

**“Jolling¹ and Brawling: The Beer Party and Intra-Subaltern Conflict in Late Colonial
Natal, South Africa, 1879-1906”**

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For Africans living in Natal colony from 1843 to 1879, the immediate consequences of white rule and land expropriation were minimal: They continued to live where they lived before, and in much the same style as before. Neither settler landowners nor the colonial state yet had the ability to translate their *de facto* domination into on-the-ground reality to any great extent. After the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, however, the consequences of white racial domination came to hit Natal Africans very hard, indeed. Economically, the story of African lives in late colonial Natal is one of ever growing immiseration prompted by a seemingly endless series of disasters, both natural and man-made. It is not hard to see this growing poverty as the root cause of the 1906 Poll Tax Rebellion, which was the climax of the colonial era in Natal and helped inspire the white-ruled colonies of South Africa to unite as an independent British dominion in 1906. As John Lambert has put it, Ultimately, it would appear that most Africans who rose against white domination in 1906 were driven to rebel by a sense of desperation and frustration. Faced with discriminatory legislation, overcrowding, insecurity of tenure on private lands, poor wages, debts, and with increasing demands for taxes and rents, many Africans in reserves and on private lands alike were driven into rebellion in a desperate attempt to save themselves.²

Similarly, Shula Marks, the foremost authority on the rebellion, has argued that “the causes of the Bhambatha uprising are to be sought in the intolerable pressures which colonial society was exerting upon the peasant communities of Natal.”³

¹ For those unfamiliar with colloquial South African English, a “jol” is a party and “to jol” means “to party,” and very heartily at that. The present article is the third chapter of a book currently being reviewed for publication. It was produced with financial help from the University of California at Los Angeles, the United States Department of Education’s Title VI grants, and Yale University’s Whitney, Griswold, and Morse fellowships.

² John Lambert, *Betrayed Trust: Africans and the State in Colonial Natal* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1995), p. 189.

³ Shula Marks, “Class, Ideology, and the Bhambatha Rebellion,” in Donald Crummey (ed), *Banditry*,

Material grievances were clearly the main driving factor that pushed the 1906 rebels into action. However, there is one very important problem with that argument: Before 1906, poverty had indeed caused Natal Africans to lash out, often violently, but not at the settlers and colonial officials who were so clearly behind their distress. Instead, the vast majority of the overt conflict and violence in late colonial Natal – the 1906 rebellion excepted – took place between different groups of Africans. My aim here is to try to explain this intra-African conflict and violence.

The Mineral Revolution and African Poverty

African wage labor in Natal had existed from the beginning of colonialism, but settlers there struggled to create the cheap and reliable labor supply they wanted. From 1865, togt labor, a form of casual day labor, began to emerge, particularly in Natal's cities. During the 1870s, togt labor increased enormously as Africans more and more refused to engage in monthly contracts. In response, settler employers relied ever more heavily on legislation and imported labor to discipline the workforce to their liking. Natal's first Masters and Servants Law, Ordinance no. 2 of 1850, made contract-breaking a criminal offense, but Africans got around this law by often refusing to engage for periods longer than one day. Settler employers managed to pressure Natal's government into passing several more Masters and Servants Laws throughout the colonial era. As a result of these laws, Africans in certain areas could no longer legally refuse work when it was offered to them, and even doing work improperly became subject to criminal sanction. Punishments for these crimes included imprisonment and spare diet, but also cash fines and hard labor, both of which pushed Africans into the labor market: Wage labor was one of the only ways to earn cash, and the state often hired convict laborers out to private employers. Prosecutions boomed from less than 100 a year to between 800 and 900 annually between 1870 and 1875. Barracks and police surveillance were

Rebellion, and Social Protest in Africa (London: James Currey; Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1986), p. 355.

introduced in the cities, as were pass laws that required workers to work if they were offered a minimum wage for the day. Imported labor from India and Tongaland (a region straddling the border between northern Zululand and southern Mozambique) was also intended to give employers more leverage over labor. The primary value of imported labor was not that it lowered labor costs – it did not – but that it made the supply more continuous and reliable. More than forty percent of the non-European wage labor force in Natal in the 1870's was either Indian or Tonga, even though both populations were vastly outnumbered by Natal-born Africans. Legislation and other government interventions managed to keep wages down for a while. Where the average worker in Durban earned 8s. a month and a muid of ground maize cost 6s. in 1870, by 1878 the wage was 20s. and the muid of ground maize cost 32s. The Anglo-Zulu War, however, led to a boom and an increased demand for labor, reversing many of the employers' gains. By the 1880s, wages for togt workers on the Durban docks were almost equal to those of casual day laborers on the London docks.⁴

Although the economic boom of the 1870s led to a rise in African wages at first, in the long run the forces behind the boom would create a labor situation more favorable for employers. As long as homestead agriculture continued to give Natal Africans the independence and standard of living they wanted, the attraction of wage labor would be limited. This was why it took boom periods, such as occurred in Natal during the 1870s, to bring substantial numbers of Natal Africans into the labor pool. During the 1870s, the diamond rush at Kimberley in the interior and the Anglo-Zulu War both increased the traffic at Durban harbor and led to an infusion of capital into the colony. The rise of the gold industry on the Witwatersrand after 1886 achieved similar, but more dramatic, results. Only events such as these could make wages high enough to draw Natal Africans away from their homesteads.

At the same time, however, the mineral revolution also brought to Natal the capital and

⁴ David Hemson, "Class consciousness and migrant workers: Dock workers of Durban" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Warwick, 1979), pp. 14-29; Keletso Atkins, *The Moon is Dead! Give Us Our Money!: The Cultural Origins of an African Work Ethic, Natal, South Africa, 1843-1900* (London: James Currey; Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1993), pp. 100-114.

the demand necessary to finally make large-scale settler agriculture profitable. Settlers were now in a better position than ever before to evict African tenants from their lands. This was also a period when the British government devolved ever more power to the locally-elected Natal legislature, a transition which culminated – in 1893 – in the granting of “responsible government,” i.e., internal self-government and a cabinet chosen by the Natal legislature, not the British government. The qualification process for obtaining voting rights was so skewed that virtually all the voters in colonial Natal were white: by 1905, the government had given only three Africans the right to vote, and none had obtained this right before 1875.⁵ As a result, local self-government in fact meant white (male) settler self-government. European employers in Natal, and especially farmers, gained the political clout to obtain even more favorable legislation. The settler-dominated government made it more difficult for Africans to buy land outside the reserves or choose not to work for European employers, and facilitated the eviction of Africans from both government-owned and private land. Many things increased in such a way as to hurt rural Africans particularly: population densities, commodity prices, rents, taxes, and fines for the growing catalogue of newly-criminalized acts. The decline of homestead agriculture also made it increasingly difficult for homestead heads to meet their various needs. To make up the difference, they either pressured their young men to go out and work for wages, or caved in to demands from the young men themselves to be allowed to do so. More than anything else, however, it was a “crisis in African production” – especially during and after the five-year drought from 1888 to 1893 – that forced Africans of all classes to migrate in search of wage labor.⁶

The boom on the Witwatersrand also attracted large numbers of Natal Africans, especially after 1894, but the consequences of such long-distance migration were much more severe than those resulting from labor migration within Natal. African agricultural production

⁵ David Welsh, *The Roots of Segregation: Native Policy in Colonial Natal, 1845-1910* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1971), esp. p. 243.

