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978-0-521-10233-9 - Adam Kok's Griquas: A Study in the Development of Stratification in South Africa

Robert Ross

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

This is a tragedy, *sensu stricto*. It describes the growth, the aspirations, the flourishing, the decline and the final collapse of the Griqua Captaincies of Philippolis and Kokstad, during the evolution of nineteenth-century South Africa. The Griquas were descendants of early Boer frontiersmen; of the remnants of Khoisan tribes – hunters, gatherers and pastoralists; of escaped slaves from the wine and wheat farms of the south-west Cape; of free blacks from the colony who could find no acceptable place for themselves in it; and of African tribesmen, detached from their tribes by war or by choice. They formed a community which attempted to discover what their role in South Africa was, or if there was none, to create one for themselves. In the end they could not do this. Philippolis is today distinguished from the other *dorps* of the Orange Free State only by the street pattern which the Griquas gave it, not by any of its inhabitants. In Kokstad the tomb and statue of Adam Kok are prominent features. The Griqua church dominates the centre of the town, but its worshippers have been driven to the edge. Far more of the descendants of the old Griquas are spread around the towns of the four provinces of South Africa, but their sense of community has gone, and many now forget their heritage. Their community, indeed, disappeared with their independence, for annexation signified the failure of their attempts to gain acceptance into the society of the Cape Colony as a respectable, Christian, prosperous people. In the ambiguity inherent in their aspirations lay the dynamic of their history.

The reasons which have been advanced for their failure are various. To contemporary colonists, they were nothing but a bunch of lazy good-for-nothings who acquired successively two of the finest tracts of South Africa for farming by a combination of force and fraud, but were too indolent to make anything of them. The president of the Orange Free State once wrote of the Griquas as ‘an indolent people, neither understanding nor caring for the value of land, which nearly half a century has proved they were and still are incapable of improving in any way, or of otherwise bettering their condition’.<sup>1</sup> Prejudice and self-interest evidently have much to do with such a description, but it has often been echoed by historians, who have generally ignored other aspects of Griqua history: the

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development of a stable political system among the Griquas and its working by at least three politicians of considerable ability; the trading trips which the Griquas made through Botswana deep into central Africa, which did much to open the road to the north; the prosperity acquired from the flocks of merino sheep; and the spectacular cutting of a road over Ongeluks Nek, at one of the highest points of the Drakensberg. The place of the Griquas in the history of South Africa must be seen within these wider horizons.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, the Griquas failed. The poles of the argument as to why they failed, as represented by those who sympathised with them and recognised their potential, come on the one hand from a missionary and on the other from two committed left-wing historians of South Africa. John Mackenzie, who was fleetingly in Philippolis just before the Griquas left it, wrote that 'their only fault was their features'.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, according to H. J. and R. E. Simons, 'the Griquas were destroyed because the colonists coveted their land'.<sup>4</sup> In a very bald sense, both of these contentions are true, but neither could be unless the other was. It would not have been a fault to look like a Griqua unless this signified possession of some resource, in this case primarily land, which was sought by colonists who could use their political and economic power to wrest it from the Griquas. Conversely, the colonists coveted the land of the Griquas only because they would not accept that the Griquas were as entitled to it as they were. To understand Griqua history, it is therefore necessary to comprehend, as far as possible, the development of racial stratification within nineteenth-century South Africa as a whole.

It would be impossible to describe the history of southern Africa before the beginning of the nineteenth century in any unified way. There were a variety of histories, of all those people who have lived between the Zambesi and the Cape of Good Hope. Many of these histories are shadowy, and are likely to remain so, although the increasing pace of archaeological research is making more and more of the remote and not so remote past of southern Africa intelligible.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, it would be a bad history – which, unfortunately, is far from unusual – to write of any section of the South African population during the twentieth as if it existed in isolation from the others. It can be argued that the despised proposition that South African history begins with van Riebeck is true, even if it remains false to consider that it should therefore concern itself only with self-designated 'whites', for their history is incomprehensible without an understanding of their dealing with their fellow South Africans (in the widest sense).<sup>6</sup> Even before the advent of industrialisation the society that emanated from Cape Town spread out to bring almost all the inhabitants of the region into a single overarching system of relationships. In so doing, it began the process by which all the

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diverse social groups of the area were reduced from independence to a position of subordination.

