Chapter 1

Political History in Precolonial Africa: The Case of the AmaZulu Kingdom

Many of the kingdoms of precolonial Africa still exist today in name, in sentiment, in affiliation, and in residual forms of identification. The shifting composition and open boundaries of social and political groups over centuries render their residual names, still found as family names and place names, ambiguous outside of their historical context. Associated with a distinct geographic location, a common political history, and a common culture and language as the result of cultural assimilation that had followed political and social consolidation, the large political units of the past were the so-called "tribes" identified by European western observers. Europeans, by the time of the advent of colonial rule in the nineteenth century, perceived only the primitive aspects of an impoverished material culture rather than the generations and centuries of steadily increasing political sophistication that had finally created institutionalized states in the form of kingdoms. As elsewhere in the world, these large political units had multicultural origins and had been forged by cooperation and warfare, ambition, and submission. These kingdoms were the products of leaders who were chiefs, kings, and military commanders and of their followers or adherents or subjects who produced the food and marched into battle on behalf of their chiefs, kings, ancestors, and children in the name of their chiefdom, kingdom, or empire.

The colonization of most of the African continent by the foreign nations of Europe curtailed abruptly the independence and sovereignty of African chiefdoms and kingdoms. Even where indirect colonial rule allowed the continuation of the forms and functions of precolonial political units, chiefdoms, and kingdoms with chiefs and kings, the political

as well as economic prerogatives of surviving chiefdoms and kingdoms were harshly restricted to conform to the goals of the colonizing nations. Now perceived in these residual forms as "tribes" by colonial officials, western ethnographers, and anthropologists, many of these truncated and disempowered chiefdoms and kingdoms of the past survived into the colonial and postcolonial periods as the roots of group identities that had been joined by new group identities or "tribes" forged or fabricated under colonial auspices. With a sense of common group culture and experience from a past common belonging to a chiefdom or kingdom, an institutionalized political unit that had fostered cultural assimilation, the inheritors of these political and cultural memories and traditions retained their sense of common identity in the whirlwinds and turmoil of the colonial era. They created real and functional bonds that came to be perceived as ethnic groups. The mobilization of ethnic bonds for political purposes sometimes generated violent competition over access to resources and authority in the colonial and postcolonial worlds, and "ethnicity" has rightly been condemned as the source of intractable and violent disruptions causing enormous harm in the modern world. In its origins and functioning, *ethnicity* refers to the politicization of sociocultural identity for political and economic gain at the expense of others. Ethnic groups and ethnic identities are not merely imagined, however, and the presence of ethnic identities linked to a common past does not necessarily breed the violence of politicized ethnicity. Cultural assimilation has followed political consolidation or unification and the adoption and promotion of common values and practices for the common social welfare of all. The memory and recognition of multicultural or "multi-ethnic" origins need not inhibit popular and voluntary adherence to and support for new and larger forms and boundaries of political organization. In the modern world, equal access to opportunities, resources, and decision-making processes can prevent the inequalities that breed politicized ethnic mobilization and the violence of ethnicity.

The people of southeast Africa who identified themselves as AmaZulu in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries readily recognized their diverse multicultural and political origins from centuries and generations before.[1] Between 1817 and 1828 Shaka, the firstborn son of Senzangakhona, chief of the AmaZulu chiefdom, used war and diplomacy to bring about the submission of dozens of large and small neighboring chiefdoms and, through a process of consolidation, to create the Zulu kingdom of southern Africa. The nature of warfare changed, and the scope of Shaka's military campaigns, or *impi*s, expanded as the size

