. From time to time archaeologists discover sites of early settlement, providing rare, crucial data, and pushing back in time the arrival of the first agriculturists. We know, for example, that small numbers of farmers lived in the Transkei at least by the end of the fifth century A.D. A thousand years later their numbers had increased dramatically, and farmers had pressed inland from the coast up into the hills and mountains leading to Lesotho.<sup>31</sup>

Language aids in this reconstruction; like the soil itself language can be unearthed to reveal core concepts in the mental world of people.<sup>32</sup> For if the way people have felt and have understood their world is shaped by yet prior understandings, if “objective perceptions are ordered by a priori conceptions,”<sup>33</sup> the words for the “sensible things” that created boundaries and established meanings help us discern a distant yet formative past. This is important because

colonialism was all about the creation of and contestation over new boundaries, and the meaning of the material objects that signified them: roads, district maps, censuses, even the “house of trials” and “that great book, the book of causes (criminal record book).”<sup>34</sup>

Two of the most powerful and quintessential emblems of precolonial political authority were the lion and the leopard.<sup>35</sup> European travelers observed the skins of both animals on the persons and at the homes of chiefs and paramounts.<sup>36</sup> The missionary van der Kemp described the Xhosa chief Ngqika, for example, as “covered with a long robe of [a] panther’s skin.”<sup>37</sup> Leopard and lion skin indicated “royalty or superiority,” a later missionary noted.<sup>38</sup> Warriors might eat lion or leopard, and ritual specialists made potions from the animals which they sprinkled on warriors before a battle.<sup>39</sup>

Europeans also knew of rituals associated with those who slew these mighty animals. To kill them was revered yet associated with a great “impurity” that, to cleanse, required “a special festivity.” For the vanquishing of these great animals re-enacted mytho-historical relationships between people and the land and the beginnings of the social order as people knew it. “When the hunting party has returned to the neighbourhood of its village,” Alberti wrote in the early nineteenth century, “the one who inflicted the first wound on the Lion that was killed, is hidden from view by shields held in front of him.”

At the same time one of the hunters leaves the troop and praises the courage of the slayer with a screaming voice, accompanied by a variety of leaps, and then returns again, when another one repeats the performance, during which the others incessantly shout hi! hi! hi! and beat their shields with knobkirries at the same time. This is continued until one has really reached the village. Now an inferior hut is constructed not far from it, in which the lion slayer has to remain for four days, separated from any association with the rest of the horde, because he is impure. Here he colours his whole body with white ochre, and youths who have not yet been circumcized, and who moreover are in the same position of moral impurity, bring a calf for sustenance and perform the necessary services for him. When the four days have passed, the impure person washes himself, colours himself again as usual with red ochre, and is conducted back to the horde by an official of the chief. Finally a second calf is slaughtered, which everyone may eat with him, as the impurity now no longer exists.<sup>40</sup>

The lion skins ended up at the kraal of the chief, the gathering of people and the circulation of the hide marking the authority and the political boundaries of a chiefdom.<sup>41</sup>

The ancient origin of the word for chief, *inkosi*, means “lion,” though most Xhosa speakers today would not be aware of this linguistic connection of animal and ruler. The widespread dispersal of *inkosi* suggests that the first agriculturists arrived with complex institutions of political authority centering on the elevated status of big men, the founders of chiefdoms whose status was adorned by



1 Xhosa chief Kreli (Sarhili), wearing a leopard skin (reproduced with permission, Cory Library, Rhodes University)

sacred animals.<sup>42</sup> This hypothesis is confirmed in the second emblem of political authority. The word for leopard scarcely differs in places as far away as Angola and Burundi; there are still more distant roots in West–Central Africa in the heartlands of proto-Bantu some five thousand years ago. In the Eastern Cape the root for leopard is shared by two other words: the authority or mandate of a political leader, and to celebrate that leader’s jurisdiction.<sup>43</sup>

