Résumé
D. Webster — Le système de parenté tembe-thonga : les noces de l'histoire et de l'anthropologie.
L'auteur dénonce l'usage trop fréquent du « présent ethnographique » en démontrant, par comparaison entre la situation actuelle, les descriptions anciennes comme celle de Junod, et la tradition orale, que les structures familiales du groupe ont changé parallèlement aux transformations politiques, tant endo- qu'exogènes.

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This article represents a plea to anthropologists to take history seriously as a component of social and cultural analysis, and to balance this against the propensity to become dazzled by the structural implications of various forms of marriage rules, kin-term systems or residence rules. A balance can be struck between these two tendencies, for structural predispositions do indeed lie within cultural and social forms, and these may channel the trajectory of historical processes in certain directions. But historical forces have their own power and momentum, and certain structural tendencies may be given prominence at certain moments, only to be cast aside later. My appeal is for a sense of perspective and a dialogue between the two.

A particularly dangerous tendency of anthropologists is to write in the ‘ethnographic present’. This often elides history, marking the descriptions of an observer at a particular moment in time as a timeless stereotype of the norms of a group, when what is being observed may be transient strategies, suited to the contingencies of politics or economies of that time. The presence or absence of strong lineages in a society, for instance, may reflect the state of mobilization and power of the chieftdom or district, and it would be wrong to extrapolate from present observations into the past.

In my own study of the southern Thonga, for example, I describe a cultural grouping who went through a series of transformations, from being a collection of small and fragmented agnatic groups into the most powerful political and economic force in the region, superseded by the

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powerful State formation of the Swazi and Zulu, and finally fragmented by the colonialism of the Portuguese and British, and now ravaged by poverty, labour migrancy and drought. The systems of kinship, marriage, politics and economics have all been fundamentally affected by these vast upheavals, and the work of that excellent ethnographer, H. A. Junod, written at the turn of the century, should be seen for what it is: a carefully recorded and analysed poignant moment in a dynamic historical process. To take his monograph as a model for Thonga society would be naïve and arbitrary.

This paper therefore attempts to provide a brief historical overview of southern Thonga history, noting the kinship, economic and political structures, as an attempt to contextualize the forms of kinship and marriage in the Kosi Bay area of KwaZulu today. I even have reservations about calling the people of the region Thonga, and Tembe-Thonga, as the majority no longer accept this appellation themselves. As will be seen, the Tembe-Thonga were once a political entity, not based on language or ethnicity, but on political dominance over a number of other groups and clan fragments in the area between Delagoa Bay and Mkuze.

Reconstructing the early history of African societies is a complex and difficult task. The oral traditions gleaned from the present inhabitants of an area, or descendants of an important leader, tend to be self-serving, and are often a legitimation of an existing state of affairs, or constitute claims for a desired one. The earliest written records are mostly reports by traders, explorers, missionaries or shipwrecked sailors. Many of these also have vested interests, or have passed through an area hurriedly, and do not have a good understanding of local complexities.

The Ingwavuma region of north-eastern KwaZulu is no exception to these problems, but we are fortunate in that oral traditions in the area are rich, and can be cross-checked, and a large number of traders and shipwreck victims passed through the area, leaving a scattered written record. Let us examine the historical background by breaking it up into three broad periods: prior to 1750; 1750-1850; 1850 to the present.

Southern Thongaland and Ingwavuma, prior to 1750

The Ingwavuma region of KwaZulu is an anomaly. It is an arbitrarily delimited district, whose boundaries were decided upon for administrative convenience. It cuts across both ethnic and geographical entities, and is controlled by a magistrate. When reconstructing its history therefore, one has to see it as a part of a much wider zone, covering both northern KwaZulu and southern Mozambique.

One of the earliest written accounts of this area comes from survivors of the shipwrecked Portuguese trading ship, the São Thomé, which went
aground near Sordwana Bay in 1589.1 Their description of the inhabitants of the area is not very useful, with few names being noted to help locate the inhabitants. They called the local people 'famos', referring to the smoke from the fires they lit. From their contact, however, and from archaeological evidence from the Ndumo area, it is clear that people had inhabited the area for a very long time, at least as early as the 13th century, probably 1250 A.D.

The people inhabiting the area more or less from Delagoa Bay (Maputo) to Lake St. Lucia from the mid-16th century to the present have been one or other branch of the Thonga people, mingled with smaller numbers of Zulu and Swazi clan-members.2 It must be remembered that the consolidation of a number of scattered Nguni-speaking clans into the Zulu nation at its height was a long and slow process, coming to fruition between about 1790-1870, and the emergence of the Ngwane-Dlamini lineage to a position of dominance to form Swaziland covers roughly the same period. The Thonga, though different clan fragments within them were predominant at different times,3 showed greater political, economic and social coherence than their Nguni neighbours prior to their State formation, and emergence as major powers in the region.

In the 1550s, Portuguese traders in Delagoa Bay recorded the existence of two Thonga chiefdoms stretching southwards—the Nyaka and Tembe. By 1590, it was clear that Nyaka had control over all the land as far south as the southern extension of the Ubombo hills, well south of the area under discussion. The control of the Thonga over this large stretch of territory was not disputed.4 The Thonga were so powerful during the early period

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1. The record of this shipwreck, written by Do Couto, shows a higher level of State formation among the people of this region than in what appear to be Nguni groupings to the south. Do Couto describes the inhabitants as being under two 'kings', with highly developed trading relationships, while other groups are smaller, their chiefs governing three or four villages (homesteads). See Do Couto in G. M. Theal 1898: 199; Hedges 1978: 102.