of the military under his command grew from hundreds to tens of thousands of warriors in only a decade. Through ruthless raids, surprise attacks, and battlefield confrontations, war accomplished the goals of compelling the submission of chiefs and chiefdoms to the rule of Shaka and the expanding Zulu chiefdom, the expulsion of defiant and recalcitrant chiefs and their adherents, the expansion of the pool of available men of military age, and the seizure of wealth in the form of territory and cattle. Diplomacy allowed for the voluntary submission of chiefs who might give their allegiance to, or *khonza*, Shaka and become a tributary subordinate ally. Shaka was motivated by personal ambition for himself and for the Zulu royal family into which he had been born. Shaka built a cadre of loyal followers from family members, senior counselors, subordinate chiefs, and military commanders who oversaw the expansion and maintenance of a multitiered sociopolitical unit comprising many large and small chiefdoms from across the region of modern KwaZulu-Natal that lost their independence as they voluntarily and involuntarily submitted to the rule of the Zulu royal family. The once small chiefdom of the AmaZulu people, so named after an early ancestor called Zulu, meaning the sky or heavens, was headed by Shaka, who had seized the chieftaincy by force and killed the heir, his half brother, and a younger but senior son of his father. Shaka pursued expansionist aims until the time of his assassination in 1828. The sociopolitical organization of his kingdom revolved around a military system that incorporated every man as part of a regiment from about age twenty to the time of their death, even as old men. Shaka accompanied many of his most important *impi*s but for his last military campaign had stayed behind, leaving him vulnerable to his half brothers. They returned secretly from the military campaign and succeeded in a long-standing plan to kill Shaka whose violence against his own people had become intolerable even to his closest family members and counselors. Shaka left behind a kingdom that was united by only tentative and fragile bonds, so that his successor, his half brother Dingane by another mother, was left to subdue rebellion and reinforce the political boundaries of the diverse peoples who comprised the new AmaZulu kingdom. The process of forging a new AmaZulu identity that had enjoyed a common political origin under Shaka and reflected growing cultural assimilation took the remainder of the nineteenth century, spurred by the perceived common threat of European intrusion and white settler expansionism. The AmaZulu identity of the twentieth century has multicultural roots stemming from the political and social processes of

consolidation that created the Zulu kingdom under Shaka in the early decades of the nineteenth century.[2]

For the region of southern Africa east of the Drakensberg mountains, the longest genealogy remembered in oral traditions is that of the ruling family of the Swazi kingdom that was consolidated in the 1810s and 1820s. The ruling line of descent traces its genealogy back to the ninth century AD based on the number of generations recorded in it, indicating long-standing traditions of socially constructed political units that valued the retention of a genealogical remembrance of their origins. For the region of modern KwaZulu-Natal, evidence of the ancestors of modern Bantu-speaking agriculturalists practicing mixed herding and cultivation has been found dating to about the third century AD, when these societies interacted with ancestral San populations of hunter-gatherers across the area. The fairly good distribution of water resources through large and small rivers running from the Drakensberg to the Indian Ocean allowed the widespread distribution of settlements over the centuries. The practice of ironworking allowed for more efficient cultivation and hunting to support a growing population. Large and small chiefdoms were not new in KwaZulu-Natal at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but it was the chief of a the small chiefdom known as the AmaZulu, descendants of an ancestor named Zulu, who managed to consolidate political control over KwaZulu-Natal and create a political unit with the structural components and size to be considered a kingdom by the 1820s.

Historians of Africa have long recognized the processes involved in the emergence of larger political units through the consolidation or amalgamation of several smaller polities. These sociopolitical and cultural units are appropriately conceived of as *chiefdoms*, defined as the adherents to a political leader or "chief," usually chosen because of his social role that was often inherited. In southeastern Africa, the term *inkosi* has been understood to refer to the person in political authority who ordinarily was also the senior male of the ruling descent line in a sociopolitical unit or chiefdom. That the head of small sociopolitical units in Africa have commonly been the senior male of a ruling line of descent has also prompted historians to perceive of such units as "clans" with the understanding that the family and blood ties defining membership in a clan unit were often blurred with the acquisition of new adherents joining voluntarily in an accepted social process of incorporation. A chiefdom's incorporation of multiple smaller chiefdoms in a subordinate status – marked by symbolic submission and the payment of tribute and taxes and contribution to military functions – has commonly been perceived in

western terms as the creation of a kingdom by virtue of its greater size and multiple layers of authority. The accepted understanding that a kingdom ordinarily relied on a legal and political system and process similar to that of smaller chiefdoms but on an expanded scale and with additional layers of overlapping authority has provided historians a term that can be appropriately applied even when a kingdom lacked the complex structure of a formal state with systematic foreign diplomacy and the routine functioning of civil servants from diplomats to tax collectors, operating within well-defined boundaries. Shaka created a kingdom and by extension the term *inkosi* came to refer to the highest authority, commonly referred to as "king" by Europeans at the time.

