A YEAR BEFORE HIS DEATH, Sir Theophilus Shepstone engaged in a debate with Orange Free State President F.W. Reitz over native policy in southern Africa. Reitz had proposed that indirect rule in Natal, with its recognition of native law and chieftainship, should be abolished. Natal’s first Secretary for Native Affairs responded with a pithy defence of the system of government he had implemented and which bore his name:

I hold that so long as the social condition of the natives is what it is chieftainship and tribalism are necessary. They are necessary to give us proper control of them, and proper control they must have. I do not believe in the efficacy of violent measures to destroy prejudices; to efface barbarism, or to commend civilised ideas and habits to a barbarous race . . . Their ancient institutions may be faulty, but they are efficient, and can be made so for the purposes of enlightened government . . . Civilisation will undermine them by the gradual but sure process of enforcing the fitness of things.¹

Shepstone was not alone in asserting that societies should be understood through the lens of civilisation and barbarism, for similar views shaped settler perceptions of Africans, rationalised white supremacy, guided policy decisions and informed legislation throughout colonial South Africa.² The impact of theories of civilisation and barbarism also extended beyond southern Africa’s borders into other territories under British imperial control. While nineteenth-century settlers did not think in terms of ‘Zuluness’, their assertion that all Africans in KwaZulu-Natal shared a homogeneous barbaric culture blinded them to the complex kinship identities that existed in southeast Africa. This monolithic characterisation profoundly influenced later constructions of Zuluness, which remain with us today.
For much of the nineteenth century, British attitudes towards colonisation were informed by a stadial theory of societal development. Principally derived from the writings of influential Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, this theory posited that humankind was comprised of a diverse variety of peoples at different developmental stages. All societies occupied a place on the scale between savagery and civilisation; at the bottom of the scale were the ‘rude’ savage tribes of America and Australia, at the top the civilised ‘polished nations’ of Europe. This formulation rested on an assumption of European supremacy quite distinct from biologically racist theories of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Enlightenment philosophers rejected the idea that there were innate differences between the savage and civilised; for them, all people, regardless of origin, belonged to a single human family and inherited a universal human nature. Human differentiation resulted from environmental conditions, especially the state of societies in which people lived.

According to Enlightenment theory, all societies naturally passed through four economic stages, each phase corresponding to a different mode of subsistence. Hunting communities gradually evolved into pastoral societies, which, over time, developed agriculture. Eventually, agricultural communities made the final progression to commercial society, the apogee of human organisation. Moreover, it was argued that as the mode of subsistence varied in societies, so too did customs, manners and morals, as well as ideas and institutions relating to law, property and government. The four-stage theory ignored differences between communities regarded as uncivilised. Thus pastoral societies in different parts of the world were often assumed to share similar laws, morals and customs. When translated to the colonial context, this assumption encouraged educated administrators to approach the governance of colonised peoples in certain prescribed ways.

This investigation will concentrate on those Enlightenment ideas relating to chieftainship, governance and the position of women in savage societies, and the extent to which they influenced native policy in colonial Natal.

**Chieftainship in early colonial Natal**

When explaining the development of indirect rule in colonial Natal, historians emphasise a number of factors: the strength of Nguni institutions, the unwillingness of the British to spend large sums of money on African administration, the pragmatic genius of Theophilus Shepstone and the practical necessity of cultivating indigenous allies to safeguard colonial security. The validity of these factors is beyond dispute; nevertheless, it is possible that ideas about civilisation and savagery played a more significant role in shaping the Shepstone system than has hitherto been acknowledged.

From the early 1840s British colonial officials frequently contrasted the civilisation and security of British-administered Natal with the barbarism and tyranny of the Zulu kingdom on the colony’s northern border. Shepstone himself described the Zulu government as ‘despotic and arbitrary’ and characterised Mpande as a capricious
tyrant who presided over an unhappy land rife with murder and bloodshed. ‘Such a government as this upon our immediate border’, he warned in 1846, ‘must greatly influence the amount of native population, and the means of providing for it within the colony.’ The short-sighted and cruel policies of the amaZulu had forced thousands of refugees, ‘wearied by turmoil and war’, to flee to Natal for British protection. It was therefore the responsibility of the colonial government to provide a counterpoint to Zulu despotism and to ‘proceed at once with the worthy project of christianising and civilising 100 000 degraded human beings’. Shepstone argued that the key to effective administration of this large population was to govern through their chiefs, who themselves had been in ‘a state of vassalage and abject servitude under the Zulu yoke’.6