Hope’s murder was a premeditated act. He died, indeed was ritually murdered, by the paramount’s “witchdoctor,” at a celebration that had roots in a distant past and which reaffirmed in ritual practice some of the most basic concepts of political authority and its relationship to agricultural fertility.<sup>44</sup> September and October are crucial months in the agricultural cycle. With the hoped-for rains people cleared lands, planted seeds, and anxiously awaited the appearance of green sprouts reaching skyward from their roots in the African soil. This period is marked astronomically. Indeed, 20 October, the day Hope left his offices for Sulenkama, came exactly twenty-nine days after the southern hemisphere’s vernal equinox, the precise equivalent of one lunar month. By the time Hope arrived in Sulenkama people would have noticed that the days were growing longer and the sun was rising and setting further to the north. Venus would have appeared low and bright and crystalline in the western sky; in the east, and opposite Venus, Jupiter and Saturn would have sat in an unusually close configuration. The annual spring Orionid meteor showers, one of the easiest to observe, had dazzled the evening skies for about a week. The celestial display peaked on 20 October. Two days earlier, 18 October, the moon had sat full and ripe in the spring sky.<sup>45</sup>

October was an especially auspicious, and in times of drought downright anxious, period for farmers. It is easy to forget just how fragile agriculture can be, especially in the Eastern Cape. People worried about the appearance of locusts and grasshoppers, whether animals such as baboons might ravage crops in the dark of night, or if the cattle of an inattentive herder might stray into the fields. We know that rainfall has been, and continues to be, variable and often extremely localized, so much so that one can see rain falling in one area while, literally next door, another area remains bone dry. While the Eastern Cape is not nearly as dry as regions to the north and west, it is prone to recurrent drought. We can imagine people in times of drought looking up into the sky at the showers of the Orionid meteors and lamenting an earth unquenched by the spring rains.

People have long fretted over the arrival of nourishing rains but also the possibility of destructive downpours. With the change of seasons, and especially with the arrival of the spring rains, lightning struck violently and capriciously as thunderstorms bolted down from the Lesotho highlands, creating fires, destroying homesteads and crops, occasionally killing the innocent. As one nineteenth-century writer described it,

when the appearance of the sky indicates the approach of a storm, magicians . . . shout and yell in the most frantic manner to divert the storm from its course. Such storms frequently diverge from the straight line, and occasionally part into two or more sections in their course. This is attributed to the power of magicians. He who has the highest skill diverts the storm from his own locality, and should he fail it is because one more powerful than he was working against him, and sent the storm on the course it took.<sup>46</sup>

The spring was thus particularly a time of destruction as well as creation, of promise and of portent, of glittering skies and warmer days, an uneasy moment in the making and remaking of the world. Hope's final days were lived out in precisely this grand drama about which he knew very little.

In short, people faced the problem of contingency and order, the expected and the unforeseen. Not surprisingly fertility and the fabulous were closely intertwined. A pioneer missionary, van der Kemp, described how, during "great thunder-storms," people said they saw "a man dressed in green . . . leaning against the stump of a tree, having his eyes fixed towards the ground; when they offer him corn, meat, or milk, or invite him to come into their houses, as they commonly do, he never accepts the invitation, and seldom speaks." But "once in a tremendous storm he has been heard to say, 'Do not be afraid, I only play with this country!'"<sup>47</sup> Storms quite literally brought out sorcerers who worked their magic in competition with others to avoid destructive cloudbursts and to bring nourishing rains to the crops.