Modern scholars have assumed that the Zulu kingdom constituted a new and revolutionary political structure in the region. However, as Adam Kuper has observed, there was continuity in sociopolitical structures as represented in the kingdom's royal settlements that "embody some of the same symbolic spatial dimensions as the homestead."[3] These spatial configurations as found in homesteads and royal settlements demarcated "the lines of political affiliation." This was true even as the royal settlements alternatively incorporated other family members or commoners or separated to form independent homesteads that nevertheless remained under the authority of the main "house" of the ruling descent line.[4] In a process of such geographic or spatial expansion,

> The head of the original, core homestead is formally the *umnumzana*, or family head of the whole cluster of related homesteads, but in the course of time, and especially after his death, these relationships of relative authority become attenuated, each homestead gaining greater autonomy, though the original homestead, now under the *uyise wabantu* [the heir of the section of the house which remains in the old homestead to guard the ancestral burial grounds when other sections relocate], retains a ritual pre-eminence.[5]

Larger sociopolitical units falling under the authority of a chief were structured in accordance with "the 'house' system of the reigning chief's family."[6] Women, as Kuper has shown, were central in the creation and sustenance of political structures, because in the "house" system, "[i]ts nodes are female-centred units, clusters of wives and their heirs. These nodes represent the points of impact of marriage alliances made by the homestead head. To understand the political dynamics of the great homesteads, one must therefore pay attention to the pattern of royal and noble marriages, and to the political position of leading women."[7] Kuper further explains, "[a]s the houses of new chiefs succeeded at the apex of the hierarchy, they propelled some peripheral houses of earlier regimes

[previous generations] to the very edge of the royal family. After five generations they were extruded from the royal family and became marriageable. . . . More closely related royal houses did not intermarry, however, heirs were normally produced by wives who had been taken from outside the royal family."[8] In their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers, women created and reproduced important political ruling houses and alliances.[9]

Early European observers were aware of the political basis for the identity of chiefdoms and kingdoms, which did not correspond with cultural differences such as language and ritual practices because known polities comprised peoples of multiple languages and cultures, and people of the same language and cultural practices were dispersed over multiple political units. Nevertheless, these political units, chiefdoms, and kingdoms were elided into the European western concept of "tribe," which in turn was mistakenly presupposed to comprise only a single and entire linguistic and cultural population. Europeans' reification of cultural identities was the result of imperial, colonial, and missionary efforts to understand the people they were confronting, ruling, or proselytizing at that moment in time. These identities corresponded with a widespread European fascination with the pseudoscientific classification of race according to somatic or phenotype characteristics of people who were being encountered across the globe during the era of colonization. The pseudoscientific establishment of categories of race provided ideological support for colonial domination and racial discrimination and culminated in an extreme form: the formal implementation of apartheid policies of modern race-based domination in South Africa. The European definition of culture as timeless and primordial has never been the indigenous understanding of named identities associated with political and social authority and cultural attributes, notably language and ritual practices, that have always been described in oral tradition as changing and in flux. The persistence in South Africa of the misunderstanding and manipulation of reified cultural identities, which has long been discredited, prolonged the acceptance of these false claims of authority and entitlement whose goals were economic control and financial gain.[10]

The people living in the many small chiefdoms of KwaZulu-Natal at the beginning of the nineteenth century recognized that the processes of political amalgamation involved cultural change and cultural assimilation, however obscure these differences have been to modern observers.[11] By the twentieth century, the cultural heterogeneity of the original societies Shaka had incorporated into the Zulu kingdom had given way

to strong cultural as well as social and political bonds of affinity and identification. Earlier understandings of and preferences for sociocultural differentiation were becoming lost to historical memory. But in the era of Shaka's reign, cultural assimilation was only beginning, and cultural homogeneity from a local perspective had not yet been achieved and could not serve as the basis for political unity. The Zulu kingdom was not only created but also sustained by force and the threat of force. Violence and fear underlay popular compliance with Shaka's governance and his deviation from past and accepted practices of leadership and rule prompted popular disaffection and discontent.

