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The Khoisan peoples & Bantu-speaking settlement

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The environment

In contrast to the tropical lands to the north, the geographical region of South Africa offers a changing and often harsh environment. The greater part of the region is an inland plateau. Here it is hot in summer and freezing cold on winter nights when bitter Antarctic air from the south sweeps over the land. Much of the inland plateau tilts gently to the west. Thus the Orange River, forming with its tributaries the main drainage system of the South African highveld, flows westward to the Atlantic. Further to the north, however, the Limpopo, which forms part of South Africa's northern border, flows eastward in a wide curve around the northern limit of the plateau.

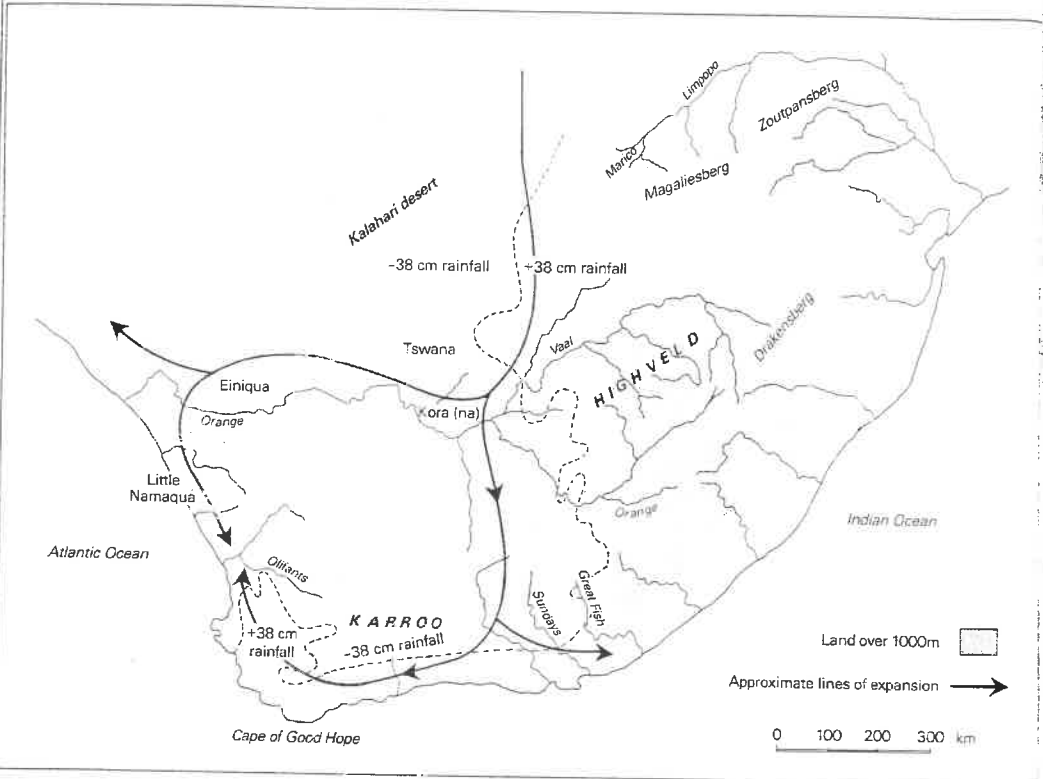
Stretching from the north-east to the south, a mountain escarpment separates the highveld from a lowland coastal strip of varying width. The escarpment rises to its greatest heights in the Drakensberg mountain range which separates the highveld of the Orange Free State and southern Transvaal from the coastal lands of the Transkei and Natal. The highest peaks of the Drakensberg range and the associated range of the Maluti mountains are found within the borders of Lesotho.

The central plateau itself presents a varied landscape. Large expanses of open plain known in Afrikaans as the *platteland* are broken by mountain ranges. These include the Magaliesberg near Fretoria and much rugged country in the lands near the borders of the western Transvaal and Botswana. In the far north of the Transvaal lies the Zoutpansberg range and, further south, the Waterberg mountains. In Namibia (formerly South-West Africa), the plateau falls away to an extensive basin in the central Kalahari desert. In the north-eastern Transvaal, the land also drops away to a more low-lying area, the Transvaal lowveld.

Most of the South African region receives its major rainfall between November and April, brought by winds blowing from the Indian Ocean. Rains are heaviest on the eastern coastal strip and the mountainous escarpment, and decline as the winds move westward across the plateau area. A cold current which flows northwards along the west coast causes most of the moisture brought by winds from the Atlantic to fall over the sea, so that very little reaches the land. The climate over most of South Africa thus becomes progressively drier from east to west with semi-desert or desert conditions in the Kalahari.

Near the Cape of Good Hope, however, the climate pattern is different. This southernmost tip of the continent catches winds from the Atlantic

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1.1 South Africa, showing relief and rainfall and the probable migration routes of the Khoi

blowing between May and October. The winds bring rain which falls as the rain clouds are forced to rise over the mountains of the Cape. The western Cape thus has cold, wet winters and hot, dry summers similar to those of the Mediterranean countries. The area is well suited to the growing of wheat, grapes and other European fruit crops. The mountains of the Cape series which bring about the winter rain, however, create a rain shadow in the hinterland producing an extensive area of semi-desert known as the *karroo*.

