

The Fall of some Southern Bantu Kingdoms in the Late 19th Century

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Abstract – A branch of the human family was about to get settled in present day South Africa before the arrival of Europeans. By the end of the nineteenth century, the languages spoken by dark-skinned Africans south of a line from northern Cameroun to southern Somalia (which were closely related grammatically), had come to be thought of as members of a single family which was called “Bantu”, “ntu” being the common root for “man” and “ba” being a usual plural prefix for the class of nouns denoting persons. According to J.D. Fage (In: A History of Africa, 1978) the best known of the early southern Bantu kingdoms are those in the area of modern Rhodesia. He proves this by saying that more work has probably been done in this area than elsewhere on the surviving oral traditions, which seem to reach back to about 1400. Hence, this area of central Africa was most explored by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century because of its gold; also it was here and southwards into the Transvaal that the early Bantu Kingdoms built in stone, thus giving rise to durable and often very impressive ruins that have fascinated explorers and archeologists for more than a century. More broadly though, George McCall Theal brings to light in his book (“History of the Boers”, 1969), that European writers today usually term the Bantu people to be the section of the human race that occupied the whole of Central and South-Eastern Africa. Furthermore, Theal defines the word “Bantu” as people with the dialects spoken along the coasts of the Cape Colony and Natal. Again, J.D. Omer-Cooper mentions in “The Growth of African civilization - The Making of Modern Africa”, that the largest proportion of the peoples of Southern and Central Africa was Bantu-speaking people since the beginning of the fifteenth century as at present. He claims, also, that the Bantu-speaking group in this area had been established as far south as modern Rhodesia as early as AD 200 and had probably begun to enter the area south of the Limpopo River as early as the twelfth or thirteenth century. However, the question of settlement in South Africa was not certain until the late nineteenth century. As a result, the Bantu were known to have advanced furthest on the east coast. For this reason, by the eighteenth century, they had already arrived at the Fish River, where they began to settle in the land between it and the Sundays River called the Zuurveld. This was the area where they first came into contact with white settlers who were advancing from the Cape. In the central part of South Africa, the Bantu were at the north of the Orange River around the nineteenth century and in South-West Africa, they were confined only to the area north of modern Windhoek.

Keywords: Bantu, Religion, the Gaza, Matabeleland, Matashonaland.

Introduction

The Bantu family is divided into many tribes which are politically independent of each other. Each and every one of these tribes is composed of clans which have traditions which share and bear a common origin at no remote date. However, in certain cases it is difficult to trace the relationship between one tribe and a clan, simply because most of these tribes comprise clans brought together accidentally or by war.

The Bantu-speaking peoples of South Africa, Rhodesia (today Zimbabwe) and the southern parts of Mozambique were the great group known as the “Southern Bantu”. They were mixed farmers who used to keep cattle but, in addition, to cultivate the land. Their contact with the cattle-keeping Nilotes stemmed from their ancestors who might have come from the far north.

The Nguni-speaking group is the most important group in South Africa. Their dwelling area was the eastern coastal strip from Zululand to the Zuurveld. Hence they were well noted for adapting more of the click sounds which are known to be common in the languages of the Bushmen and the Hottentots than other Bantu people. The Sotho people occupied larger parts of the central plateau of South Africa as far as the Kalahari Desert.

Generally, many different tribes of the Bantu group have close language similarities. However, the languages of the westerly tribes, called Tswana, are different from those of the southerly tribes. The Herero were more southerly at the west of the Kalahari. Their way of life was almost like the Hottentots - for they depended more on cattle than agriculture. The second group of the Bantu west of the Kalahari were called the Ambo. This group practiced mixed farming in the same way as other southern Bantu. The Thonga group was the largest population in southern Mozambique. They never used the click sounds but were thought of as a group belonging to the Nguni-speakers of South Africa. Many different tribes lived in Rhodesia and are believed to belong to the group called Shona - which consisted of Kalanga and Rozwi as two main groups.