⁶ Lambert, *Betrayed Trust*, pp. 71-2, 115, 118.

soared after 1880, but the African population was increasing even faster, placing stress on the land and making migrant labor ever more attractive. At the same time, employers on the Witwatersrand, desperate for cheap labor, began to recruit Africans in Natal, the most densely-populated region in southern Africa. Those employers competed successfully with Natal employers by offering high wages and efficient transport to the Rand. Heavily capitalized, Rand employers were able to offer lower wages than their Natal counterparts could. More importantly, by the 1894 the mining industry had set up an efficient labor procurement system that relied on roving labor recruiting agents in rural Natal and on new railways to transport Natal Africans to the Rand. As a result, labor migration from Natal to the Rand increased dramatically that year. At the same time, migration to the Rand kept young males away longer, giving them more time to be influenced by the more alien culture there, and giving their families more time to be affected by their absence. As a result of the greater cultural alienation, geographical distance, and time away, migrants to Johannesburg tended to remit a smaller portion of their wages back home than did migrants within Natal.⁷

It was precisely those parts of Natal which were heaviest hit by the economic reverses of the 1880s and 1890s that would become the centers of rebellion in 1906: the districts of Umsinga, Krantzkop, Mapumulo, and Lower Tugela, all on the Natal side of the Thukela river valley. These districts were home to some of the largest African reserves, which became in essence dumping grounds to which Africans were sent after they were evicted from settler farms. By 1894 the reserve lands of Lower Tugela district had a higher population density than those of any other division in Natal.⁸

With homestead agriculture already weakened, ecological crisis between 1896 and 1898 sealed African dependence on migrant labor, particularly in the Thukela valley reserves. In a matter of two to three years, drought, rinderpest, and locusts decimated crops and, more

⁷ Benedict Carton, *Blood from Your Children: The Colonial Origins of Generational Conflict in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2000), pp. 63-68.

⁸ Colony of Natal, *Blue Book on Native Affairs, 1894*, p. 7.

importantly, cattle herds. Since cattle were more currency than foodstuff for Africans in Natal generally, the cattle losses effectively wiped out their savings. Mapumulo was particularly hard-hit, as the rindepest epidemic of 1897 killed 97% of the cattle there.⁹

By 1904, if not earlier, the Thukela valley districts had become the greatest labor-exporting area in Natal. Mapumulo and Lower Tugela, where the second and largest phase of the 1906 rebellion took place, ranked second and fourth among all Natal districts in the total number of migrant workers they sent out each year. And they ranked first and third, respectively, in the percentage of adult males absent, more than 40% in both cases.¹⁰

Generational Conflict ... and Intra-Generational Conflict

One of the most striking things about the available evidence on African daily life in late colonial Natal is the near-constant reference by colonial officials, missionaries, and, above all, African elders to the growing insubordination of women and youths. As John Lambert and Benedict Carton have shown, this “insubordination” had everything to do with the immiseration Natal Africans were experiencing at the time. African elders had less and less land and cattle which they could reward their sons with or, conversely, withhold from their sons as a form of punishment or control. At the same time, the migrant labor option took young African men out of the orbit of their fathers’ control for months at a time, and provided the young migrants with alternative sources of wealth that they could spend as they wished without having to curry favor with their fathers.¹¹

Thus, especially after 1880, African elders and their sons struggled with each other for control over the young men’s wealth, labor, and marriage. Migrancy meant that the productive labor that young men engaged in was not directly overseen by the homestead head for the benefit of the whole family. When a son was away, that meant that there was one less person

⁹ Shula Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion: The 1906-8 Disturbances in Natal* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), p. 198.

¹⁰ Hemson, “Class consciousness and migrant workers,” pp. 52, 56.

¹¹ These arguments are conveyed most succinctly in Lambert, *Betrayed Trust*, pp. 123, 179-80; and in Carton, *Blood from Your Children*, pp. 67, 71-2, 76-7.

available at the homestead to maintain the herds, the crops, and the physical condition of the homestead itself. And even when migrant workers returned home, they increasingly refused to fulfill their customary labor obligations for those purposes. Before 1880, when the wealth earned from migrant labor had been minimal or non-existent, the relatively plentiful wealth of the homestead took the form of cattle, crops, and land that were all controlled by the homestead head. Many homestead heads insisted that they controlled their sons' wages, but young men tended to resist these claims. They often remitted little or none of their wages back to their families, choosing instead to spend their money on themselves or to put it in their own savings. Back home, many young men would refuse to give their fathers control of the money, and on occasion even refused to help pay the family's rent or taxes or to buy them food. Most did contribute at least to some degree, but in an amount and manner of their own choosing. In a society where marriage required the groom's family to give the bride's family a small portion of its wealth, and in which marriage turned young men into full-fledged homestead heads themselves, control over wealth meant control over access to patriarchal power itself. As long as the main form of bridewealth was the cattle that the father owned, then the authority of homestead heads was rather secure. But migrancy enabled young men to buy their own cattle, marry, and become homestead heads without their fathers' permission. It is easy to see why so many African elders protested that migrant labor made them irrelevant.¹²

Women, too, sought the advantages that came with leaving the homestead, but in this case African men and the colonial state joined forces to keep them from doing so. The government's codification of African customary law in 1891, done by white government officials in consultation with African elder men, confined women to perpetual minority status. Married women were subject to their husbands, and unmarried women (including women or divorcees) were subject to their fathers, brothers, or brothers-in-law. No woman could own property in her own name, nor leave her homestead without the permission of her male

¹² Lambert, *Betrayed Trust*, pp. 123, 135, 179-80; Carton, *Blood from Your Children*, pp. 55, 60, 64, 75-6, 111.

guardian. Of course, these laws could not keep thousands of women from absconding anyway, the most common destinations being mission stations and towns. In these centers of European culture in Africa, women were still subject to patriarchy, albeit of a new and different kind, but one that many apparently preferred to live with. However, for those women left behind on rural homesteads, the migration of both men and other women made their own burdens that much greater. Migrancy increased the share of labor each woman was expected to perform and, by thus increasing their husbands' and fathers' dependence on that labor, made men in general more determined to keep them at home.¹³

But the situation was even worse than Lambert and Carton suggest. For one thing, women and young men were often in conflict with each other, not just their patriarchs. It is true that young men and women of all ages to some extent shared an interest in challenging the patriarchal authority of homestead heads. For example, as Carton notes, the phenomenon of mothers giving their sons some of the household's wealth was such a common and threatening phenomenon for African elders that such transactions were specifically outlawed by the 1891 Native Law Code.¹⁴ Women and men also engaged in illicit sexuality. Adultery and seduction, the crime of a man having sex with an unmarried woman, were both outlawed and became very common "crimes" during this period. Clearly many married women were chafing at the restrictions of a legal order that subjected them so thoroughly to their husbands. Unmarried men and women, for their part, were to some challenging their fathers' ability to determine when they could get married and therefore legally have sexual intercourse. Indeed, by having intercourse, and especially if the woman got pregnant, the couple could force their fathers to let them marry whom they wanted when they wanted.¹⁵

But not all the sexual "immorality" that horrified colonial officials and African elders

¹³ Lambert, *Betrayed Trust*, pp. 52, 62, 135-8, 180; Carton, *Blood from Your Children*, pp. 87-111. The most thorough and theoretically developed treatment of this subject for South Africa in general is Cheryl Walker, "Gender and the Development of the Migrant Labour System, c1850-1930," in Cheryl Walker (ed), *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*.

¹⁴ Carton, *Blood from Your Children*, p. 60.

