

**Timothy Gibbs, *Mandela's Kinsmen: Nationalist Elites and Apartheid's First Bantustan***

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This new study of the history and politics of the Transkei is a fascinating and complex one. Its contribution is not only to our understanding of the sometimes obscure political dynamics of elites in South Africa's "first Bantustan", but to the broader fields of development history and political economy. While at one level this is a revisionist history of the story of the inclusive nationalism of the liberation movement versus the divide and rule history of the apartheid Bantustan strategy, at another level it provides a subtle exploration of development politics and the development (or underdevelopment) of one of South Africa's poorest rural areas.

From 1976, when Kaiser Matanzima accepted the "independence" of the Transkei from the apartheid government, activists in South Africa derided him as a sell out. One popular song, sung by tens of thousands at mass rallies and funerals in the Eastern Cape for the decade to follow, accused Matanzima of literally selling his people: *Wena Matanzima, uthengisa abantwana, abantwana base Afrika* ("You, Matanzima, you have sold the children of Africa"). At the time of Kaiser Matanzima's death in 2003, and in current political discourse, there is a much muted criticism of his role expressed in South African history. His death saw him respected rather than reviled; and today there are mutterings in some circles that his illegitimate regime saw various "good developments" which have now fallen into disrepair. Gibbs offers us an understanding of the contradictory nature of the Transkei of the Matanzimas and the complex patterns of collaboration and resistance within this Bantustan state.

I must admit to an initial hesitancy in reading a book with the title "Mandela's Kinsmen", because I imagined long paragraphs of Madiba clan genealogy, the web of relationships between the Madikizelas the Matanzimas and the Mandelas, and general name dropping of the "who's who" in Transkei politics. However, this study does not fall into that trap and where individuals are mentioned, the narrative is usually accompanied by a riveting story of local power relations. Prominent teachers, development workers, security force officials and clergymen are situated in their respective social and political contexts. Far from an over focus on Nelson Mandela, there are many extraordinary personalities who are featured in the sometimes bizarre story of the Transkei. One of the many well written accounts is the story of the late and now well known King Sabata Dalindyebo, after whom one of the district municipalities of the Eastern Cape has

been named. Gibbs adds to the dramatic story of King Sabata's exile, return and reburial with a bizarre account of how Matanzima's genealogical claims to paramount chieftaincy led to him "snatching back a manuscript stored in the archives of Rhodes University, entitled 'Who are the Thembu and where do they come from?'" (p 98).

The other well known story is that of Bantu Holomisa, a Transkei Defence Force general who took power at the end of 1987, a few months after George Matanzima had been ousted and replaced with Stella Sigcau; and then how Holomisa's regime was in turn threatened by an apartheid security force backed coup attempt led by Colonel Craig Duli. Holomisa's decision to allow Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) to operate after 1990, and his playing of the "apartheid endgame" in the transition period of 1990 to 1994, are also covered, making the important point that in contrast to KwaZulu Natal, the Transkei transition did not descend into civil war – thankfully and perhaps remarkably, given the influx of trained guerrillas and a flood of weapons. The dramatic events of this period are recounted not as descriptive journalism, but situated within an analysis of the complex relationships between the security forces, the Transkei elite and the apartheid state.

There are stories of "non state actors" as well: the students, nurses and Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) organisers who tried to build alternatives to the Transkei state. There is the story of the Anglican Reverend Mcebisi Xundu, for one, who played a significant role in initiating resistance to the Matanzima regime in 1977. He died on 21 January 2015 and was given an official funeral by the Eastern Cape provincial government. There are also stories of the older generation of activists, among them "Oom Gov", the communist and intellectual Govan Mbeki, who ran a co operative trading store in the Transkei in the pre Bantustan days. Mbeki, who wrote the first significant analysis of the Transkei in 1960, is trenchantly assessed by Gibbs as follows: "Recent research tends to support Mbeki's observations, not his doctrines" (p 178). Govan Mbeki must surely qualify as one of the foremost intellectual products of the Transkei, along with Wycliffe Tsotsi. Others of the older generation were released from Robben Island and banished to remote villages of the Transkei under Matanzima's rule. These stories of banishment have recently been retold in a seminal work by Saleem Badat, and in an exhibition by Omar Badsha with the same title, *The Forgotten People: Political Banishment under Apartheid*.

