Transformation in Southern Africa after 1750.

The Mfecane: east of the Drakensberg

The Nguni word 'Mfecane' is usually translated as 'the crushing'. The equivalent word in Sotho-Tswana is 'Difaqane' and it is usually translated as 'the scattering'. Historians use these terms Mfecane and Difaqane to indicate the violent period between about 1810 and 1830 among the African peoples of the South African interior.

Historians and the Mfecane Until at least the 1960s, historians who were pro-colonial, wrote about the Mfecane period as a time 'savage tribal warfare'. They said that this period had started with the rise of the Zulu kingdom and spread destruction across the Nguni lowveld and also through the highveld communities west of the Drakensberg (the Sotho-Tswana Difaqane). The Mfecane left huge areas of land deserted just at a time when white Boer trekkers from the Cape Colony were beginning to move into the interior in search of new land. These historians portrayed Africans as a destructive force who destroyed their own communities. On the other hand they portrayed the invading [white people as source of peace and order. Since the 1960s, this colonially-inspired version of history has been shown to be false, a deliberate distortion and gross exaggeration. Nevertheless, this interpretation of history has had a profound impact upon people's understanding of this period, not least because it was the official version on South African school syllabuses for most of the 20th Century.

Since the 1960s historians have re-examined and re-interpreted the Mfecane/Difaqane period. Some have gone as far as to suggest that the Mfecane was a complete myth, made up by colonists to demonise the Zulu and to excuse the colonial seizure of land. This version suggests that where there was any violence at all, it was largely at the instigation of Portuguese, Boer or British slave raiders and traders. However, this re-interpretation of the Mfecane appears to have taken the exaggeration to the other extreme. There is plenty of evidence for instance, of violent conflict between African people in the region. And there is no evidence that slave trading from Delagoa-Bay was of any significance until at least the mid-1820s. Therefore the slave trade could not have been a cause of the upheaval that began in the 1810s, although it may have "been a contributing factor in later conflicts in the region. Nevertheless, this extreme version has prompted historians to thoroughly re-examine the whole Mfecane/Difaqane period.

By the end of the 20th Century historians had come to recognise that 1810-30 was indeed a time of heightened African-initiated conflict. However, it was also a time of rational political development and state building. The reasons for the conflict were complex and the levels of depopulation had indeed been grossly exaggerated in the past.

Origins of the Mfecane

Economic and political developments As we saw in Chapter 2, the northern Nguni peoples were mixed fanners. They hunted wild animals, herded cattle and cultivated crops. They took full advantage of the variety of soils and vegetation between foothills,
steep valleys and lowlands. The second half of the 18th Century was a period of unusually high rainfall. Pastures improved, livestock thrived and herds increased in size. Crop cultivation became more widespread with the introduction of maize, a South American crop recently brought to the region by Portuguese traders. It yielded heavier crops than the native African sorghum, as long as rainfall levels remained fairly high. The farmers brought more land into regular use, there was extra food, people were better fed and the population grew.

While population levels were low, herdsmen could still move their cattle freely between the summer and winter pastures of hills, valleys and lowlands. However, as the population grew and herds increased in size, competition for the best land developed between the herdsmen. People needed to control and protect a wide variety of grazing as well as agricultural land. This may have been one reason why Nguni chiefdoms began to co-operate with each other to form larger political units or kingdoms.

**Age-regiments** As Nguni states grew in size so the role of age-regiments, amabutho, increased in importance. As we saw in Chapter 2, initiation ceremonies and *amabutho* were a way of promoting unity within the state at the same time as providing the chief or king with a large workforce or army. As competition for land increased, the role of this army became more important.

**Hunting and trade** The chief or king used the co-operative labour of the *amabutho* for organised hunting parties. Wild animals harboured the tsetse fly, carriers of fatal cattle (and human) disease. So the large-scale destruction of wild game by the amabutho made larger areas safe for grazing cattle. The hunting elephants also provided ivory for trade with European ships at Delagoa Bay. A chief or king who controlled this long distance trade could increase his wealth and reward his followers. This desire control the trade with Delagoa Bay may have been a further reason for the growth of larger states in the late 18th Century. Certainly the Tsonga peoples of the Delagoa Bay area developed strong centralised state systems with age-regiments for raiding and hunting in the period 1750-1800.