The association of the Zulu kingdom of the AmaZulu people with warfare has been well-established in the European understanding of the region since the time of Shaka. Europeans blatantly distorted the history of the region as they sought to justify European settlement and colonization in lands once ruled by Shaka. However, the broad picture conveyed by biased European sources of Shaka's use of violence in his foreign relations and his internal governance can be established and confirmed from indigenous AmaZulu historical sources.[12] The military organization established by Shaka persisted beyond his death, allowing the kingdom to survive under the rule of his half brothers Dingane, from 1828 to 1840, and Mpande, from 1840 to 1872. The process of unification was accomplished by means of violence and the threat of violence by Shaka's famous regiments sent on military expeditions, called *impi*s, within and beyond the borders of modern KwaZulu-Natal. During the twentieth century, the unification achieved by Shaka overshadowed the violence of the process and the harshness of his rule. However, a side comment about Shaka made by Magidigidi ka Nobebe to colonial magistrate James Stuart in 1905 reflects the understanding of those AmaZulu who had experienced the reign of Shaka and kept the oral traditions of the past. The AmaZulu of the early nineteenth century had inherited centuries of cultural practices, including laws and a judicial process upheld by chiefs, that embodied an adherence to the rule of law, practices that reflected social respect for life, family, property, and entitlement to land resources. Shaka, however, was remembered as achieving the unification of a kingdom under the rule of the AmaZulu chiefdom only by engaging in illegal acts, earning him the moniker, "the wrong-doer who knows no law."[13] His eventual assassination reflected a widespread discontent with the violence that he had come to inflict upon his own followers in the governance of the kingdom, and with few exceptions the accession of his half-brother Dingane was readily supported.

A primary goal of this book is to reconstruct as accurately as possible a chronological narrative of events surrounding the creation of the Zulu kingdom and the shifting social and political contexts in which those events occurred. In spite of the long-standing fascination of Europeans with the AmaZulu kingdom, in part because of its defeat of the British in battle in 1879, an historical study of KwaZulu-Natal in the era of Shaka's reign has not been previously produced using the entire range of oral and written sources for the era in accordance with current accepted practices in the discipline of history. This may be because an accepted version of the broad narrative of events was established in the nineteenth century that left a false impression that the political history of the AmaZulu kingdom under Shaka was already known and did not need to be revisited. In fact, to date our knowledge and understanding of the events and circumstances surrounding the consolidation of the AmaZulu kingdom by Shaka has been both limited and distorted because of unintentional misunderstanding as well as an inadequate consultation of oral histories and traditions.

In a seminal contribution, Carolyn Hamilton has written an incisive analysis of the transformation of the images and myths of Shaka from the time of his rule through the production of movie images in the 1980s.[14] In tracing both European and African perspectives and presentations of images of Shaka, she has demonstrated how these perspectives diverged widely among Africans who had been incorporated into the Zulu kingdom and how they had changed over the generations among Europeans, whose motives for purveying certain myths shifted with their political goals of colonization. Hamilton demonstrates that in spite of, or because of, the variations portrayed in images of Shaka, it has been impossible to suppress competing perspectives on Shaka in order to convey a single, hegemonic myth, whether positive or negative in its connotations. Literary scholar Dan Wylie has analyzed "white myths of Shaka."[15] The sequence of events associated with Shaka's consolidation of many small chiefdoms under AmaZulu rule has been known from European traders of the time.[16] Unfortunately, a reliance on the writings of missionary A. T. Bryant's work has persisted.[17] Modern scholars have perpetuated to the present day distortions in the European understanding of the history of events of the nineteenth century surrounding the emergence of the AmaZulu kingdom. These distortions have had unfortunate effects on modern politics that draw upon these false assessments of the region's political and cultural history. The outstanding work of Jeff Peires and Philip Bonner in recreating the history of the AmaXhosa and the