2. Hedges (1978: 111-12) reports that, in the mid-16th century, two Ronga (southern Thonga) chiefdoms or kingdoms were in control of the region and in contact with the Portuguese-Nyaka (on the coast) and Tembe (inland, bounded by the Ubombo hills). At this time, the Nyaka group appeared more powerful and better known, though in conflict with a powerful rival, probably the Tembe.

3. Prior to 1550, the Tembe were stronger than the Nyaka, by controlling trade in ivory with Europeans, and an internal trade to the north in copper and iron. The ivory trade dried up in the 1580s for a while, and this weakened Tembe dominance (Hedges 1978: 116). Thereafter the Nyaka dominate, only to be superseded by the Tembe when a succession dispute weakens the Nyaka in the mid-1600s. By 1725 the Tembe are restored to prominence, controlling trade, now in brass and beads, for cattle. Internal disputes weaken the Tembe again, and they are only restored to power in the last decade of the 18th century (ibid.: 135).

4. For example, by 1593, the Nyaka had taken control over trade with Europeans, which gave them increased power in the region. Chiefs to the south-west of Nyaka territory confirmed the Nyaka reputation as the sole trader with Europeans (Hedges 1978: 113). Hedges shows that Nyaka territory at this time stretched to the Mkuze gap at Ubombo (ibid.: 114).
that the Portuguese only maintained their trading station at Lourenço Marques at the pleasure of the Thonga, who were content to have them, in order to trade. The Thonga built themselves a deserved reputation as traders and middlemen, controlling the flow of cloth, beads, brass, guns and other European artifacts into the interior, and ivory, skins and cattle in the opposite direction.

1750-1850: The Thonga Consolidate

The height of Thonga power was during the reign of Mabudu of the Tembe clan (after whom both Maputo in Mozambique and Maputa in South Africa are named) ca. 1740-1798, which predates the emergence of both Swazi and Zulu States. A respected historian, David Hedges, argues that it was the consolidation of power in the area of Mabudu which dislodged what was then a typically small lineage, the Ngwane-Dlamini, which was later to found the Swazi royal house. Indeed, it is ironic that Hedges (1978: 138-139) reports: ‘Nineteenth century Swazi royal traditions suggest that ancestors of their kings lived near the lower slopes of the uBombo hills in close proximity to the Tembe (Thonga) and even that the Swazi were an offshoot of the Thonga people’ (My emphasis). Under Mabudu Tembe, the Nyaka chiefdom declined in power and became a sub-chiefdom in Tembe-Thongaland.

Under Mabudu, the Thonga prospered as traders, and were powerful militarily. Mabudu had a trading and military alliance with Dingiswayo, Shaka’s predecessor, which was cemented by a marriage alliance as well. After Dingiswayo’s death, the Thonga continued trading with Shaka. Some years later, when Shaka was consolidating his empire, Mabudu saw fit to pay tribute to him, but the Thonga were not raided or conquered by Zulu forces and, after the defeat of the Zulu at the hands of the British, they retained their autonomy.

In the disputed territory, therefore, the picture that emerges is similar to what was happening in other parts of the subcontinent. In any region, a number of independent lineage and clan fragments could be found, sometimes speaking different dialects and with differing cultural practices. Over time, one such group gained advantage over local rivals, and became powerful, both numerically and in other crucial areas, such as politically, economically and in the ideological sphere. In this situation, there were always other clan fragments who came to be dominated, or moved off, as apparently the Ngwane-Dlamini did. In Thongaland

5. Mabudu may have pioneered the organization and centralization of young men into regiments (amabutho), initially for hunting purposes, later for military ends. They appear to have existed well before 1790 (Hedges 1978: 153-154).
therefore, from the earliest times to the present, were Nguni groups, subordinate to the Thonga, but which were linked to the Zulu or the Swazi.

1850 to the Present: Colonizers and Colonized

Colonial powers began to take a serious interest in the area in the latter half of the 19th century. No longer content to be trading nations, both the British and Portuguese began to take active steps to colonize the south-east coast of Africa. The Portuguese, though they had never controlled the interior, but merely had a toehold in a few trading posts, claimed Mozambique and Thongaland south to the boundary of the Zulu State. The British also laid claim to all of Thongaland, including Delagoa Bay. Finally, Marshal MacMahon, President of France at the time, was called in to arbitrate, and in 1875 awarded Delagoa Bay to the Portuguese, but to appease the British, gave them control over the southern half of Thongaland. This is the boundary between Mozambique and South Africa today, cutting what was a united people in two.

In 1896, the Thonga chief Ngwanase rebelled against the Portuguese, who tried to arrest him. He fled to South Africa, and asked to be placed under British protection. A treaty was concluded between the Tembe-Thonga, led by Ngwanase, and Britain. In 1897 Britain annexed Thongaland, and in the same year Thongaland and Zululand were incorporated into Natal.