**The Madlatule famine** Around the turn of the century disaster struck. The period of high rainfall came to an end and for about ten years there was a prolonged drought. Crops failed, pasture withered and there was widespread famine. This became known as the Madlatule famine from the saying 'Makadle athule'; 'Let him eat and be quiet'.

Competition for scarce resources became severe as people raided each other for their cattle and their meagre stores of grain. The age-regiments were in the field permanently. Besides raiding cattle from neighbouring chiefdoms and protecting their own herds, amabutho were also needed for hunting wild animals, for meat as well as for trade.

**Northern Nguni kingdoms: Ndwandwe, Ngwane and Mthethwa** We saw in Chapter 2 that between about 1750 and 1800, the process of state-building and conflict had
been developing among the northern Nguni. By the early 1800s the northern Nguni region was dominated by three main kingdoms. The Ndandwe, under the leadership of Zwide, controlled the foothills and valleys between the Mkuze and Black Mfolozi Rivers. To their north lay the Ngwane, under Sobhuza of the Dlamini clan, while the south and south-east was dominated by Dingiswayo’s Mthethwa. Besides the big three there were numerous smaller chieftoms with varying degrees of independence, such as the Khumalo, Zulu, Qwabe, Hlube and Ngwane of Matiwane.

The Ndandwe, being inland, were particularly badly affected by early 1800s. This may partly account for the severity of their attacks against their neighbours. Zwide used his army to destroy old chieftoms, seize their livestock and incorporate young adults into his regiments. In this way he built up a powerful, centrally-controlled kingdom. Dingiswayo's kingdom, on the other hand, was not quite so firmly and centrally controlled. As the kingdom expanded, old chieftoms were left in place, as long as their ruler paid regular tribute in cattle or grain and supported Dingiswayo with regiments. The Mthethwa’s great strength lay in their control of coastal hunting forests and the trade with Delagoa Bay.

In 1816 the Ndandwe army invaded the agricultural valley of the Pongola, expelling the Ngwane and driving them northwards (see pages 65-6). Two years later Zwide turned his army against the Mthethwa, probably in an effort to seize control of Dingiswayo's hunting grounds and trade. What followed seemed like the decisive battle between the two great rival kingdoms, Dingiswayo was somehow separated from his army, captured and killed. Without their leader the Mthethwa regiments were easily scattered. For the moment Zwide was victorious. However almost immediately Ndandwe dominance was challenged by an entirely new force which rose from the ruins of the Mthethwa: the kingdom of the Zulu under the leadership of Shaka.

**Shaka and the rise of the Zulu kingdom**

Shaka (also spelt Tshaka or Chaka) was born in about 1787, the sun of the Zulu chief, Senzangakhona and a neighbouring Langeni princess, Nandi. The Zulu at the time were a minor clan, living around the upper Mhlathuze River. They were soon to be absorbed into the Mthethwa Kingdom. Shaka was brought up first among the Langeni, then the Qwabe and finally the Mthethwa. He joined a Mthethwa age-regiment where he distinguished himself as a brave and able soldier. Dingiswayo soon recognised his abilities and put him in charge of a regiment When Senzangakhona died in 1816, Shaka seized the Zulu throne from his brother Sigujana, with Dingiswayo's approval. The Zulu chiefdom was by then part of the Mthethwa kingdom.

**Developments in military techniques and tactics** The old method of Nguni warfare mainly involved cattle raids and a show of military strength. The aim was to get the enemy to acknowledge political authority and agree to pay tribute. When two armies faced each other they buried their long-handled spears until one side gave way. Casualties were not normally very heavy. The victorious side would then retire with a large booty of cattle. However, as warfare in the region became more common and fighting became more, ruthless, this kind of tactical show of strength and cattle raid was no longer sufficient.
Because of Shaka's great military success, he has often been credited with having invented all his military techniques himself. In fact most of the military innovations in that period were tried and developed by the Ndandwe and Mthethwa over the previous decade or two.