Carolyn Hamilton has recently argued that Shepstone found in the Zulu monarchy a model for his system of indirect rule. While he cast Mpande as a capricious despot, Shepstone nevertheless believed that Natal’s African community could only be effectively controlled through patriarchal command and a strong centralised government. He therefore sought to take on the ‘mantle of Shaka’ and rule over Natal Africans as Somtsewu, the Great White Father.7 Shepstone maintained that the ‘constant and exterminating wars’ set in motion by Zulu depredations had led to anarchy and wanton violence. It was therefore necessary to provide ‘a supreme restraining power, such as the Government now established, to which all look for protection, and from which all must expect punishment who contravene its regulations and break its laws’. He urged the British government to replace Zulu tyranny with an administration that, while benevolent, nonetheless recognised that Africans required a firm hand for

> [t]he whole of the native population has been born and brought up with the notions of the most implicit obedience to their rulers... they pretend to no individual opinion of their own, and are guided in every respect by the will of their legally-constituted superiors; and it is this feeling I so anxiously recommend the Government to take advantage of, before it gives way (as I already see indications of its doing) to more dangerous views, from continued relaxation from control.8

British preconceptions about the Zulu government and the effective administration of the indigenous inhabitants of Natal were in no small measure influenced by Enlightenment theories about appropriate forms of government for savage societies.9 Adam Ferguson, John Millar and others had argued in the late eighteenth century that ‘the uniform history of mankind in a barbarous state’ demonstrated that when ‘rude nations’ made the transition from hunters to herders and farmers, their mode of government changed to reflect evolving distinctions between ‘the leader and follower, the prince and the subject’. Chiefs emerged to lead large communities, but
resorted to ‘the bridle of despotism and military force’ to control their followers’ ‘warlike and turbulent spirit’. Consequently ‘[r]apacity and terror’ became the ‘predominant motives of conduct’, forming ‘the character of the only parties into which mankind are divided, that of the oppressor, and that of the oppressed’. In this state, the power of superstition led to the creation of an ‘order of men’ who used magic and who sometimes gave communities ‘an early taste of despotism and absolute slavery’. Over time chiefs asserted control over land and assumed legislative power. And, once members of the tribe were dependent on a chief with regard to their property, they were ‘in no condition to dispute his commands, or to refuse obedience to those ordinances which he issues at pleasure’.

The 1847 Natal Locations Commission report was one of the first documents to outline the principles of Shepstone’s native administration and his assertion that prosperity depended on ‘management and efficient control of the large native population’ guided colonial policy into the twentieth century. The recommendation that locations be set aside for African habitation, that administration of law involve ‘chiefs and councillors’ and that legal decisions be adapted as much as possible ‘to the usages and customs of the native law’ were predicated on an understanding of society very similar to that of Ferguson and Millar. Africans’ ‘universal character’ was ‘superstitious and warlike’, they had a low regard for human life, and their passions were ‘easily enflamed’. These characteristics were not innate, however, but were formed by ‘education, habits and associations’. Africans had ‘grown up in habits of such servile compliance to the wills of their despotic rulers, that they still show ready obedience to constituted authority’.

