

Fred Morton, *The Cattle People: The Tswana*. Gaborone: The Botswana Society, 2024, ISBN (pdf) 978-99912-71-66-8 and ISBN (print) 978-99912-488-3-7, pages xviii-144

Fred Morton is well known in scholarly circles in Southern Africa as one of the leading scholars of the history of Tswana groups before colonial times. He has published widely in this field. His latest book, *The Cattle People: The Tswana*, is a handy and at the same time scholarly guide to the history of the period from about 1600 to the late 1800s. The author combines an outline of what he sees as the main events with fresh interpretations of key developments.

A feature of the book is that Morton is not afraid to confront well established stereotypes. Early on he makes a point of countering what he tells us has become a common notion, especially on social media, about the origins of Tswana groups. This is the idea that Tswana people migrated long ago into Southern Africa from Egypt or East Africa in ready-made 'tribal' communities. On the basis of 60 years of research by archaeologists, and of his own careful re-interpretation of oral accounts of Tswana history that have been recorded since the early nineteenth-century, the author indicates, rather, that Tswana people emerged in Southern Africa several hundred years ago as diverse groups with local origins. When they began to refer to themselves as Batswana is not known; it was probably in the last few centuries.

Another misleading notion that Morton confronts, one common among Tswana people and others, is that, like African people generally, they have always lived in 'tribes'. These are seen as homogeneous communities of people who share a common descent and a common culture. But the historical evidence shows that Tswana communities, like others, consisted in the past, as they still do today, of a core of people related to the leader, together with people from a diversity of unrelated groups who, at different times and for different reasons, came to give the ruling family their political allegiance.

After discussing conflicting ideas about Tswana origins, Morton goes on to sketch out an account of how, from about the 1600s, identifiable Tswana groups settled in what he calls the 'Tswana Cradleland', the region that stretches from Zeerust in the west, along the slopes of the Magaliesberg, to Pretoria. They favoured pockets of land that offered combinations of fertile soils, year-round grazing for cattle, perennial streams, and plenty of timber for building. In some areas an added bonus was provided by deposits of iron ore.

From early in their lives, individuals acquired an intimate knowledge of the landscape and of the resources of plants and animals, from elephants to insects, that it offered for food, medicines and materials for making buildings, clothing, domestic items and weapons. Professor Morton graphically makes the point that the learning manual which people used was the Setswana language. In its many dialects, it carries thousands of terms for animals, plants and varieties of landscape. Retaining this knowledge, and transmitting it through the education of children, was the responsibility of older women. To quote the author, 'A woman's world spliced the wild to the domestic' (p.36).

Another powerful point -and, in view of the sub-title of his book, in some ways a counter-intuitive one -made by Morton is about the difficulty that people in the past faced in accumulating cattle. Not all groups had access to good grazing lands. In times of drought, grass shrivelled and streams dried up. For many people it was easier to seize cattle from neighbouring groups than to try to breed them over a number of years. In many areas, cattle-raiding became endemic. As the author puts it, cattle changed hands all the time. Only a few families became rich.

A new era in Tswana history, an era marked by loss of land, of cattle and of political autonomy, began in the 1820s, when, on top of ongoing cattle raiding, a succession of groups began invading the Cradleland with the purpose of settling there. In the process, many of the inhabitants were driven out or else chose to move away to find refuge on the edge of the

Kalahari Desert. Many others were forced to submit to new rulers; still others joined the invading groups. Morton leaves open the question of what the ultimate causes of these upheavals were; he confines himself to giving a brief but carefully outlined account of events of what has become known in the literature as the Mfecane or Difaqane.

From about 1827 the dominant figure in the region was Mzilikazi Khumalo, leader of an invading group from the east that formed the core of what came to be called the Ndebele kingdom. He and his followers eventually moved off northwards in 1837. The common account in history books is that they were 'driven out' by another force of interlopers, this time Voortrekkers from the Cape. Morton makes the point that the Voortrekkers were assisted by African allies, and that Mzilikazi may have already decided to move away to put a distance between himself and this new group of settlers.

Mzilikazi's move opened the way for the return of many Tswana groups to their former lands. Over the next twenty years or so their leaders sought to find ways of dealing with the presence of the Voortrekkers, or Boers as they called themselves, who aimed to settle on the same land and to seize cattle and slaves where they could. By the 1860s, the Boers were gaining the upper hand. To find a degree of security on the land, many Tswana people were forced to buy farms from the Boers who claimed them. To raise the necessary money, people had to find a place in the new cash economy, as hunters of ivory, as labourers on Boer farms, or as migrant workers in the distant Cape Colony. For many, a new way of life under colonial rule was beginning.

All this is squeezed into a text of 130 pages, with many useful maps, followed by an informative appendix on Tswana totems and a six-page list of works on various aspects of Tswana history for further reading. Other scholars in the field, together with newcomers to it, will find this book a must-read source of reference. It will be the job of a new generation of scholars to develop the insights that Professor Morton provides into more detailed studies of the period that he covers.

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