The earliest peoples

South Africa, together with the uplands of central and east Africa, provided a home for the earliest known forms of man and his pre-human relatives. In 1924 the fossilised skull of an ape-like creature with some humanoid features was discovered near Taung in the Transvaal. In later years there

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were further discoveries at several other sites in the Transvaal. These produced bones and tools which are at least 1.5 million years old and which represent evidence of a very early class of ape man, now classified as *Australopithecus*.

In South Africa numerous finds have been made of the crude so-called pebble tools, possibly the first form of man-made object, and of the more sophisticated stone hand axes typical of the Early Stone Age in Africa. These give way to the more varied stone tools of the Middle Stone Age and again gradually to the carefully shaped, often tiny (microlithic), stone implements of the Late Stone Age.

This late Stone Age culture continued to be practised down to historic times by some of South Africa's most ancient peoples who are known as the San (called the Twa by Bantu-speakers and, derogatively, Bushmen by later European settlers). The San or related peoples were at one time very widespread in central and east as well as southern Africa. This can be seen in the record of stone implements found throughout these regions and in the existence of small pockets of people in east Africa speaking languages containing the click consonants which occur only in Khoisan languages and those of peoples who have been in contact with them. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries they had been absorbed into other cultural communities in most of their original territory. They survived, however, in Namibia and neighbouring Botswana, southern Angola and a small area of Zambia, in the hinterland of the Cape up to and somewhat beyond the Orange river, and along the east coast up to the neighbourhood of the Great Fish river. Elsewhere throughout southern Africa, small San communities survived here and there in isolated and barren pockets in territories long occupied by Bantu-speaking populations. San communities survived in the mountains of Lesotho, for example, until the second half of the nineteenth century.

The San were originally foragers practising no agriculture and keeping no domestic animals other than dogs. In communities which retained or were forced to revert to this way of life the men hunted wild animals using bows and poisoned arrows. The women collected wild bulbs, tubers and fruits, digging up the ground with pointed sticks weighted with heavy stones. They were organised in small communities, hunting bands made up of a few hundred members at most. Political organisation was simple; in many cases decisions were simply taken by discussion and agreement amongst the adult men. In some cases a leader was recognised as chief but his authority still depended on the agreement of the other adults. Each band occupied an extensive but clearly defined territory. Within this territory the band would migrate from waterhole to waterhole in pursuit of wild game and wild-growing vegetable foods. Movement across territorial boundaries into the area of another band, however, required formal consent, and intrusion without permission was met by force.

The San of southern Africa, like some hunting and gathering peoples in other parts of the world, had great artistic gifts. They used natural colours and dyes to decorate the rock faces of many of their caves and shelters. The best examples of their work capture the grace and movement of antelopes and other game with extraordinary vividness and accuracy. Apart from their artistic value, these paintings provide an important historic record. They show not only the animals the San hunted but also scenes of San

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The San



A San rock painting

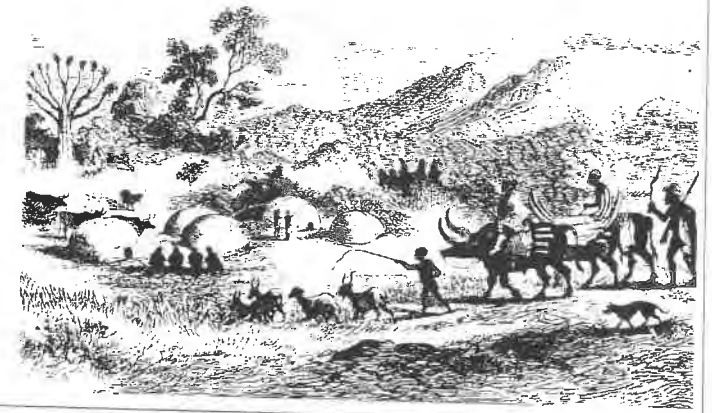
meeting Bantu-speaking peoples. In some of the most recent paintings white farmers make their appearance.

In contrast to the stereotype formerly portrayed, San culture has been shown by recent research to have been neither self-enclosed nor impervious to change. When contact was established with other peoples they commonly entered into trading relationships with them, exchanging game, meat, animal skins and ostrich eggshell beads for other products, such as iron for arrow heads. The development of such trade may perhaps explain the origin of the Berg Dama (Damaras) in Namibia. Their physical appearance suggests kinship with the Bantu-speaking peoples but they speak San languages and follow a predominantly hunting and gathering lifestyle. Originally they may have been descended from small groups of Bantu traders who penetrated deep into San-occupied country and settled there.

Apart from exchanging their own specialised products the San appear to have been prepared to adopt new food-producing methods from other peoples with whom they came in contact. There is now a great deal of archaeological evidence demonstrating that from about two thousand years ago pastoralism, accompanied in many cases by the use of ceramics, had been adopted by numerous Late Stone Age communities over a large part, if not the whole, of southern Africa. Sheep and goats appear to have been most important initially, with horned cattle subsequently playing the greater role.