Earl Grey, Secretary of State for the Colonies, endorsed the Commission’s assessment of African society. ‘It is obvious’, he asserted, ‘that those who have hitherto been under a rule of despotic severity cannot without extreme danger be emancipated from all control.’ It was therefore essential that the Natal government abstain ‘from any sudden or violent interference with the authority exercised over these people by their own chiefs’. Africans should continue to ‘administer justice towards each other as they had been used to do in former times’, although chiefs should be restrained from ‘those acts of cruelty and tyranny which are so common among savages’. However, this restraint should be sparingly exercised so that chiefly power was not diminished and the chiefs were not ‘lowered in the eyes of their tribes’, for their maintaining a strong authority affords the only means by which in the actual state of things absolute anarchy and confusion can be averted, and it would therefore be advisable to abstain from examining too minutely into the manner in which the chiefs may rule over their tribes, even though this should unfortunately allow of the existence of much oppression, and the commission of many acts highly repugnant to our notions of justice and humanity."
These principles of government were embodied in the Royal Instructions of 1848, which recognised the validity of customary law and the powers that ‘the laws, customs, and usages of the inhabitants’ had vested in the chiefs. These principles also underpinned the enactment of Ordinance 3 of 1849, which gave to the Lieutenant-Governor ‘all the power and authority which, according to the laws, customs and usages of the natives, are held and enjoyed by any supreme or paramount native chief’. Indirect rule in Natal therefore fitted neatly within the theory that savage societies were suited to despotic rule and that any tampering with this rule would result in anarchy. An enlightened, ‘decentralised despotism’ was the best that civilised government could provide.

The Natal administration thus characterised indirect rule as an enlightened alternative to the barbarous Zulu kingdom on its border. As in the Zulu kingdom, Natal native administration would be based on patriarchal control and a strong centralised government. However, Shepstone would assume Shaka’s mantle and replace unbridled despotism with firm and benevolent government that would make use of chieftainship and tribalism, the institutions best suited to the barbarous social condition in which Natal’s Africans found themselves. That Shepstone held these ideas for the whole of his career is evidenced by the quotation at the beginning of this chapter.

**Taxation in early colonial Natal**

If the transition from barbarism to civilisation was a gradual process, enlightened government could at least facilitate the process through the encouragement of ‘industry and the formation of a taste for the comforts and luxuries of civilised life’. Ferguson had argued that in between ‘the prospects of ruin and conquest’ the barbarian spent ‘every moment of relaxation in the indulgence of sloth. He cannot descend to the pursuits of industry or mechanical labour.’ Earl Grey applied a similar formula to the ‘Zoolahs located in Natal’. He agreed with Harry Smith’s assessment that Africans in the colony had inherited ‘that apathetic idea of comfort comprised in having a sufficiency to eat and time to sleep’, arguing that this disposition was one ‘which almost universally distinguishes uncivilised men.’

The imposition of a system of taxation would not only increase the revenue of the colony, and provide funds for schools and other institutions, but would also encourage Africans to ‘acquire habits of industry’ and raise them in the scale of civilisation. The form of taxation eventually adopted was a ‘rate upon their huts’, fixed at 7s per annum. Shepstone argued that a hut tax created ‘every advantage of both a property and an income tax, and has the further recommendation of directly discouraging polygamy [sic], that great incentive to the exclusive acquirement of cattle, as the most desirable description of property’. The adoption of the hut tax was a landmark in Natal’s development of indirect rule, and the connections Shepstone drew between taxation, polygamy and civilisation continued to shape revenue collection in the colony throughout the nineteenth century.
Furthermore, future British efforts to raise isiZulu-speaking Africans in the scale of civilisation would not be confined to Natal. In 1879 Sir Bartle Frere rationalised the invasion of Zululand partly on the grounds that the Zulu ‘belong to the same race which furnishes the good humoured volatile labourers and servants who abound in Natal, men capable of being moulded in the ways of civilisation, and when not actually trained to manslaughter not naturally blood-thirsty nor incurably barbarous’. By the time the hut-tax system was introduced in Zululand in 1888, the transformation of young Zulu men into the ‘volatile labourers and servants’, which the southern African economy depended upon, was well advanced.

Colonial debates over African marriage
The issue of African marriage as contracted in Natal and Zululand was central to settler discussions about civilisation and barbarism. Settler discussions of the Zulu kingdom frequently emphasised the king’s tyrannical control over his soldiers’ nuptials. As early as 1847, the Locations Commission had insisted that any ‘improvement of the natives’ in Natal depended on ‘raising their women in the scale of native society’, for ‘polygamy and bartering for women prevail universally in their worst form in the district’. No official action was taken in Natal until 1869, when regulations proclaimed under a new law imposed a tax on every marriage contracted by Africans, restricted the practice of ukulobola (the giving of bridewealth cattle) and required that brides publicly express their assent before an official witness for marriages to be valid. The implementation of these measures unleashed a storm of protest from white settlers and missionaries, and the controversy over polygamy further emphasises how colonial myths about the barbarism of isiZulu-speaking Africans shaped colonial policies.

