BRIEFING NOTE
CONFLICT AT THE CATTLE DIP: LIVESTOCK TAXES AND THE SINEWS OF THE STATE ACROSS A CENTURY

TIMOTHY GIBBS

INTRODUCTION

Inside one of the small portacabins that houses the government vets working in the KwaZulu–Natal provincial Department of Agriculture in Msunduzi/Pietermaritzburg, you might still find a small cabinet display telling the history of cattle dipping in South Africa. I saw it in 2019, whilst conducting fieldwork in the Midlands region, just after the display had been rescued from a skip by a couple of government vets, horrified that senior officials had decided to close down the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Agriculture's Museum display, quite literally consigning their institutional knowledge to the dustbin of history.

The lack of interest in this history is telling – and perhaps unexpected, given the central role that cattle played, until relatively recently, in African societies. In many accounts of African history, the imposition of livestock taxes and cattle dipping features as a pivotal moment, when independent African peasantries were first brought under the surveillance of and subordinated to the colonial state. This is certainly the case in South Africa. Here, cattle dipping, funded by a variety of livestock taxes and levies, was established in the 1900s to counter an outbreak of East Coast cattle fever, just years after the final independent African kingdoms had been annexed and conquered. Unsurprisingly, dipping and taxes were bitterly resented. In the northeastern districts of KwaZulu-Natal, a rebellion against poll taxes (issued at much the same time as the livestock levies) gathered momentum because of widespread opposition to stock dipping. Indeed, the leader of the revolt, Bambatha, was described by his contemporaries as being like a tethered bull penned in by the colonial state (Beinart 1994: 99). There are innumerable histories of peasant taxation that, drawing on Govan Mbeki's classic account of the intrusion of the segregationist state in peasant societies, describe the system of cattle taxes as the *impundulu*: a bloodsucking, vampire-like, evil omen (Mbeki 1964: 41, 46, 85, 139–40; Crais 2002: 173–5, 215; Redding 2006: 104–6).

Yet whilst this description of peasant taxation as a vampiric omen makes sense during moments of crisis and rebellion, this characterisation of the state as an alien oppressive force cannot explain the sweep of history across the century. For one, as Beinart and Brown (2013) note in their history of veterinary services in the Bantustans, a system of mandatory cattle dipping did eventually gain a measure of popular acceptance in the second half of the twentieth century, as part of a suite of animal healthcare services that demonstrably improved the health of Africans' livestock. Moreover, one of the key crises that rural South Africa faces today is that the state no longer provides fundamental vet services, no longer dipping cattle against disease, vaccinating livestock, or controlling contagious diseases. For when the system of government cattle dipping and associated livestock taxes collapsed during the 1994 democratic transition, the sinews of the state also withered away: government controls, surveillance measures, and technocratic expertise lost, in some provinces perhaps irrevocably (Gibbs 2010).

Accordingly, in this briefing note I suggest that we might see the revenue relationships observed in this system of cattle dipping and livestock taxation as illustrative of the 'sinews of the state' that developed in rural South Africa during a short twentieth century that ran from roughly 1920 to 1980, but then atrophied and collapsed during the democratic transition.[1]

THE SINEWS OF THE STATE, C.1925–C.1980

If the initial imposition of cattle dipping and livestock taxes at the turn of the 20th century had provoked a number of explosive rebellions, the infrastructure of state power remained fractured for several decades afterwards. In different districts, revenues for cattle dipping were raised through a myriad of levies and taxes, depending of specific histories of conquest and colonisation (NAC Report 1921: 14–5). It was only with the 1925 Native Development and Taxation Act that the sinews of the state were strengthened and systematised across the majority of tribal authority areas of South Africa. On the one hand, a standardised set of peasant taxes, including a six and a half shilling tax on each head of cattle, were paid into a South Africa-wide Native Development Account. At the same time, the extensive infrastructure of livestock dipping was often put into the hands of the Native Affairs Department in each province.[2] Given that African livestock owners held around five million cattle in 1930 (approximately half the total national herd), this system of taxation and surveillance reached deep into rural society. Every month or so, African livestock owners were compelled to bring their cattle to a government-run dipping tank – a major operation that required owners and herd boys to noisily march their cattle to the central gathering points. Here, their prized animals would be dipped, controlled, and quite possibly fined and taxed by (to use the racialised nomenclature that was so important to the workings of the South Africa state) a 'European supervisor' assisted by several 'native dipping attendants' (Rogers 1949: 171–3).

