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Brief Political History of South Africa

Introduction

This chapter discusses the various African communities in the broader southern Africa, their various interactions with one another and the interactions with non-African peoples. The chapter also describes how the various African communities such as the San, Khoi, Nguni, Sotho and Tswana managed their socio-economic and political systems. The role and interactions of non-African communities, such as the Portuguese, the Dutch and the English with African communities are also discussed. In the main, European colonialism negatively impacted the African communities. It is in this context that history is critical in order that the understanding of the post-apartheid political economy is not divorced from the totality of the historical experience that has influenced today's political economy.

The history of southern Africa can be said to be not a single narrative or story but rather a series of contested histories that have been altered and remodelled to shape non-African communities and institutions.³² That is why this chapter examines the pre-colonial African communities and the key developments which characterised their societies. The chapter also gives a brief background explanation on how South Africa's pre-colonial history was manipulated in order to misrepresent the fact that African peoples/communities did in fact have vibrant and functional pre-colonial interactions and societies.

In describing the history of southern Africa, it is important to first acknowledge the fact that the history did not begin with the Portuguese or British or Dutch (European) arrival, but is rather an interrupted narrative of socio-economic development.³³ There were many African communities that co-existed in southern Africa before the arrival of Europeans – and there were various advanced kingdoms, as epitomised by civilisations pertaining to Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe for example. In fact, those originating within the African continent had migrated from different other parts of the continent to the southern parts.³⁴

Europeans arrived in southern Africa about two centuries after Africans from other parts of the continent had migrated to the southern tip. It is understood that, in fact, mainly the Khoi and the San – derogatorily called Hottentots – had existed in the southern tip of Africa from time immemorial.³⁵

The southern Africa of pre-colonial era was one that did not have clearly identifiable borders, and societies were categorised into kingdoms (i.e. Zulu, Sotho, Venda and others) and smaller hunter (San) or gatherer (Khoi-Khoi) communities.³⁶ It is important to note that the African communities in that period did have some interactions with non-African communities such as the Portuguese, Dutch and sometimes Arab traders and ship merchants as well as Asians. It is also important to note that Africans are said to have settled at what later became known as South Africa over 2000 years ago and they had occupied the east coast around the sixteenth century³⁷. It was during this time that great cities and states like Mapungubwe State, Toutswe State (near Limpopo River), Kilwa and Sofala (along the so-called Indian Ocean coast) were formed and great African leaders like Inkosi Shaka Zulu and Morena Moshoeshe reigned.³⁸

African Communities

As indicated earlier, there is no single history of African communities and kingdoms. Rather, it is a series of histories of different communities who could be divided into different ethnic or language groups. Following is a discussion on (1) San and Khoi-Khoi; (2) Nguni; and (3) Sotho-Tswana and other communities.

San and Khoi-khoi

The San and Khoi-khoi need to be understood as two different and distinct African communities.³⁹ Each of these two groups was predominantly found in the western hemisphere of southern Africa. They could also be distinguished by their linguistic differences and livelihood strategies (hunters or gatherers). Both these communities were the original inhabitants of the area known today as the Western Cape and had interactions with other African communities, most notably Bantu-speaking Africans.⁴⁰

The Khoi-khoi and San were slightly different from their fellow Africans in the southern African region, in part due to their non-Bantu language, smaller community size and choice of routine – they were nomadic and exhibited hunter-gatherer traits.⁴¹ Despite these obvious and real differences, it is important to note that the San and Khoi-khoi were themselves two different communities who, depending on where they stayed, were expert hunters, trackers, artists and on occasion makers of hunting tools and weapons.⁴²

Nguni

The largest African communities in the southern African region were the Nguni communities.⁴³ The Nguni communities, much like the Sotho-Tswana, were a Bantu-speaking ethnic group.⁴⁴ While the Khoi and San communities could be found along the Western Cape area of present-day South Africa, the Nguni communities were to be found along the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal coastal and inland regions.⁴⁵

Within the Nguni communities, further delineations between communities existed. For instance, the Eastern Cape area had the amaXhosa (this is a generic term that refers to an amalgamation of clans from the broader Eastern Cape) while the KwaZulu area had the amaZulu (who were formed into one nation or kingdom over time). Other Nguni communities, such as the amaSwati and amaNdebele would later come out from the predominantly Zulu kingdom.⁴⁶

The Nguni people of both the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu areas were nation states that came to be formed partly due to the expansionist tendencies of their respective leaders and kings. As mentioned earlier, the Zulu Kingdom came to the fore largely due to the actions of Inkosi Shaka Zulu and the Mfecane process, which had the effect of further delineating the South African and southern African landscape.⁴⁷ The Mfecane or Difaqane was a process whereby various ethnic groups were amalgamated to the Zulu Kingdom, while others formed their own kingdoms.

The Eastern Cape amaXhosa was a conglomeration of mini-clans such as the abaThembu, amaMpondo, amaMpondomise, amaXesibe and amaQwathi, to mention but a few.⁴⁸ However, these communities did not reach the level or influence of the Zulu Kingdom, partly due to the numerous subsets of chieftaincies and numerous political reasons, such as not having a single leader in the form of Inkosi Shaka Zulu.