In the 20th century, Thongaland became increasingly integrated into the structures of Native Administration, then Bantu Administration, and was treated as a part of Zululand, even though large tracts of land were still ‘crown land’ from the time of annexation. Over the years, the loss of independence, the splitting of the Tembe-Thonga chiefdom, the ravages of proletarianization, and various colonial practices, all took their toll on the Thonga, and their coherence as a society began to crumble. Most of the men now speak Zulu as their preferential language, and have adapted Thonga clan names to resemble Zulu ones. Thonga cultural practices such as traditional economic pursuits, rituals, and material culture still persist, and many women in the area insist on speaking Tsonga, and teaching the children to do the same.

The Ingwavuma Region Today

The most recent census places the population at about 96,000 people, probably a low estimate, of which the overwhelming majority are listed as being Zulu. This fact needs not confuse us, as the government’s
attempts at social engineering can change a person's ethnicity, race or nationality at the stroke of a pen. Thus the area that was until recently referred to as 'British Amatongaland' became an integral part of Kwa-Zulu.

The area falls into four ecological zones, from east to west: the coastal strip, the Musi swamp, the Pongolo flood plain, and the Lebombo mountains. Across this variety of ecologies, there are local variations in how much food is procured from tilling, fishing and gathering. But recent surveys have shown the area to be extremely poverty-stricken. From the time of Mabudu, at the turn of the 19th century, when it was one of the wealthiest areas in the subcontinent, the ravages of the Mfecane, colonialism, taxation, sporadic droughts, and the intensification of control under apartheid, have all combined to produce underdevelopment in the area which has few equals in South Africa.

Almost every able-bodied man, and increasing numbers of women now, are engaged in migrant labour. The labour bureau system is virtually inoperative in the region, so most workers have to rely on their own resourcefulness or the help of friends to find accommodation and jobs. Many of the young men of the area fill the most menial of migrant jobs, such as sugar-cane cutters in the plantations near Empangeni, or flat cleaners and petrol-pump attendants on the Witwatersrand.

Pensions are a vital resource, despite the paucity of the payment. There are many too old or too sick to work, and a pension provides a regular, if meagre, source of income. Indeed, in 1987, the unemployment rate of the Kosi Bay area was 52% for men and 89% for women. In such poverty, a pension is a vital resource.

There is marked class differentiation in the area. There is a small petit-bourgeois group who manage to evade migrant labour. They comprise those who are in the government or missionary service as clerks, nurses, teachers, etc., those who are store-keepers, taxi-owners and others with small business interests and, finally, there are chiefs and sub-chiefs.

Among the migrants, there are at least four categories: a few have steady, well-paid jobs in one of the more advanced industries, where unionism is well-developed, and earn from R200-R400 per month; others are less well paid, yet have a steady income, while working, of something less than R200; the third group are contract workers on sugar plantations, where the pay is bad, and the conditions of labour punitive. Finally, there are those engaged in casual labour: occasionally, for instance, a farmer from, say, the Barberton area will arrive with a truck and load up with workers, usually women and children, to work for a month or two at R1 per day.

All of the above categories are better off than those who remain behind and form a kind of rural proletariat or are unemployed. There is quite a large number of people in these categories, who try to survive by work-
ing in other people’s fields, being paid between 50c and R1 per day, when the work is available, which is by no means every month. Those who fall into these categories tend to be the old and the young—those too old or ill to work, but who do not receive pensions, and those who have left school and are struggling to find employment.

A survey of the coastal area conducted on a recent fieldwork trip found that the average household income was R102 per month, which included local production and cash remittances from migrants. Indeed, the entire Ingwavuma region is totally dependent on migrancy for its survival. The same survey as quoted above found that over 80% of food consumed at meal-times was bought at a local trading store (and consisted predominantly of refined mealie meal).

A crucial prop to survival is the resourcefulness of the women, who not only till the soil, but gather wild spinach, mushrooms, water-chestnut, and shellfish, where available, as diet supplements. But even the hard work of the women is not enough to stave off the inevitable debilitation born from the structural causes of underdevelopment. One widow, for example, her only son having long been away as a migrant, had ploughed the same field since 1948 without leaving it fallow. The soil is already poor, but to open a new field requires the clearing of trees and undergrowth, a task she could not tackle alone. The work-party system in the area has collapsed in parts. Another childless widow lives off the leaves of her beans and pumpkins, so desperate is her need, and they never bear their fruits because of it. It is, as usual, the women who suffer the most in the situation.

Southern Thonga Kinship and Marriage

The Other Side of History: The Structural Forces which Shape the Social Process

It is extremely difficult to unravel the history of changing kinship arrangements among the Thonga. The main problem is the quality of sources. The early shipwrecked sailors were more interested in their own stomachs and survival than in Thonga views on kinship; their reports tend to talk of crops, cattle and the power of communities and chiefs. Traders, travellers and explorers likewise found that ivory, cattle and geography had more fascination than local marriage patterns. It was left to the Swiss missionary, Junod, to provide us with the first detailed and analytical monograph on the Thonga. The earlier sources do allow us fragmentary glimpses of the quality of Thonga society, and Patrick Harries, an historian, has attempted to piece these together. Junod’s own work is of mixed quality. Much of it is meticulous, but there are three problems: he collected his information from only a few informants,
and from widely differing areas (part of his work was done in southern Mozambique, part in Shiluvane, now a Pedi-speaking area of the Transvaal); he also operated from a very synchronic view of the society.