One of the delightful things about *Mandela's Kinsmen* is how some other, non Mandela family histories are woven throughout the narrative of the Transkei; one such is the story of Zoleka Langa. She is one of the younger generation of activists who were in the liberation movement. Langa, a female ANC underground operative who went on to become mayor of the OR Tambo District Municipality, was by all accounts a remarkable survivor. Other stories of that generation are of Lungisile and Dumisa Ntsebeza and Matthew Goniwe. Goniwe was assassinated by apartheid security forces in 1985 (there is a minor error in the book's account of the killing of the Cradock Four, in that their bodies were discovered soon after the killing, and they were not classified as "disappeared"). Lungisile is now professor of African Studies at UCT, following in Oom Gov's footsteps as another of the fine intellectuals to come out of the Transkei. Another prominent academic, Wiseman Nkhulu, has his controversial role as vice chancellor of the University of Transkei

in the late 1980s and early 1990s also outlined in the context of dramatic contestation with students. This is to mention just a few of the well known and lesser known people whose stories are deftly woven into the chapters of the book, which deal both thematically and chronologically with the history of the Transkei.

The often tragic tales of the MK guerrillas and ANC underground operatives are told with sympathy, although only briefly, which is a pity when the “brutal intimacy of insurgency” involves not attacks on anonymous civilians, but armed insurgents and security force members often coming from the same community or college. The conflicts over schooling and the fraught history of the colleges and University of Transkei are dealt with in some more depth. Of most interest, though, to a development scholar or practitioner, are the reflections on the developmental role of the Bantustan state apparatus; the way in which resource access by local elites was used to bolster their position, and the parallel way in which grassroots elements linked to the liberation movement attempted to do the same thing. On the one hand, they showcase agricultural projects and irrigation schemes of the Transkei government; on the other, the community development projects, co-operatives and health programmes initiated by radical activists “on the ground”. Gibbs argues that “communitarian ideology was often as important as insurgent protest” (p 161). The efforts of the latter do not seem to have had much lasting impact, however; sadly there are few indications of a lasting radical tradition of solidarity economy, co-operatives and communitarian projects. Gibbs refers to Chris Tapscott’s important contemporary critique of the Transkei development state, linking it to James Ferguson’s analysis of technocratic and depoliticised “development” in Lesotho (p 54).<sup>7</sup> The discussion of the Transkei state is not merely of historical interest; it has important resonance with current discourses of the ANC government in relation to the “developmental state”.

In his conclusion on the political economy of state building in South Africa, Gibbs notes that “a left wing critique of the ANC government argues that welfare transfers have not overturned the structural inequalities inherited from apartheid; that neo liberal policies have failed to bring broad based economic growth” – a critique with which I would certainly agree, but which is not Gibbs’ own position (p 183). His more interesting observation is that “Intriguingly, most local forms of political protest prevalent in South Africa today ... do not demand autonomy but rather incorporation” (p 184). The politics of identity and diversity are not as important as the “politics of recognition” whereby “impoverished localities make claims on central government in the name of their community” (p 184). It is easy to conclude that there is a continuity of dependency from apartheid to the democratic “developmental state” as the real and noted improvements in infrastructure and welfare access over the past decade have not resulted in any significant economic development in the former homelands. The tensions of democracy and traditional leadership, cultures of patronage and resource access which can easily slip into corruption, are dealt with sensitively by Gibbs and situated within the historical and social contexts of the power and social statuses of local elites.

Gibbs writes elegantly and concisely, and although it is not light entertainment, the book is a pleasure to read. One minor quibble is the strange

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7. J. Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: “Development”, Depoliticisation and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1990).

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repetition of the adjective 'swingeing' (as in "swingeing poverty" (p 100)) a term maybe in use in academic circles in the United Kingdom, but certainly not in common usage in South Africa. The book is meticulously researched and the richness of the study lies in its use of multiple sources, many of them previously little researched archival sources such as the Umtata High Court archive, which Gibbs notes is "in disarray" (p 186).

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