Sotho-Tswana

The Sotho-Tswana communities encompassed three small communities, namely the Sotho, Tswana and Pedi (i.e. South Sotho). They were predominantly found in the northern areas of South Africa (present-day Gauteng, Free State, Limpopo, North-West and parts of the Northern Cape provinces of South Africa) and later Botswana in southern African.⁴⁹

Despite sharing the same form of Bantu dialect, both the Sotho and Tswana communities came to occupy different parts of South Africa and southern Africa and later developed into distinct communities.⁵⁰ For instance, the Sotho occupied and lived in the central areas of South Africa and eventually became a kingdom

– Morena Moshoeshe – through the founder of present-day Lesotho.⁵¹ The Batswana would come to be recognised through their royal houses such as the baKwena, baKgatla, baRolong and baHurutshe, which were later integrated into smaller subsets and kingdoms.⁵² It was not uncommon for both these communities to be involved in skirmishes, firstly between themselves and also with the San and Khoi-Khoi communities, partly due to the limited resources that characterised non-coastal areas.⁵³ Despite the differences, the Sotho-Tswana communities, much like the Nguni communities of the coast, did involve themselves in large scale agricultural pursuits and also some form of metal and mining activities in their respective lining areas.⁵⁴

Political and Economic Systems

The political landscape of the early (so-called pre-colonial) southern Africa can be said to have been one that was characterised by the rule of kings or, more precisely, regional kingdoms. It needs to be mentioned that the power dynamics and political system of that time were more complex than has previously been presented, and that the community, especially elders, had significant influence on how respective kings, and on occasion queens, ruled their people.⁵⁵ To simply characterise the rule of kings and queens as genetic or divine right-rule would fail to capture the complexity and nuances that characterised how African communities in the most southern tip of the continent functioned and or were organised.

It is important to highlight that one of the biggest political ruptures or events to define early southern Africa had to do with the activities of Inkosi Shaka Zulu. The event referred to came to be known as Mfecane, which was the expansion of the Zulu Kingdom from its coastal areas to the inland areas of the then South Africa.⁵⁶ It was during this period that numerous African communities fled to other parts of southern Africa and that resulted in the creation of newer political formations and communities, such as the Shona and Ndebele.⁵⁷ The Mfecane greatly reshaped the political landscape of South Africa and southern Africa, as old ruling community structures were either dealt away with or new ones came into existence.

With regards to economic activities during this time, trade between the various African communities did take place.⁵⁸ At a basic level, trade of different food stuffs was quite common in the early periods of interaction; however as civilisations came to exploit agricultural and even mining activities, there were shifts in economic activities to relatively advanced trade products. For instance, cattle came to be viewed as an important currency for both practical and even cultural-religious purposes and the more cattle one owned the richer one was thought to be.⁵⁹

Interactions between Africans and non-Africans

The interactions between African communities and non-African communities, especially within the southern African region and South Africa in particular, can be said to have been one based on economic ties and trade.⁶⁰ As more and more Europeans, and on occasion Arab travellers, began to manufacture and operate ships for trade purposes, first at a small scale and later at industrial levels, they came to interact with African communities living on the coastal areas of the Western and later the Eastern Cape, and finally KwaZulu region.⁶¹

The trade that took place between African and non-African communities first began with basic food products and fresh waters and later on advanced to valuable products such as gold and other prized possessions.⁶² As this trade advanced, the reach of non-African traders and merchants extended to places as far north as present-day Zimbabwe.

The city state or kingdom of Mapungubwe is an interesting case study for advancing the idea that southern Africa was a developing region, before European colonialism. It thrived as a sophisticated trading centre from around the thirteenth century. As more research work is being done on the area and history of Mapungubwe, what has been revealed thus far shows a fairly advanced African kingdom, with a rich commercial and societal development.

Commercial History

Research and work linked to the study of Mapungubwe show that it was a society at a commercial level which was characterised by small scale mining and metallurgy.⁶³ While the mining which took place was not the type seen in later centuries, it was able to produce end products like jewellery, potteries and other items which were traded by citizens of this kingdom with non-African merchants, with business extending to not only Europe but also Asia.

It is this commercial activity that clearly illustrates the fact that not only the region of Mapungubwe, but also southern African kingdoms and city states were in the process of economic development. While it is true that more research is needed to uncover how and in what ways other southern African kingdoms and city states were developing, what cannot be denied though is the fact that areas like the Mapungubwe City State illustrates that there exists a long history of southern/South Africa commercial pre-colonial history.⁶⁴

What has also been confirmed by research is that the Mapungubwe City State did have leadership structures and structures of society that were able to first organise commercial activity and then attend to rudimentary governance matters. As Ramsey⁶⁵ explains, the findings at Mapungubwe clearly illustrate the fact that development of the city state was led and in some ways governed by ruling elites and royal classes. It has also been explained by Moffat⁶⁶ that some of the major governance responsibilities administered by the royalty and ruling class were the issues of trade and commercial activity which even extended to how they interacted with other regional kingdoms and city states.

The ruins of Mapungubwe – just like the ruins of Great Zimbabwe – are not only important for South Africa's early history, but are equally critical to understanding the whole history of southern Africa. It is important to remember that Mapungubwe, though part of modern South Africa, was in the past a stand-alone city state encompassing not only present-day South Africa but also parts of Zimbabwe. Furthermore, the influence of the city state is said to have assisted in the development of the Great Zimbabwe Kingdom that came later. Mapungubwe represents an important argument for the idea that Africa and southern Africa's development was not predicated on European inventions and ideas, but was rather stunted by the colonisation and apartheid regimes.

Conclusion

This chapter sought to highlight, briefly, some important aspects of the history of what is known as South Africa today. Chapter 12 discusses the evolution of post-apartheid South African society. It is critical to understand the early history of any country so as to better understand the present and consider the future, as political economy has to engage with the evolution of societies. For well over three hundred and fifty years of British and Afrikaner rule, according to Thompson,⁶⁷ the propaganda was that African peoples in southern Africa neither had the mental capabilities nor the historical hegemony to create kingdoms and governance systems. However, as case studies such as regarding Mapungubwe or even the governance and expansionist history of Inkosi Shaka Zulu show, African people had had a very strong socio-economic development before the advent of European colonialism.