Other authors have examined Thonga kinship: Jaques (1929), Clerc (1938), Harris (1959) and Felgate (1982). Unfortunately, the first two set themselves narrow tasks and, not being trained anthropologists, may have missed important details. Harris was writing on migrant labour, so only tangentially touches on kinship, and Felgate’s book is a combination of his own fieldwork and references to Junod’s views, so it is not always clear where the differences may lie. What follows therefore, is of necessity incomplete, and only takes up certain of the important themes.

The first issue I would like to note is that there is marked difference in the rules of marriage between chiefs and commoners, a point I shall return to later. The second is that I strongly believe that society and culture are made up of rules, customs, values and traditions, which open up but more often impose limitations on avenues for individual volition and action. It is necessary to explain how ramifications of both—rules of marriage, inheritance, etc.—predispose a society to a particular form of structure; yet individuals, by their ambitions and ingenuity, can circumvent this, as is shown by Comaroff’s work (1974) on the Tswana. Bearing these caveats in mind, let us try for a tentative reconstruction of some aspects of Thonga kinship.

From early travellers’ reports, not much is learnt except that, from the mid-16th century, the people we now know as southern Thonga had a fairly highly developed form of State, which appears to have been predicated upon control over trade routes, especially between interior societies and the Europeans. Apart from their middleman role in trading relations, little is known of the material conditions of Thonga society. The pattern that appears to have emerged is that the area was characterized by a scatter of homesteads in dispersed settlements, with no powerful lineage organization, and probably consisted of small agnatic clusters which can best be called ‘clan fragments’. From among these, one such cluster might emerge, for reasons of a fortuitous geographical placement perhaps, and gain pre-eminence over the others. Certainly, those chiefdoms deemed to be powerful by traders and travellers appear to be characterized by a mass of small undifferentiated (to their eyes) homesteads, under the leadership or domination of a powerful ruling group, perhaps even a lineage, named initially after their leader (e.g. Nyaka, Tembe, Mabudu).

Patrick Harries (1979), while not dealing with the very early period, seems to indicate quite a serious division in Thonga society: that between elders and juniors. It is not clear if he is arguing for the existence of lineages, or even a lineage mode of production, but he asserts that bride-
wealth was the primary means by which chiefs and elders were able to exert domination over the junior members of society. Presumably this domination took place within the family unit, where a father would decide the timing of the marriages of both his daughters and sons but, as the debate over the lineage mode of production has shown (Rey 1975), this can only be successfully maintained if all elders in a society collaborate. Elders obtain influence not only by controlling the reproductive capacities of women (via the bridewealth, which consists of the elite goods of a society), but also by ideological powers, such as the ancestor cult, which they control.

Harries depicts a society which had already lost its former glories as a powerful trading group. Under encroachment from invading Nguni under Soshangane and subsequently his grandson Ngungunyane, and from Portuguese and British colonialism, the Thonga were beginning to disintegrate. By 1879, migrant labour was well under way, with over 5,000 seeking work in South Africa. As early as 1887, 50% of the male population in some areas were migrants, and by 1897, 60,000 Mozambicans were seeking employment outside of their country (Harries 1979: 3, 14 and 3 respectively). Harries argues that the representatives of the old order, chiefs and elders, were desperately trying to preserve the basis of their power—control over women’s reproductive powers, and therefore bridewealth.

The young men, meanwhile, were taking advantage of the new opportunities to earn money and thus try to circumvent the powerful grip of their elders over their lives, by providing for their own bridewealth in the form of money. Bridewealth goods had varied over time. Cattle were always the final measure, but beads, cloth and brass had all played a role, depending on what European traders were offering. One of the bases of chiefly power was total control over trade, and its subsequent redistribution among the homestead heads, in exchange for wives or cattle. From the 1830s, iron hoes, mostly of Venda origin, supplemented cattle as bridewealth goods. But a devastating drought in the 1860s, followed by cattle lung disease, decimated herds, so hoes became the main form of exchange, and chiefs and elders closely controlled their ownership. However, in 1869-1876 a French firm imported a million hoes, selling them at 2 shillings each; migrants working in Natal could buy them and circumvent the elders, who immediately responded by raising bridewealth from ten to hundred hoes (ibid.: 9).

This speaks of society where elders were quite powerful, and acting in some kind of unison. Indeed, this was shown again, when a more serious threat to their control emerged: wages were paid in gold species to migrants who used this as a dowry payment (ibid.: 15). Elders responded in two ways (accepting the inevitability of migrancy and cash wages): first, they attempted to control it ideologically, by accepting migrancy as a part of a boy’s initiation into manhood; second, by dropping
the marriage age to the early teens from the mid-twenties, and by prohibiting premarital sexual favours (previously condoned). Thus, a young man already had a family when he went to the mines, and was not necessarily going to earn his bridewealth. It also ensured that the juniors still were dependent on elders for the payment.

Harries's fascinating description offers a tentative argument that elders had, in the 19th century at least (and perhaps before), exerted a considerable amount of power. The basis for that power, control over bridewealth goods, became more and more difficult to sustain. It is not clear if elders combined in lineages, but they may easily have. Harries argues that in 1897, the defeat of independent Thonga chiefdoms by the Portuguese was 'the beginning of the end of elder control over migrant labour' (ibid.: 16)—although in this assertion he is wrong, because elders still exert some form of control by agreeing to look after the migrant’s family, land and other rights while he is away: while admittedly, the quality of control is different, the migrant feels obligated and indebted to his elders.