This expansion was driven on by a single segment of colonial society, distinguished from the others by its wealth and by its pigmentation. South African economic and political science has tended in recent years to concentrate on the interrelationships between ethnic and economic stratification, between 'race' and 'class'.<sup>7</sup> The subject is at the core of the controversies which enmesh and invigorate – or enervate – South African intellectual effort. But any attempt to elevate either pole of the dichotomy to paramountcy and to declare the other irrelevant must prove vain. If there were now, and always had been, economic equality between the various racial groups, with consequent parity in terms of power, then there would be nothing to argue about. Conversely, if racial criteria played no part in the identification of class patterns, then South African society and the arguments about it would have taken very different forms from those they currently do. Rather, the dichotomy is false, stemming mainly from an insufficient understanding of the dynamics of class. Following E. P. Thompson, class should be defined as 'an historical phenomenon . . . not . . . as a "structure" or even as a "category" but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships'. Above all, 'the notion of class entails the notion of historical relationship'. Therefore,

class happens when some men, as a result of common experience (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born – or enter involuntarily. Class consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms.<sup>8</sup>

When such concepts are applied to South Africa, it is apparent that there has long been a ruling class, which originated among the officials of the Dutch East India Company and the farmers of the south-west Cape and has incorporated more and more social groups as the South African economy has expanded and diversified. However, the 'cultural terms' within which this class has operated have become primarily racial, and the criteria for incorporation almost entirely so. Without exception those who have ruled have been categorised as white, and they have been prepared to share both the semblance and the substance of power only with those of the same putative ancestry. Therefore there has been a long process of consolidation of the great racial blocks which form the categories into which all South Africans are now divided. Men are legislated into four main

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blocks, and many see themselves as living in a land split into two unequal sections, the white and the black. But this is a phenomenon of relatively recent growth, associated with the spread of the white-dominated commercial and industrial economy. To give two examples, Martin Legassick rightly criticises Sheila Patterson for considering it strange that the white frontiersmen of the early nineteenth century should ally themselves with an Xhosa chief. At that time, argues Legassick, 'enemies and friends were not divided into rigid static categories; non-whites were not regarded implacably as enemies'.<sup>9</sup> Again, the Bantu speakers were always prepared to accept Khoisan into their midst.<sup>10</sup> Only during the nineteenth century was the concept of race, in its modern sense, imposed.

Clearly, major processes of South African history resulted from the imposition of the concept of race. As individuals and groups came to be incorporated into the wider circles of South African economic life, they found themselves assigned to categories according to the preconceptions of those who controlled the political economy of the country. It was as though a centrifuge was operating, by which the old alignments were broken down and new ones formed, much larger in scale than the local or tribal communities which had preceded them, but much less ambiguous. Many forms of diversity within the non-European society were destroyed, particularly when these seemed to conflict with the interests of the dominant settler group. Thus the gradual expansion of the white-held land within the country and the gradual depression of Africans and coloureds into a situation where they are little more than agricultural and urban proletariat stems from this process, which was determined by the white ruling class. As the dominant force within South African society it has been able to determine the main patterns of development, so that those who have entered into the white-controlled orbit have had their position within that society determined for them, on the basis, primarily, of their racial origin. Where the aspirations of those entering the society conflicted strongly with the expectations of the whites as to the position of that group, then there was naturally a struggle, but in all cases the victory went in time to the far greater coercive power of the settler, the mining capitalist, the farmer and the industrialist.

This was a long-term process. The particular cultural terms by which classes define themselves take time to develop, and are always changing. Nevertheless, by the mid-nineteenth century at the latest, a set of criteria for inclusion in the ruling class of South Africa had been delineated. In order to be fully accepted into the nascent ruling group of South African society, it was necessary to possess the characteristics in the left-hand column of the following table:<sup>11</sup>

white	black
rich	poor

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landed	landless
Christian	non-Christian
literate	illiterate
within the money economy	purely within the subsistence economy
free-born	slave (or ex-slave)
farmer/merchant	artisan
self-employed (ideally)	employed by another

Various points have to be made about such a classification. First, pigmentation is the most visible of the characteristics. Someone can tell relatively easily whether another is black or white, while to discover the extent of his property or his religion is a more lengthy procedure. Therefore there is a very definite tendency for the fact of colour to become dominant in assessing social relations. Conclusions that have been jumped to in this way are difficult to undermine.<sup>12</sup> Secondly, the criteria do not of themselves generate each other. There was no reason why a black ex-slave artisan should not have been Christian, literate or even rich. Certainly, he would have been within the money economy. On the other hand, until political measures were taken to end the problem they were said to have created, during the middle of this century, there was always a substantial number of people who were considered white but who were poor, landless *bywoners*, at best semi-literate and relying for their subsistence on the herds they ran and the land they farmed for others or, later, on the most menial urban occupations.