Zwide's Ndandwe was the first in the region to develop the idea of 'total warfare': those who failed to submit should be totally destroyed. The original defiant chiefdom should no longer exist. Thus defeated armies suffered huge slaughter. The survivors were incorporated into the age-regiments of the victor. Meanwhile their original homesteads were usually burned, and their women and children either killed or taken captive. All enemy livestock were rounded up and divided out among the regiments or sent to the king to form a new royal kraal.

Under the old Nguni system, after initiation the amabutho were used as a military force. Its members served the chief or king for a limited period before being released and allowed to marry. By the 1810s the initiation ceremonies were being abolished and all young men were being pressed into amabutho on a long-term basis as permanent armies. The regiments were only disbanded and the men allowed to marry after they distinguished themselves in battle or were past their fighting prime.

The regiments were trained regularly until they were extremely fit. Soldiers ran and fought barefoot to gain extra speed. Young boys were used to carry the soldiers' baggage. Each soldier earned a long shield and was armed with a short-handled stabbing spear as well as several longer throwing spears. The long shields protected them from the spears thrown by their opponents. They then rushed in close and used the stabbing spears to kill as many of the enemy as possible.

Shaka's unique contribution was to bring all these military techniques together, develop and improve them, and make them more effective. In doing so he turned out the mostly highly-trained, disciplined, fit and efficient fighting force the region had ever seen. Shaka also refined the Ndandwe tactic of the 'cow-horn' formation. As the bulk of the army faced the enemy, regiments were sent out on each side like two great horns. While the 'chest' advanced in the centre, the 'horns' encircled the enemy and prevented their escape. In Shaka's campaigns full use was also made of spies, smoke signals and speed of movement to catch the enemy unawares and ensure complete victory. His soldiers developed great pride in their success. This was just as well, for in Shaka's army cowardice in battle was punishable by execution.

The Ndandwe/Zulu War 1818-19  
In 1818 Shaka seized the opportunity of Dingiswayo's defeat and quickly brought the chiefdoms of 'the Mthethwa kingdom under his control.

Zwide recognised the danger of this new threat to Ndandwe domination, but Shaka's regiments drove off the first force Zwide sent against them. Towards the end of 1818 Zwide launched his whole army across the Mfolozi as he was determined to defeat this new Zulu kingdom. Shaka recognised the superior strength of his opponent and
withdrew his entire people in the face of the Nd wandwe advance. As the Nd wandwe marched southwards, they found no livestock, craps or stores of grain to sustain them. At the same lime their army was worn down by frequent Zulu night assaults. Then, as the tired, hungry and weakened Nd wandwe army turned for home, Shaka launched his attack. The Nd wandwe suffered a terrible defeat. Shaka followed up his victory by sacking the undefended Nd wandwe capital. Nd wandwe refugees fled north of the Pongola. Zwide himself escaped to the region of the upper Nkomati River. Two of his generals, Soshangane and Zwangendaba, led the remnants of their army to the north of Delagoa Bay (see page 66-7). With this victory Shaka was left in command of a vast region from the Pongola in the north to the Tugela in the south.

**The expansion of the Zulu kingdom**  In the years that followed, Shaka's armies attacked chiefdoms that did not submit to his control. Though many were killed, many more were incorporated into the expanding Zulu state. By the mid-1820s Zulu power extended well south of the Tugela towards the Umzimkulu River. In 1824 Shaka's armies penetrated across the Umzimkulu and raided cattie from Faku's Mpondo. The fame of Shaka's army spread wide, and from way beyond the Zulu kingdom rulers sent tribute to avoid being attacked.

**Trade**  Shaka kept strict control over trade, and all ivory hunted in the kingdom belonged to the king. To the north he kept the trade route open to Delagoa Bay where ivory was exchanged for beads and cloth. In 1824 a group of British traders and their Khoisan servants from the Cape arrived at Port Natal (present-day Durban) and began ivory trading with the Zulu kingdom. Shaka allowed them to remain and treated them as minor subject chiefs. He was very interested in their muzzle-loading guns, but did not think they would be a match for his regiments as they took so long to reload.