Unsurprisingly, this tightly organised system of mandatory cattle dipping imposed in communal areas would be an object of suspicion and mistrust across the twentieth century. Each household carried a stock-book, listing the animals that they held, which would be regularly checked by stock inspectors and dipping tank attendants when the herds were assembled at the dip tank. In theory, this system of surveillance was strictly enforced: stock inspectors (a post typically held by a white government official) noting the death/slaughter of animals and issuing permits that allowed livestock movements and sales. All animals had to be accounted for. If an animal died or was slaughtered, the owner would have to bring the animal's spleen as proof of death. (The spleens were taken away by the state to be tested for disease at the vet sciences laboratory at Onderstepoort, Pretoria.) Where there were discrepancies, livestock owners could be fined. Moreover, the much-detested livestock taxes levied on rural households were calculated on the basis of the censuses carried out at the dip tanks (Mdukatshani interviews 2019; Gibbs 2020). This was an authoritarian, effective system of surveillance, judging from the relatively high rates of livestock taxes that were collected.

Little wonder that when rural revolts swept across South Africa in the middle decades of the twentieth century, dipping tanks were one the key sites of government surveillance that were destroyed by insurgents. In the most organised of these revolts, specific complaints against the dipping regime emerges in the petitions and demands drawn up by the rebels: that livestock taxes had been raised too high by the 1956 Native Taxation and Development Act and that mandatory dipping should cease. Indeed, the Lion of the Midlands, Harry Gwala (1920–1995), one of the very few ANC leaders to build a systematic base in the rural hinterlands, rallied support by mobilising popular anger against livestock taxes. Radhie Pillay's (1999) meticulous research on the 1959 protests in Natal describes the drama that played out in a dozen rural districts: hundreds of women publicly gathering to burn dip-tank holding-pens; imprisoned protestors freed by angry crowds breaking down jail house doors. For several months, the infrastructure of the state was burning.

Nonetheless, it would seem that after these years of rebellion passed, the system of cattle dipping was gradually reimposed and, indeed, stabilised in many districts in subsequent decades. Importantly, the encounter with the state at the cattle dip tank subtly changed. For one, the coercive, controlling grasp of state power slackened to some extent, as livestock levies decreased in real terms and deeply unpopular cattle culling campaigns eased-off in many districts. Instead, cattle dipping increasingly became associated with a state that provided free animal healthcare – particularly as government vet services budgets rose in the 1970s, as part of a general increase in Bantustan government expenditures. The dipping tanks were no longer simply a place of livestock surveillance and control, but also a place where government veterinary officers might support African livestock owners, vaccinating cattle against diseases such as anthrax. Importantly too, the rising cohort of African stock inspectors who staffed the KwaZulu department of agriculture, are remembered as a generation that combined both technical competence with new levels of sympathy and engagement. These were men rooted in the soil, who could sympathetically explain to suspicious villagers why obscure government livestock surveillance procedures should be followed: such as the requirement that animal spleens of slaughtered animals be taken away by the state, not for malign magical purposes, but so that vet science labs at Onderstepoort could check for controlled diseases (state vet interviews 2019; Mdukatshani interviews 2019). In some of the archives, we find anecdotes about government vets conducting annual vaccination campaigns having small fowls slaughtered in their honour; of unpaid communal work-parties (remunerated with home brewed beer) refilling the dipping tank with fresh water each year (Gibbs 2010). Thus, state practices of surveillance were domesticated into the rhythms village life.