Religion of the Bantu

Not all of these tribes profess the religion of the Bantu, but most of them regulate their conduct by it. Their religious practices were for them a belief that their forefathers interfered in their affairs. Therefore, everyone had the belief in worshipping the spirits of his own ancestors with special sacrifices offered against their wrath or evil when they (i.e. the spirits of the ancestors) were thought to be angry with him. The bond of religion tends to keep them together. Their greatest dread is of offending the spirits of their ancestors.

They believe this with awareness that any departure from established customs will assuredly destroy them and thus bring them evil. They were, most of the time, people who directed their whole attention to material objects, which could not help them to improve their welfare. However, we are told by J.D. Fage ("A History of Africa" 1978, p. 133), that "their cult-centres, where access could be had to the high God through the spirits of their ancestors, often situated in the hill fortresses or caves close by which many of the best ruins are found, would thus become more potent than others, thus enabling them to attract even more clients and wealth and trade and power." About the fourteenth century, the build-up at and from Great Zimbabwe comes to an end. It remained into modern times as a major cult-centre of the Shona peoples of modern Rhodesia, but was never again a political or economic centre of importance.

Witchcraft

The causes of disease were little understood and witchcraft was universally dreaded. Ailments, which could not be immediately recognized, were commonly ascribed to the malignant practices of wizards and witches, who were believed to act in conjunction with evil spirits. Events like sickness in man, murrain in cattle, blight in crops and even casual accidents were attributed to the agency of sorcerers. Confiscation of property, torture and death were measures used to penalize, whoever might have been charged with such offences. The ill-health of a chief was generally the occasion for many such executions. Worst of all, witch-hunting led to further abuses. The cattle of persons executed, were confiscated by the chief and wealthy persons were never very secure, from the imputation of witchcraft.

Married Life

It was very uncommon for one to believe that chastity existed among all of the tribes. For, among all the tribes polygamy and polyandry were practised. By custom it was well known to them that every wife of a polygamist had a lover and, therefore, there was no earthly reason for any woman to keep it secret.

A description of the manners of the people so far as polygamy is concerned, is taken from a paper drawn up by Reverend E.S. Rolland in 1868 for the information and use of Sir Philip Wodehouse [M. Theal, History of the Boers in South Africa, 1969, page 18].

A Basuto chief was said to be called a rich chief, based on the number of women he married. Each wife was supposed to enrich her husband by the produce of her gardens and labour. Her sons were used as servants and cattle herds, and her daughters were made available only for exchange.

A polygamist had (unlike today) therefore also the right to exercise hospitality to the full, including food, lodging and the loan of his wife to a visitor during his stay. Another backward custom of some of the tribes is that of polyandrous marriages. If a man is poor and his family or his father is poor too, he is permitted to get to a wealthy chief and obtain assistance from him to share joint marital rights with him.

It would simply be improper for me to condemn these customs of some of the tribes of the Bantus, which look the same to me as those of the people of West Africa. But I still think that it is no wonder that the framework of a society falls to pieces, if the domestic life of the people were immoral or maybe more than immoral - even though many a polygamous and/or polyandrous society has held together for a very long period.

Foreign Invasion

Briefly, there were three different thrusts into the interior causing the scramble for South and Central Africa. First, the British were aiming northwards through their newly acquired area called Bechuanaland. The leadership of Rhodes and the British South Africa Company encouraged them to drive away their rivals from all areas expected to be rich in mineral ores.

Next, the Belgian agents of the Congo Free State were on the move towards Katanga and the surrounding area. The third thrust came from the Portuguese and the Germans who were entering from the east and west with the intention of linking up their colonies on both sides of the continent.

The Gaza, Shona and Ndebele

In the interior, Portugal's position was still weak. The Shangan empire of Gaza, prevented Portuguese penetration into the southern part of the region. The prazeros further north became, in reality, African chieftains with no allegiance to Portugal. These (the prazeros) were, thus, forced out by Shona, Gaza and Ndebele pressure. The Shona on the other hand, under pressure from the terrible Ndebele, were compelled to block any Portuguese expansion to the south-west. In the 1870s the situation began to change. The Gaza got into trouble both in the south and in the north. In the south there was a continuing feud with the Swazi, who yearly defeated large numbers of warriors. In addition, the Portuguese were becoming more active in the south.