This development pre-dates the advent of Iron Age peoples in South Africa by several hundred years and presumably arose from contact between the San and a pastoral people (perhaps a section of the Bantu-speaking peoples) further to the north, possibly in northern Botswana or Angola. The adoption of herding did not mean the abandonment of foraging. Initially domestic animals probably merely supplemented the products of hunting and gathering, though where substantial flocks and herds were built up they would assume the predominant role. On the other hand, where domesticated animals were lost to disease, theft by carnivores or human robbers, the community would revert to a purely foraging lifestyle.

*A Namaqua kraal
(Keith Johnston: Africa, 1878)*



The latest research thus shows that the previously supposed contrast between hunters and herders is largely a myth, the product of European false identification of race with culture as well as of the intellectual demand for categorisation. There is considerable evidence derived from white travellers and explorers as well as from African oral tradition to show that many communities identified as San possessed domestic animals in historic times. Where exclusive reliance on foraging was observed, it may indicate not the continuance of a tradition unchanged from Stone Age times but a more recent adaptation to being driven into an environment unsuitable for pastoralism, specialisation in an exchange relationship with another community, or subordination in a client relationship to a Bantu chiefdom.

Among the San communities which did adopt pastoralism, the most prominent were a widespread group which spoke dialects of a common language related to the Tshukwe group of San languages. They called themselves Khoi-Khoi and were known to the Dutch by the derogatory name Hottentots. They kept cattle as well as a breed of fat-tailed sheep peculiar to the Cape. Cattle formed the centre of their lives and the basis of personal status. The animals were used not only for milk, meat and clothing but were trained for riding and were even used in warfare: specially chosen and trained war-oxen were used to charge hostile groups. In addition to using the products of their herds and flocks, the Khoi also practised hunting and gathering. Like the San they did not engage in agriculture and apart from their animals their material culture remained very basic. For clothing they had only cloaks (called *carosses* in South Africa) made from the skins of their cattle or of wild animals. As a protection against disease their legs were sometimes laced with garters made by twisting the raw entrails of cattle around them. Their homes were simple shelters woven of branches, twigs and grass which were sometimes carried on the backs of oxen when they moved their encampments.

The origins of the Khoi and the routes of their migration and settlement in southern Africa are still not known with certainty. As most of the San group speaking Tshukwe languages have their habitat in northern Botswana, and it seems unlikely that they would have migrated as a complete group over any long distance, it is probable that it was in this general area that their ancestors first adopted the herding of domestic animals.

Environmental circumstances make it appear likely that the Khoi would have spread eastward and settled in Zimbabwe, northern Transvaal and Natal. Bantu-speaking peoples now living there use words associated with stock which appear to have been borrowed from them. If they did once live there, however, they had been absorbed into Bantu-speaking communities before European observers appeared on the scene. A large part of the Khoi seem, however, to have moved south from their centre of origin. Near the junction of the Vaal and Orange rivers they divided into two groups. The first spread out westward along the northern bank of the Orange River, settling in communities later known to the Dutch as the Korana and Einiqua. Near the mouth of the Orange some spread out southward down the coast as far as the Olifants river (the 'little Namaqua') while others turned north into southern Namibia (the 'great Namaqua').

The second group seems to have crossed the Orange river near its junction

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A Khoi village beside the Orange river
(Samuel Daniell: *African Scenery and
Animals*, 1804)

with the Vaal and continued southward, reaching the coast near the Sundays river. From there, some spread out eastward along the coast as far as the Great Fish river. Others moved westward settling the coastal areas down to and around the Cape of Good Hope. They then continued to expand northward up the west coast until they met the 'little Namaqua' near the Olifants river. As they spread out, Khoi communities often absorbed forager bands into their chiefdoms. Sometimes these clients may have adopted the Khoi way of life and been entirely incorporated into the Khoi community. There is evidence for the opposite process also, however. Khoi communities who lost their cattle from natural causes, in warfare or (after the establishment of the Dutch settlements) through trade or conflict with whites, sometimes reverted to a hunting and gathering way of life. A number of such communities lived along the coast, feeding mainly on shellfish. They have left numerous shell middens along the beaches east of the Cape up to and beyond the Great Fish river. The Dutch called them *strandloopers* (beach walkers). Other Khoi groups living a foraging life style they called Bushman-Hottentots.

The Khoi were organised politically in chiefdoms considerably larger than the San hunting bands but generally consisting of no more than one or two thousand members. Each chiefdom was normally made up of a number of clans which recognised a relationship to a senior clan. The head of the senior clan held the office of chief. Each individual clan was made up of the male descendants of a single common ancestor. Each clan also had a recognised head or leader and the clan heads together with the chief made up the government of each chiefdom. In the Khoi chiefdoms decisions were made by the chief in consultation with the other clan heads. The chief had no machinery through which to enforce his decisions; his power was limited by the need to obtain the agreement of the other clan heads and for these to hold the loyalty of their clan members. In these circumstances the authority exercised by chiefs depended very much on personality and a given situation

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and could vary widely. Though normally mainly made up of members of related clans, the membership of Khoi communities was fairly flexible. Families or clans breaking away from one leader would often be received by another and the chiefdoms sometimes incorporated communities of other peoples. For example, San communities and Bantu-speaking groups might be adopted in this way.