¹⁵ Lambert, *Betrayed Trust*, p. 135-8; Carton, *Blood from Your Children*, pp. 88-94, 105-110.

was consensual. Arrests for rape more than doubled between 1893 and 1896, while those for “indecent assault” more than doubled between 1894 and 1904. It is true that the figures were nevertheless small: 25 rape arrests in 1897, 219 indecent assault arrests in 1904, in a population of just under one million in 1904.¹⁶ However, given the minimal police presence in Natal at the time, especially in predominantly African areas, and given the sexual double standard that existed among both blacks and whites, these numbers should be taken with a grain of salt. Indeed, both African elders and colonial officials accused both African and European police of using their positions to seduce or even rape African women with impunity.¹⁷

Moreover, there is every reason to believe that many cases of seduction, which supposedly involved consensual (albeit illicitly premarital) intercourse, were actually cases of rape. Consider, for example, the following case:
Charge: Seduction, in that on or about June 25th 1894 he [the defendant] wrongfully and unlawfully seduced one Nolaga, the unmarried daughter of Kapu. Judgement: Guilty.
Sentence: To be imprisoned with hard labor for two months and to receive a private whipping of fifteen lashes. Facts: Defendant was present at a marriage ceremony with the girl Nolaga, who is his sweetheart. In the evening they left together and when in the “veld,” Defendant detained the girl for the purpose of having “Hlobonga” [i.e., external sexual intercourse] with her, but when in the act he went further and penetrated her vagina, but with the girl’s consent, *as she did not resist him*. The girl on getting home reported what had taken place to her parents and her father reported it to his District Headman, who brought the Defendant before the Court.¹⁸

Note that the court judged that Nolaga had consented merely because she did not resist her boyfriend, and yet she was clearly sufficiently disturbed by the incident to tell her parents and have her father report her boyfriend to the authorities. In the same vein, one official felt

¹⁶ NCP 7/4/2 Colony of Natal, *Departmental Reports, 1894-5*, p. E6; NCP 7/4/4 Colony of Natal, *Departmental Reports 1897*, pp. F31-2; Colony of Natal, *Blue Book on Native Affairs, 1904* (Pietermaritzburg, 1905), pp. 177-8.

¹⁷ Colony of Natal, *Blue Book on Native Affairs, 1904* (Pietermaritzburg, 1905), p. 56, RM Bergville, 7 January 1905; Colony of Natal, *Native Affairs Commission 1906-7: Evidence* (Pietermaritzburg, 1907), p. 790, testimony of Bekakupiwa; p. 820, testimony of Mafika Mhlongo; p. 849, testimony of John Hlonono; and p. 959, testimony of John L. Dube.

¹⁸ SNA 1/1/270 2951/1897 Court of ANL Klip River, case no. 92/1894, Supreme Chief v. Mabande ka Mbadule Ch. Kwebane, 6 July 1894. Italics added, not in original.

compelled to argue that “Cases of hlobonga where the girl is not a consenting party should be dealt with as cases of indecent assault,” which suggests that not all officials felt that way or acted accordingly.¹⁹ Indeed, another official felt that seductions usually did *not* involve the active consent of the woman: “In my experience seductions occur more frequently in the manner described [in Nolaga’s case] than they do with the girls’ deliberate concurrence. The act brings shame only upon her, & in general she will resist it until, overcome (probably) by the heat engendered by the filthy practice referred to, she yields to the importunities of the man.”²⁰ Seduction was an exceedingly common crime in late colonial Natal. As one official put it, “It is to be regretted, but is none the less true, that fines for seduction form quite, if not more than half the revenue of this dept.”²¹ Given the frequency with which seduction occurred, and given the evidence that seduction cases were often actually rape cases, sexual violence was undoubtedly far more common than official arrest statistics might indicate.

There were also other ways in which young men’s sexual self-assertion actually involved the victimization of women. As the historian Julie Parle has pointed out, sexual coercion was not always so obviously physical. Both men and women used love medicines in order to make others fall in love with them. But men’s love medicines were much more powerful and controlling than women’s, and women risked social opprobrium if they used such medicines, while men did not.²² Moreover, even if premarital sexual intercourse *was* consensual, the young women in such cases ran the risk not only of getting pregnant, but also of being abandoned by their lovers and forced to bear the burden of raising the child by themselves. One African elder complained to the 1906-7 Natal Native Affairs Commission that “A boy might lobolo [pay bridewealth for], or begin to lobolo, a particular girl, and when

¹⁹ Ibid., RM Umvoti, 22 September 1894.

²⁰ Ibid., RM Klip River, 18 September 1894.

²¹ Ibid., RM Upper Tugela, 18 September 1894.

²² Personal communications, Julie Parle, May-June 2003. This evidence comes from Ms. Parle’s research for her doctoral dissertation on the history of madness in KwaZulu-Natal. I am grateful to her for sharing this information and for collaborating with me on a forthcoming article on the history of intra-generational sexual conflict in late colonial Natal.

he had continued paying for her for some time, he would throw her over, take the cattle that had been set apart for her lobolo, and proceed to repeat this performance in regard to some other girl. This took place even where the father was quite willing that the marriage should take place.”²³ As one official noted in 1904, “Illegitimacy is very prevalent and seems to become more so in succeeding years. Severe punishments are inflicted, but without, so far, perceptible effect.”²⁴ This led to the common situation described in 1968 by the South African legal scholar H. J. Simons: “An obligation to maintain the child falls in common law on its natural father and mother, and can be enforced by order of court and statutory sanctions. But men easily evade their obligations, and this irresponsibility is a significant cause of the high rate of illegitimacy in contemporary society.”²⁵

Intra-generational conflict could not only set young men against young women, it could also set young men against each other. For example, in late colonial Natal seduction proceedings against young men were often initiated, not by their lovers’ fathers, but by their lovers’ brothers. After all, one possible source of bridewealth for a young man from a household barely getting by would be the bridewealth earned by his own sister. Brothers would often therefore take a very keen interest in negotiations around their sisters’ marriages, serving as the main representatives for their families and taking charge of the relevant cattle.²⁶ Brothers might also try to secure their future father-in-law’s permission for marriage by pledging the bridewealth to be paid for their sisters in the future.²⁷ Therefore brothers were perhaps even less willing than their fathers to see young women enter into sexual relationships

²³ Quoted in Carton, *Bood from Your Children*, p. 105. Carton argues that young men at this time “were risktakers who were engaging in premarital sex, which led to pregnancy.” (p. 176) But he does not consider how it was often young women, and not young men, who had to face the negative consequences of such “risktaking.”

²⁴ Colony of Natal, *Blue Book on Native Affairs* (Pietermaritzburg, 1902), report, RM Estcourt, 12 January 1903, p. A13.

²⁵ H. J. Simons, *African Women: Their Legal Status in South Africa* (London: C. Hurst and Co., 1968), p. 228.

²⁶ *Natal Native Affairs Commission, 1906-7: Evidence*, testimony of Mgodini, p. 731.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, testimony of Tshonkwani, p. 812.

without having any bridewealth paid for them at all. Such brothers then put themselves in the rather odd position of punishing their sisters for consensual relationships, and of punishing young men of their own generation.²⁸

“Faction Fighting”

But perhaps the most notorious form of intra-generational conflict in late colonial Natal was the “faction fight.” Here groups of young men from different chiefdoms would lash out violently, not at the colonial state, nor even at their elders, but rather at each other, in the name of their respective chiefs. Carton tries to fit even such violent intra-generational conflict within his fathers-vs.-sons framework by arguing that there were “widespread police reports of drunken boys confronting their elders at faction fights.”²⁹ In fact, such incidents were quite rare. It was far more common for elders to avoid getting involved, or to instigate and even plan the fighting, than to come into conflict with the young men. If the role of elders, and especially chiefs, is often obscure, that is partly because they wanted to maintain their “deniability” and thus avoid, in the case of chiefs and headmen, being deprived of their privileged positions.

It would be difficult to identify a “typical” faction fight when dozens occurred every year, when every district – urban or rural – played host to its share, and when some of the particulars varied enormously from fight to fight. However, by way of illustration, consider that which took place in 1887 in Alfred district in southern Natal, between subjects of Chief Mtshiwa and subjects of the chiefs Duka Fynn and Tom Fynn (these chiefs were two of the many descendants of the early Port Natal trader Henry Francis Fynn and his African wives).³⁰ One of Chief Duka’s subjects was holding an engagement feast for his daughter, where cattle

²⁸ As, for example, in SNA 1/1/313 1974/1904 Rex vs. Umsindo ka Maqilimana, Estcourt Division, 17 September 1904.