The salutary lesson of Harries's work is that, when Junod was observing the Thonga people, they were already a society undergoing enormous change in many spheres of life, not least in kinship and politics. Therefore, when we read in Junod (1927: 245) that the Thonga chief is 'all powerful—an autocrat with power over life and death. In every village the headman possesses similar power over his subjects and the elder brother reigns as a despot over the younger', we should recall that this may well depict the death throes of an old order and not the norm for Thonga society.

The Dynamics of Thonga Kinship, 1900-1927

I now examine Junod's ethnography, observed and written over a quarter of a century, and try to unravel its intricacies. It is a very complex system, combining residence patterns, kin-term structures, marriage rules and inheritance patterns. It is further complicated by the potential for human agency. Junod describes the Thonga kin-term system, which is a classic Omaha type.6 This is characterized by parallel cousins being assigned sibling terms, while cross-cousins are distinguished from both each other and parallel cousins. Matrilateral cross-cousins are called the equivalent of 'mother' and 'mother's brother' for female and male relatives respectively, while all patrilateral cross-cousins are called

6. Approximating to Lounsbury's formulation (1964) of Omaha type III.
grandchild’. Linguistically and sociologically therefore, there is a qualitative difference between the cross-cousins, with those on the maternal side (the wife-giving group) being ‘elevated’ a generation, while on the paternal side they are skewed downwards two generations.

The kin terms must be read in conjunction with exogamy rules. While there are a number of exceptions, the Thonga generally forbid marriage with any person of one’s father’s or mother’s clan, and even the clans of grandparents (Junod 1913: 241). This system has the effect of spreading marriage alliances widely, so that any one clan (or its representation ‘on the ground’, a clan fragment) is linked to a multiplicity of others. This is in marked contrast to, say, the Sotho system of preferential cross-cousin marriage in which a MBd is married by each generation. The Thonga marriage rules for commoners were a form of ‘marrying out’, spreading all alliances laterally rather than vertically. Further, there was a large degree of choice in marriage partners, Junod reports, the structural consequence of which is an emphasis on individual volition.

Confronted with this choice of partner (given the few restraints), and the lack of continuity in alliances from one generation to the next, the structural implications are similar to patrilateral cross-cousin marriage. Instead of a stable set of alliances and relationships, repeated generation after generation, the very point of this system is to render the alliances of previous generations ephemeral, inherited only in the form of complementary filiation which, after all, is a bond of consanguinal kinship, not alliance and affinity. This has a tendency to ‘big-man’ or local-level politics; the groups who supply leaders now have their chances reduced in the next generation; the network of alliances has to be renegotiated and struck anew.

Figure 1 illustrates the constant shifting of direction of alliances that arises out of Thonga marriage rules, and the attempt to cling to the alliance struck by the previous generation by ties of matrifiliation. The individuals A, B and C are members of a clan fragment or local descent group. In the first generation, A contracts a marriage alliance with clan X; his son, B, is forced to seek elsewhere and takes a wife from clan Y, and C must seek even further afield, and allies with clan Z. As a pattern of alliances, it is random and extremely unstable, but it does have the immense value of spreading ties widely. In a hostile and precarious environment, as Thongaland was at the turn of the century, this form of marriage had the immense advantage of spreading the risk.

Lévi-Strauss (1966: 20) has argued that Omaha systems such as these, ‘allow history to play a part in social life. Instead of acting as a regulating device which is constantly tending to set the society back on its old tracks (as in asymmetrical alliance systems), they leave it a measure of freedom which may lead to change’.
Marriage then becomes a game of strategy, rather like chess. Every move of a piece totally alters the state of the game, and all other pieces must be structurally defined in terms of it. Every move opens up, yet limits, all other possible moves which will follow. For commoners, this was the form of marriage at the turn of the century, and perhaps much earlier, but our records do not permit any firm conclusions on this. But the Thonga of Junod’s time were nothing if not pragmatists. He reports that they managed to keep their options open even in marriages which were formally forbidden. A ceremony called *dlaya shilongo* (‘to destroy the relationship’) could be performed which cut an existing kinship tie, allowing two close relatives of forbidden categories to marry (Junod 1913: 243).

**Fig. 1.** Patterns of Alliance Inheritance over Three Generations.
Junod’s use of terms is sometimes loose and therefore confusing. When discussing ‘permitted’ marriages, he says: ‘the choice of a boy is unlimited within the clan and within the tribe’. Presumably the word ‘clan’ means ‘chieftom’ here, as he has claimed fellow clan members as proscribed marriages. Nevertheless, Junod reports what appears to be a territorial dimension to marriage choices when he continues: ‘however, marriages into a too far distant clan are not recommended’—his informant explaining that if they are too far, and the marriage breaks down, one may not be able to reclaim the bridewealth \( (ibid.: 247) \). Attesting, perhaps, to the local nature of politics and trust in a turbulent historical period? Or, the informant expanded, if the oxen supplied were to multiply, we may be tempted to make war with one’s in-laws for cattle! That is, disputes can be settled locally, but distant relatives may be fought with and could be driven away. This is an interesting explanation: it points to the desire for local alliances which will be useful; the fear that alliances are fragile and easily broken; and the scarcity of valued resources—that one could potentially contemplate attacking in-laws for their cattle.