Where contingency plays with the country, authority brings order. Politically powerful individuals tamed forces that could destroy and, in so doing, brought fertility to the world. The connections between farming and authority, between chaos and order, between destruction and production, had roots in the origins of political society and in the expansion of agriculture. Agriculture created a dramatically different landscape, but only after newcomers had become well established in the area. This could take many, many decades. Trees needed to be cut down, land broken with stick or hoe, animals that might compete with or kill cattle or destroy crops controlled. Leopards and early agriculturists shared the same environment, wooded areas near sources of running water. Chiefs, "owners of the land," descended from these pioneer lineages and heroic founders who made peace with the land and the animals and original inhabitants living on it. People imbued them "with a special ritual relationship to the land and its spirits."<sup>48</sup> They wore rings of elephant ivory, the skins of leopards and lions, and bracelets of copper and iron, representing chiefs as hunters and the possessors of metals. Chiefs were, in short, the "sons of those who wear ivory arm-rings," the "Sons of heroes."<sup>49</sup>

Migration is a central feature of the common tradition of agriculturists, and, with it, a consciousness that they are intruders whose relation to the land is powerful precisely because it was once so fragile. Agriculturists first settled near the coast. Over many centuries they began moving inland, into the hills



2 Xhosa homestead: *View of a Kaffir Village*, 1803, painting by Alberti (Africana Museum, Johannesburg)

and valleys that led in precisely the same direction whence came the rains and lightning and thunder. These Bantu speakers, with their cattle, sorghum and iron, did not enter a vacant land. In the far west of the Eastern Cape there were pastoralists, the Khoikhoi. But especially and ubiquitously there were the people of the eland, the hunting and gathering Thwa (San) whom the agriculturists recognized as the original inhabitants of the land. The newcomers had to make peace with those who came before them, those who knew the land best and who had the most elemental connections to it. The people of the eland lived in the mountains where rain clouds formed. Agriculturists saw these original inhabitants as the “producers” of rain.<sup>50</sup>

This relationship of autochthon and newcomer was paradoxical, as it is elsewhere in Africa.<sup>51</sup> In the Eastern Cape agriculturists at once despised and revered Thwa. Many they married and brought into their world of agriculture. Others they vanquished. But in all cases, as one scholar has written in a very different context, “mastery of the land had to involve the legitimizing presence of a quintessential autochthon.”<sup>52</sup> Chiefs recognized this presence by inviting rain doctors to their residence to produce showers that succored the land. These hunter-gatherers, these “authors of the rains,” came to the chief’s enclosure and performed ceremonies that would bring agricultural fertility. When rains still did not appear the autochthon would say that the rains had been bewitched, their magic defeated by someone more powerful and devious. “Did you not see” how “the heavens gathered blackness, the clouds enveloped the sun, the lightening spread through the land and the thunders roared?” “Now that was *my* rain. I made it and intended it to fall on this land, but there is a power wielded by some person . . . which paralyzes my efforts and blasts your expectations.”<sup>53</sup>

The association of chiefship with rain, autochthons and, especially, with magic, are ubiquitous features of political society, a central part of the common tradition of the Eastern Cape.<sup>54</sup> Bhaca, for example, locate the celebration of rain and fertility with a distant and revered chief who had exceptional control of the magical world. Chiefs’ elevated status,<sup>55</sup> their symbolic power and control of powerful magic, stemmed from their origin as founding heroes. They opened new areas to agriculture and herding, defeated the animals of forest and grassland, vanquished enemies, made their peace with the original occupants of the land. Their magic, with its connections to the founding of society, could help ensure nourishing rains and bountiful crops.

Fertility and, especially, rain thus formed an ineluctable part of this notion of ownership and of the founding of new communities by heroes. One observer wrote in the early part of the nineteenth century that “they fancy the influence of their departed chiefs,” whose spirits could bring drought and famine.<sup>56</sup> Chiefs were responsible for the rain because of their descendants’ relations with autochthonous hunter-gatherers. Xhosa chiefs enlisted Thwa (San) rain-makers, in a sense reproducing founding mytho-historical relationships between