As the population of a Khoi chiefdom expanded, the difficulties of herding all the cattle together would lead to the community separating into two or more groups of clans which would set up separate encampments and graze their cattle separately. This was generally the first step towards a break-up of the chiefdoms. The final break was often caused by a quarrel between the chief and some of the clan heads. These clans would then break away and establish a separate chiefdom which, if it flourished, would eventually divide in the same way. Sometimes political disagreement would lead to the earlier division of a chiefdom. The size of chiefdoms could therefore vary considerably. Possession of cattle provided the Khoi with the opportunity and incentive to engage in economic relations with other peoples. Regular trading relations with Bantu-speaking peoples were established in pre-colonial times, and after the Dutch settled at the Cape the Khoi were drawn into trade with them.

As personal standing in Khoi communities depended on possession of cattle, a man who had none was forced to be the client of a wealthier person. Once trade with whites became established, other material goods also became marks of status. Khoi were therefore prepared to make considerable sacrifices to obtain them. They could thus be persuaded much more easily than the San to enter the services of white masters and alter their way of life for material rewards.

Iron Age peoples

Archaeological evidence shows that settled food-producing communities acquainted with the techniques of smelting iron and other metals were established in much of modern Mozambique, Zimbabwe and some areas in the north and north-east of South Africa as early as the third to fourth centuries AD. These peoples made pottery of a general type that was very widespread throughout central and east Africa and has been used to identify the Early Iron Age in this area. Evidence from the area as a whole shows that this Early Iron Age culture was practised in the neighbourhood of the great lakes in east Africa as early as 300 BC. By the second and third centuries AD it seems to have reached the east African coast. It then spread rapidly southward into what are now Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa in the fourth and fifth centuries. The spread of the Iron Age culture probably involved both the immigration and settlement of new peoples and the adoption of new technologies by some of the established Khoisan population. Intermingling and intermarriage between the newcomers and the earlier population was doubtless common. Over time, however, the language of the newcomers, albeit enriched by borrowings from Khoisan tongues, was to prevail. From the material remains of the Early Iron Age culture it is impossible to identify the languages spoken by the peoples involved. It is most probable, however, that they spoke Bantu languages: otherwise some remnants of their language would have survived in the present Bantu languages of the area, as is the case with the Khoisan click sounds.

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From about the eleventh century in southern Africa, as well as in most of central and east Africa, the Early Iron Age pottery tradition rapidly gave way to different forms typical of the Later Iron Age. These later forms remained virtually unaltered until recent times. Though the appearance of the new style pottery might suggest the arrival of a new immigrant population, examination of occupation sites indicates continuity of settlement and general culture. It is now considered most probable that the new style did not involve significant population movement but the spread of the practice of pottery-making by women rather than by the men who had practised the earlier styles.

Early Iron Age communities in the forested areas on the Natal coast appear to have been predominantly dependent on agriculture, whereas in the arid areas near the Kalahari the established pastoralist tradition remained predominant with agriculture playing a minor role. Subsequently, however, cattle-keeping was to become central to the cultural and political life of Bantu-speaking peoples throughout the area. In most of southern Africa the words used for sheep and cattle in Bantu languages are derived from Khoisan words which are not used by Bantu speakers north of the Zambezi. This suggests that the strong emphasis on cattle-keeping may have been derived from contact with Khoisan pastoralists. It is also possible that the development of hierarchically structured chiefdoms by southern African Bantu speakers may have been related to the heightened role of cattle in their culture. The possibilities offered by control of cattle for the extension of political power seem to have been important in the development of the first known large-scale socio-political organisations in southern Africa: at Toutswevogola near the Kalahari in Botswana from perhaps as early as 900 AD and at the twin sites of Bambandyanalo and Mapungubwe in the northern Transvaal between that date and 1250 AD. In both cases a substantial central settlement was surrounded at a distance by several smaller centres, each at the hub of a network of smaller villages or hamlets. Evidence of the bones of animals consumed at the main centres indicates that they could not have all been provided from herds kept locally, and some must have come from tribute from the smaller settlements where consumption was less extravagant. Finds of goods of east coast origin have been made at these sites, both of which pre-date the rise of Great Zimbabwe. Trade with the Indian Ocean coast was thus clearly established by the earlier years of the second millennium AD. It may have been critical to the rise of Bambandyanalo/Mapungubwe where there was a significant trade in gold, but is unlikely to have played a key role in the emergence of Toutswevogola where the evidence of trade goods is more sparse.

Whether the first iron-using communities came into southern Africa in one or two identifiable streams, or in a whole series of small groups over the whole front from the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic, is a matter of current controversy. The groups which settled in South Africa, however, either inherited or developed an essentially common culture, though recognisable linguistic and cultural subgroupings can be discerned.