During the mid-nineteenth century, moreover, three major forces tended to confuse the criteria. First, there were present among the ruling group elements who attempted to liberate various of the subordinate groups from the bondage of slavery, of heathenism, of illiteracy and, to a certain degree, of poverty. Foremost among these were the Christian missionaries, who generally considered that the adoption of Christianity entailed the social advancement of the formerly pagan, but there were others, often in influential positions in government or in the press, who made similar attempts to upset the distinctions of society. It was because they were shaking the foundations of the world which others were attempting to build that such men as Dr John Philip, John Fairbairn of the *South African Commercial Advertiser*, even Sir Andries Stockenström, were held in such opprobrium. Moreover, the successes of missionary endeavour often found that the society into which they hoped to gain access was hostile to them. The prejudice against the 'Christian native' and in favour of the 'raw blanket Kaffir' arose because the former threatened the bases of the social organisation which the white ruling class hoped to establish in a way that the latter could never do. Secondly, there was the threat posed by those groups, frequently under mission

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influence, who had been able to gain sufficient land to set up efficient peasant farms, which were always disliked by sections of the white community, as they undercut agricultural prices, occupied land that the whites coveted and deprived the whites of labour which they thought should have been under their control. If only in a small way, these two groups created counter-cultures within the interstices of white society which challenged that society, by depriving it of control over a portion of the major resources of pre-industrial South Africa, land and labour, and by negating the taxonomy by which it ordered its social relations. Thirdly there were several groups which were able to set themselves up beyond the boundary of white settlement and which attempted to fulfil the requirements for acceptance into that society as it expanded over them. Individuals and family groups who had come into contact with the ways of life in the Cape Colony, but who were not accepted by the colony, moved north and north-east into areas which were within the orbit of the colony and its economic system but which were not as yet dominated by its social order. Often, of course, these people were half-caste children of white farmers but equally they included ex-slaves and various Khoisan bands which had seen the advantages of a connection with the colonial economy. In time, these groups became sedentary, settling around the supplies of water that are vital to human existence in the interior of southern Africa. As the white population expanded, however, it continually required a greater area of land on which to run its flocks and herds.<sup>13</sup> Thus it began to exert pressure on these settlers on its border, who had the choice of either moving farther into the interior, where they would clash with the powerful and thickly settled African tribes, Xhosa, Sotho, Tswana or Herero, or staying put and trying to maintain themselves against the expansion of white settlement. Moreover, because of the leapfrogging of the southern Orange Free State, the Transkei and Basutoland by the movements associated with the Great Trek of the 1830s, these communities, which had once been beyond the boundaries of colonial society, now found that they were locked within its social networks, and subject to pressures to accept its criteria of status.

In these ways, and in others, South Africa came to contain within itself sizeable elements which challenged the system of hierarchy that its ruling class wished to impose. They were anomalous, as are the uncomfortable facts by which, in one theory, scientists are persuaded to alter the basic assumptions of their disciplines.<sup>14</sup> However, unlike scientific facts, which can only be ignored, social relationships are not given, but may be altered by the actions of men, alone or in concert. The communal deeds of sectors of the white ruling class throughout the nineteenth century, whether encased in legislation or stemming from the individual actions of its members, may frequently be seen as attempts,

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which ultimately were successful, to maintain the paradigms of social relationships by which they wished their world to be governed.