agriculturists and hunter-gatherers as the former migrated some one thousand years ago towards the land of the rains.<sup>57</sup> Such “rain-doctors . . . are supported for their imaginary services by their respective Chiefs” who “institute a grand feast . . . which is often continued for several days, while” the rainmaker deploys “his magic charms.”<sup>58</sup> “Procuring rain in time of drought,” Hunter wrote in her classic 1936 ethnography of the Mpondo, “is normally the business of the chief. Where the district chief is powerful he is appealed to for rain.”<sup>59</sup> Bhaca chiefs “acted as the tribal rainmaker.”<sup>60</sup> Once they had performed their magic “even if the sky was clear it would rain before you reached home.”<sup>61</sup> In 1913, for example, a colonial official wrote that the Bhaca chief Rolobile had “a great name as a ‘rain maker’.” Rolobile “had ‘doctored’ the hills and caused a heavy rain so that the Kinira river should be impassable . . . It is also widely believed that the recent drought was caused by Rolobile refusing to make rain, as he had been suspended” by the British.<sup>62</sup>

“It was an ancient custom” among Thembu “to hold meetings in times of drought at the graves” of paramount chiefs “and ‘cry’ for rain.”<sup>63</sup> Mpondomise chiefs descended from heroic men and autochthonous women who brought rain to the land and thus made agriculture possible. Malangana is remembered among Mpondomise as being a pioneer who led people from Natal into the Transkei. An accomplished hunter, Malangana “was a master of magic” who defeated the many leopards that prowled virgin forests. His grandson Ngcwina married a Thwa woman, whose son, after an epic struggle with his brother from another wife, became chief. A “big rain” followed. “The rain came, and thus was originated a practice among the Mpondomise: when there is a drought, they go to the Thwa to plead for rain. That custom was born on that day” of marriage.<sup>64</sup>

Rites associated with the agricultural cycle, such as the *mguya* Hope attended, reiterated the elevated status of chiefs. At the beginning of spring chiefs blessed the seed and brought the rain, typically around late September or October after the vernal equinox, when the Orionid meteors might be showering the sky and rain clouds began descending from the Lesotho highlands. At first harvest households delivered a portion of the grains to the chief, in the offering of first fruits that took place when the green maize became available in late December or January. In some parts of the Eastern Cape harvesting required “permission from the Great [paramount] Chief.”<sup>65</sup> “It is accounted a very great crime,” a European explorer wrote in the early nineteenth century, “for any person to partake of the first fruits of the harvest before this ceremony has been celebrated.”<sup>66</sup> These rites, as we shall see later, rearticulated the chief’s status as hero/founder and controller of magic.<sup>67</sup> Importantly, rituals associated with rain and fertility were intimately connected to the political system. Chiefs ensured the fertility of the land at the same time that they strengthened their warriors.<sup>68</sup> In so doing they affirmed their elevated status and created, recreated, and clarified the boundaries of their rule.

But precisely because they were so important to social health and to the drawing of social and political boundaries, these rites were not without danger. Subordinates might not proffer their offerings, declaring their independence and reworking the local map of power. Within the rites themselves, political process and structure could be probed, interrogated, and ultimately reworked. Among the Bhaca, for example, chiefs were both praised and insulted, a “ritual rebellion” central to the reconstitution of the political order. At the *mguya* Hope attended warriors brandished their spears, weapons that could have been turned against the chief himself.<sup>69</sup>

A central feature of chiefs’ elevated status, then, was their access to, and control over, magic.<sup>70</sup> The historical record, oral tradition, and ethnographic reporting is replete with the association of magic and chiefship, as it is in other areas of Africa.<sup>71</sup> Magic formed an important part of the eighteenth-century Xhosa paramount chief Gcaleka’s attempt to centralize power. Maqoma and others did the same in the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>72</sup> The Mpondomise founder chief Malangana “was a master of magic – yes, a king having exceptional magical ability.”<sup>73</sup> The Bhaca chief Rolobile deployed powerful magic in his conflict with chief Mngcisana. Not only did he create destructive downpours and drought, Rolobile bewitched Mngcisana with an *isidliso*, a magical creature that enters into the stomach or esophagus and kills its victim unless the person can attain powerful medicines to counteract the witch’s animal. Mngcisana “became very ill” and “was suddenly seized with violent fits of vomiting and purging.” He said “he was bewitched and that his own Native doctors extracted two large toads from his body!”<sup>74</sup>

