The impact of trade with Europeans on the creation of the new Zulu sociality in the early nineteenth century

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Abstract

There is hard problem for South African anthropology to find real causes for large-scale social changes in the Zulu society in the early nineteenth century. The goal of this article is to find a place for trade with Europeans in the set of estimated causes.

On the territory of Zululand in the early nineteenth century Dingiswayo, the chief from Mthethwa clan (gen), started a creation of chiefdoms union; after his death power was brought to the chief from Zulu clan – Shaka. During their reign the new "regimental" age-class system was created, in which military unions and strong army was forming on the base of age groups. Zulu accepted unknown for neighbors war tactics and the new weapon – assegai. Zulu authority was expanded on almost all Zululand and many chiefs in Natal southward were involved in subordinate relations.

These and other large-scale social changes, including polito- and ethnogenetic, in the first half of nineteenth century happened in South Africa are including by historians in the Mfecane period, which is one of the most important periods for the south-African ethnic history. The forming of such Nguni-speaking peoples as Zulu, Swazi, Matabele (Zimbabwean Ndebele) and Ngoni ethnic identity was arising from this point on.

Keywords: Nguni; chiefdom; paramountcy; inkosi; Zulu; KwaZulu-Natal; Mfecane; trade.
Zulu expansion was not a trigger of Mfecane but its most important part. Suchwise, the causes of first phenomena origin were, in many ways, the causes of the Mfecane beginning.

Among estimated causes are:
- a demographic explosion, which was connected with distribution of corn after the import of it by Portuguese and later by Dutch traders in the Delagoa Bay (Oliver P., Atmore A. 2001: 222). But archaeological data shows us, that there was a consolidation of the population in the region in the early nineteenth century but not a natural population growth (vide: Perry W.R. 2002).
- an ecological factor: the lack of grasslands, which was provoked by the excessive use and the decrease of the ground productivity by soil erosion and drought, lead to the territorial expansion (Perry W.R. 2002: 11). But here too we have no evidences that there was the soil depletion. Most strong droughts in south-eastern Africa, indeed, took place between 1800 and 1803, in 1812 and in 1816-18. There was a special droughts cycle, which were not something unusual. But in the time, when the new polities and social inequality were emerged, droughts undermined traditional strategies of the famine avoiding among people (Eldredge E.A. 1992: 26, 29, 31).
- a slave trade. Absolutely, other regions were involved in a slave trade earlier and in larger scales, but its level in Delagoa Bay was minimal until 1820s (and first big conflicts in the region arose in 1817 only) until emerging of a large number of captives and refuges in the region. "The natives [Nguni], – as witness – captain Owen noted, – have a decided aversion to the [slave] trade." (Owen, Captain of HMS Leven. "The Bay of Delagoa." RSEA, II: 465-79. Cit. in: Eldredge E.A. 1992: 10). The Cape colony was placed to the south of Zulu, along its borders raided Griqua and Korana, which were sponsored by Europeans. But neither the first nor the second could be the cause of forming the polities and the migrations. And that was convincingly proved by an American researcher E.A. Eldredge (Eldredge E.A. 1992: 1-35). Already since 1820s slave traders escalated the continued violence for obtaining "goods" (Eldredge E.A. 1992: 1).
- a material goods trade: ivory, skins, cattle, Rhino horns in exchange for woolen and cotton shawls, calico, brass ornaments, beads, and tobacco (Ballard Ch. 1981: 10).

In the moment when Europeans came, an exchange between chieftoms already was a privilege of elites. Common members of society, as Soviet anthropologist-africanist I.I. Potekhin noted, "produced foreign exchange with permission of the chief only, paying him some bribe". The interior exchange was with "iron, copper, ivory, skin, wood, cane and clay" products (Potekhin I.I. 1955: 38-41).

In the beginning of the Mfecane period there was a sharp intensification of the struggle of elites for control over trade and resources, coming mostly from Port Natal and Delagoa Bay (Perry W.R. 2002: 14-16). Before this moment Arabian and Swahili traders did not go so far to the south, and Portuguese, which situated in the region since sixteenth century, focused on gold-bearing areas of Zimbabwe. Only when British and Dutch interested in buying ivory arrived, northern Nguni (future Zulu and Swazi) were involved in coastal trade (Huffman T.N. 2004: 102). The new trade net grew from the station based at Delagoa Bay by Dutch in early seventeenth century. The control over the region belonged to the chieftom of Tsonga – Maputu. Tsonga militant activity created a chain-reaction, which triggered the struggle for the monopolization of foreign trade in the inland areas of Northern Natal. Trade in Delagoa Bay peaked in 1780s and then the supply began to decrease, and the chieftdom Maputu turned to
the production of food for European whaling ships (Oliver P., Atmore A. 2001: 222). In KwaZulu-Natal the number of raids to capture cattle has increased sharply from the 1780s. To the 1800s, the demand of Europeans for cattle begins to exceed the demand for ivory (Huffman T.N. 2004: 104).

The rise of political and wealth inequality in complex with droughts forced the weakest to join major polities involved in the competition for good irrigated land (Eldredge E.A. 1992: 1). In the mid to late eighteenth century, the population in South Africa starts to accumulate in larger settlements (Huffman T.N. 2004: 103-107).

During the reign of Shaka the vast majority of Zulu had not the opportunity to exchange with white traders, so that economic interaction was limited with the ruling elite (Ballard Ch. 1981: 5). Only by the time of the establishment of colonial rule (under the paramount chief Mpande) local leaders have achieved a higher level of autonomy and an opportunity to exchange with European traders directly (Ballard Ch. 1981: 11).

Neither ivory exporting nor importing of clothing and beads transformed the local production. However, this trade was important because it served as a source of wealth for the elite, stimulating the growth of social inequality (Eldredge E.A. 1992: 29). As a result of increasing political hierarchy, the local chiefdoms of Zululand, which were headed by chiefs (inkosi) and their assistants (induna), unite under the authority of the paramount chief (inkosi enkhulu). The presence of a centralized authority contributed to the cultural and linguistic homogenization of the population, and this process continued during the colonial period (since 1840s).

So we see that the desire to monopolize trade was inherent in the elites of the region before the advent of European goods. However, after, the social rupture of the elite with ordinary members of the society increased markedly. Thus, trade with Europeans can be called one of the most important causes for the emergence of a new form of Zulu sociality – the union of chiefdoms (or paramount chiefdom), which became known far beyond Africa thanks to the victory of the Zulu over the British at the battle of hill Isandlwana in 1879.

Acknowledgements

Valieva would like to extend her sincerest appreciation and gratitude to Professor V.A. Popov of Saint-Petersburg State University who guided the early stages of the research that resulted in this article.

Notes

1. This research was supported by the Russian Science Foundation via grant № 14-18-02785 "Neotraditionalism: archaic syndrome and construction of the new sociality in the context of globalization processes".
References


