Making Identities in the Thukela-Mzimvubu Region c.1770–c.1940

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The region between the Thukela and Mzimvubu rivers constitutes the southern portion of what is now the province of KwaZulu-Natal and the northern portion of the province of Eastern Cape. Since the 1920s and 1930s, the African inhabitants of the KwaZulu-Natal portion have been widely categorised by scholars, administrators and politicians of all stripes as belonging to a more or less homogeneous ‘tribal’ grouping labelled ‘Zulu’, and those of the Eastern Cape portion as belonging to a somewhat less homogeneous, but still distinctive grouping labelled ‘Xhosa’. These have not necessarily always been identities claimed by the people to whom they are applied. The identity of the Zulu as a group is commonly supposed to date back to the Zulu conquests under Shaka in the 1820s, while the origins of Xhosa identity are supposed to lie in a more remote period now lost to traditional knowledge. These notions quite fail to capture the fact that for more than two centuries collective identities in the region have been shaped and reshaped in a series of complex historical processes that have brought into being and given a variety of collective names to a wide range of social groupings. Their amalgamation into two broad ‘tribal’ categories by the early twentieth century is itself a product of these processes. Drawing on academic research conducted since the 1960s, this essay examines the history of identity-making in the region, with a view to identifying and explaining the least documented changes that took place during the period from the late eighteenth century, when they first became visible in the historical record, to the 1930s and 1940s, when modern ‘tribal’ identities became more or less fixed.

Before the 1960s the assumption was mostly unquestioned in both scholarly and popular thinking that African people had ‘traditionally’ (that is, always) lived in bounded ‘tribes’, each of which was made up mostly of members who shared a common descent and a common tribal culture and identity. The existence of tribes seemed to be unproblematically rooted both in observational evidence and in what African people had to say about their own histories and their own group identities. It was only in the 1960s and 1970s that Africanists and other scholars began to mount a sustained critique of essentialist ideas of ‘tribe’ and to open the way for the development of historians, not only of African political and social organisation, but also of cultural consciousness and – by extension – of collective identities. It is significant that critiques of tribal identities as

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