Running as a theme through this period of Thonga history is a fear of the instability of marriage and the possibility of divorce. Junod lists a number of grounds for divorce and, in writing of the reasons why there are such strong taboos against marrying a woman patrilineally related to one, he remarks that it is because, in the event of a divorce, there would be great confusion over the *lobolo* debt. He gives examples where one divorce sets off a chain reaction of others, as each has to return the bridewealth, the same set of cattle being used, in series. \(^7\) It is not clear from the ethnography whether the instability of marriage arises from the generally ephemeral nature of alliances inherent in the kinship structure, or whether it relates to the particular historical conditions at that time; I presume it is a combination of the two.

At the turn of the century, it appears that lineages were absent. A close reading of Junod indicates the existence of small agnatic clusters. From the time of Harries’s reportage, there appears to be less power in the hands of elders, and that elders are definitely not combined into lineage groups of any size of power (if they ever had been). By the time Felgate (1982: 9) was researching further south some fifty years later, this tendency had reached a point where, of the 5,189 homesteads of the region, there were representatives of 271 clans, which does not speak of powerful, deep lineage or clan structures.

\(^7\) As reported in KUPER 1982: 110-112.
The Structural Implications of Thonga Succession

Succession to office, whether chieftainship or headmanship, is adelphic in Thongaland. Devolution of office is therefore collateral, and ideally depends upon primogeniture within a group of brothers. Junod (1913: 383) reports that it is a particular form of adelphic succession, incorporating elements of a lineal devolution as well: when a chief dies, his elder son is the regular heir, but all his younger brothers must reign before his son, the true heir, is crowned. This system tries to reconcile two principles [. . . ] (1) the absolute pre-eminent right of the elder branch, (2) the community of property amongst brothers’.

This pattern of succession gives rise to tensions between siblings—further exacerbating the ephemeral nature of allegiances, as there is often fierce competition between brothers over succession, the losers being placed under the dominance of the victor. There are also inter-generational tensions: once a line of brothers has been exhausted, the line reverts to the eldest son of the senior brother. Early records show that many of the tensions in the Tembe chiefdom were between a ‘regent’ and his nephew, finally going to war against each other. Another aspect of this system of adelphic succession is that junior houses in a homestead or chief’s village are constantly being by-passed. Indeed, Marvin Harris (1959: 55) attributes to this system of inheritance and succession a particular pattern of labour migration from Thonga areas—the junior houses tending to send out work-seekers, while those in direct line of succession stay at home, since they inherit the family wealth in the form of cattle and access to land.

Fig. 2. Thonga Adelphic Succession.
The lateral emphasis apparent in Thonga society of Junod’s observations still pertains in southern Thonga areas and, it seems logical, probably was the norm for commoners from early times. When this is seen in the context of a marriage system which Lévi-Strauss calls ‘dispersed affinal alliance’, spreading marriage ties widely across society, without building stable ties of some generations depth, and an unstable marriage pattern, divorce being common, one forms the impression of a society concerned very much with the present, and very much with survival. The Thonga of Junod’s time lacked lineages (and still do), having a genealogical memory depth of an average of three generations (except for chiefs, who have greater generational depth of memory). This further exacerbated the confusion that invariably ensued over succession to office. Effectively, genealogical amnesia draws a veil over the ‘genuine’ heir, opening up competition between a range of brothers and nephews; in the end, the person or faction which is able to mobilize the greatest support will succeed, and ex post facto, his genealogical claims will become legitimized, as against those of his rivals.

Yet another linking feature in this matrix of forces was the ‘traditional’ mode of production. I have already described how prior to colonialism, the Thonga homesteads, scattered over the countryside, were self-reproducing units, practicing a mixed economy of horticulture, hunting, gathering, herding and fishing. Most of these economic pursuits could be carried out in terms of the household division of labour and its place in the development cycle. Most of the pursuits could be carried out in the immediate vicinity of the homestead, such was the ecology. This early mode of production tended, therefore, to isolate and individuate—it was an “inward-looking” economy, metaphorically speaking. Interestingly, the kinship and marriage arrangements counterbalanced this tendency, and turned the homestead or local clan fragment ‘outwards’, forcing it to marry out (this is in contrast to the Sotho, where residential, kinship and marriage arrangements turn communities and villages ‘inwards’, while the traditional economy, with scattered fields and grazing posts, faced them ‘outwards’).

Chiefs and Strategies for Power

The preceding text has been dealing largely with commoners. It is time to turn our attention to the power-holding groups. Given the description of commoner economy, residences, marriage and inheritance patterns, it is an enigma as to how a group can emerge from the levelling forces and the egalitarian and competitive tendencies of the structures. The key to the enigma seems to lie in the marital strategies pursued. Junod (1913: 350, 354) casually drops the remark: ‘We have already mentioned the fact that marriages between relatives are sanctioned in the royal
families'. This is echoed by Kuper (1982: 121): ‘Thonga chiefs, like ruling families throughout the Southern Bantu area, tend to marry endogamously and to form repetitive marriage with other powerful families’.

Reconstructing as best one can from the fragmentary evidence available, it appears that the great Thonga chiefdoms arose out of a complex set of circumstances. It seems that each of them originally gained advantage over other clan fragments by being in a strategically placed location at a fortuitous moment in time. Both Tembe and Nyaka were located at positions in Delagoa Bay where European traders sought shelter, victuals, and trading partners, and were able to exploit their situations to become middlemen. It has already been indicated that Nyaka turned their trading wealth into cattle.

