Review


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Timothy Gibbs’ *Mandela’s Kinsmen* is a thoroughly researched, well written history of the Transkei during the second half of the twentieth century. Indeed, Gibbs discloses that he travelled 50,000 kilometres in search of historical evidence and in the process scoured 25 archival collections. The dedication of the author is evident from the richness of the narrative; this is a fine piece of work. Somewhat surprisingly, the recent history of the Transkei is under-researched; work on the topic is largely limited to writings of works of Southall, Streek and Wicksteed, Hendricks, Mbeki, Ntsebeza and Kepe. Gibbs’ sweeping work adds considerably to our understanding in this regard.

Gibbs’ main contention is that ‘the notable networks that had shaped “Mandela’s kinsmen” in the early twentieth century did not unravel during apartheid’ (4), but rather remained intact to the extent that they continue to wield influence in the ‘new’ South Africa. He uses the term ‘notable networks’ to refer to Transkei-based relations forged through a combination of kinship, marriage and educational institutions. Gibbs presents compelling evidence in support of his contention and in the process makes a number of additional correctives to dominant arguments in ‘Bantustan’ historiography. Two of the most important of these are that ‘The Bantustan state played a vital role in the formation of African elites’ (5), and that there was an ‘ambiguous relationship between the Bantustan elites and the ANC’ (5), one in which stark notions of collaboration on the one hand and resistance on the other have limited usefulness.
Within the overall narrative there a number of interesting specific histories, the most significant of which is the protracted Thembuland contestation between Kaizer Matanzima and Sabata Dalindyebo. The riveting contest is described over chapters 2 and 5. Chapter 2 describes the period leading up to Transkei self-government in the early 1960s. Flashpoints here include Matanzima’s success in having Cala and Cofimvaba seceded from Thembuland (courtesy of the Young Commission), his subsequent installation as an independent chief, and his outmanoeuvring of Sabata in the 1963 elections, despite the latter’s greater popularity. Chapter 5 picks up on the narrative of the clash in the immediate aftermath of the elections and takes it up to 1980. The drama reached a climax in the period 1976 – 1980. In 1976 Sabata took over the leadership of the opposition Democratic Party. Thereafter Matanzima moved against Sabata’s ‘Great Place Gang’ and in the process severely weakened the ‘Comrade-King’. This paved the way for his arrest on spurious charges of treason in 1979. However, he was acquitted on these charges in early 1980 and smuggled into exile shortly thereafter.

One of the most colourful and enigmatic politicians who emerged from the Transkei bantustan and continues to play a prominent role in South African politics, 20 years after the dawn of formal democracy, is Bantu Holomisa. In a bristling chapter 7, entitled ‘The apartheid endgame, 1987 – 1996’, Gibbs describes Holomisa’s rise to power as a 33 year old through a military coup in December 1987, his ‘inching towards’ the liberation movements, his sidelining of Matanzima acolytes and his ‘posthumous rehabilitation’ of Sabata as key strategies of power in the late 1980s (137), his thwarting of the November 1990 Vlakplaas-backed counter-coup led by Holomisa’s erstwhile friend Craig Duli, his joining the ANC in December 1993, his brief tenure as its most popular leader following its elective conference in 1994, and his unceremonious expulsion from the party in 1996 (over his allegations against another Transkei notable, Stella Sigcau). As Gibbs earlier commented in his introduction, ‘Bantu Holomisa was the most spectacular example of how the entwined histories of the nationalist elite and their kinsmen in the Bantustans forged unexpected alliances in the early 1990s’ (6).

Because educational institutions and experiences sit so centrally in Gibbs’ conception of notable politics and networks, the book includes rich information on many of the Transkei’s elite institutions, principally St Johns College, Clarkebury College, Blythswood College, Jongilizwe College and the University of Transkei. Moreover, scattered across its pages is what amounts to a useful history of African education in the Transkei and beyond,
from c 1940 onwards. Over the course of the book, he describes missionary education, Bantu Education (the massification of African schooling), the schooling upheavals from 1976 to the mid-1980s, the rise of the South African Democratic Teachers Union (which included its swallowing of the Transkei Teachers Association in 1990), and the crippling teacher strikes of the early 1990s. Importantly, Gibbs’ account of the 1950s and early 1960s illuminates the interconnectedness of resistance against Bantu Education with that against Betterment impositions and Bantu Authorities. Case studies such as that on Emnxe locality add texture and depth in this regard.

I conclude with a critical remark. Gibbs’ apparent attraction toward ambiguity and grey-ness prevents him from understanding, articulating and asserting the true value of his work, which is that it can be regarded as a cutting history of the present. Zuma’s ANC is without question more rural than it is urban – its loyal voter base is rural whilst the urban middle classes are in the process of abandoning it, its key strategies of power namely patronage and welfare were forged in the bantustans, and it is actively engaged in what researchers such as Claassens at the Centre for Law, Race and Gender at the University of Cape Town call the ‘reBantustanisation’ or Balkanisation of rural society (http://www.iol.co.za/the-star/plan-to-amend-draft-traditional-courts-bill-raises-hackles-1.1368823#.VLC8QcnssJg). As the joke quoted by Phillips, Lissoni and Chipkin goes, ‘Have you heard what happened to South Africa after 1994? It was colonised by its Bantustans’ (http://mg.co.za/article/2014-07-10-bantustans-are-dead-long-live-the-bantustans). Yet Gibbs is apparently satisfied with balancing the long recognised significance of urban politics during the period under consideration with the assertion that what was happening in the Transkei also mattered and had consequences. This does not go far enough, because there is a compelling argument to be made that the events and processes that he describes so eloquently are foundational to post-1994 South Africa.

References