The Nguni

Along the coastal land between the Drakensberg and the Indian Ocean lived a large number of communities speaking closely related languages to which the name Nguni has been given. These dialects are all mutually

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Nguni settlement
(Ludwig Alberti's *Account of the Tribal
Life and Customs of the Xhosa in 1807*)

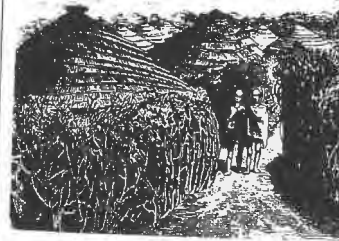
intelligible though there are considerable differences of pronunciation and vocabulary between the northern and the southern branches of the group. All Nguni make frequent use of the three click consonants derived from the Khoisan. In addition to the common base of their languages, the Nguni are distinguished from their neighbours by strict exogamy rules, forbidding marriage to any partner whose descent can be traced from a common ancestor. Many also have a taboo against eating fish. It should be emphasised however that there were significant cultural variations between different communities within the group, and that the differences between them and the neighbouring Sotho-speaking communities were neither sharp nor unbridgeable. Where communities belonging to the different linguistic sub-groupings were in contact they readily learnt and adopted one another's languages and customs. The apparent precision of the divisions between sub-groupings, as well as the names given to them, are the product of European scholarship's demand for classification. To that extent they are in fact inventions, although they do reflect real patterns of similarities.

The eastern coastlands on which the Nguni settled are the best-watered areas in South Africa and also have some of the most fertile soil. This may have encouraged their population to grow faster and to spread further south than other groups. Before contact with the whites of the Cape Colony, the Xhosa, the southernmost of the Nguni peoples, had already settled along the coastal strip as far south as the Great Fish river. In the eighteenth century they were beginning to occupy the area immediately beyond it. Nguni-speaking communities also expanded out of the coastal area and settled over wide areas of the Transvaal highveld as well as in the neighbourhood of modern Lesotho.

The abundance of springs and rivers in the territory they occupied may help to explain why the Nguni lived in small family hamlets. At the southern limits of their settlement the Nguni peoples were settled alongside Khoi groups. Their neighbours to the north were the Thonga peoples of southern Mozambique. Their origin has as yet been inadequately studied

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The Sotho-Tswana



Street in a Tswana town
(Keith Johnston: *Africa*, 1878)

*Other Bantu-
speaking groups*

*Social, economic and
political organisation*

but they are probably fairly closely related to their Nguni neighbours.

Over the greater part of the central plateau of South Africa (the area now comprising Botswana, the Transvaal, the Bechuanaland districts of the Cape, the Orange Free State and Lesotho) the majority of the Bantu-speaking population belonged to the Sotho-Tswana group. These peoples speak a group of languages that are mutually intelligible with one another though not with Nguni languages. There are considerable differences in dialect, however particularly between those of the westernmost members of the group, who are called Tswana, and the rest who are known as the Sotho. Differences between the dialects of the northern and southern Sotho are also considerable. Unlike the Nguni, Sotho-Tswana marriage rules encourage marriage between cross-cousins, a relationship which the Nguni regard as incestuous.

The lands occupied by the Sotho-Tswana group are less well watered than those of the Nguni and this is particularly true of the areas near the Kalahari occupied by the Tswana communities. Such conditions may explain why the Tswana in particular lived in fairly large towns situated where permanent water was available. The Sotho lived in villages of a size falling between the large towns of the Tswana and the small hamlets of the Nguni. Before the nineteenth century, the Sotho-Tswana had not spread as far to the south as the Nguni. Their southernmost settlements had not yet reached the line of the Orange river where Khoisan communities persisted.

Though the main centres of Nguni and Sotho-Tswana settlement are clearly geographically distinct, the two language and culture groups were by no means cut off from contact with one another. Many Nguni-speaking communities crossed the escarpment in past times and migrated on to the Transvaal highveld, settling amongst Sotho-Tswana communities in many different parts of the area. These communities, known to the Sotho-Tswana as Ndebele or Koni, became acculturated to the language and customs of their Sotho neighbours to varying degrees. Further south another Nguni group known as the Zizi formed the first Bantu-speaking settlers in modern Lesotho. At the northern end of the eastern escarpment where it forms a less serious barrier to human movement, Sotho-speakers and Nguni communities lived alongside one another in the area of modern Swaziland.

In the extreme north of the Transvaal, the Zoutpansberg area was occupied by a people known as the Venda who are believed to be closely related to the Shona of Zimbabwe. In northern Botswana some communities of Shona origin, notably the Kalaka, migrated from the north in relatively recent times and settled alongside Tswana communities. Beyond the Kalahari Desert in the northern part of modern Namibia two further groups settled. Their languages were distinct from any other in the Bantu-speaking groups of southern Africa. The Ovambo were the northernmost group; in the drylands to the south and in direct contact with Khoi groups were the Herero. Partly because of their dry surroundings and partly through contact with the Khoi, the Herero, like their Khoi neighbours, practised no agriculture.

From the period when they were first encountered by the European observers, all the Bantu-speaking peoples in southern Africa except the Herero practised a mixed economy. The bulk of their diet was in most cases provided by agriculture. Sorghum and miller were the traditional staples

later supplemented and increasingly replaced by maize after it was introduced to Mozambique by the Portuguese. These cereals were also the chief ingredients of a thick beer which was the main alcoholic beverage. Surplus cereals were stored in storage pits for use during the dry season. Pumpkins, squashes and gourds were also grown and the women collected the leaves of a variety of wild plants as green vegetables. As agriculturalists, the Bantu-speaking people lived a more settled life in more substantial dwellings than the Khoi. Most Nguni peoples built low, dome-shaped huts of woven grass. The Sotho-Tswana, however, built substantial thatched round huts of mud. The lower parts of the walls of these houses were sometimes faced with stone as a protection against rain. Their cattle enclosures were also often built of dry-stone walling. Huts were kept free of dust by treating the floors with a polish made of earth and cow dung. The walls were frequently ornamented with geometric designs drawn in coloured clay.