Yet even when livestock dipping worked relatively well, it was a rickety operation run on shoe-string budgets. Partly, this was because the livestock taxes that notionally paid for cattle dipping were never adjusted upwards to keep up with inflation, for fear of antagonising restive rural communities. (One isolated attempt to increase taxes in the early 1980s was met with widespread fury.) Additionally, when it came to prioritising government revenues, vet services and cattle dipping was an unglamorous, low priority, budget line item – certainly, compared to the demands put on government to build schools and fund teacher posts. Therefore, whilst cattle dipping operations budgets kept up with rising costs, funding was clearly not set aside for crucial maintenance. One government engineer (interview 2019) estimated that there had been no proper repairs to the dipping tank structures since the 1960s/1970s. The state was fragile – thus it is no surprise that these sinews snapped during the turbulent years leading up to South Africa's democratic transition.

THE SURVEILLANCE STATE IS CHASED AWAY, C.1970–2004

In any case, the system of checking livestock permits at the cattle dipping tank, which were fundamental to the collection of stock taxes and surveillance of animal health, was unwinding rapidly in the 1970s. The forced removals that hit the districts of the Natal Midlands very hard are remembered as ushering in a time of 'confusion': when householders facing eviction hastily sold prized animals to a variety of speculators and swindlers; when cattle were lost and stolen as they were herded scores of kilometres to new pastures. Moreover, the collapse of peasant agriculture and stable, blue-collar migrant worker jobs in this period forced many households to try to piece together livelihoods in the informal sector. These decades saw the rise of well-armed stock theft gangs that rustled herds of cattle on a large commercial sale – particularly after the minibus-taxi industry took off, and aspirant owners needing to acquire capital quickly engaged in a very brutal form of 'primitive accumulation'. The Alcock family ran an agricultural NGO in Msinga, one of the districts hardest hit by stock theft and minibus-taxi wars. Their newsletters describe cross-border traders/smugglers from Lesotho travelling around KwaZulu/Natal, buying and selling unregistered cattle; the anti-stock theft vigilante gangs who demanded permits from men herding cattle through mountain passes; the violent death of a few traditional leaders who tried to enforce 'customary' fines (e.g. Church Agricultural Project August 1975, October 1985). By the turn of the 1980s, stock theft had gripped a dozen districts in KwaZulu/Natal so hard that apartheid police was granted emergency powers to stem the flow of illegal commerce to no avail (Gibbs 2017).

The final collapse of mandatory cattle dipping and peasant taxation came with the 1990s democratic transition. In the politically restive districts, government officials and stock inspectors were sometimes chased away by rural communities – seen as symbols of repressive state authority. Elsewhere, state authority quietly subsided. Dipping tank attendants stopped working; magistrates no longer attempted to collect livestock taxes; routines of administration collapsed.

Accordingly, the democratic government that came into office in 1994 decided to wash their hands entirely of this discredited system of livestock levies, mandatory cattle dipping and veterinary surveillance. In political terms, the decision was clear: the costs of rebuilding any sort of infrastructure of state control were just too high. In technocratic terms, the decision was equally clear cut for policymakers in the national treasury. Given that the apartheid government had come so close to a sovereign debt crisis in the 1980s and international financial markets were sceptical of spendthrift socialist governments, the ANC had to carefully prioritise its Reconstruction and Development Programme expenditures. In order to fund keynote social development priorities, such as health, education and social pensions, it was thought best to stop subsidising 'unproductive' agricultural services of the apartheid era, such as cattle dipping. In practical terms, these decisions had the consequence that provincial agricultural department budgets were slashed in real terms well into the mid–2000s, such that critical organisational capacity was lost (Gibbs 2014, 171–2). The KwaZulu-Natal Department of Agriculture was one of the more competent post–1994 provincial bureaucracies to be constructed out of the rubble of apartheid. Even so, government vet service was demoralised. With stock inspectors and dipping attendants transferred into other parts of the government service, they lost the capacity to monitor stock movements completely. Animal diseases not seen for generations returned to many parts of South Africa (state vet interviews, 2019).