²⁹ Carton, *Blood from Your Children*, p. 174. See also *ibid.*, pp. 74-5.

³⁰ The following account is based on SNA 1/1/103 1125/1887 Papers relating to the faction fight between the Amanyuswa tribe under Chief Umtshiwa and the Etsimbeni tribe under Chief Duka Fynn, 22 December 1887.

would be slaughtered and fed to the guests, homemade beer would be provided, and there would be singing and dancing, too. Hundreds of guests showed up, as was often the case, particularly when the host was prominent and wealthy. Many of these guests were both uninvited and unexpected, although this was also typical, and the host of such a party risked severe censure from his neighbors if he did not provide plenty of beef and beer to all comers. But a large proportion of the guests were subjects of Chief Mtshiwa, who claimed some of the land occupied by Duka's subjects, including the land that was the site of this particular party. As a result, there was considerable tension between these two groups even before the party. Men from both sides showed up with spears, clubs, and shields, which in itself was not unusual, but in these circumstances the presence of weapons only raised the tension that much further. After Mtshiwa's subjects arrived, Duka asked them to go to two neighboring homesteads, where they would be served away from his own people. On the way, out in the open veld, a huge fight broke out between the two groups, with some of Tom Fynn's subjects joining in on the side of Duka's. Nobody was killed (even the worst faction fights in late colonial Natal had only six deaths³¹), but the number of participants was massive: afterwards government authorities charged 208 men with participating in the fight, and 106 of the accused pleaded guilty. The European judge who tried the case assigned collective responsibility to the young men of both sides, fining all of the accused regardless of whether they had actually participated or not. However, the fine for Mtshiwa's subjects was £5 per person while that for Duka's subjects was only £3 a head. The reason for this was that the judge concluded that Mtshiwa's subjects had been the aggressors, partly for the simple fact that they had showed up armed at a household on the land of their enemies, but partly also because the evidence seemed to indicate that it was one of Mtshiwa's people who had actually started the fighting.

Fights like this have been very common for a long time in what is today KwaZulu-Natal. Indeed, many South Africans, both black and white, associate faction fights with

³¹ For two cases in which six fighters were killed, see SNA 1/1/212 1605/1895 SNA to RM Umlazi, 27 December 1895; and SNA 1/1/328 2756/1905 Report, Tpr. Schonberg NP Glendale, 18 October 1905.

KwaZulu-Natal in much the same way that they associate ritual murders and witch killings with Limpopo province, even though these phenomena occur throughout the country and elsewhere, too. Chiefdoms in KwaZulu-Natal have on occasion fought wars with one another since pre-Shakan times, as have neighboring polities all over the world throughout history. And they continue today, although they have subsided greatly since peaking in the 1980s and early 1990s, when hundreds died every year in the low-level civil war then plaguing KwaZulu-Natal. The scope of this violence was greatly exacerbated by the struggles between various political parties for primacy in the anti-apartheid movement and in post-apartheid politics, as well as active intervention by agents of the apartheid regime.³²

During the colonial period, and apparently also afterward, the incidence of faction fighting was rather cyclical. There is evidence of colonial-era faction fighting as far back as the 1850s, if not earlier, although the low levels of government surveillance before 1879 makes it hard to gauge the extent of such violence.³³ In the early 1880s, several magistrates noted a decline in faction fighting.³⁴ Even then, though, in 1881, 190 of the 192 convictions involving Africans in the Inanda district resident magistrate's court involved faction fighting,³⁵ and throughout the 1880s the Native High Court alone dealt with an average of 30 cases of faction fighting a year, involving 900 people.³⁶ Such statistical information as exists for the late colonial period is incomplete, scattered across different jurisdictions, and obscured by changing legal definitions. Until 1897, for example, faction fighting was prosecuted under the heading of "riot and breaches of peace," but after that date it was categorized on its own. Similarly, faction fight trials occurred at all levels of the judicial hierarchy, from the resident

³² For an account of this most recent chapter in the history of collective violence in KwaZulu-Natal, see Anthea Jeffrey, *The Natal Story: Sixteen Years of Conflict* (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1997).

³³ SNA 1/3/1 RM Umvoti to SNA, 25 February 1851; SNA 1/3/6 RM Klip River to SNA, 10 August 1857.

³⁴ Colony of Natal, *Blue Book for Native Affairs, 1879*, Report, RM Umgeni, p. 5; Colony of Natal, *Blue Book for Native Affairs, 1882*, Report, RM Klip River, p. 205; Colony of Natal, *Blue Book for Native Affairs, 1884*, Report, RM Newcastle, 13 March 1885, p. 13.

³⁵ Colony of Natal, *Blue Book for Native Affairs, 1881*, Report, RM Inanda, p. 156.

³⁶ SNA 1/1/103 1125/1887 Master of the Supreme Court to SNA, 10 March 1888.

magistrates' courts to the Native High Court. Statistics on riot convictions before 1895 only exist for the Native High Court, which naturally only tried a small fraction of the total number of cases. These indicate that the highest numbers of convictions came in 1884, 1886, and 1887, in which latter year they peaked at 937. Thereafter convictions declined to a low of 77. Between 1895 and 1898, at least 3,000 Africans were arrested every year for riot, with the peak coming in 1897, when 6,785 Africans were charged with this particular offense. Between 1898 and 1905, faction fight convictions in the resident magistrates' courts ranged from a low of 710 in 1903 to a high of 3,212 in 1905. By the latter date it was the second most prosecuted crime in Natal, accounting for more than a sixth of Africans convicted.³⁷

The Beer Party

What was the cause of all this violence? As far as most white officials at the time were concerned, the cause was beer parties. While such an explanation is clearly somewhat reductionist (and the more thoughtful white observers at the time had more nuanced understandings of the factors at work), there is some truth in it. Most faction fights, such as the one described above, were closely connected with beer parties. And it would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of the beer party in rural Natal, then or now.³⁸ It was quite simply the main form of entertainment and leisure-time socializing (in all the senses of that word) in rural Natal during this period. Beer parties were held on numerous occasions, most notably at

³⁷ Statistics compiled from the following annual government publications for the relevant years: Colony of Natal, *Supplement to the Blue Book for the Colony of Natal: Departmental Reports*; Colony of Natal, *Blue Book for Native Affairs*; Colony of Natal, *Departmental Reports*.

³⁸ Indeed, the beer party is a significant institution throughout Africa. For analyses of the beer party in other parts of the continent, see M. Bridget O'Laughlin, "Mbum Beer-Parties: Structures of Production and Exchange in an African Social Formation" (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1973); Paul La Hausse, *Brewers, Beerhalls, and Boycotts: A History of Liquor in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1988); John Crush and Charles Ambler (eds), *Liquor and Labour in Southern Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press; Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1992); Emmanuel Akyeampong, *Drink, Power, and Cultural Change: A Social History of Alcohol in Ghana, c.1800 to Recent Times* (Portsmouth: Heinemann; Oxford: James Currey, 1996); Patrick McAllister, *Building the Homestead: Agriculture, Labour, and Beer in South Africa's Transkei* (Aldershot, 2001); Justin Willis, *Potent Brews: A Social History of Alcohol in East Africa, 1850-1899* (London: James Currey; Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002).

marriage dances (*imisindo* or *imicanguza*), but also at puberty dances (known variously as *imigonqo*, *amacamba*, or *ukomulisa*).³⁹ A homestead head would also throw a beer party for his neighbors if they had provided him with labor for some major task, such as housebuilding, harvesting, or cornshucking. Indeed, he could be ostracized if he did not.⁴⁰ The beer party offered the host an opportunity to enhance his prestige by acquiring a reputation not only for wealth, but also for generosity. It also offered poorer members of the community an opportunity to demand limited access to the wealth of their richer neighbors: According to African rules of hospitality, no visitor could be turned away, not even a stranger.⁴¹ Failure to do so could even lead to violent retribution.⁴² On the other hand, if someone offered hospitality incommensurate with his status in the community, local elites might criticize him for his presumptuousness.⁴³

By the 1880s, colonial officials in Natal had come to identify the beer party as the root of many different evils. These included, in the order of prominence that officials assigned to them, faction fighting, stock theft (though even several officials questioned this particular link), illicit sex, and a decline the quality and quantity of labor that Africans provided to white employers.⁴⁴ For officials, the problem was that beer parties were becoming so frequent, either because wages were too high or because harvests were too plentiful. Indeed, a bad harvest of sorghum (*amabele*) could lead to a decline in the production of African homemade

³⁹ SNA 1/1/145 897/1891 RM Newcastle to SNA, 6 November 1884; Colony of Natal, *Blue Book on Native Affairs* (Pietermaritzburg, 1903), pp. B64-5: Rules for controlling and regulating the gathering of natives at different kraals or homes for the purpose of feasting or beer drinking [under the provisions and sanctioned by Act 5, 1898, sec. 2; promulgated 8 January 1903].