These concepts carried over into early relationships between Africans and Europeans. Chiefs, for example, believed that early missionaries had access to rain magic; not surprisingly they tried to control them. “Where [was] the rain,” a chief asked van der Kemp, “alluding to the dryness of the season; and desired that I would pray to Thiko [God] for rain.” Ngqika also requested the missionaries to “make it rain.” Since the chief’s “magicians could make no rain, I should give rain to the country.” The missionary said he could not “procure rain.” But he later “prayed for rain in subordination to the glory of God.” Heavy rains followed. The Africans “of this country all knew what had been transacted between Gika and me with respect to the rain.”<sup>75</sup>

Historians have written of the paradoxical nature of authority and its relation to magic. We have noted the importance of precedence, that chiefs were descended from pioneers, and thus were considered to have a special relationship to the land and to the forces that protect and make it bountiful.<sup>76</sup> Access to and control over magic was connected to their pioneer status. Vansina has written that leaders “had extraordinary powers, identical with and often superior to those of witches . . . A battery of charms helped him to repel the attacks of witches, and his own witchcraft killed competitors or subjects.”<sup>77</sup> And yet,

paradoxically, witchcraft was both “an ideology of equality and cooperation” and central to political competition and the centralization of power.<sup>78</sup> Equally paradoxically, the chief embodied collective identity and was simultaneously the most individualistic of figures, capable of behavior that could extend well beyond ethical norms. They both made and unmade the world.

Magic was central to a chief’s accumulation of power, especially in what has been glossed in the historical record as “eating up” through witchcraft accusations, inevitably one of the first practices the British prohibited. Rapacious and individualistic, they aggressively “ate up” others to concentrate power within themselves. Ritual specialists allied with chiefs accused others of witchcraft, confiscated their stock and, typically, redistributed a portion in the creation of new political alliances. Such eating up was especially pronounced in periods when chiefs attempted to expand their power or when that power came to be contested. Sickness and death inevitably involved suspicions of witchcraft; Ngqika suspected the rain doctor van der Kemp of poisoning him.<sup>79</sup> Magic, thus, resided at the center of competitive politics, a politics that brought conflict and disorder as well as stability and abundance.

Power lay as much in chiefs’ and the heads of agnatic lineages’ capacity to control material resources as in the command of symbol and ritual, reflecting a conceptual map of power and producing a distinctive geography of rule. Like the display of metal filings arranged by the force of a magnet, power was concentrated at the center but dispersed at the periphery. Chiefs’ magic both repelled and attracted, by bringing rain and through “eating up,” as did the more mundane but no less important processes of strategic marriages, the resolution of disputes, tribute, cattle loans, and death dues. In return for nourishing rains commoners gave up stock and produce to chiefs at crucial moments in the agricultural cycle. In so doing people participated in the drawing and redrawing of political domains, the location of power and the identification of its boundaries.<sup>80</sup>

Drought substantially imperiled the power of chiefs. With drought political boundaries blurred. Competition flared into open hostility and conflict, and misfortune befell the world. In times of drought people looked to new centers of political authority within an always contested world of chiefly rivalries – or they sought alternative bases of social health. For chiefs, and especially paramount chiefs, never totally controlled the ritual and magic necessary to bring rains. Autochthons, representatives of an original world, lived nearby in the foothills and mountains rising from the agricultural lowlands. Relationships with autochthons made possible a restaging of the mytho-historical contacts that first brought agriculture and rainfall. There were other ritual specialists with powerful magic. There were also one’s own ancestors, whose spirits scrutinized the living.<sup>81</sup>