While economic considerations informed both the government’s decision to pass the 1869 legislation and settlers’ opposition to the law, both sides drew from ideas of civilisation and savagery to defend their positions. In Enlightenment theory, the condition of women was regarded as an index of the level of civilisation of any society. It was argued that among savages ‘the women of a family are usually treated as the servants or slaves of the men’ and that nothing could exceed the ‘dependence and subjection in which they are kept, or the toil and drudgery which they are obliged to undergo’. Wives in these societies were ‘bought and sold, like any other species of property’ by their husbands from their fathers and ‘the conclusion of a bargain of this nature, together with the payment of the price, has therefore become the most usual form of solemnity in the celebration of their marriages’. This theory helps to explain why settlers frequently compared African polygamous marriages in Natal and Zululand to slavery transactions. African men supposedly purchased large numbers of African women and regarded them as property, to be bought and sold like cattle. It was lamented that this savagery resulted in downtrodden women and unmanly, promiscuous, lazy men.
While all white Natalians agreed that female oppression was a sign of African barbarism, they could not agree on the best way to ameliorate the position of women and thereby raise African society in the scale of civilisation. Settlers and missionaries argued that moral legislation abolishing traditional African marriage practices would allow civilised domestic relations to emerge, and consequently black women and men would be rescued from barbarism. Conveniently, the enforcement of civilised monogamous marriages would also encourage black men to work for whites. Officials in contrast insisted that the only judicious way to facilitate civilisation was to employ indirect methods to regulate African marriage practices, rather than abolish them outright. Furthermore, officials insisted that the marriage tax would encourage Africans to enter the employ of settlers and augment the treasury.

In 1869 Shepstone recommended the new marriage regulations on the grounds that their implementation could ‘only favour the operation of natural causes to achieve the extinction of polygamy’. And, when called upon to defend the law, he reported that its provisions had the effect of ‘protecting the young suitor from the mere property competition of the rich old polygamist: – in short, it makes the union a marriage, instead of practically a mere sale’. He went on to state that the application of the law since 1869 had greatly improved ‘[i]n every respect . . . the condition of both the young men and women . . . and native marriage has been placed on a better footing’. It is possible also that Shepstone viewed these regulations as a further means by which he could appropriate the Zulu monarch’s traditional control over marriage and thereby consolidate his position as the Great White Father.

Lieutenant-Governor Keate endorsed Shepstone’s appraisal of the measure. In African society, Keate wrote, ‘at present it is the wives and children who support by their labour the heads of families’ and until ‘surrounding circumstances so change as to throw upon the husband and the father the work and the duty of supporting wife and children polygamy will prevail’. Any attempt to tackle polygamy directly would be imprudent because ‘all that can be done by Legislative interference is to help on and remove obstructions [to] the natural causes which are leading however slowly to that result’. The means by which the marriage registration measure would help on and remove these ‘obstructions’ would be by giving ‘to the woman, what has hitherto been entirely denied to her, a voice in her own disposal, and by so doing tend to raise her in her own estimation and in the social scale, and thus give her an influence in the control and management of her own family and eventually beyond its limits’. Furthermore, the marriage tax would serve to increase the supply of African labour to settlers by encouraging ‘labour habits among the male portion of the native community upon which more than anything else the extinction of polygamy depends’.

The leading settler opponent of the legislation was Natal Witness editor R.E. Ridley, who detailed how the legal recognition of ‘a vicious and brutal polygamy’ and ‘woman slavery’ condemned Africans to barbarism. If settlers wanted Africans
to continue ‘to be shrouded in the thick mantle of superstition and vice’ and to remain impervious to Christianity and ‘the gentle teaching of civilisation’, they should strengthen and foster isiZulu-speaking Africans in their ‘present depravity’. If, however, white Natalians had ‘any faith that this tractable savage can be raised, can be weaned from his brutalising customs, can learn the practices of civilisation, and can appreciate the high truths and discharge the holy duties of our common Christianity, then let us cancel this foolish law’. Legalising polygamy, Ridley maintained, had the effect of ‘making the savage habits of the Kafir perpetual’.