**The organisation of the Zulu kingdom**

The strength of the Zulu kingdom did not depend solely upon the success of Shaka's armies. Closely connected with the *amabutho* and hacking up their success in battle was the political reorganisation of the kingdom. Like the Tsonga and Nd wandwe before him, Shaka converted the loosely controlled chiefdoms and homesteads of the northern Nguni into a single, large, centralised kingdom in which all authority came directly from the king. The whole kingdom was built along military lines. All young adults between the ages of about 18 and 35 were drafted into male and female regiments. These were housed in a number of large regimental towns carefully placed around the kingdom. Each town encircled a huge cattle enclosure some 100 metres in diameter. Besides housing the cattle at night, the enclosure was also used for military parades and ceremonies during the day. The male and female regiments lived separately in the houses around the enclosure. Each town was allocated regimental cattle, usually those captured in warfare. The male regiments tended the cattle and fed off their milk and meat. The female regiments cultivated maize and sorghum for use in the town. The king appointed a military commander (*induna*) to command the male regiments. A female relative of the king was appointed to take charge of the female regiments of each town. She kept the king informed about the loyalty of the *induna* and his regiments.
Apart from regimental towns there were also small private homesteads. There the married men and women lived with their young children and elderly relatives. Marriage was only allowed when the king allowed the older soldiers to retire from full-time service. He then also released a female regiment for them to marry. The homesteads were still organised into chiefdoms and were expected to pay tribute to the king. But they posed no threat to the central authority of the king for he appointed their chief - often one of his own indunas - and all the young men of the chiefdom were incorporated into the king's amabutho when they were of age.

Shaka's power was absolute. The indunas formed a central council, but in practice his councillors were careful never to offer advice which their king might not want to hear. A sense of unity and national pride within the kingdom was cultivated by the annual inxwala or first-fruit; ceremony. Held at the capital at the height of the summer rainy season the inxwala was attended by regiments and representatives from all over the kingdom. During the ceremony the king's spiritual power as their leader was renewed and his subjects celebrated the prosperity and fruitfulness of the harvest and the kingdom in the year ahead. The centralisation of Zulu authority was so successful and the people so proud of Shaka's victories that all within kingdom-began to refer to themselves as 'Zulu'.

The end of Shaka's rule  
To a certain extent Shaka had always used fear of execution to instill loyalty. For instance, any person who lost their spear in battle or was wounded in the back was executed for cowardice. As Shaka became ever more powerful, the rate of executions increased and people were killed for even the pettiest of offences. After the death of Shaka's mother in 1827 many people were killed for not showing enough grief. It is possible that Shaka's mind became unbalanced. No one, not even his brothers or closest advisers, felt safe from his anger or displeasure. The regiments too were tiring of constant campaigns, of having to travel further and further afield to find the enemy, of meeting increasingly better-organised opposition, and of having to return to face Shaka's anger and the inevitable executions.

Shaka had never married though he-lived within a royal women's enclosure. Anyone who fell pregnant was immediately executed, for, it was said, Shaka feared the birth of a son and heir who might one day challenge his claim to the throne. But these precautions did not save him. In 1828 his half-brothers, Dingane and Mhlangane, assassinated Shaka,

The reign of Dingane

At the time of Shaka's death the army was away on a long and unsuccessful campaign against the new Gaza state of Soshangane in the region of Delagoa Bay (see page 67). By the time the army returned to the Zulu capital, Dingane had proclaimed himself king after he had murdered his co-conspirator, Mhlangane. The army accepted the death of Shaka for they had dreaded his anger at the failure of their recent campaign. To win-support, Dingane promised an end to war and executions and allowed many regiments to marry,
The new king followed the absolutist principles of his brother, but Dingane was no Shaka. He lacked the inspiration, leadership qualities and military genius which had made the Zulu kingdom great under Shaka. And he did not keep his initial promises of peace for long. He turned on those whose loyalty he suspected and regular executions were quickly re-established. In this rasped. Dingane was more of a tyrant than Shaka, It was not long before Dingane re-established the centralised regimental system. And Zulu armies were once more sent out on regular campaigns.

In the 1830s Dingane sent his army against the Ndebele on the highveld (see Chapter 6) and against the Swazi to his north (see page 65-6). But the Zulu regiments did not have the successes they had achieved under Shaka's leadership. Their opponents were stronger and better organised.