⁴⁰ Colony of Natal, *Blue Book on Native Affairs, 1902* (Pietermaritzburg, 1903), p. A14, Report, RM Estcourt, 12 January 1903; SNA 1/1/302 2158/1903 Statement, Chief Mabojana, Amacele, Lower Umzimkulu, 25 June 1903.

⁴¹ SNA 1/1/145 897/1891 RM Umsinga, 23 October 1884; RM Upper Umkomanzi, 11 January 1887.

⁴² SNA 1/4/8 C106/1900 Report of Native Intelligence Officer No. 1, 10 September 1900; SNA 1/1/299 491/1903 Report, USNA, 10 February 1903.

⁴³ SNA 1/1/145 897/1891 Transcript of the meeting between chiefs and officials at Verulam, Inanda, 10 December 1884, testimony of Ncaphayi.

⁴⁴ This ranking is based on the frequency with which each factor was cited by the various officials questioned in SNA 1/1/145 897/1891 SNA Circular 1056/1886 to RM's and ANL's, 18 December 1886.

beer (*utshwala*) and thus also to a fall in the number of beer parties.⁴⁵ As the historian Paul La Hausse pointed out, official opposition to African liquor consumption reflected the frustration on the part of both colonial officials and settler employers over their inability to get Africans to work for them at the wages the Europeans wanted to pay them.⁴⁶ However, officials themselves clearly saw faction fighting, stock theft, and illicit sex as more significant consequences of drinking than what they called “the labor question.”

Moreover, officials were not the only ones to express substantial concern about youths and drinking: African elders did, too. Until recently, beer parties had been regulated by a certain amount of decorum and involved certain sacred rituals, such as the pouring of libations for the ancestors. Patriarchs ran the show and women and youths were to obey their orders. The patriarchy of the beer party was symbolized by the fact that elder men were to be served first and given pride of place in a central location reserved for them. Attendees were to avoid excessive drunkenness, and women were strictly segregated from the men, if they were allowed to attend at all. Now, however, young men elbowed their way past their elders to get at the beer and “engag[ed] in sexual adventuring” such as “flirting with young women” and even “court[ing] married women.” For their part, both married and unmarried women also flouted convention, by mingling with the men and drinking inordinate amounts out of turn. Small wonder that so many of the cases of adultery and seduction were alleged to have taken place at beer parties!⁴⁷ As one African elder said, “At the time Sir T. Shepstone governed [1845-76] the boys did not drink beer, only the men drank the beer, the boys stood on one side. But now the beer is drunk by the boys.”⁴⁸ It is no surprise, then, that in response the colonial

⁴⁵ Colony of Natal, *Blue Book on Native Affairs* (Pietermaritzburg, 1884), Report of RM Ixopo, 1880, p. 117; Report of RM Newcastle, 1881, p. 139; Report of RM Alexandra, 1881, p. 181; Report of RM Upper Tugela, 1881, p. 189; Report of RM Alexandra, 1882, p. 222. Colony of Natal, *Blue Book on Native Affairs* (Pietermaritzburg, 1886), Report of RM Inanda, 18 May 1885, p. 27.

⁴⁶ Paul La Hausse, “The Struggle for the City: Alcohol, the Ematsheni, and Popular Culture in Durban, 1902-1936” (M.A. thesis, University of Cape Town, 1984), pp. 15-16; “Drink and Cultural Innovation in Durban: The Origins of the Beerhall in South Africa, 1902-1916,” in Crush and Ambler (eds), *Liquor and Labor*, pp. 86-88.

⁴⁷ Carton, *Blood from Your Children*, pp. 72-3; Lambert, *Betrayed Trust*, p. 127.

state drafted new drinking regulations that included the following provision:

Young men (Izinsizwa) who may be allowed or invited to attend a beer drinking party, and who shall fail or neglect to recognise and to respect the superior position and rank of their elders or the men present (Amadoda) shall be guilty of an offence. Any young man or men who shall sit down to drink beer in the company of the men (amadoda) as aforesaid, unless specifically invited so to do by the principal man of the hut, with the approval of the other men present, shall also be guilty of an offence.⁴⁹

Young men also tried to circumvent both custom and law by turning to new concoctions that had no protocols associated with them. One of these was a newly-invented drink called *isishimiyana*, a mixture of sugar cane spirits and beer. The potency and novelty of the new beverage made its consumption even more subversive than that of beer from the point of view of colonial officials. It was the young who dominated the consumption and production of *isishimiyana*, and they constantly frustrated government attempts to crack down on them: Very few cases of 'isitshimiyana' have been brought to light, and it appears to be a matter of great difficulty to run the delinquents to earth. The liquor is almost universally drunk in this Division. Regular 'isitshimiyana' parties are got up. The invitation is by means of a white flag suspended to a bamboo or other long pole placed in the most commanding position near the festive kraal. The effect is magical. Young men and girls now drink to the exclusion of the elders. The idea is that an 'mtimba' (bride's) party has arrived. These young people enter the hut, drink is handed round, and revelry reigns supreme – the older people being actually denied admission, thus an instance of the growing power of the young men in defiance of the authority of the older generation.⁵⁰

Not surprisingly, the African elders consulted by colonial officials therefore blamed the faction fighting not just on beer parties, but also largely (though not entirely) on young men. Young men were drinking more now partly because, the elders alleged, the state had usurped the punitive powers of everybody from chiefs to homestead heads. Without those punitive powers, young men merely laughed at elders who tried to rein them in. This same latitude was

⁴⁸ SNA 1/1/145 897/1891 Meetings of Chiefs re Minute of SNA of 11 October 1884, Zwartkop Location, 6 November 1884, testimony of Suzindela.

⁴⁹ Colony of Natal, *Blue Book on Native Affairs* (Pietermaritzburg, 1903), pp. B64-5: Rules for controlling and regulating the gathering of natives at different kraals or homes for the purpose of feasting or beer drinking [under the provisions and sanctioned by Act 5, 1898, sec. 2; promulgated 8 January 1903].

⁵⁰ Colony of Natal, *Blue Book on Native Affairs, 1904* (Pietermaritzburg, 1905), Report, RM Ndwedwe, 3 January 1905, p. 36.

also supposedly one of the reasons why faction fights were more common: elders were powerless to stop them. And the alcohol, too, which the young men did not know how to handle, also lowered their inhibitions about fighting. The only answer was for the state to give elders more authority, which it did in the 1891 Native Law Code and the 1903 beer drinking regulations.⁵¹

For African elders to blame faction fighting almost entirely on young men and beer was not only self-serving, it was also disingenuous, as we shall see. But it is true that the vast majority of participants were young men. Moreover, faction fighting as a social institution was closely connected with ideologies of masculinity, and with the masculinity of young men, in particular. Jonathan Clegg, in his earlier incarnation as a sociologist before he became a famous musician, attributed the rise of faction fighting historically to a crisis of masculinity. The economic decline experienced by Africans made it increasingly difficult for young men to achieve the prestigious position of homestead head, and white racism excluded them from newer positions of prestigious manhood. At the same time there occurred a decline in the older institutions of male socialization, which affirmed young men's masculinity in many different ways, including by providing safe outlets in which they could assert their masculinity through stick-fighting. Instead, manhood in many rural areas became increasingly associated with an ideology of vengeance: *ukubuyisa isidumbu*, "bringing back the body." With few other available alternative means of gaining such affirmation, faction fighting picked up much of the slack.⁵²

Arguments that attribute internecine violence to the dysfunctional masculinity of underclass blacks are troubling and not entirely satisfying, partly because they start us on the slippery slope towards blaming the victim. On the other hand, Clegg places front and center

⁵¹ See the copious testimony to this effect from chiefs and headmen in SNA 1/1/145 897/1891 Replies to SNA Circular 1056/1886, 18 December 1886.