AmaSwazi by using recorded oral traditions has not been duplicated for the early history of the KwaZulu-Natal region, although John Wright has studied the region south of the Thukhela River.[18] In their essay, "Traditions and Transformations: The Phongolo-Mzimkhulu Region in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries," John Wright and Carolyn Hamilton devoted only a few pages to Shaka's reign.[19] In his more recent work, Wright has made a significant contribution in presenting evidence that the destruction of the region was more limited during Shaka's reign than has been commonly assumed and that it was other chiefs and chiefdoms rather than Shaka and the AmaZulu regiments that inflicted most of the damage that occurred.[20] However, Wright underestimates the damage inflicted on chiefdoms of the Natal region upon the orders and with the support of Shaka himself. Wright reiterates unsupported speculative assertions of an active slave trade out of Delagoa Bay in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that have been definitively overturned by the work of half a dozen historians.[21] Jeff Guy has raised important issues regarding the productive needs for herding that affected settlement and expansion patterns.[22] His work *The Destruction of the Zulu Kingdom* remains seminal and representative of the more extensive literature on Zulu history in the later nineteenth century and since.[23]

A number of scholars have explored the history of southern Africa in the era of Shaka's reign and after to consider both migrations and conflicts triggered by chiefdoms from KwaZulu-Natal as well as demographic and political turmoil caused by other factors during the same period, events sometimes denoted as the *mfecane* or, in the interior west of the Drakensberg, *lifaqane*.[24] Recent research has demonstrated both that demographic dislocations and sociopolitical consolidation into chiefdoms predated the era of Shaka both east and west of the Drakensberg. The research has also shown that these events were caused by a variety of factors both before and during Shaka's reign, and were not merely a consequence of the consolidation of the AmaZulu kingdom. Taken collectively, this recent scholarship on the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries emphasizes multiple factors at play in demographic dislocations and social and political reorganization, including environment and trade.[25]

The relative neglect of the precolonial history of southern Africa, except for the historiography of the Cape Colony, has been recently noted by scholars seeking to renew interest in the area, hoping to regenerate interest in the region's early history.[26] John Wright's new contribution,

"Rediscovering the Ndwandwe Kingdom," draws attention to the possibilities for reconstructing a narrative of events but underscores how little has been done in the past three decades.[27] Wright traced the contemporary historical treatment of the AmaNdwandwe kingdom and presented a preliminary narrative of the kingdom based on secondary sources.[28] Wright has also made a close and careful reading of the evidence to establish a narrative of events concerning "The Thuli and Cele Paramountcies in the Coastlands of Natal, c. 1770–1820," which is almost entirely in accord with my reconstruction of these. He suggests, however, a more compressed time period for the events described.[29] Wright's overview of the entire region and period, "Turbulent Times: Political Transformations in the North and East, 1760s-1830s," written for the newly published *Cambridge History of South Africa*, of necessity relies exclusively on publications from twenty to thirty years ago, the most recent source cited being Hamilton's 1998 book on Shaka.[30] A 2009 book on *Zulu Identities: Being Zulu, Past and Present* contains numerous brief contributions by various historians, which provide important summaries and reiterations of the existing scholarship on the subject but do not contain any new contributions for the precolonial era.[31]

Some of the recent work that has been pursued for other areas of southern Africa suggests potential avenues of investigation and elaboration for the region of KwaZulu-Natal. With a focus on the southern African interior, Paul Landau has traced the process by which Europeans constructed the set of their accepted conceptions and misconceptions of "tribes" and of indigenous beliefs about and references to ancestors.[32] As elsewhere in Africa, he points out that "...the passage of successful *chiefs*, to *ancestors*, to *community self-identification*, to *oblivion* formed a kind of ideal cycle."[33] Thus, "...every so often an ancestor, nearer to the [contemporary] chief in time than the ancients, would give his name to a chiefdom, and the ancestral namesake which *had* been invoked would recede in favor of the more germane one."[34] A "500 Year Initiative" of archaeologists and historians studying southern Africa, launched in 2007, has borne fruit in the gradual reconciliation of archaeological evidence with historical evidence that is inevitably recorded oral evidence.[35]

Norman Etherington has produced a masterful reconstruction from an exhaustive range of both primary and secondary sources that covers the wider region. He links the events of the region of KwaZulu-Natal to the rest of southern Africa. However, Etherington is somewhat misled by relying on Bryant, leading Etherington, for example, to question