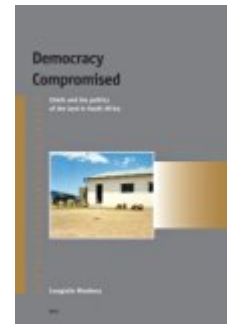


Lungisile Ntsebeza. *Democracy Compromised: Chiefs and the Politics of the Land in South Africa*. Leiden: Brill, 2005. 300 pp. \$38.00 (paper), ISBN 978-90-04-14482-8.

Reviewed by Sean Redding

Published on H-SAfrica (August, 2009)

Commissioned by Lindsay F. Braun



## Decentralized Despotism and Its Discontents in the Eastern Cape, South Africa

One central question forms the backbone for this local study of governance in a rural district of the Eastern Cape: how is it that the chiefs and headmen, many of whom were so central to the apartheid state's project of maintaining white supremacy, have managed to hold onto and consolidate their power in the rural areas even after the demise of the apartheid state? Lungisile Ntsebeza's answer is, in short, that the African National Congress (ANC) as the governing party was willing to compromise on democratic principles largely for the sake of political expediency.

Ntsebeza comes to his scathing conclusion in the final two chapters of this well-researched book. The study mostly concerns Xhalanga district in a part of the Eastern Cape that used to be the Transkeian Territories Native Reserve and then the pseudo-independent Bantustan of the Transkei from 1976 to 1994. Although the book is very much a local study, detailing events from 1865 to the present, Ntsebeza makes the case that it is representative of much of rural South Africa and of rural postcolonial Africa more generally.

Drawing on the analysis of Mahmood Mamdani's *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (1996), Ntsebeza highlights the ways in which South Africa's colonial and apartheid states constructed their administration in the rural areas by building the chiefs into icons of a nebulous "tradition" but also by granting them the very real power to allocate land. Land became part of a complex system of political, cul-

tural, and ethnic loyalties and identities. Chiefs used land distribution to reward their own followers and create a network of political obligations that sometimes passed for political legitimacy.

Ntsebeza follows Mamdani's analysis that in the post-colonial world, the chiefs and other traditional authorities are the heirs to the colonial administrative system as they rule over rural people (the "subjects" of the citizen and subject dichotomy). Ntsebeza asks, given the chiefs' complicity with apartheid administration, why did the ANC endorse these traditional rulers post-1994? As it took power, the ANC expressed the opinion that the chiefs' positions were straight out of the precolonial past and had traditional legitimacy, and yet most in the ANC knew that that was not the case. They knew that these rulers and their administrations had been created by first the colonial state (working from a precolonial template) and then refined and retooled by the apartheid state in its push to create African homelands with "legitimate" political leaders. The chiefs and Tribal Authorities thus created were authoritarian and deeply undemocratic, as well as often corrupt, and yet they have survived into the post-apartheid era.

The first several chapters of the book look at the historical reconstruction of chieftainship in the period up to the creation of Bantu (or Tribal) Authorities in the 1950s. Ntsebeza makes clear that the precolonial relationship between chiefs and their subjects was fluid. When individual African chiefdoms or states came under colonial

control, the relations of power became less fluid and the chiefs found their authority profoundly changed. Even though early magistrates and colonial policies were disdainful of both chiefs and their followers, the Glen Grey Act of 1894 (creating separate political institutions for rural Africans in the Cape Colony) and subsequent segregationist legislation rendered the chiefs necessary to the maintenance of an effective system of administration in the rural areas. Essentially these policies were intended to re-tribalize Africans, and these tribes would then be governed by chiefs; whites could then exclude Africans from the politics of “white” South Africa. Ntsebeza notes the irony here that it was “red” or “traditional” chiefs who became the pillars of support for the colonial state in the rural areas, while Africans from a “school” background (often Christian converts) were increasingly seen by white administrators as politically demanding and therefore undesirable.