⁵² Jonathan Clegg, "*Ukubuyisa isidumbu* – 'Bringing Back the Body': An Examination into the Ideology of Vengeance in the Msinga and Mpofana Rural Locations, 1882-1944," in Phillip Bonner (ed), *Working Papers in Southern African Studies* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1981), vol. 2.

the victimization of young black men through racism and the poverty it produces, as do other arguments which emphasize the role of masculinity, such as Carton's. And many, even most, men – throughout history and all over the world, across boundaries of class – have (at least at times) linked their own dignity with masculinity and violence: Warfare, murder, and rape, as well as fighting, have always been overwhelmingly male activities. In the case of faction fighting in rural colonial Natal, however, Clegg and Carton's arguments falter because they talk about masculinity without linking it with women and sexuality. Young, unmarried men (*izinsizwa*) needed wives before they could become full-fledged men (*amadoda*), with all the rights, privileges, and prestige such a role entailed. And even though land disputes were frequently at the root of the ongoing wars between chiefdoms in colonial Natal, young men also needed wives before they could have access to land.

The connection between masculinity, women, sexuality, and faction fighting comes out clearly when one considers that many faction fights were attributed to romantic conflicts: two groups of men might fight because of their competition over certain women, or a jilted lover might try to regain his honor by declaring war on her people.⁵³ Note also that weddings were one of the most common occasions for the beer parties that so often seemed to lead to young men fighting. Several elders even identified this as the main cause of faction fights, such as the chief who said, "The fighting is chiefly caused by the presence on these occasions of young girls which creates jealousy between the groups of young men from different localities, each group wishing to obtain preference from the girls to do so by dancing and jumping (*gwiya*) to please the girls."⁵⁴ Many young men who lost these dancing competitions felt humiliation and "jealousy on account of the girls not dancing with them, or that others have been preferred before them."⁵⁵ Some of the men who were rejected in this way would then

⁵³ See, for example, SNA 1/4/5 C42/1898 Report of Native Intelligence Officer No. 2, 9 September 1898; SNA 1/1/306 3601/1903 RM Umsinga to USNA, 25 November 1903.

⁵⁴ SNA 1/1/145 897/1891 Minutes of the meeting at Verulam, Inanda, 10 December 1884, testimony of Mananabukana, hereditary chief of the Ngwane.

⁵⁵ SNA 1/1/145 897/1891 Meeting of Chiefs at Camperdown, 11 November 1884, testimony of Mngundane.

dance, not for the girls to judge, but in the faces of the men who were their rivals. An official compared this act to “the traditional trailing of a coat at an Irish faction fight”⁵⁶: an act of defiance so humiliating that to ignore it would be to call one’s own masculinity into question. In other cases, “a rejected lover is said to go to a marriage dance he has nothing to do with and repeatedly giya in the face of the bride in such a defiant manner that a fight ensues.”⁵⁷

Other scholars, too, have traced in some detail how violence is often caused by a loss of dignity and the sense of shame that results. For example, James Gilligan, in a wide-ranging examination of very diverse forms of violence, time and again finds shame and a loss of dignity as the psychological triggers for violence. Of course, poverty and political and social subordination are leading causes of such shame.⁵⁸ In a similar vein, the political scientist James Scott adds that that same political and social subordination also prevents its victims from finding catharsis by asserting themselves against those who dominate them:

We may capture the existential dilemma at work here by contrasting it briefly with Hegel’s analysis of the duelist. A person challenges another to a duel because he judges that his honor and standing (including often that of his family) to have been mortally insulted. He demands an apology or retraction, failing which his honor can be satisfied only by a duel to the death. What the challenge to a duel says, symbolically, is that to accept this insult is to lose standing, without which life is not worth living (the ideal code, seldom rigorously followed, of the warrior aristocrat). Who wins the duel is symbolically irrelevant; it is the challenge that restores honor. If the challenger loses, he paradoxically wins his point by demonstrating that he was willing to wager his physical life in order to preserve his honor, his name. The very logic of the duel makes its status as an ideal apparent; any code that preaches the assertion of standing and honor at the expense of life itself is likely to have many lukewarm adherents in a pinch. For most bondsmen through history, whether untouchables, slaves, serfs, captives, minorities held in contempt, the trick to survival, not always mastered by any means, has been to swallow one’s bile, choke back one’s rage, and conquer the impulse to physical violence.⁵⁹

Clearly, Scott’s (and Hegel’s) metaphor is relevant to the faction fighting case: Here too we

⁵⁶ SNA 1/1/145 897/1891 RM Lower Tugela to SNA, 28 December 1886.

⁵⁷ SNA 1/1/145 897/1891 ANL & BA Lower Tugela, 28 October 1884.

⁵⁸ James Gilligan, *Violence: Reflections on Our Deadliest Epidemic* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1992).

⁵⁹ James Scott, *Hidden Transcripts: Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 37.

have a kind of duel, based on an ideology of honor, but *among* socially subordinated people. What if the duelist in one context were the “bondsmen” in another? Might not the unacted-upon, pent-up rage and impulse to physical violence produced in one context be released in the other? Perhaps this might help to explain the great increase in fighting among Africans at the same time as their racial subordination was becoming more intense and consequential. Of course, there were other, possibly more important, factors at work, as well.

The Role of Elders

But it would not do to see faction fighting strictly as the work of young men, sexually frustrated, drunk, lashing out as much against the elders who try to restrain them as against the young men of the opposing faction, even if this was what some elders told colonial officials. Actually, such claims should be treated with suspicion *especially* because they were made by elders before colonial officials. Elders, too, had an interest not only in waging these small-scale wars, but also in concealing their involvement from prying officials.

The evidence of faction fighting youths also attacking their elders is both thin and highly unreliable. For example, Carton quotes one homestead head as saying that “boys [had been] behaving in a most contemptuous manner to men much their senior [in] years. They even struck those with head-rings [male elders] who happened to interfere when fights arose. ... This had never happened before.”⁶⁰ But this man was testifying at the 1906-7 Natal Native Affairs Commission, convened after the 1906 rebellion to investigate the causes of that particular outbreak of violence. Elders were virtually the only Africans that government officials ever consulted, and the elders consistently used such opportunities to lobby for increased power over and against both women and youths. The lobbying worked, for, as John Lambert and others have shown, “Throughout these years and until the end of the colonial period, the thrust of official policy in Natal remained the preservation of the hierarchical and

⁶⁰ Carton, *Blood from Your Children*, p. 74.

patriarchal nature of African society.”⁶¹ But the African witnesses before the 1906-7 commission had another motive for talking about conflict between themselves and young men: thus could they distance themselves from accusations of involvement in or support of the rebellion.