The environment, then, fashioned and refashioned political domains. Political boundaries also expanded and contracted with the careers of individual chiefs,

whose character helped determine the extent of their rule. The early reign of a chief was an especially important time when political boundaries might be redrawn or more clearly defined, and new frontiers created. With the waxing of power, however, came its waning. Chiefs' deaths always gave rise to suspicion. Their illnesses or deaths inflamed agnatic tensions and rivalries; sons might even be accused of bewitching fathers.<sup>82</sup> Succession invariably became a time of considerable instability and conflict in which political domains might be substantially reworked, especially in the relationships among chiefs and between chiefs and lineage heads.<sup>83</sup> Each of these variables, and for ruler and ruled they were intimately interrelated, meant that the many hundreds of political boundaries were constantly expanding or contracting, coming into resolution or fading into ambiguity. Frontier zones or unsupervised areas formed at the edges of domains. These in turn had an important impact on life at the center, at the homesteads of chiefs and paramounts.<sup>84</sup>

A central feature of political process were the attempts, whether successes and failures, of chiefs to centralize power, and to extend that power over bordering chiefdoms. To do so required the stimulus created by the unequal distribution of powerful symbols and magic, economic goods, trade, or population. Such disequilibrium seldom existed until the late eighteenth century, and when it did exist it was fleeting. Moreover, because of the alternative bases of social health that existed at the level of individual homesteads, chiefs never monopolized control over those symbols necessary to ensure agricultural fertility. Magic's ubiquitousness defeated its centralization.

European observers noted how chiefs seemed to be the "absolute Lord, and Master of his own *clan*."<sup>85</sup> Yet there were no kings, for paramount chiefs seldom wielded "an authority over the *whole* nation." People may have called themselves, for example, the Xhosa, "yet each horde or the subjects of what may be termed independent chiefs, have separate [*sic*] and particular appellations by which they are distinguished from those of the other rulers."<sup>86</sup> As Alberti described the Xhosa in the early years of the nineteenth century, they

are divided into hordes. Each of these hordes has its chief, whose power and standing in respect of other chiefs is related to the respective number of households. At times a horde does not live together, but has settled in different places and has divided itself into two or three sections. In that case the sections in which the chiefs does not live are governed by persons appointed by him . . . depending upon the number of such chiefs occupying a certain stretch of country with their hordes, they fall under a Principal Chief, who regards this area as his domain over which he exercised his sovereign powers.<sup>87</sup>

At best there were unstable principalities<sup>88</sup> in which one chief effectively exerted power over a number of others. Typically the attempt to create a principality failed, as in the case of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Xhosa chief Ngqika. Ngqika's sub-chiefs "jointly decided to leave the unjust

one, together with their hordes, and to take up their abodes in another region, whereby he was compelled to withdraw his new law.”<sup>89</sup> The most effective strategy to frustrate attempts at political centralization was simply for households or larger groups to move to new areas. People left “by gradual emigration,” van der Kemp wrote. “Some kraals break up, and march towards the borders of the country, and there they stay.”<sup>90</sup>

“When the people or chiefs get annoyed with him they speak out freely and if it be not arranged they more seldom rebel than show their displeasure by gradually leaving him.” The leaders of petty chiefdoms might be “attached to some more powerful chief,” but the “authority of these chiefs is however extremely limited.” In short, the “great chiefs” could not “control the subordinate ones,” nor did a “subordinate one [have] any efficient check upon the individual members of their respective kraals.”<sup>91</sup> Because rule was exceedingly personal power dissipated rapidly with distance from the chief’s kraal. The pilfering of cattle from the chief’s more distant kraals, whereby “herders” and others “contrive to impose upon the Chief,”<sup>92</sup> demonstrated both the extent and the fragile limit of a chief’s political domain.