In his chapters on the 1950s and 1960s, Ntsebeza describes in detail how white officials groomed Chief K. D. Matanzima to hold power in the apartheid system. Matanzima was a reliable ally for the apartheid state in the 1950s and he was adept at fanning the flames of ethnic divisiveness if he thought it would work to his advantage. But by allying with the apartheid state, Matanzima was strongly connected in people’s minds with the much-hated betterment schemes and rehabilitation measures that the state was forcing on the rural population at the time. Resistance to these measures by the late 1950s and early 1960s became more organized and militant, and included the burning of huts of government headmen and attacks on officials. Landholders led the resistance, reacting both to a declining economy and to state interference with their land rights, with youth and women playing only minor roles. State reaction in the form of police and paramilitary actions was often brutal and ultimately suppressed the resistance at least until the 1980s. The quelling of the violence left the state with an opening to turn the Transkei into the showpiece of the Bantustan system, granting it a highly compromised form of independence in 1976, with Matanzima elected (in a sham election) to lead it. Matanzima was every inch a decentralized despot in Mamdani’s sense. His real governing authority came from Pretoria and his real job was to suppress dissent, but at the same time he was supposed to play the (largely fictional) role of a democratically elected leader of a nation-state.

Ntsebeza, born in the Xhalanga district, lived there in the 1980s because he was legally restricted to the district by the apartheid state acting in concert with the

Transkeian regime. His sources for the chapters on resistance in the 1980s and 1990s include interviews, life histories, and participant observation. In discussing this period, he examines how the ANC took over the role of political ally to the chiefs, and he determines that the ANC’s position resulted primarily from its relatively weak support in rural areas. Most of the resistance in Xhalanga at the time was driven by local issues and led by local youth and some professional women who expressed solidarity with the larger struggle, but who had few real ties to either the ANC or the United Democratic Front (UDF).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, ANC leaders at the national level felt they had to join hands with the newly formed CONTRALESA (Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa), stating that the new organization was “continuing the heroic role of the chiefs who were part of the ANC” (p. 264). Jacob Zuma, in particular, feared that trying to abolish chiefs would create new problems and divide anti-apartheid forces rather than unite them. Moreover, by the late 1980s, both the ANC and the UDF were a bit afraid of being too supportive of the rebellious youth in rural areas because of fears that the youth were alienating other supporters with their tactics. By the early 1990s, the unbanned ANC, acting as a political party, hoped that by backing traditional authorities it might conciliate some Inkatha/IFP (Inkatha Freedom Party) supporters and forestall any secession of KwaZulu-Natal. Once established as the ruling party, the ANC continued to support the administration of rural areas by chiefs as a matter of political and bureaucratic expediency. Ntsebeza states, “Despite their despotic role as an extended arm of the apartheid regime, traditional authorities have not only won recognition in the South African Constitution, but have had their lease of life in land administration extended. The latter has been made possible by the promulgation of the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework and Communal Land Rights Acts. The former law creates traditional councils which are dominated by traditional authorities and their appointees, while the Communal Land Rights Act gives these structures unprecedented powers in land administration” (p. 294). Thus the ANC has invested the traditional authorities with the right to control the most valuable resource in the rural areas—land.

Ntsebeza makes a compelling case that the post-apartheid history of South Africa shares a great deal with the postcolonial histories of other African states. In the particular case of Xhalanga, he demonstrates that the ANC government, similar to the preceding colonial and apartheid states, has come to rely on the creaky,

corrupt, and corrupting institution of chiefs and other “traditional authorities” for day-to-day governing. The flesh and blood chiefs of the recent past were neither democrats nor benign paternalists; the reinvestment of chiefs with governmental authority by the ANC smacks of a post-apartheid version of Indirect Rule. Although South Africa’s rural inhabitants have some of the political rights of citizens, Ntsebeza’s conclusion that their daily lives are administered from above as subjects shows one of the more enduring legacies of colonialism and apartheid. It is reminiscent of Colin Bundy’s criticism of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission—that its mandate did not address (or redress) the “bureaucratic terrorism” that established and policed the contours of people’s daily lives under apartheid (“The Beast of the Past: History and the TRC,” in Wilmot James and Linda van de Vijver’s edited collection *After the TRC* [2001]). The details of *Democracy Compromised* focus on a small region of South Africa but its analysis has a much wider resonance.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-safrica>

**Citation:** Sean Redding. Review of Ntsebeza, Lungisile, *Democracy Compromised: Chiefs and the Politics of the Land in South Africa*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. August, 2009.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23812>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.