Vital though agriculture was to the economy of most of the southern Bantu-speaking peoples, it had less importance in their eyes than cattle-keeping. Cattle not only provided milk, meat and skins but constituted a form of capital that could be accumulated and which would increase itself. Most important of all, cattle played an essential role in legitimating marriage. All the southern Bantu-speaking peoples had a patrilineal family system. Marriage therefore involved the transfer of a woman and her potential offspring from the household of her father to that of her husband. This required the transfer of cattle as bridewealth (*lobola*) to the family of her father. A man who possessed many cattle could thus marry several wives. They and their children would build up the economic and political strength of his household. Cattle thus had the highest social value. Their possession conferred status on the individual, the household or the wider community. Their care was the preserve of men while most agricultural work was done by the women. Cattle were essential for ritual sacrifices. The cattle enclosure was the centre of every settlement and often formed the public meeting place for political discussion and ceremonies. Cattle feature in most traditional stories and proverbs.

The possession of cattle not only allowed their owner to acquire women as wives for himself or his sons, it also allowed him to acquire the loyalty of other males as clients. He could do this by loaning some of his cattle to a poorer man. The client would be allowed the use of the milk and sometimes a proportion of the offspring. This system (known to the Sotho as *mafisa*) may have been the means by which some lineage groups were able to build up followers to such an extent that the household was expanded into a chiefdom. Alternatively, the chiefly system may have originated in one or two centres such as Toutswe-mogola and Bambandyanalo/Mapungubwe and diffused from there. Whatever their origin, by the earliest times to which oral tradition or written evidence refers, all the southern Bantu-speaking peoples were organised in such hierarchically structured political communities.

The patrilineal system of the southern Bantu gave rise to groups of persons who could trace their descent from a common ancestor. Each such clan had a common name. Among the Nguni it was often the name of the remembered common ancestor. Among the Sotho-Tswana it was frequently the name of a totem animal. At the centre of each chiefdom there was usually a core of families belonging to such a clan. Their clan name was often used

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Detail from Nguni settlement, p. 9

Chiefdom structure and organisation

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Detail from Tswana town, facing p. 1

for the chiefdom as a whole. Chiefdoms, however, usually contained many families who belonged to other clans. Often these might be the majority. Chiefdoms were in fact political rather than kinship organisations. Chiefs were generally very willing to accept new members who had broken away from other chiefdoms. They sometimes even incorporated Khoi or San, either as full members or as client communities.

Though chiefdoms were essentially political organisations, their administrative structure was based on that of the royal family. This in turn was based on the normal family pattern of a wealthy man. Such men would normally marry several wives. These wives and their children were each accommodated in separate homes, cultivated their own land and possessed household property. Normally some portion of the family head's cattle would be allocated to each such subdivision of his total household. The households of different wives were ranked in an order of seniority. Among the Nguni, the houses of the first and second wife to be married were built on the right and left respectively of the central cattle enclosure. In addition to the 'right-hand house' and 'left-hand house', some Nguni also recognised a 'great house'. This belonged to the senior wife. The eldest son of that house would succeed his father as head of the family and would inherit the greater part of his father's cattle and other property, but the eldest sons in the other houses would become the heads of their respective households and inherit possessions which went with them. The Sotho-Tswana did not classify households as 'right-hand' or 'left-hand' but wives and their households still ranked in an order of seniority. The most senior was the 'great house'.

Chiefs' households differed from those of commoners mainly in the number of followers and servants attached to them and the size of the herds allocated for their support. Sometimes each royal household would form a significant hamlet in itself. The households were sometimes placed in different parts of the chiefdom and served as local centres of justice and administration and rallying points in times of war. When a chief died, the heirs in such subordinate houses would succeed to the headship and property of those houses and to the power of local authority and jurisdiction that went with it. In this way each chiefdom was divided into a series of administrative divisions, some governed directly by the chief and others by other senior members of the royal lineage who were themselves lesser chiefs.

In addition to this hierarchy of 'royals', chiefs and sub-chiefs employed officers known as *induna*, who were appointed on a personal basis and normally chosen from commoner families. *Induna* could be employed in a variety of ways, as messengers, or as envoys to another chiefdom, as commanders of military expeditions or as deputies who acted in the name of the chief in hearing legal cases or exercising administrative authority. The system of multiple households, which involved frequent movement of the chief from one to another, meant that an *induna* would often be left to act in the chief's name during his absence.

Within each chiefdom, the authority of the chief was final. He represented the unity of the community and the living link with its ancestors. Unlike his Khoi counterpart, the Bantu chief had supreme authority in administration and law. Appeals would be brought to his court from those of the other royals who administered divisions of the chiefdom's territory. He was also the religious head of the community. Rituals of significance to the whole community, such as the annual first-fruits ceremony, had to be

performed by him in person. The South African Bantu-speaking peoples did have ritual specialists, particularly witchcraft diviners whose job was to uncover those guilty of sorcery and accused of many ills and misfortunes. In some cases there were also specialist rain-makers though in others this was a function of the chief. Such ritual experts, however, exercised their functions under the authority of the chief. In cases of witchcraft the chief held the final authority to order the execution of those found guilty.

