Careful historical analysis reveals hidden layer

P.S. Landau, *Popular Politics in the History of South Africa, 1400–1948*
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Popular Politics in the History of South Africa is an ambitious book by any standard. Landau sets out to cover 548 years of South African history in 250 pages of text, and the reader may be forgiven for feeling some initial apprehension at the plausibility of such an undertaking. But such fears are short lived. The book leaves you with a feeling that you have just experienced privileged access to a previously hidden layer of historical analysis. It is grounded in detailed narrative and yet demonstrative of the ways in which the "big picture", as we know it today, has been carved out over the centuries.

Landau makes two central arguments, both of which are controversial and will surely force a wider rethink of historical and anthropological scholarship in the region. Firstly, the main thesis of the book contends that the people living in pre-colonial South Africa were devoid of "tribal" allegiance. The second assertion, clearly connected to the main argument, is that there was no "religion" on the Highveld to speak of until the missionaries brought it there. I will deal with each in turn.

The idea that tribalism was "invented" is, of course, hardly novel ground for historians of southern Africa. Vail, Ranger, Frederick Cooper and a host of other scholars have grappled with the idea that tribal allegiances were/are the result of relatively recent political forces. Landau defines membership of a tribe as a "primary, inalienable birthright, uniting culture and blood, and providing a total blueprint for behaviour, necessarily diminished by 'civilisation'" (p 124). This "total blueprint", he argues, emerged in the Highveld along with encroaching colonial influence in the period after c. 1800. Much of the book is devoted to developing the argument that c. 1400–1800 the overall picture was "one of overlapping movement and the persistence and transmutation of authority building practices – not of separate tribes" (p 246). Here he makes a clear distinction between "political terrain" (the pre-colonial mixing and splitting of groups, or "houses"), and "tribal" identities – concocted by Europeans and eventually internalised by Africans. Echoing Cooper, Landau reminds us that "Europeans *always* thought in terms of tribes ... [which is] ... not the same thing as the people of South Africa doing so" (p 124, his emphasis). The focus on amalgamation as opposed to tribal particularity is evidenced by a sustained analytical focus on and around the settlement of Thaba Nchu (some 300 kilometres north of present- day East London), and the shifting centres of power and fluctuating loyalties brought about by the slow encroachment of colonial rule and missionary activity.

Landau draws on an impressive array of sources to back up his claims. Among them, schoolboy essays from the 1860s and court hearings make for particularly interesting analysis, but perhaps the most convincing and innovative source used throughout the book, at times almost in passing, is Landau's astute use of language. For example, in tracing the origin of the term Tswana, we learn that it most likely came from a variety of words uttered to European travellers with the broad meanings that "we are the same", "blended together" or "similar" – from the reciprocal *-ana* (pp 9–10). From the mundane phrase "yes, we are the same" (*tshwana*), Landau argues, Europeans created the "the Sichuana language", which today we associate with "the Tswana" people. But at the time of early contact, the language was spoken over a vast geographical area spanning north of the Limpopo, by people who practised – by and large – similar ways of life.

Tribalisation, then, happened towards the end of the timeframe covered in the book, and by the end of the 1870s Highveld people were "being tribalised" in a variety of ways and in specific sites: in mission stations and on Boer farms. A fundamentally important catalyst in this process was the profound change in social and cosmological structures wrought through the mass movement of people from peasant existences, agrarian freedom and warring chiefdoms towards rural proletarianisation and external administration (p 247). Tribal allegiances were "born denying the circumstances of their own generation and protesting their imminent demise. They were taken up by Africans suffering territorial conquest and enserfment, because they were what was left over" (p 149).

The second main argument made in the book relates to religion. "There was no separate body of practices", Landau states, "... no accepted set of ideas connected to an afterlife or eternal life ... No religious system or spiritual domain can be postulated before missionaries introduced these ideas themselves" (p 76). Chiefs were said to be god-like figures, with the power to make rain, but the idea of a distant God did not exist. The evidence presented in support of these claims is perhaps less persuasive than for the previous argument, but it is by no means completely unconvincing. Again, Landau turns to an analysis of language, using Ludwig Wittgenstein to elaborate on the meaning of words. The term "it's raining", for example, may be thought to have universal application. Consider however, what it means if it is understood that someone (the chief) has made the rain fall. Rain, in this context, is a vindication of chiefly power and a direct justification of his divinity. Missionaries, Landau argues, were convinced that they possessed divine truths, stable meanings which all non-believers had yet correctly to grasp. "At the moment of decision, of naming his own Christian concepts, the missionary translator moved from translating in order to comprehend, to translating in order to convey new meaning. And then he erased his tracks. Ancestors would eventually be said to have always meant god, just as 'rain' (*pula, go na*) was said to always have meant precipitation" (p 81).

Pioneering anthropologists, such as Isaac Schapera and others in the early to mid 1900s, commented on their surprise that ancestor worship and "traditional religion" seemed to have largely disappeared. Landau postulates that it never actually existed in the first place, but that the set of ideas we know today as "traditional religion" gradually developed in relation to the ways in which missionaries translated – and miss-translated – the ritual practices they encountered and the Christian concepts at the centre of their endeavour to save lost souls. This is an interesting proposition, but one is left with the feeling that more evidence could have been presented in its defence. Nonetheless, in conjunction with the main argument of the book, it works. Traditional religion and

"tribal" allegiances may be taken for granted today, but Landau wants to show us how they came to be in the first place.

This is a timely contribution to wider South Africa politics. In recent years, the South African government has been at pains to identify tribal leaders through the Nhlapo Commission. With the ostensible aims of "correcting historical wrongs", deposing chiefs and kings who were put in place by previous regimes and replacing them with their rightful incumbents, the Nhlapo Commission has acted to re-tribalise the South African political and social landscapes in profound ways. The dominance of certain groups has been confirmed, and others – such as Shangaan – have been left to deal with the ruling that they have no claim to kingship within South African borders. The commission re-ignited historical rivalries, but perhaps more than anything demonstrated that chiefly authority has been well and truly trumped by state power. The state decides who will be king, and then pays them royally for the privilege.

In this wider context, Landau's contribution should serve as a reminder that there is nothing "natural" about the groupings which dominate our common-sensical understandings of South Africa's people or its past. Academic discussion on the current obsession with re-tribalisation on these shores and beyond – and particularly the ways in which culture and tradition have been commodified – must be rooted in careful historical analyses such as this one, lest we forget that in the end, we all have much more in common than we have been led to believe.

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