Delagoa Bay and its increasing fame and contact with the Boers, attracted the Portuguese to lay hands on the area of the lower Limpopo. The man who engineered this threat (in the north) was Manuel Antonio de Souza (usually called Gouveia), an Indian adventurer from the Portuguese colony of Goa. Hence, he was a self-established semi-independent authority in the Zambezivalley - and by alliance and conquest he penetrated southwards and westwards.

Mzila was the Gaza king. From 1870 to 1872 he made the necessary efforts for appeals to Durban for trade, friendly relations and helps to settle his dispute with the Swazi and the Portuguese. His empire went through a long process of breaking up before and after his death in the year 1885.

His successor, Gungunyana's efforts for British protection against the Portuguese were all to no avail. Although he was determined not to put his land under the command of the Portuguese, things became worse around 1890. Agents of the British South African Company (B.S.A. Co.), which was about to operate in Matabeleland visited Gungunyana with an offer of a thousand rifles, twenty thousand pounds of ammunition and five hundred pounds per year in exchange for mining and prospecting rights in Gazaland. These claims, put forward by the B.S.A. Co., led to strong nationalistic reactions in Britain and Portugal. So politicians had to intervene to settle the dispute between the two governments [British and the Portuguese]. In effect, the last straw that broke the camel's back was the Anglo-Portuguese treaty of 1891 - a year after the Anglo-German treaty (Derek Wilson, A History of South and Central Africa, 1980, p.175). This placed Gazaland under full Portuguese influence. However, this did not convince Gungunyana to give up his demand for protection. For about a period of four years, the Portuguese made no serious attempt to attack the Gaza. This is understandable because the Gaza outnumbered their (the Portuguese) forces of occupation.

1894 was the year the Gaza and their local chiefs with support from Gungunyana attacked the port of Lourenço Marques which was about to be developed. The result was enormous damage and loss of life. This attack was then quelled by a relief force from Lisbon, which also succeeded in driving the Shangaan forces away from the port completely.

In 1895 the invaders, again, made a second attack on the Gaza not far from their capital, Manjacaze. The Gaza continued to resist and their chiefs had to be defeated one by one. Hence, two years later, the once mighty empire of Shoshangane was conquered. In 1902 the Portuguese forces were able to defeat the last area of resistance called

Barwe - which for many years had been a centre of attack on the Portuguese. The Ndebele in the west of Mashonaland remained a powerful feature in political life. Their dominance over the Shona people compelled the latter's chiefs to negotiate with Gouveia for guns. In one sense they (the Shona) used these guns to fight among themselves and, in another, these weapons served as devices to protect and guard them against the powerful Ndebele. Thus, many Shona groups were able to overcome the Ndebele suzerainty. For this reason, it is certain that between the 1880s and the 1890s the Shona were preparing to reassert themselves, just like they used to [be] in their former days of independence.

Activities of the British South Africa Company

Europeans immigrated in large numbers in the 1870s and 1880s in search of important mineral deposits in areas belonging to Lobengula - the king of the Ndebele. After the year 1885 unconquered African territories became a target for the Europeans. Competition increased between the individuals and small companies and this rose to the level of international rivalry, concerning changes in the nature of European capitalism, improvements in European medicine (and weapons) which meant Africa less dangerous for Europeans. Such a change put invaders in Matabeleland under pressure to stake their claim without any further delay. In 1887 a treaty between Pretoria and Lobengula was signed. This treaty was more than a blow to Cecil Rhodes and his colleagues in the Cape Colony who were all expecting that all mineral wealth in Matabeleland would be controlled by the British empire, and who also were only waiting for the downfall of the Boer States.

Rhodes was already aware of the fact that the government in London, having recently been compelled to annex Bechuanaland, would not be in a position to extend British authority over the Ndebele. For this reason, Rhodes took the trouble to persuade the British government to sign a treaty of friendship called the Moffat Treaty, in 1885 (Wilson, Derek 1980, p.161) with Lobengula. This treaty was only to the benefit of the British, for it suppressed Matabeleland, as a fully independent polity and the king was to remain a yes-man to the Cape Colony on all foreign affairs.