It is now a conventional wisdom of the study of precapitalist modes of production that control over bridewealth goods means control over reproduction; the more cattle, the more wives are obtainable, the more offspring, who can become productive workers in fields, or numerical strength on the battlefield. When the technology of warfare is simple, numerical strength is paramount. There is evidence, adduced earlier, that the Thonga were one of the earliest of the Southern African societies to form and employ amabutho (‘regiments’) apparently used for hunting, raiding and defence.

In an early stage of State formation, conquest is a common method of expansion. But having done so, the problem is to hold the conquered territory and pacify and stabilize the population. It is here that the Thonga system of marriage, employing dispersed affinal alliances, is a great advantage: one can marry one’s enemies, and turn them into affines. But the drawback with this, as we have seen, is that the system is a levelling one, in which accumulated power and wealth is quickly dissipated. After the first phases of State formation—accumulation, conquest, and pacification—must come consolidation.

The consolidation of power in the ruling group was facilitated by continuing control over the resources which first brought them to power—the trade routes. But after a while this process of consolidation must be effected by other means. It is here that Junod’s casual remark offers us insight. Dispersed alliances will siphon off the hard-won gains of the ruling clan fragment. It must effect closure over the system, keeping the alliances within a defined aristocratic group. The Tembe found a simple means: they effected a marriage rule which urged them to ‘take their own family’—to marry another Tembe. Already the custom of ‘to kill the relationship’ existed, but this was superseded by a positive injunction to marry within the clan. In this way, the wealth of the Tembe was not dispersed, and could be accumulated.

The danger of this marriage strategy as a normative rule is that it could effect total closure and encapsulate the Tembe as a ruling caste, aloof from their subjects. It is not, for example, like the system of the
Swazi ruling clans, couched in terms of cross-cousins or father's mother's clans-people, where at least three clan fragments, and often more, are joined in a cycle of exchange and form a broader aristocracy. However, it seems the Tembe attempted to overcome this by simply not invoking the 'marry within' rule when it was tactically unsound to do so. The marital arrangements were made by a family marriage council, who would no doubt weigh very carefully the advantages and disadvantages of particular alliances.

Perhaps it was this tragic irony which finally ensured that, in the long term, a Thonga State could not survive: the Thonga's marital strategies, located in the full complexity of their ecology, economy, social and cultural arrangements, were on the one hand too fissiparous and dissipating in order to accumulate wealth and consolidate power; and, on the other hand, their tactic for sealing off the haemorrhage of their power and wealth was too inflexible, too closed. In the Kosi Bay region, long after such marriage rules can have any force, people remember vividly and resent what they regard as arrogance. When the Tembe moved into the area in the early 1800s, they first married into local communities, especially the original 'owners of the land', then they effected closure. A man of the Ngubane clan complained: 'Tembe married Tembe; they are like dogs, covering their own kind'.

The Tembe had some success by employing an inflated bridewealth system as well—one paid double the usual lobolo for the daughter of a chief. But they lacked the systematic means of milking surpluses from their commoners which the Swazi so adroitly created—as Bonner (1983: 33-39) and Derman (1977) have so skillfully shown. The original basis of their wealth, their broker role in the trade routes, was also always a tenuous and fickle foundation. Thonga ruling groups needed to transform their basis for accumulation of wealth; they failed, due to the inhospitable environmental conditions in which they were located, the intractability of the social and cultural resources available and, not least, due to the spirited independence of the Thonga people themselves.

The Fate of the Thonga Kinship System: The Current Phase

It is well known that the Thonga are one of the first societies to be recorded in detail (by Junod) which possessed an Omaha-type kin-term system, with the attendant marriage rules of clan exogamy on both parents' sides, and a variation of the adelphic succession pattern. For a

8. I here refer to the Thonga in the anthropological classification sense, though strictly speaking one must acknowledge that no such broad grouping presently exists, and perhaps never did (vide e. g. HARRIES [n.d.]). The term is used here to introduce Junod's classification of the Thonga as an Omaha-type kin-term system.
considerable period, and perhaps accelerating in recent years, the formerly Tsonga-speaking people of northern KwaZulu have been adopting Zulu as the lingua franca, to the detriment of Tsonga. Indeed, a pattern has developed where all menfolk speak Zulu, while the womenfolk are bilingual, and frequently speak Tsonga to each other and their children, in a type of women’s code (though all men are exposed to Tsonga in their childhood).

This growing dominance of the Zulu language over Tsonga reflects historical and political realities of the region dating back to the 1820s and the emergence of the Zulu polity as the most powerful in the subcontinent. Subordinated or tributary peoples naturally learnt the language of the dominant group. This was perpetuated by British colonialism, which administered the Thonga as part of Zululand, and continues today, the area falling under the aegis of the KwaZulu Legislative Authority. There is also a widespread belief among people of the area that prospects of employment are enhanced if one adopts the ethnicity of the Zulu. It must also be borne in mind that many of the original inhabitants of the area were Nguni-speakers rather than Tsonga, who had become part of the Tembe-Thonga polity in the 19th century. These people presumably retained their mother tongue during this period.

