

BOOK REVIEW

Jill E. Kelly. *To Swim with Crocodiles: Land, Violence, and Belonging in South Africa, 1800–1996*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2018. liv + 342 pp. Illustrations. Maps. Tables. Bibliography. Index. \$49.95. Paper. ISBN: 9781611862850.

Did traditional chiefs in colonial times function primarily as local proxies for oppressive national authorities? Or did they try to serve their subjects as best they could? Both, according to Jill Kelly's masterful and richly detailed study, *To Swim with Crocodiles: Land, Violence, and Belonging in South Africa, 1800–1996*. Kelly details how, for nearly two centuries, some chiefs in Zulu-speaking South Africa operated mainly as agents for various white-minority governments, while others sought and enjoyed popular support. For such chiefs and their subjects, the most recurrent concerns were access to land and security, from the turbulent era of the first Zulu king, Shaka, through the "civil war" that claimed thousands of lives in KwaZulu/Natal during apartheid's waning days.

Kelly demonstrates not only an impressive command of the local archives and oral history accounts, but also an understanding of the wider significance of her work for students of Africa more generally. Contrary to scholars who argue that the imposition of colonial rule transformed chiefs into local despots unaccountable to their subjects, Kelly shows that the reality was more complex and nuanced, with many villagers able to make demands of their chiefs, to varying effect. That focus enables her to highlight the agency and creativity of rural Africans, who utilized customary practices that persisted even into the especially harsh period of apartheid rule.

One of the most important of those practices was *ukukhonsa*, a historical social agreement that bound together subjects and chiefs, with the latter exercising authority on the basis of their ability to provide security and land. They were chiefs only with their followers' approval. And when chiefs failed to uphold their side of the bargain, subjects at times simply deserted them in favor of someone who could. In times of great turbulence, security was paramount, reflected in the traditional tale that gives the book its title: an ancestor flees a tyrannical chief by jumping into a river full of crocodiles—yet survives. With the gradual extension of colonial administration over Zulu-speaking rural areas, a new, more top-down concept of chiefship was also imposed, one that depended more on state recognition and equated chiefly

authority with fixed territorial boundaries. But social understandings between chiefs and subjects also survived, sometimes cutting across official administrative divisions and complicating rivalries and competition among and sometimes within communities.

The specific locale that was the main focus of Kelly's research is known as Table Mountain, after a flat-topped mountain some 40 kilometers northwest of Durban (and not to be confused with Cape Town's similarly named landmark). While all who lived around Table Mountain and its vicinity spoke Zulu, the communities' identities changed over time as one group split off from another, the different segments identifying themselves variously as Qamu, Gcumisa, or Maphumulo, among others. The formation of such communities—commonly known as “tribes”—were shaped by the behaviors of particular chiefs and driven by opportunities to access land, which became ever more uncertain and competitive amid changing colonial demarcations, the expansion of white-owned farming, and African population displacements. In the process, rural Africans often fashioned and refashioned traditional narratives to buttress assumed identities and support claims to the legitimacy of their chiefs and thus to land rights.

Kelly also demonstrates the ways in which such local dynamics intersected with national politics. At first, communities' external interactions were mainly with government authorities, but by the last decades of the twentieth century, the Inkatha movement in KwaZulu and the African National Congress (ANC) liberation movement gained notable influence. As Inkatha received more political backing and arms from apartheid security forces, violence spread across KwaZulu/Natal, including Table Mountain, eventually claiming some 20,000 lives. That confrontation has frequently been portrayed as a clash between supporters of one political party (Inkatha) against another (ANC). Kelly, however, shows that it also had local dynamics, as some communities sought arms from Inkatha largely to press their land claims against others, including the Maphumulo, whose chief, Mhlabunzima Maphumulo, was the first head of the ANC-aligned Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa.

Like a number of others, Mhlabunzima explicitly rejected the image of chiefs as apartheid surrogates. He identified instead with the traditional notion of *ukukhonsa*, in which popular consent guides chiefly conduct: “If one is leading people who are progressive ... it is right and proper to be also progressive as a leader.” Mhlabunzima was assassinated in 1991, but his struggle and that of other “progressive” chiefs partly accounts for the survival of the institution of chieftaincy in post-apartheid South Africa. Kelly's book lays out the deep historical roots of that phenomenon, offering new insights both into how apartheid functioned at the local level and into the complexities of South Africa's democratic transition.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Barber, Karin. 2001. "Cultural Reconstruction in the New South Africa." *African Studies Review* 44 (2): 177–86. doi:[10.2307/525581](https://doi.org/10.2307/525581).
- Grundy, Kenneth W. 1996. "Cultural Politics in South Africa: An Inconclusive Transformation." *African Studies Review* 39 (1): 1–24. doi:[10.2307/524666](https://doi.org/10.2307/524666).