Evidence of specific cases of young men and their elders coming to blows over faction fighting is also sparse and unreliable. For example, Carton relies entirely on accounts relating to one particular on-going feud, that between the Mabaso under Tulwana and the Thembu under Mabizela and, later, his successor Ngqamuzana.⁶² The Thembu and Mabaso are two neighboring chiefdoms located in Umsinga district, which was during the colonial era one of the most densely-populated in Natal. It was also the district where Jonathan Clegg did his research on the ideology of vengeance. Land disputes between the two chiefdoms seem to date back at least to the 1880s, prompting the government in 1897 to draw an official boundary separating them.⁶³ Though the Thembu chiefdom was ten times bigger than the Mabaso, and therefore both more needful of land and better able to enforce its claims militarily, the Mabaso chief Tulwana felt shortchanged by the new boundary. Between 1902 and 1905, armed conflict between the two chiefdoms broke out on several occasions. The largest battle was on November 23, 1905, when five men were killed, numerous homesteads burnt or destroyed, and large amounts of livestock were looted. It could have been even worse, for three large neighboring chiefdoms had made alliances with one or the other of the antagonists and were about to intervene militarily themselves until the police stepped in. The resident magistrate maintained that, if it had not been for the police, this could have been the largest faction fight in the history of the colony.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Lambert, *Betrayed Trust*, p. 52.

⁶² Carton, *Blood from Your Children*, p. 86n50. Two of the three minute papers referred to in this note deal with the Mabaso-Thembu feud. The third citation must be an error, for it has no reference to “young men raising their fists against elders.”

⁶³ Colony of Natal, *Blue Book for Native Affairs, 1897* (Pietermaritzburg, 1898), p. 36.

⁶⁴ Colony of Natal, *Blue Book for Native Affairs, 1905* (Pietermaritzburg, 1906), Report, RM Umsinga, 2 January 1906, p. 3.

The chiefs and other elders involved in the Thembu-Mabaso feud claimed that the young men of both chiefdoms had fought in flagrant defiance of their orders. The Thembu chief Mabizela, for example, said that When I heard of the fight I said to Ndabazibona [one of his headmen], why have my orders been disobeyed, I issued orders that none of my men were to go to the dance, except Sikopela and his daughter. I was very angry because my men went to the dance in defiance of my order and had I not been afraid of the Magistrate, I should have killed them. I sent to my headman, Zixuku, who lives on the Umsinga Mountain on Saturday and Sunday to tell him to order all men living under him to remain quietly at their kraals and not to go about the country carrying shields.⁶⁵

Similarly, the opposing chief, Tulwana, claimed that neither the presence of the police nor the remonstrations of chiefdom elders were sufficient to keep their youths from engaging the invading *impi* (army) militarily: As the police were about to go up the hill to question the impi, it came down from the hill towards the kraal of Magadhlela where my people were. My men then said, “as they are coming down the hill, they will reach the kraal and kill us,” the boys (abafana) saying “we shall not allow them to come to our kraal.” The men (amadoda) did not succeed in keeping the boys back and they went to meet the approaching impi.⁶⁶

But, upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that Mabizela, at least, was far from the pacifist he claimed to be. For example, in 1902, four of Tulwana’s headmen accused Mabizela of threatening to have his forces destroy the Mabaso chiefdom in one day, leaving the bodies of men and women stacked upon each other just like at Isandlwana, where the Zulu army had routed the British. The Under-Secretary for Native Affairs doubted the accusations, partly because Tulwana’s men may have had ulterior motives in making them, namely to discredit Mabizela and thus win a better hearing from the government in their ongoing land dispute. But the USNA also doubted the accusations because Tulwana’s headmen claimed “that Mabizela was sober when he made threats which a man of his position would not for a moment dare to make in public, especially after the serious warning you gave him in February

⁶⁵ SNA 1/1/306 3601/1903 Statement, Mabizela, Thembu Chief, Umsinga, 16 November 1903.

⁶⁶ Ibid., Statement, Tulwana, Amabaso Chief, Umsinga, 16 November 1903.

of this year.”⁶⁷ Such a “serious warning” might make a chief refrain from making war on his neighbors, but if he was really determined, threats of government action would only make him more circumspect.

In fact, when whites were not present, chiefs and elders sang a very a different tune. Evidence for this comes from the confidential reports of Africans hired by the state to work as spies from 1897 onwards. Chiefs who claimed to be cooperative pacifists in their meetings with officials were very belligerent in other settings. For example, one spy quoted Mabizela as saying that “if he were not afraid of the Government he would wipe out the tribe of Kula.”⁶⁸ A very common theme in these reports is the lengths to which chiefs and other elders would go in participating in faction fights without being detected. Thus the same spy also alleged that Deliweyo had said “that when he heard that the two tribes [his own and Chief Swayimana’s Nyuswa] were likely to fight, he would go to his kraal near to the Indwedwe, so that he could report to the Magistrate that there had been a fight, and in this manner, clear himself.” The spy claimed to have been present at an assembly where Deliweyo’s opponent, Swayimana, told his subjects how to proceed against other neighboring chiefdoms: “when there was a wedding in Ngangezwe’s tribe they were to join in the dance and not to go as on-lookers, so that if there were a fight with Mdepa’s men they would not be so harshly dealt with when the evidence showed that they were partakers in the festivities and not on-lookers only.”⁶⁹ The spies told of many other chiefs offering up similar strategies: Chief Silwane told his soldiers to wrap their spears in cloth and go to a wedding with a large group of people from the chiefdom. Those on the outside of the crowd would be unarmed and would thus further conceal the armed soldiers in the center. He would also make sure that the magistrate had given him and his people permission to attend the wedding, as such permission had proven to be good grounds for defense in faction fight trials.⁷⁰ There were many reports of chiefs making

⁶⁷ SNA 1/1/297 2567/1902 USNA to SNA, 4 August 1902.

⁶⁸ SNA 1/4/6 C36/1899 Report of Native Intelligence Officer No. 1, 3 August 1899.

⁶⁹ SNA 1/4/6 C13/1899 Report of Native Intelligence Officer No. 1, 15 May 1899.

alliances with one another. In one case, Chief Tshutshutshu told his allied chiefs not to be present at the fight, the better to avoid being implicated when the authorities investigated.⁷¹ “Native Intelligence Officer No. 1” concluded one of his intelligence reports by saying, “Everywhere I hear the men saying that they are not afraid of the authorities, because the Lawyers will get them off if they fight. This is the talk at beer drinks. At beer drinks everyone talks of fighting, even the chiefs.”⁷²

Doubtless such reports made resident magistrates increasingly skeptical about chiefs’ protestations of innocence. In the conferences that took place in the mid-1880s regarding the “evils of beer-drinking,” officials tended to accept the chiefs’ attribution of faction fighting to out-of-control youths. Even during the 1880s and 1890s, the government did little to clamp down on chiefs like Sawoti and Thetheleku, who tried to take land from neighboring chiefdoms, and in some cases even allowed those chiefs to wage war with impunity.⁷³ After about 1900, however, the state’s attitude towards chiefs started to change. At first officials simply became more suspicious of individual chiefs, and more receptive to accusations of faction fighting made against chiefs by their rivals or by African spies. Thus, in 1903, one resident magistrate accused Chief Ndlovu ka Thimuni of having orchestrated a faction fight by his subjects, and even of having fined those who refused to participate.⁷⁴ That same year, the chiefdom of Chief Lewis “Tim” Ogle, also known as Ntembo, another Eurafrican descendant of an early Port Natal trader, was involved in several large faction fights. The resident magistrate of Ogle’s district, who presided over the trial of Ogle’s subjects, concluded that, despite Ogle’s own testimony otherwise, “the evidence led showed that Ogle actually urged his men to fight.”⁷⁵ In 1905, one chief, Gobosi, was deposed for having worked with his

⁷⁰ SNA 1/4/6 C36/1899 Report of Native Intelligence Officer No. 1, 3 August 1899.

⁷¹ SNA 1/4/9 C49/1901 Report of Native Intelligence Officer No. 1, 16 November 1901.

⁷² SNA 1/4/5 C34/1898 Report of Native Intelligence Officer No. 1, 7 November 1898.