To support his position, and in addition to the produce of his own enlarged household's herd and gardens, a chief was entitled to regular tribute from his subjects and a variety of other payments. A family head seeking to join the following of a chief had to offer a gift of cattle. On the death of a man his family had to console the chief for the loss of a subject with a similar gift. Special levies of cattle were made in connection with the chief's marriage to his great wife. Fees were charged and fines levied in relation to judicial hearings. The cattle of those condemned for witchcraft were forfeited to the ruler.

Chiefs and their officers were thus able to take a significant part of the surplus produced by commoner households over and above their essential consumption needs. They could enjoy higher levels of consumption. They could also marry more wives and attract many personal clients, thus reinforcing their power.

Although the chief's authority was unlimited in theory, in practice it was fairly closely restricted. Within a chiefdom there was always potential rivalry between the chief and other important royals who held sway over parts of the chiefdom and the immediate loyalty of the population. Though rules of succession to the position of chief were quite precise, royalty was believed to belong to all close members of the royal family. Any of them could become a chief, and on occasions a technically junior heir would be chosen by general agreement where the senior heir was regarded as incompetent or otherwise unfit. A chief who angered his powerful relatives and a significant proportion of the population could therefore find himself faced with rebellion or with the secession of one or more segments of his community. To maintain his authority it was essential for him to retain the loyalty of the most powerful members of the community. Government was thus conducted by discussion aimed at the achievement of consensus.

On day-to-day matters the chief would consult with senior members of the royal family living at the household where he was staying, as well as with his *induna* and other personal advisers, who might be chosen on a variety of grounds. On more important occasions a wider council would assemble, including the subordinate chiefs responsible for the main divisions of the chiefdom. Among the Sotho-Tswana, where bigger settlements made this possible, matters of great importance to the community would be discussed in public meetings (*pitso*) open to all adult males. At these meetings anyone could express criticisms of the chief's behaviour and government. Apart from the danger of open rebellion or secession of a section of his following under the leadership of the rival royal, a chief who was unsuccessful or unpopular faced the danger of seeing his support simply melt away. Families who abandoned one chief would be readily accepted by another. Their new chief was in that way able to strengthen his following at the expense of his neighbour. For these reasons the South African Bantu-speaking peoples, while maintaining that 'a chief is a chief by birth', also believed that 'a chief is a chief by the people'.

The tension within chiefdoms between members of the royal lineage

The Khoisan peoples
& Bantu-speaking
settlement



A group of Nguni travelling
(Detail from Ludwig Alberti's *Account of
the Tribal Life and Customs of the Xhosa in
1807*)

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frequently came into the open on the occasion of the death of a chief and the installation of his successor. The rules of succession themselves heightened the problem. The rightful heir to a chief was the eldest son of his great house. A chief, however, could only marry his great wife after he had succeeded to the chieftaincy. The bride-price cattle for the chief's bride would then be paid by the community as a whole. It was usually the case however that the chief had sons by earlier marriages who were considerably older than the official heir. The heir himself might also be too young to take over the chieftaincy, and in this event a regency would be necessary, through which the chiefdom could be ruled on his behalf; even when this was not so, this was often an ideal opportunity for a rival to snatch the chieftaincy for himself. The uncles and elder brothers of the official heir frequently resented the accession of a young and inexperienced man. Succession disputes were thus very common and frequently resulted in the secession of one or more sections of the community to form a new chiefdom.

This process of division was not just the consequence of tensions within the royal lineage. It was also a reaction to economic circumstances and opportunities. As the numbers of people and cattle grew, the problems of finding adequate grazing and agricultural land would increase until it was advantageous for a section of the population to break away and move with its cattle into new lands. So long as the South African Bantu-speaking peoples were expanding into extensive areas of thinly populated land this process of repeated fission accompanying increases of population was advantageous. It was important to be able to react quickly against attack from another Bantu group, or perhaps a Khoisan enemy. A large army was clearly impractical for dealing with a small skirmish or cattle raid; so under these circumstances political decentralisation into smaller units was more efficient than the development of large-scale centralised systems.

The process of chiefdom division was also an expression of tension between chiefs and commoners and afforded a channel for commoner ambitions. Chiefs naturally wanted to increase their wealth by raising the level of payments for hearing judicial cases etc., or by multiplying witchcraft accusations. The frequent splitting of chiefdoms and the opportunity to transfer loyalty from a grasping to a less demanding ruler limited the capacity of chiefs to exploit their subjects.

Where the economic conditions that favoured division of chiefdoms were altered, an opposite process – the expansion of a chiefdom into a kingdom – could take place. This might be the result of increased trade. It could also happen because there was no longer any easily accessible unclaimed territory within a particular area for breakaway groups to move into. It might take the form of the head of an original chiefdom successfully maintaining, or re-establishing, a measure of effective authority over breakaway sections. It might also arise through one chiefdom conquering others and reducing their once independent rulers to subordinate status in an expanded realm.