In short, until the nineteenth century African polities, anywhere in the Eastern Cape, cannot be described as states.<sup>93</sup> Paramount chiefs were invariably weak; people most often followed their local chief over that of the paramount.<sup>94</sup> Political society was as highly competitive as it was localized. Chiefs and other big men attempted to consolidate and to extend their control, but their successes were at best limited and usually fleeting. The deaths of chiefs began the process anew, so that political boundaries were more or less permanently in flux and the existence of numerous, often overlapping, frontier areas characterized the political geography of the region.<sup>95</sup>

This complex political landscape, formed by the environment and fashioned by the lives of people who sought authority or who fled the pretensions of the powerful, began to change in the second half of the eighteenth century, and then rapidly and irrevocably in the nineteenth century. The pace of change also quickened radically. New symbols and sources of magic appeared, typically first in the guise of European missionaries and then the representatives of the colonial state. New sources and networks of trade appeared, and in a few areas there were changes in population density and distribution. All of these factors became part of the field of political competition and process.

These changes did not inevitably lead to state formation; indeed, virtually all of the Eastern Cape remained stateless. In the early part of the nineteenth century, however, states began emerging in the wider region. By 1818 the Zulu kingdom had arisen north of the Mzimkhulu River. The kingdom’s consolidation and expansion, particularly in the 1820s, powerfully reshaped politics in the greater Eastern Cape region as groups of people moved south. One such group was the Bhaca under chief Madikane who settled in the area just north of what

is today Mount Frere and near territories claimed by the Mpondomise. Other groups moved further south, in some cases across the Kei River. These complex migrations generally created a more competitive and more anxious political world that, in some areas, accelerated the process of political centralization as chiefs, and especially paramounts, sought strategic alliances and attempted to extend and strengthen their control over regions. The most notable examples of these processes are the rise of the Sotho kingdom high in the Drakensberg mountains and political centralization among the Mpondo under Faku.

Colonial conquest followed closely on the heels of this competition, centralization, and rising disequilibrium. Indeed, the colonial state should be counted as the fourth example of political centralization unfolding in the wider region, a state with a wholly different set of symbols, processes, and conventions that sometimes destroyed and often distorted what had been a common tradition of political process and society. The conquest of the Eastern Cape began in the last quarter of the eighteenth century and ended, well over a century later, with the 1894 annexation of Pondoland. In the Transkei conquest generally proceeded in two waves. The first wave, roughly period between the 1850s and the 1870s, depending on the areas, entailed a series of political agreements in which African rulers accepted British rule. In so doing the British expected them to end political conflicts, glossed in the archive as “tribal wars.” The second wave involved transforming conquest into rule: the collection of taxes, the greater elaboration of administrative boundaries, and, importantly, a decisive shift in power away from chiefs and to magistrates.

Much of the political conflict in the nineteenth century coincided with, or immediately followed, drought. The colonial conquest of the Transkei unfolded during a particularly unstable climatic period. Periodic droughts had long characterized the area. Generally speaking, however, the second half of the nineteenth century saw more frequent and more punishing droughts as a consequence of world climate changes rooted in disturbed Pacific Ocean air masses.<sup>96</sup> The drought that began in the closing years of the 1870s was especially long and punishing, perhaps the worst in the living memories of people. We know, further, that drought created anxiety among people who relied on rainfall for their agriculture, heightened fears of the malevolent use of magic, and produced political instability. Colonial conquest thus unfolded at precisely a time of exceptional apprehension and insecurity.

Until the late 1870s the British were not always clear how they intended to rule these new possessions. In some respects their early rule in areas such as Thembuland and further to the east was similar to that over their protectorates. Chiefs retained much of their power. Few in number and their control nominal, resident magistrates ruled “principally through their own Chiefs and in accordance with Kaffir laws and customs, when not opposed to justice or humanity.”<sup>97</sup> In many areas chiefs used the first magistrates in their attempts to consolidate



3 The Transkei