⁷³ Lambert, *Betrayed Trust*, p. 129.

⁷⁴ SNA 1/1/299 289/1903 RM Lower Tugela to USNA, 23 January 1903.

⁷⁵ SNA 1/1/302 2013/1903 RM Newcastle to RM Alexandra, 31 March 1903.

headmen to cover up the involvement of some of his subjects in faction fighting, while the next year another chief, Bhambatha, was deposed for having actively participated in a faction fight.

⁷⁶ Of all these chiefs, Bhambatha and Ndlovu would be two of the three most prominent leaders of the rebellion in 1906.

The Role of the Government

Of course, elders usually had very good reasons for engaging in warfare with neighboring chiefdoms. The most common of these, and one that comes up time and time again in the accounts of individual faction fights, was land. Whatever they may say about the other factors at work, and however much they may disagree on other points, scholars are virtually unanimous in tracing faction fighting to overcrowding on reserve lands.⁷⁷ It is no coincidence that those areas where faction fighting was most common tended to be those that were most densely populated and composed mostly or entirely of reserve lands. Among these were also the districts that sent out the highest numbers of migrant workers and would later be centers of rebellion in 1906: the Thukela valley districts on the Natal side, such as Kranskop, Umsinga, Mapumulo, and Lower Tugela.⁷⁸

But the land hunger that fed this conflict was an artificial land hunger. Population densities were usually much lower on white-owned land, and the disparity between white land and African land grew amid the wholesale evictions of the later colonial period. It was the government that recognized most of the trekker land expropriation of the late 1830s and 1840s,

⁷⁶ SNA 1/1/330 3117/1905 RM Ndwedwe reports unsatisfactory conduct of the Acting Chief Gobosi, Amanuswa Tribe, 21 November 1905; SNA 1/1/333 78/1906 RM Umvoti, 8 January 1906.

⁷⁷ Clegg, "Ukubuyisa Isidumbu," pp. 164-5; Lambert, *Betrayed Trust*, pp. 72, 128; William Beinart, "Political and Collective Violence in Southern African Historiography," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 18, no. 3 (September 1992),

⁷⁸ NPP 146 No. 109, 1886, Return showing the number of faction fights and the number of natives concerned therein from the 1st of September 1884 to the 30th of Sept. 1886; Colony of Natal, *Blue Book for Native Affairs, 1896* (Pietermaritzburg, 1897), p. 2; Colony of Natal, *Blue Book for Native Affairs, 1897* (Pietermaritzburg, 1898), p. 24; CSO 1793 5586/1905 Return shewing the fines inflicted by Magistrates on Natives for assaults, including faction fighting, for the nine months – July, 1904 to March, 1905; Carton, *Blood from Your Children*, pp. 74-5.

that set aside only about one-sixth of the land in Natal, and relatively infertile land at that, for African occupation, that facilitated the expulsion of African tenants from white-owned land, and that made it increasingly difficult for Africans to buy land outside the reserves.

It has further been argued that white-dominated governments were also responsible for faction fighting in a larger sense. Beinart, for example, in discussing “violence within or between African communities” throughout southern Africa, identifies several ways in which the government created an atmosphere conducive to such violence: 1) by creating divisions among the colonized, 2) by consciously fostering conflict between the different units thus created, 3) by pursuing policies that led to immiseration and social dislocation and therefore frustration and despair that found outlets in violence, and 4) by neglecting to police predominantly African areas to such an extent that violence was allowed to flourish.⁷⁹ Addressing colonial Natal specifically, Lambert blames the government not only for contributing to overcrowding in the reserves, but also for either adopting a “laissez-faire” attitude towards faction fighting or, conversely, punishing so indiscriminately that tensions between chiefdoms only increased, and bystanders had little incentive to remain aloof, reckoning they would be punished even if they did not participate. The state also exacerbated succession disputes – admittedly a common phenomenon even in pre-colonial days –by its ham-handed treatment of them.⁸⁰

To these I would like to add three further points. First, if there were contradictions in colonial policy on faction fighting, it was because the colonizers were not united to begin with. Colonial debates over policy exacerbated violence among Africans. Second, there were conflicts among the colonized from the beginning, as well. This point bears some repeating, for no administrating authority, whether colonial or not, would have been able to please all parties in such conflicts. Indeed, different groups of Africans often found allies among different groups of Europeans. When this happened, the division between colonizer and

⁷⁹ Beinart, “Political and Collective Violence,” pp. 465-8.

⁸⁰ Lambert, *Betrayed Trust*, pp. 128-131.

colonized was still important and relevant, but only a small part of a larger drama that played havoc with such boundaries. Finally, government policy was not static. It changed over time, often in response to African reactions to those policies. While sometimes African reactions to colonial initiatives could prompt the colonizers to reform those initiatives in ways that were more pleasing to Africans, in this particular case the opposite happened: colonial officials became progressively more brutal and uncompromising in their actions towards Africans.

One case study well illustrates all these factors, namely the Qwabe succession dispute of the 1890s and early 1900s. The Qwabe succession dispute was important for several reasons. First, it was the largest, longest, bloodiest, most intractable internal conflict in colonial Natal, leading to persistent fighting and dozens of deaths over a period of fifteen years. Second, it had an enormous influence on colonial policy. It arguably contributed to the growing tendency on the part of colonizers to see faction fighting as a threat to colonial rule itself. The change was manifest not only in new attitudes, but also in new legislation. At first the Qwabe succession divided Europeans as much as it did Africans. In the end, though, it united Europeans by largely ending settler opposition to the Shepstonian notion of the Supreme Chief. Ironically, though, the new, unhindered Supreme Chief made the settler-dominated government that much more heedless of African public opinion, setting the stage for the rebellion of 1906. It is no accident that the leader of the largest outbreak of that rebellion was Meseni, the Qwabe chief (and not Bhambatha, whose role in the rebellion has been greatly exaggerated by posterity). And yet, however much the government's handling of the dispute may have pushed Meseni into rebellion, the dispute also further divided both the Qwabe chiefdom and its neighbors to such a degree that it is a wonder the rebellion ever got the broad support it did.⁸¹

In fact, when the rebellion finally broke out, the two Qwabe factions that had feuded so bitterly for such a long time – with episodes of moral combat as late as 1905 – actually joined

⁸¹ Because of the length restrictions that most seminars place on papers to be presented, a detailed examination of the Qwabe succession dispute has been excised here.

forces. This was not the only case where future allies were killing each other only months before. Meseni's allies in 1906 included men from Xekwana's Nyuswa, Swayimana's Nyuswa, Ngqokwana's Mbedu, and Njubanjuba's Luthuli. There had been ongoing feuds between Meseni's Qwabe and each of these other chiefdoms.⁸² The turnabout in 1906 was a mystery to colonial officials, and perhaps even to the rebels themselves. As the resident magistrate of Ndwedwe said in 1907, in the aftermath of the rebellion, "What induced the Nyuswa tribe to throw in their lot with Messeni they themselves cannot say, especially as there was a long standing feud between the members of the two tribes."⁸³ The following chapters will attempt to explain this mystery.

⁸² For the Qwabe vs. the Nyuswa, see SNA 1/1/287 1688/1899 RM Mapumulo to SNA, 26 August 1899; SNA 1/4/14 C41/1905 RM Lower Tugela to USNA, 28 October 1905. For the Qwabe vs. the Luthuli, see Colony of Natal, *Blue Book for Native Affairs, 1897* (Pietermaritzburg, 1898), p. 3. For the Qwabe vs. the Mbedu, which had itself broken away from the Qwabe chiefdom in pre-Shakan times, see SNA 1/1/282 1734/1898 Papers re boundary dispute between Meseni and Ngqokwana, 16 August 1898 - 19 November 1903.

⁸³ SNA 1/1/367 1116/1907 Magisterial Reports not to be published, Report, RM Ndwedwe, 17 April 1907.