The small white trading settlement of Port Natal was considered part of the Zulu kingdom, and the British traders there had paid tribute to Shaka in recognition of his authority. During the reign of Dingane the traders began to act without reference to Zulu authority. They acted as an independent chiefdom, establishing an African settlement around them, with workers and fanners to provide them with food. The white people claimed that these Africans were refugees, fleeing to their protection from the violence of the Zulu kingdom. This soured relations between the Zulu and the white traders and in 1833 a Zulu army sacked the port. The white traders fled to the safety of a ship in the harbour and only returned after the Zulu army had withdrawn. Nevertheless, Dingane continued to be suspicious of white intentions towards his kingdom. And not without reason. In 1834 Boers from the Cape arrived to spy out the land around Port Natal for future white settlement. Three years later parties of Boers with their livestock, wagons and servants began to pour down the passes of the Drakensberg and onto the green pastures south of the Tugela. We will examine how Dingane and the Zulu faced this new challenge in Chapter 8.

The Mfecane period was not only notable for its turbulence. It was a time of general political re-alignment. One feature of this was the rise of a number of new and powerful nations.

Sobhuza, Mswati and the founding of the Swazi nation

As we saw earlier, in 1816 Zwide's Ndwandwe had driven Sobhuza's Ngwane northwards from the Pongola valley. The Ngwane retreated to the mountains around the upper Nkomati River. When Zwide himself retreated to this region in 1819, Sobhuza led his people back southwards to the Usuthu valley. It was here that Sobhuza laid the foundations of the nation that was to take its name, Swazi, from his son and heir Mswati, Sobhuza and Mswati built their nation upon a careful mixture of conquest, diplomacy and marriage alliances. By the end of Mswati's reign in 1865 the Swazi kingdom rivalled the Zulu in power and importance.

Marriage as a nation-building policy  As Sobhuza absorbed surrounding Nguni and Sotho chiefdoms, marriage was a useful tool for foreign diplomacy as well as for
internal control. Sobhuza used marriage alliances to ward off attacks from both Zwide and Shaka. He married one of Zwide's daughters and sent two of his own daughters to Shaka. Though Shaka later had them killed for becoming pregnant, Sobhuza took no action to avenge their deaths.

Within the kingdom itself Sobhuza allowed the various chiefdoms to remain intact provided they showed loyalty to him by paying tribute. The chiefs of the kingdom were also expected to marry daughters of the royal family. Through their bride wealth (*lobola*) Sobhuza received large numbers of cattle. The sons of these marriages would become heirs of the chiefdoms and in time they would also marry into the royal family. In this way Sobhuza used marriage to cement close personal relationships between himself and the local aristocracy. At the same time he increased his own personal wealth through receipt of *lobola*.

**Sotho influence on Swazi culture**  As a number of Sotho were absorbed into the growing kingdom, the Ngwane (Swazi) adopted certain Sotho cultural customs. One of these was the marriage of cousins, which was an important part of the ling's marriage policy. Another was the holding of *libandla*, a nation-wide general meeting summoned by the king: the Swazi equivalent of the Sotho *pitso*. In this way the Swazi king unlike the-Zulu, was answerable to the people for his good government. Further Sotho influence was seen in the importance of the mother of the king, the Ndlhovukati ('the Great She-Elephant'). She was the king's closest adviser and ruled for him as regent if the king was under age, as in the case of Sobhuza's heir.

Sobhuza's foreign policy was to avoid conflict with his neighbours. He paid occasional tribute to the Zulu king. If attacked, his people retreated to the safety of mountain caves. Nevertheless they suffered a number of Zulu raids, especially from the armies of Dingane. During one of these raids, in 1839, Sobhuza died. A year later Dingane fled to Swaziland, having been defeated by his brother Mpande and the Boers of Natal (see pages 98-9). In line with Sobhuza's policy, the defeated Dingane was killed and a treaty of friendship was made with the new power in the region, the Boers.

**The reign of Mswati, 1839-65**  When Sobhuza died Mswati was only 13 so his mother, Zwide's daughter, Thandile, ruled as regent. She reorganised the kingdom along more centralised Ndwandwe lines. The annual *incwala* (first-fruits) ceremony was introduced to raise the status of the king as well as to unify the kingdom. Age-regiments were formed across the nation and royal villages were set up around the country to control them.