The increasing influence of the Zulu language has been accompanied by similar transitions in other social and cultural spheres, perhaps none more so than in kinship and kin terms. Junod’s work indicates that Thonga classificatory kin terms at the turn of the century were of the Omaha type. As remarked above, this kin-term system places wife-givers in an ‘elevated’ position over wife-receivers. It also allocates a linguistic ‘solidarity’ to descent groups (so, for example, all the men of one’s mother’s group are called malume, while all the women are called mame, regardless of generation). While recognizing that there is no necessary ‘fit’ between kin-term systems and kinship groups on the ground, the Omaha-type system is well adapted to a society with strongly developed lineages, lineal groups or agniclusters. Such a kin-term system would be particularly efficacious in a powerful society such as the southern Thonga undoubtedly were in the late 18th and early 19th century.

In more recent times, however, as the people of northern KwaZulu/southern Mozambique have entered a transition towards modern Zulu cultural and political forms, so too has the contemporary Zulu kin-term classification tended to supplant that of the Thonga. Modern Zulu kin terms are of the Iroquois type, which has some significant differences from the Thonga/Omaha type. Both are bifurcate-merging systems, but there the similarity ends. In contrast to the ‘skewed’ generations of the Omaha, the Iroquois system gives equal weight to the generations. More important is the emphasis which is laid on closer relatives belonging primarily to the nuclear family, and secondarily to more extended rela-
tives in Ego's generation, such as parallel cousins, who are called the equivalent of brother and sister. Cross-cousins, on the other hand, are given another term, which differentiates them from parallel cousins and siblings.

The Iroquois system is therefore one which fits well with a society where emphasis is placed on the immediate and extended families, or perhaps in spatial terms, the household and homestead. This reflects the on-the-ground reality of the people of northern KwaZulu. There are nowadays no discernable lineages; all that remains are clan fragments. The atrophy of the Thonga State and the erosion of the earlier bases of Thonga power in which larger descent groups or lineages could vie for, and obtain influence, has made an Omaha-type kinship system less compatible with modern empirical realities. The modern Zulu/Iroquois type, however, more accurately responds to the reality of fragmentation and nucleation of Thonga families which is most commonly found now.

My research in the Kosi Bay area reveals a situation of extreme nucleation. There is little, if any, evidence discernable of kin-based residential patterns. Oral tradition points to an earlier period when agnatic clusters were larger, and access to land was clearly defined by agnatic affiliation to a group. This is no longer the case. There are a large number of single-parent, female-headed homesteads. There are even greater numbers of households which are de facto female-headed, as the husband is absent for eleven months of the year. The old and infirm are frequently left to fend for themselves in their impoverished homesteads, rather than be brought into the care of a relative who, by so doing, would not only extend the homestead, but increase the dependency ratio in an economy already far below the breadline.

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In this article, I have attempted to capture the many transitions through which the southern Thonga have lived. In summary, it appears that, prior to ca. 1750, they lived in small, scattered homesteads, practising a mixed economy, based on the domestic unit, and with no polity of any size or significance. There followed a phase where, due to their advantageous position on trade routes, the Thonga grew to be, by local standards, a wealthy and powerful society, where higher forms of social structuring were required; there is evidence that agnatic clusters, or perhaps even lineages, emerged. The decline of the Thonga State was precipitated by the later emergence of the Swazi and Zulu States, which became pre-eminent in the region. At the same time, the once influential agnatic groups declined in significance. The process of proletarianization accelerated the destruction of large functioning kinship groups, and the current phase is characterized by autonomous family homesteads, sometimes accreted as clan fragments.
My use of the term ‘clan fragments’ perhaps needs some clarification. I have chosen this concept because, in the current situation at Kosi Bay, the small agnatic units which can be identified can in no sense be conceived to be lineages. They are not corporate groups, they have an average genealogical depth of only three generations, and they do not have exclusive control over access to land. It is possible that they represent the remnants of once-large lineages; indeed, the two most commonly found clan names of the area are Ngubane and Tembe. The oral traditions of these two clans both speak of a past period when large and strong lineages were the main form of their organization. However, since then, the lineages which may have flourished have lost their former status, and all that remains are scattered remnants. These are identifiable by their clan names, and there is very little co-operation between homesteads sharing the same name. When I use the term ‘clan’, I am using it in the restricted sense of being a category; it should not be seen to be a group. There is an extensive debate on the existence of lineages in Southern Africa (see, for example, Hammond-Tooke 1984).

I have argued that anthropology can benefit from historical insights—even especially the need to periodize clans, lineages, chiefdoms, etc., for they are not static, but changing and responding to shifts in the political economy of the region. But I wish to stress just as much that historians need to take cognizance of anthropological theory and insights. In the argument above, I have attempted to show that the structuralist insights of Lévi-Strauss, and the more orthodox understandings of kinship and marriage, descent and inheritance drawn from British social anthropology, can illuminate underlying and fundamental structures which are not only shaped by history, but which themselves provide limitations and possibilities on the trajectory of historical development. I realize that although the title of this paper posits the marriage of anthropology and history, much of what I have provided in my analysis is not so much a marriage as a dialogue, or even at times a dialectic. Nevertheless, the exchange of perspectives and insights is, I believe, to the enrichment of both.

I believe it is salutary for anthropologists to exchange insights with historians. Their emphasis on change and flux is a necessary reminder to us that far too long we have written our work in the ethnographic present, as if the society was frozen in time. It also reveals that to talk of, say, ‘the Thonga or Zulu kinship system, or marriage patterns’ is meaningless unless we are historically specific; in two centuries, vast changes may take place, as Kuper (1979) has attempted to show for the Zulu who, he argues, changed from an Iroquois kin-term system to Hawaiian and back.

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