Ridley also maintained that polygamy presented a danger to settlers, in particular women and children. The controversy over the marriage law coincided with a ‘rape scare’ in the colony, which greatly alarmed white Natalians. Ridley warned that when

one man is allowed to have five wives, it is clear that four must go unmarried and wifeless, as nature is pretty uniform in the supply of the two sexes. If in England they point with sorrow to the fact that there are no less than 500,000 unmarried women, in Natal we reverse the picture, and present to the world of philanthropists a formidable phalanx of savage unmarried men, greater by far in proportion to the respective populations.

The view that polygamy ensured that only older richer men could marry, leaving ‘hot-blooded youths frustrated’ anticipated colonial perceptions of the amaZulu ten years later. In justifying the invasion of Zululand in 1879 Sir Bartle Frere denounced ‘regulations’ in the kingdom that were ‘directed to forming every young man in Zululand into a celibate man-destroying gladiator’.

In the minds of other prominent colonists, the barbaric slavery of polygamy hindered the establishment of a civilised commercial society in Natal. Well-known settler Thomas Phipson argued that if it were not for the savage state of African society, the white settler ‘would be able to sell his labour or produce in a fair market’ and would be able to afford ‘the food and clothing appertaining to civilised life’. Good prices would be obtained for agricultural products, on the one hand, and ‘consumers, employed in arts, trades and commerce’, would be found on the other hand. However, as things stood, none of these things could happen because

[...]he black man either sets to work the girls and women whom he breeds or buys, or he ‘sebenzas’ (for work it cannot properly be called) a few months for the white man, and spends his money in cattle and women; or lastly, he ploughs himself (or makes his boys do it more likely), and thus comes into the market as a competitor with his civilised neighbour.
Although Phipson claimed that Africans had a right to live ‘barbarously, to wear rags, or skins, or nothing, when at home, to eschew groceries and squat in a beehive hut’, by doing so they tended ‘to drag down to the same level’ all who competed with them in agriculture. The settler farmer could not afford to live a civilised life ‘so long as his savage competitor continues to be a savage, and so to undersell him’.  

Combined opposition from settlers and isiZulu-speaking patriarchs forced the government to abolish the marriage tax in 1875. Even so, Natal officials and settlers continued to employ Enlightenment theories about civilisation and savagery to defend their respective positions on polygamy after the controversy had receded.

Conclusion

From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, it is easy to dismiss debates over Zulu or African barbarism and European civilisation as settler racism. However, the importance of Enlightenment theories of societal development should not be underestimated, for they helped to shape Natal’s system of indirect rule and later informed both colonial and imperial policies toward the Zulu kingdom. With a near-obsessive focus on ‘rapacious’ habits of ‘savage’ life – polygamous customs in particular – Natal whites and their imperial overlords felt justified in typecasting isiZulu-speaking people as the progeny of pent-up, celibate warriors of Shaka’s ‘frightfully efficient man-slaying machine’. Such a view helped to justify colonial repression of African peoples in KwaZulu-Natal from the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 to the 1906 Poll Tax Uprising and beyond.

Notes


9. For an introduction to Enlightenment theories of civilisation and savagery and the philosophers who espoused them, see Meek, *Social Science*.


17. Grey to Smith, 19 June 1848 in BPP, *Correspondence*, 1848, p. 222.

18. Smith to Grey, 4 March 1848; Grey to Smith, 19 June 1848 in BPP, *Correspondence*, 1848, pp. 218, 222.


25. Ibid., p. 49.

26. Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository (PAR), Secretary for Native Affairs Files (SNA) 1/7/8 (pp. 18–23), T. Shepstone, ‘Memorandum: Registration of Native Marriages’, 22 March 1869, p. 23.

27. PAR, SNA 1/7/7 (pp. 122–29), T. Shepstone, ‘Memorandum . . . on the Law No. 1, 1869’, 5 January 1875, p. 125.


29. PAR, Government House Files (GH) 1216 (pp. 313–29), Keate to Buckingham and Chandos, 24 October 1868, p. 321.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid., pp. 322–23.


35. Ibid.


38. Etherington, 'Natal's Black Rape Scare': 45.