When Mswati took over in 1845 he faced opposition from his older brothers. Malambule rebelled and sought Zulu help, while Somcuba allied with the Boers who had recently settled around Lydenburg. It was ten years before Mswati was finally free from threat of foreign invasion. With a skilful mixture of warfare and diplomacy Mswati emerged with a powerful and relatively independent kingdom. He used a system of alliances to play off one strong neighbour against another. He allied with the Boers of Lydenburg to protect his people from invasion by the Zulu, and he allied himself with the new British authorities of Natal to protect his people from the Boers. Mswati's foreign policy was not
all defensive. In the east his armies conquered as far as Delagoa Bay where he drove the Portuguese to the safely of their fort at Lourenco Marques (present-day Maputo).

**Soshangane and the Gaza state**

After Zwide’s defeat in 1819, the bulk of Ndwandwe refugees fled northwards into southern Mozambique where they regrouped around former chiefly rulers. There they became known as ‘Ngoni’. They reorganised themselves along Ndwandwe regimental lines and raided the local Tsonga and Chopi for grain and cattle. By the 1830s Zwide’s former general Soshangane, had emerged as the most powerful leader. Those Ngoni chiefdoms that did not submit to his authority were expelled from the region.

In the decades that followed, Soshangane built up a powerful military state. His raids extended over a huge area from Delagoa Bay to the Zambezi Valley. The state was named after Soshangane’s grandfather, Gaza. The original Ndwandwe, who formed the ruling class and controlled the regiments, considered themselves apart from and above the mass of subject peoples. They referred to themselves as ‘Ngoni’. The ordinary 'Shangane' who made up the bulk of the central state, were drawn from conquered peoples who were absorbed into the regiments. The third and lowest class were the mass of Tsonga and Chopi peasants who were never fully absorbed into the state. The regiments lived off raiding these peasant communities and demanding tribute from surrounding peoples. In this way they built up huge herds of cattle. The Portuguese trading settlements of Sofala, Inhambane and Lourenco Marques were also raided and forced to pay tribute for the right to trade.

Further wealth came to the central state through trade. The regiments hunted elephants for their ivory and this was traded in exchange for cloth. War captives were also sold to the Portuguese for export as slaves either for the French sugar plantations of Reunion and Ile de Francs (Mauritius) from the 1840s, or across the Atlantic to Brazil.

The Gaza state was weakened by four years of civil war after the death of Soshangane in 1858. It recovered in the 1860s, but after this control over the regiments began to decline. Nevertheless the Gaza state of Ngungunyane provided one of the major obstacles to final conquest of southern Mozambique in the 1890s.

**The Ngoni of Central Africa**

Most notable of those expelled from southern Mozambique by Soshangane in the 1830s were the Jere-Ngoni led by Zwangendaba. They and two other Ngoni groups, the Maseko and Msene, moved north-westwards onto the Zimbabwe plateau. There they attacked the ancient Rosvi and Mutapa kingdoms (see page 39). They were organised along centralised regimental lines, and they absorbed, conquered peoples into their ranks. They lived off raids and forced tribute.

After ravaging the plateau during the early 1830s, the Ngoni eventually moved north of the Zambesi. After raiding northwards, they settled as powerful independent chiefdoms in Malawi and south-western Tanzania.
Hlubi and Ngwane

Two important Nguni groups moved westwards across the Drakensberg in the early 1820s: the Hlubi of Mpangazitha and the Ngwane of Matiwane (not to be confused with the Ngwane of Sobhuza). These two chiefdoms had begun in the 19th Century among the foothills of the Drakensberg, on the edge of the expanding Ndwindwe and Mthethwa kingdoms. Matiwane responded to this potential threat by attempting to build his own amalgamation of chiefdoms around the valleys of the upper Tugela. The Hlubi resisted these attempts at absorption and suffered repeated cattle raids from Matiwane. By 1821 they had been stripped of virtually all their cattle. That year Mpangazitha led the bulk of the Hlubi across the Drakensberg where they fell upon the unsuspecting Sotho. The Ngwane meanwhile faced the threat of forceful absorption into the expanding Zulu kingdom. After suffering several Zulu attacks in 1822, Matiwane himself decided to lead his Ngwane across the Drakensberg and onto the Sotho highveld.