An important element in the political organisation of the southern Bantu-speaking communities, as well as in their social and cultural life, was the institution of manhood initiation. When they reached the age of manhood the youths underwent circumcision followed by a period of ritual seclusion during which they were instructed in the customs and tradition of the community, and the behaviour expected of an adult man. Initiation ceremonies provided the most significant educational institution amongst the South African Bantu-

speaking peoples. Their psychological impact was deep and lasting. Among the Sotho-Tswana, and possibly some Nguni chiefdoms also, initiation schools were organised by chiefs whenever they had a son of age to be initiated. At the end of their instruction, the initiates formed a permanent group or age-regiment, called a *busho*. Members of a *busho* were expected to fight together in times of war under the leadership of their age-mate prince and might also perform other corporate duties when called upon. In some cases the members of this *busho* would provide the initial core of followers for a young prince when first establishing a sub-chiefdomship (or even independent chiefdom) of his own. In some of the Sotho-Tswana communities, girls also underwent a form of initiation involving a period of seclusion and instruction, though no physical mutilation was practised. Female initiates would form a group under the leadership of their age-mate princess in the same way as the men but without the military functions of the male *busho*. Apart from its other roles, the initiation system helped to consolidate the authority of mature men over the youths. It may also have played some role in delaying the age at which young men could marry past the age of physical maturity thus making it easier for the older men to marry more than one wife.

As political communities split, an original chiefdom would give rise to a cluster of units all recognising their relationship to one another and the seniority of the original parent community but partially or entirely politically independent. Sometimes the original name (that of the founder chief among the Nguni and of a totem animal among the Sotho-Tswana) would be retained. On other occasions a split in the community would be followed by the adoption of a new name by the breakaway group. One example of this process can be seen among the southernmost of the Nguni-speaking peoples, the Xhosa. This group underwent a major split when on the accession of Gcaleka his father's 'right-hand' house seceded under Rharhabe. In the following generation the heir to the chieftainship, Ngqika, was still a boy on his father's death and a regency was established under his uncle Ndlambe. On Ngqika's coming of age, however, Ndlambe broke away. In 1800 he moved with his followers across the Great Fish river. The original Xhosa chiefdom thus gave rise to three main communities plus a number of smaller offshoots, all of which recognised their common origin and thought of themselves as Xhosa. Though they also all recognised the seniority of the rulers of the Gcaleka branch, they were largely independent and sometimes at war with one another.

In the Sotho-Tswana area the most striking example of this process is the multiplication of chieftaincies ruled by two chiefly lineages, the Kgatla and the Kwena. By the end of the eighteenth century they dominated much of the area of Sotho-Tswana occupation. The Kgatla appear to have originated as a chiefdom in the centre of the highveld, possibly not far from modern Pretoria. From there, breakaway sections spread over a wide area north of the Vaal and eastwards to the Drakensberg. The most successful of the Kgatla offshoots was a chiefdom known as the Pedi which established itself in the Leolu mountains of the eastern Transvaal. In the eighteenth century the Pedi built up a substantial kingdom there by bringing a number of other chiefdoms under their control.

The origin of the Kwena chiefdoms is believed to be a place called Rarhateng near the junction of the Marico and Crocodile rivers. Expansion from the centre may have begun as early as AD 1500. By the end of the

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Patterns of expansion



*Nguni couple
(Ludwig Alberti's Account of the Tribal Life
and Customs of the Xhosa in 1807)*

Bantu-Khoisan relations

eighteenth century chiefdoms calling themselves by this name had spread throughout the area of Sotho-Tswana occupation.

The expansion of the Kgatla and Kwena chiefdom clusters was the main historical development in the Sotho-Tswana area from the sixteenth to the late eighteenth century. It cannot as yet be adequately explained. Perhaps it was a matter of the expansion of lineages with many cattle into areas occupied by cattle-poor agriculturists. The cattle-rich lineages were able to acquire more wives, attract clients and expand more rapidly than others.

Whatever the causes, the expansion of these groups seems to have pushed some others into arid country on the fringes of cultivable land. Unable to sustain their political systems in the difficult economic conditions of the Kalahari, these groups became fragmented client communities within stronger Sotho-Tswana chiefdoms forming a major part of what came to be known as the Kgalagadi. Other groups whose chiefdoms were completely destroyed or who may perhaps never have developed a chieftaincy system formed a class of personal dependents known as the Lala.

Relationships between the expanding Bantu-speaking peoples and the Khoisan populations took many forms. Conflict and the expulsion or elimination of one group by the other undoubtedly took place in some cases; but this was by no means the only pattern. San communities were sometimes absorbed as client communities in Bantu-speaking chiefdoms. Intermarriage was common and even chiefs might marry San wives. The Xhosa chief, Sandile, was the son of a San woman. Descendants of his lineage amputated the top joint of the little finger on the right hand in accordance with San custom as a sign of their royal descent. While Khoi groups sometimes became clients of Bantu-speaking chiefdoms, roles were sometimes reversed and Bantu-speaking communities came under Khoi rule. Intermarriage also gave rise to mixed communities. One such was encountered by the eighteenth-century traveller, H.J. Wikar, on the Orange river. There, so-called 'half people' provided a trade link between the Tswana communities to the north and the Khoi to the south. On the east coast a rather similarly mixed community, the Gqunukwebe, came into existence on the frontiers of contact between Khoi and Xhosa as the Khoi Gonaqua chiefdom broke up and was absorbed by the Xhosa.