Matabeleland was not annexed by the British. But Rhodes had his own methods. He made up his mind to take a lion's share of Central Africa through a commercial company. Therefore, in 1888 after the Moffat Treaty, he sent a delegation to Lobengula's court to obtain mining concessions. After discussions and negotiations, the king was convinced to come into an agreement with the delegation, for the Rudd concession in return for incentives like money and guns.

In addition, he was promised that the concessionaires would help and protect his territory from any kind of European attack in future. The next step now for Rhodes, at this point, was to form the British South Africa Company to enable him to put the Rudd concession into operation.

Lobengula (the king) didn't seem indifferent about the "White Invasion" of his country. For about five years he was very much preoccupied with preventing whites from any attack on his land. He knew the Europeans were in possession of superior and sophisticated weapons, and so he did his best to avoid an armed conflict between the two (the whites and non-whites).

As a result, within the lapse of those five years, he was obliged to behave honourably and courteously towards the agents of the B.S.A. Co. However, his kind attitudes towards the company were just too mean for its agents to consider. They were ready at any moment to destroy the king and exploit his land - the land of his people - by any means at all, whether peacefully or by means of war. Regardless of the bad motives of the agents of the company, Lobengula thought it was expedient for him to maintain control of the Shona. Eventually, he had enough supply of cattle and slaves as a supplement to his warrior bands (through raids into Mashonaland).

Towards the middle of 1890 the pioneers of the B.S.A.Co. expedition were sent to take possession of the concession lands. During his time too, Lobengula and his people were lacking prospectors to make any attempt to find deposits of mineral on their land. So, on the arrival of the company's delegation for the concession lands, the king decided to grant permission to a small number of prospectors among them to look for mineral ores in Mashonaland. To his surprise and regret, the B.S.A.Co. pioneer column included 380 men, among whom 200 were armed police. He ordered people to carry information to the Europeans to stop any further advance within the territory, but the latter ignored the order. To retaliate, the king refused to fulfill his promise to supply the company two hundred young men who were to help with road-building.

The white men now aimed at Khana, the Ngwato chief. For a long time he had been at logger heads with Lobengula owing to a border dispute and was pleased to embarrass his enemy by agreeing to supply the B.S.A.Co. with labourers. For about three months the pioneers were skirting Ndebele territory until they arrived at their headquarters-to-be. There, they built a fort and named it Fort Salisbury after the British prime minister.

Some weeks after, Leander Starr Jameson, who was Rhodes's personal representative in Central Africa, managed to spread company rule eastwards over Manikaland. At this event, settlers who had had hard luck in their search for gold in Mashonaland and who, for that matter, wanted to go further into Matabeleland for minerals compelled Jameson to attack the Ndebele. Jameson had indeed already decided to fight them in 1893. Therefore, he deliberately provoked them by aggression and by exaggerated demands for compensation. Irrespective of all these temptations, Lobengula remained patient but in a way very angry. The British government however tried to intervene by asking Jameson and his followers to avert making any attack on Lobengula's territory "unless the Ndebele attacked first" (Wilson, Derek 1980, p.164). Still Jameson was adamant about the order sent to him (from above). His intention was to do anything possible to provoke the Ndebele into an attack so that he would be able to invade Matabeleland. Being very aggressive and warlike, Jameson tried to acquire a number of volunteers from the Cape with promises of 6,000 acres of land and fifteen gold mining claims per head. His forces thus laid ambushes at Forts Salisbury, Victoria and Tuli. To set the ball rolling, Jameson made false statements to Cape Town and London about Ndebele armies that were allegedly massing near the Company forts.

The kind of account one can give about Lobengula and his impis is that they were only prepared for a counterattack and, secondly, that he was for peace. This was why he kept on sending messengers south to protest his heart's desire for peace. But things went on worsening, even to the extent that his messengers sent for this purpose were shot at Tati!