The particular processes by which these alignments were established have not, as yet, been fully investigated by historians. Nevertheless, certain of the most obvious lines of conflict need to be distinguished before a full description is given of the ways in which such processes determined the plot of the main drama with which this book is concerned, that of the Griquas of Philippolis and Kokstad. Thus, at times, definite legislative and executive decisions were made to limit or to remove opportunities for those in subordinate positions to acquire the attributes of their superiors. For instance, when colonial officials were licensing the first mission stations, they were careful to forbid the teaching of writing to natives. They were only to be allowed to read, because then they would have access to Scripture.<sup>15</sup> Even at this early date, moreover, the belief was current that the Moravian mission at Genadendal locked up Khoi labour that would be better employed on white farms. Significantly, it was held by a representative of one of the richest families in South Africa, which has built its wealth on progressive farming and on its corner on the meat market.<sup>16</sup> Again, at the end of the nineteenth century, there was a possibility that a Malay leader might be elected as a member of the Cape House of Assembly. This was so abhorrent to the sitting members that they swiftly changed the election rules in such a way as to forestall this eventuality.<sup>17</sup>

More generally, however, the conflict was over the concrete economic advantages of access to opportunities, to credit, to labour and, above all, to land. Land, of course, was not scarce in South Africa. The deserts of the Karroo and Namaqualand have remained thinly populated even now. However, productive land which is fertile, well watered and within reach of a market has always been scarce, especially as white farming systems have seldom been intensive. That which there is has always been worth struggling for.

At times the methods of conflict were blatant. For instance, the Bastard community at de Tuin in the deserts of Boersmanland was under pressure throughout the middle of the nineteenth century from trekboers who moved into the area in their seasonal migrations from the Roggeveld. The consequences for the Bastards was described as follows, on the basis of reports from their missionary:

The Boers drove their cattle into the free grazing land in order to spare the grass on the lands they had leased, sat down at the springs which the Bastards had opened up, brought their sick cattle among those of the Bastards, followed them with their immense herds whithersoever they might retreat, in short pestered them in every conceivable manner in order to drive them forth from the neighbourhood.<sup>18</sup>



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After representations to the government in Cape Town had failed, the Bastard community was forced to trek away north, re-siting itself at Rehoboth near Windhoek and leaving the trekboers in control of their grass and their water.

In areas of the country that were closer to the eyes of the magistrates and the missionaries, the mechanisms by which the lines of hierarchy were preserved and established were subtler. There was rarely the blatant use of power by the whites, at least in the earlier period, but rather assumptions as to the worth of blacks were made. Thus, in the eastern Cape, and around the Kat River settlement, the Khoisan found it very difficult to get the credit they needed to set up as independent farmers, above all in wool. On one occasion, for instance, it was announced at an auction that any 'Hottentots' would have to pay for any purchases they might make immediately and in cash because they were not trusted not to default. Whites, of course, were allowed several months to pay.<sup>19</sup> More than this, however, the Kat River settlement suffered from continual overcrowding, as the sheep farmers of the eastern Province pressed on the lands of the Khoi and were occasionally allocated land within the area originally designated for 'coloured' occupation. At the same time, the settlement came to be used as a 'dumping' ground for discharged members of the Cape Corps, a coloured force, and for squatters from the various municipalities throughout the eastern Cape. In consequence the pressure on land within the settlement, which had only been formed in the 1820s and which suffered heavily from the various frontier wars, became acute. This was particularly so in that part of the settlement that was primarily pastoral, especially as administrative fiat caused a number of Africans, who had been clients of the Khoi and were mainly Mfengu, to be expelled. Finally, during the frontier war of 1850, many of the inhabitants joined the Xhosa and, on being defeated, their lands were distrained and handed over to the colonists.<sup>20</sup>

Similar processes seem to have been common throughout southern Africa. Indeed, it is clear that the transition from 'tribesman' to 'proletarian', whether urban or rural, which has been the general lot of the mass of South Africa's population, was frequently not made at a single leap. Increasingly there is evidence that within this process there was a phase during which a significant proportion of the black population became, for a time, independent peasant producers of substantial wealth. In Natal, for instance, it has been shown 'that during the 1860s most Africans were able to pay their taxes by selling off surplus grain or cattle'. By the end of the century, they could no longer hope to do so.<sup>21</sup> In the eastern Cape, too, there was a period of considerable peasant prosperity.<sup>22</sup> Mfengu, Thembu and other Africans are recorded as producing substantial agricultural surpluses for sale in the Witteberg Reserve of Herschel District ('the granary of both the Northern Districts and the Free State') and in the districts of



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Peddie, Victoria East, Queenstown, Kingwilliamstown, Stutterheim, Bedford, Glen Grey and Keiskama Hoek. Even in the Orange Free State and the Transvaal there were many Africans who rented land from white farmers and, giving half their produce to the owner of the farm, became quite rich enough never to have to labour for him or for any other white man.