On the ground, the dipping tanks were euphemistically 'transferred to communities' – i.e. abandoned by the government, which now simply handed-out free cattle dipping chemicals to local dipping committees, rather than attempting to organise regular dipping days. Without the spur of government authority, at least half the dip tanks ground to a permanent halt, estimated one state vet I interviewed in the late 2000s. In some districts, local rivals apparently poisoned each other with the dipping chemicals stolen from storerooms (state vet interview, 2008). With state organised vet services in decline, many cattle owners were forced to improvise remedies: treating livestock with a variety of relatively expensive sprays and lotions sold by travelling salesman, which were arguably almost as costly as the old taxes and levies (Beinart and Brown 2013, 45–6).

REBUILDING RUINED INFRASTRUCTURE, 2004 ONWARDS

Eventually, the crisis passed. Most fundamentally, as South Africa's fiscal headroom increased during the commodity boom of the mid-2000s, centrally collected tax receipts rose and government infrastructure expenditures broadly doubled during the decade. Interestingly, National Treasury was also more inclined to agree that agricultural development projects deserved a share of government revenues, if a dent were to be made in the deep rural poverty in the former homelands (Gibbs 2010). Here, they pointed to a slew of studies into post-apartheid rural livelihoods that showed the resilience of what researchers now called 'the popular economy': that even if classic patterns of peasant production had faded, a significant proportion of rural householders still kept a few cattle and (more likely) goats – particularly as increases in government grants and pensions allowed the poorest households to eat more meat and slaughter more livestock (Alcock 2013). Indeed, researchers estimated that 5.5 million cattle grazed on communal land: some 40% of the national total (Kenyon 2014). There were political calculations to be made, too. ANC provincial governments, keen to win votes in rural districts, saw providing vet services and cattle dipping *gratis* as an effective means of connecting the governing party to local political brokers and potential voters. In consequence, cattle dipping programmes were revived – albeit in a strikingly different fashion to the fiscally austere, authoritarian system characteristic of the early twentieth century.

In KwaZulu-Natal at least, the re-establishment of dipping operations was better handled than many of the haphazard, half-built, rural development projects that litter the valleys of many parts of rural South Africa. Nevertheless, the prioritisation of capital expenditures over operations and maintenance programmes, was typical of the politics of 'tax and spend' in post-apartheid South Africa. From 2004, a decentralised investment programme – contracts channelled through a wide range of small Black Economic Empowerment companies, who enjoyed close connections to provincial power-brokers– rebuilt nearly all 1900 of the cattle dipping tanks in KwaZulu Natal. Disgruntled officials claimed that this fragmented procurement system doubled construction costs to as much as R250,000 per dipping tank. (By contrast, apartheid government had channelled construction contracts to a handful of favoured large engineering companies.) Nor was it clear how maintenance programmes could be properly organised, now that provincial engineering teams had been transferred to a dozen municipalities of varying capabilities. And, in any case, the 1999 Public Finance Management Act decreed that any repair job worth more than R2000 had to be put out to competitive private tender. State engineers tied-up by malfunctioning bureaucracy described organising unofficial repairs, buying materials from local hardware stores with wads of cash collected from local cattle owners (state vet interviews, 2019). Thus tangled systems of New Public Management forced officials to raise funds by organising off-the-books collections and levies.

Most interesting were the 'make-do' forms of state authority that emerged at the cattle dipping tanks as government officials in KwaZulu-Natal helped individual dipping committees to organise dipping operations themselves. Sometime in the mid-2000s, the dipping committees were revived and reconstituted as not-for-profit organisations holding bank accounts with the state Ithala Bank. At the time of my research, officials estimated that perhaps 90% of the dipping tanks in the province were dipping on a fairly regular basis. A well-run dipping committee was an impressive vehicle of collective action and local pride, organising regular dipping days and supervising basic infrastructural repairs; counting livestock and issuing permits; charging their members annual fees of R100–150, fundraising perhaps a total of R25,000 each year (Gibbs 2020). Nonetheless, none of this surveillance work was properly aggregated. (Annual livestock statistics have not been collected since the early 1990s.) Moreover, any organisation that takes on state-like powers of surveillance quickly runs into deep water – particularly in districts where stock theft is rife. Rumours spread quickly. One dip tank chairman was apparently paid-off by the cattle rustlers for supplying them with forged livestock permits; another organised vigilante groups that killed thieves (Mdukatshani interviews, 2019). Official power was secretive – and sometimes as dangerous as witchcraft.