Jameson opened battle with the Ndebele on [the] 24th of October 1893. To this, Lobengula and his people (ie the Ndebele) now responded to, nearly 100 kilometers from Bulawayo their capital. At this first battle at Shangani the Ndebele lost to the British. They regrouped themselves again, by the 1st of November 1897 at Imbembesi in a last attempt to save their capital, almost 27 kilometers away. After they had retired to the capital, they offered to set it on fire themselves rather than to see it falling into the hands of their enemies. Across Bulawayo, Jameson ordered troops to look for Lobengula. Already after the battle, the king had become dispirited and sick with smallpox. He managed to make his way with small band of followers to the north. Having accepted defeat, the king sent messengers with about 1,000 pounds in gold and an offer to surrender. Still another piece of bad luck on his side: the gold fell into the hands of two soldiers who then suppressed the message.

As a result, Lobengula kept on withdrawing, while he was still a wanted man by his enemies. After a short period, he died, on [the] 22nd of January 1894, as the last Ndebele king. In addition, between 1894 and 1896 the Ndebele continued suffering a number of natural catastrophes. These included drought and a plague of locusts, followed by (a terrible) outbreak of Rinderpest. These, therefore, brought the white leaders to destroy a great number of Ndebele cattle in order to avoid any further spread of the disease. This reaction of the white people did not please the Ndebele and they were prepared to revolt again.

The Shona were for the arrival of the pioneers of the B.S.A.Co. in their numbers, as powerful allies who could outwit the Ndebele, and as traders with whom they (the Shona) could do business - to acquire guns and manufactured goods. But the attitude of the settlers (again) towards their Shona allies was appalling. For instance, they took land without obtaining permission. Shona criminals were punished by them (the settlers) without consulting their chiefs (ie the chiefs of the Shona). They seized men and women to labour for them on their farms. They stopped Shona trade with the Portuguese and offered higher prices for their own trade goods.

Worst of all their bad conduct, they levied a hut tax in 1894 on all the people. So, in the long run the Shona, unlike the Ndebele, refused to provide labour or to pay taxes. In general they felt they should unite and share a common grievance to resist European forces under the leadership of Mkwati - a representative of the old Rozwi ruling dynasty and the priests of the powerful Mlimo cult. These leaders incited both the Shona and the Ndebele to revolt against the white man as the cause of ills in their land. The rising began on [the] 20th of March 1896. However, the Ndebele took the lead in making peace, in view of their previous experience.

After their defeat at Umgusa River the surviving Ndebele forces withdrew to the Matopo hills. But they could not make good use of this vantage point because, first, there was a division among their leaders. Second, Cecil Rhodes made the first step to begin peace negotiations.

Rhodes was implicated in an attempted invasion of the Transvaal, which had recently caused the crash of his political career - and so he had every reason to put a rapid end to the campaign. Also, his B.S.A.Co. was under pressure from his British opponents (in Britain). After all, some politicians thought colonial occupation involved too much obvious bloodshed and white aggression. Moreover, to Rhodes who had his own way of manipulating things, the Company could do without the home government to rule Rhodesia.

Conclusion

Meanwhile the struggle was going on in Mashonaland. Here the power of religious leaders was greater. They (religious leaders) thus succeeded in uniting the Shona peoples by invoking the glories of the Rozwi Empire. Christianity was rejected by spirit mediums and prophets, who ordered the killing and torture of missionaries and converts; and thus (the religious leaders) reasserted traditional beliefs.

The main leaders of this "primary resistance" movement (as it is now called) were Mkwati and two mediums called Kakubi and Nehanda. They succeeded in prolonging this conflict in Mashonaland for a period of about a year after the defeated Ndebele.

Finally, the Shona had to take to their feet into hillstrongholds from which "they made sorties against small detachments of their enemy" (Wilson, Derek Wilson, 1980, p.168). The leaders of the uprising were captured and tried, condemned and hanged. They were the last victims of a rising in which more than 600 whites and 6,000 Africans lost their lives. So, just like the Ndebele, the Shona also were defeated in battle. Although some of their grievances, such as forced labour and unjust punishment by local authorities, were given full consideration, their hard luck was that they (the Shona) had to submit to taxation and to live under white control. To that effect, they were not allowed to live where they were supposed to in their own land, but were ejected and transferred into reserves.

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