Nevertheless, these peasantries failed, because they had been built on inherently unstable foundations and because they never had the power to alter that base for a better. Rather those who did have the power made it impossible for them to continue, by a series of legislative acts and by the operation of the market. Fundamentally, the Africans never had enough land. The Reserves were initially perhaps just large enough to support their population, but as numbers increased they could only do so at a reduced level, and even then the soil was quickly exhausted. Moreover, this was intentional. Of the Glen Grey Act, which was passed at the end of the century and finally regularised the position of the peasantry in the Cape Province, it was said that:

The intention was to locate then resident natives on these surveyed allotments, and to make no provision for the natural increase of the population, the surplus to find work elsewhere, so that . . . during the coming generations a limited number will be agriculturalists, i.e. native farmers – and the rest will have to go out and work.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, when in 1913 the Natives' Lands Act was applied to the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, the effect was to crush the wealthier Africans who had been farming on halves and building up capital in various forms.<sup>24</sup> That way of life was simply ruled out of order.

It was not only through the Acts of legislators and the shortage of land that peasantries suffered. As Bundy has argued forcibly, it is necessary to look to the power of 'the trader in whose hands were concentrated the several economic functions of purchaser of agricultural produce, purveyor of manufactured goods and supplier of credit', the want of access to markets, especially after the building of a railway system which almost completely avoided the reserves and the lack of either private or public investment in peasant agriculture.<sup>25</sup> It is, indeed, almost surprising that the peasantries lasted as long as they did.

The place of the Griquas within such a schema is clear, although the rest of this study will be devoted to describing the particular features of their history. To the deculturated individuals who had been forced into the region of the Orange River valley by the beginning of the nineteenth century, five models of existence were open. Some definition is needed here. The models in question were in the minds of the actors. They consisted of the sets of alternative systems of life from which they could choose that which seemed most appropriate. They

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were whole patterns of life, which it was difficult or impossible to blend together. One could not be a commercial farmer and a cattle raider, although one could move from one status to the other.<sup>26</sup>

The possibilities were, first, that a man could remain as a hunting and gathering 'bushman', or, secondly, that he would remain within the colonial orbit either as an independent operator in some such sphere as transport riding or as a farm labourer. Thirdly, there was still, at least until the 1870s, the possibility of a nomadic, herding and raiding life, based on such natural fortresses as the Orange River bush. Fourthly, it was possible for communities to set themselves the main purpose of living as an aristocracy over various Bantu tribes, as, for instance, Jonker Afrikaner and his followers managed with regard to the Herero, and the Griquas of Griquatown failed in respect of the Sotho-Tswana who lived north of them.<sup>27</sup> Fifthly, and this was the model adopted by the Griquas of Philippolis, there was the Christian, commercial mode of existence. The reference group for such a system was undoubtedly the trekboers, from whom the Griquas had been excluded by virtue of their colour and their illegitimacy. They adopted three of the main characteristics of this group.

First, they partook of the material advantages of the Cape Colony. They were concerned to build up an income derived from commercial activities, integrated into the Cape economy. Initially they sold as many cattle as they could spare and acted as intermediaries in the ivory trade with the interior. When the opportunity arose, they responded quickly to the possibility of building up considerable herds of merino sheep. They bred horses in large numbers for sale to Boer or Sotho. In the years of their prosperity, their wealth was translated into such commodities as wagons, European clothing and European-style housing. Such expenditure was obviously a claim for respectability, so that observers might argue that they were the equals of the Afrikaner farmers among whom, by this time, they lived. Secondly, they began to accept Christianity, not necessarily as a system of belief – it is always difficult, in view of the available evidence, to penetrate the inner cosmologies, or even social thoughts, of the Griquas – but rather as an integral part of the communal life which they had chosen. The reasons for this are obvious. It had been, in large part, their exclusion from the communion of the Dutch Reformed Church that had signalled their outcasting from white society.<sup>28</sup> The reassertion of Christian brotherhood through the missions was a claim to reacceptance by that society. Thirdly, they needed political autonomy, and the membership of a community which could withstand the pressures which were put on landholders and farmers in a frontier situation. There thus developed the Griqua Captaincies,<sup>29</sup> which were coalitions of men and family groupings with such desires, their political structure being a peculiar style of democratic oligarchy under the leadership of the Kok and Waterboer families.