TOWARDS AN AMBIGUOUS CONCLUSION

The rickety system of cattle dipping that has been revived in recent years in KwaZulu-Natal brings us to an ambiguous conclusion. For much of the twentieth century, the cattle dip was a place of conflict where men encountered the heavy hand of an extractive settler state that demanded taxes, required permits, and imposed fines. Sometime in the 1980s and 1990s, during the death throes of apartheid, the system of cattle dipping, surveillance and taxation collapsed in rural South Africa during a time of unrest and conflict. From the rubble of apartheid, the post-1994 democratic government has built a very fragile, make-do form of cattle dipping. Nonetheless, the weakness of veterinary surveillance and controls show that the sinews of the post-apartheid state are far weaker than what went before.

NOTES

1. The extensive literature that thinks of taxation, revenues and state power in this fashion has its origins in John Brewer's (1989) classic account of the British fiscal state.
2. There were some notable exceptions. Importantly, the district councils in Transkei and Ciskei ran dipping through a separate system of livestock levies. Africans living on mission lands, trust farms, and as tenants and farmworkers on commercial farmlands also had a separate system of dipping.

REFERENCES

Alcock, Rauri. 2013. "The Curious Case of the Unknown Farmers." Paper presented to conference on Land Divided: Land and South African Society in Comparative Perspective. Cape Town.

Beinart, William. 1994. *Twentieth Century South Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Beinart, William, and Karen Brown. 2013. *Agrarian Local Knowledge and Livestock Health Diseases and Treatments in South Africa.* Woodbridge: James Currey.

Brewer, John. 1989. *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State 1688–1783.* London: Routledge.

Brunette Ryan, Ivor Chipkin, and Sarah Meny-Gibert. 2014. *The Contract State: Outsourcing & Decentralisation in Contemporary South Africa.* Johannesburg: Public Affairs Research Institute.

Church Agricultural Project. *Newsletters*. Located at Alan Paton Centre, University of KwaZulu Natal.

Crais, Clifton. 2002. *The Politics of Evil: Magic, State Power, and the Political Imagination in South Africa.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gibbs, Timothy. 2010. "From Popular Resistance to Populist Politics in Transkei." In *Popular Politics and Resistance Movements in South Africa, 1970–2008*, edited by Willliam Beinart and Marcelle Dawson. Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand Press.

Gibbs, Timothy. 2014. *Mandela's Kinsmen: National Elites and Apartheid's First Bantustan.* Woodbridge: James Currey.

Gibbs, Timothy. 2017. "Inkatha's Young Militants: Reconsidering Political Violence in South Africa." *Africa*, 87, no. 2: 362–86

Gibbs, Timothy. 2020. "Collapse, Conflict or Social Cohesion? Learning from Livestock Dipping Associations in KwaZulu-Natal." Cape Town: Institute for Poverty Land and Agrarian Studies Working Paper 62.

Kenyon, Mike. 2014. "Cattle-keeping, Markets and Inclusive Growth in the Eastern Cape Province, with Main Reference to the Amathole Region." East London: Fort Hare Institute for Social and Economic Research.

Mbeki, Govan. 1964. *South Africa: The Peasants Revolt.* Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Native Affairs Committee. Reports. Pretoria: South African Government Printer.

Pillay, Radhie. 1999. "Rural Women's Protests in Natal in 1999." MA thesis, University of Natal.

Redding, Sean. 2006. *Sorcery and Sovereignty: Taxation, Power and Rebellion in South Africa, 1880–1963.* Athens OH: Ohio University Press.

Rogers, Harold. 1949. *Native Administration in the Union of South Africa.* Pretoria: South African Government Printer.

INTERVIEWS

Mdukatshani 2019 - interview with chairman of cattle dipping committee, 28 August 2019