REVIEW

Review of Richard Levin (1997) *When the Sleeping Grass Awakens: Land and Power in Swaziland,* Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.

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The long awaited, much delayed publication of this book is especially welcome for those few scholars with a keen interest in Swazi politics. Of the inner-periphery states of Southern Africa, least attention is paid to Swaziland. In part this reflects a widespread perception of the country as a backward feudal monarchy where, the occasional strike apart, little of interest ever happens politically. The near total dearth of serious scholarly writing by Swazi social scientists only serves to reinforce this fallacious view. With the admirable exception of the historian Hamilton Simelane, I know of no work in the last decade and more by a Swazi social scientist analysing the vast and profound changes wrought to Swazi society by the country's integration into the global capitalist framework and other forces of post-colonial change. Without seeking in any way to diminish the quality of this excellent book, that it, the work of a non-Swazi, will become the authoritative standard reference on the Swazi political economy is something of an indictment of local scholarship. In terms of critical scholarly production, the social science community at the University of Swaziland must rank near the bottom of the regional league.

As it is well known, a new historiography of Southern Africa has emerged since the early-1970s which has fundamentally transformed our understanding of the impact of capitalism on the processes of change and accumulation and of the often complicated and nuanced relationship between coloniser and colonised. Levin's study is solidly within this revisionist or Marxist tradition. It reveals how much of what happened in Swaziland in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries was little different from the processes of colonial capitalism elsewhere in the region. Our attention is drawn to the familiar factors of land dispossession, forced removals, crippling taxation, reluctant labour migration and the tension within the local aristocracy between tendencies towards resistance and collaboration. In this regard, Levin's study takes our understanding of Swazi history forward into the twentieth century, building on Philip Bonner's masterful study of nineteenth century Swazi history in his *Kings, Commoners and Concessionaires* published by Ravan in 1983.

Today Swaziland is the 'odd country out' in Southern Africa, the one country not to have been transformed by the democratisation struggles of the post-1960 era and whose aristocrats cling tenaciously to their absolutist ways. As Levin puts it in an epilogue to the book, since completing the writing of the main body of the book in the early-1990s 'much has happened and much has stayed the same' (p 239). It is of course true to say that they cannot last, but there seems little grounds to expect - short of an unlikely outside intervention by South Africa - their early demise. One of the major strengths of this work is that it enables us to understand why this is so.

What it does not help us to understand - and this is no criticism as this was not Levin's task - is the general haplessness of South Africa's post-apartheid foreign policy. Given the collaboration of the Swazi government in its 1980s war with the ANC and the fact that the government actually banned the ANC in 1984, describing it as a 'foreign scourge' and its leader Oliver Tambo a 'liar', one might have expected a more resilient siding with the Swazi opposition in its recent campaigns. But that has not been the case. Instead we have had the same 'softly-softly' cozying up to the dictators in Swaziland as has been evident in South Africa's relations with Indonesia, Algeria, Sudan and most everywhere else one looks. Can it be a surprise therefore that the individual who in the late-1980s had free range in Swaziland to kill MK operatives, including a member of the ANC's national executive, is now one of South Africa's top police officers?

But back to Levin. Central to his analysis are two factors. One, of the power of myth and tradition, and two, the centrality of land, particularly control over its use and allocation, as a means of both repression and accumulation. In regard to the former, Levin masterfully shows how the late King Sobhuza, whose reign stretched from 1921 to 1983 and who singlehandedly ruled the post-colonial state for the last ten years of that period, constantly invented and reinvented myth and tradition in the interests of royalist hegemony.

In this project, Sobhuza was aided and abetted by two anthropologists. One was the anthropologist-cum-colonial official AG Marwick while the other one was the South African Hilda Kuper who built a successful academic career through a string of books on Swazi custom and who, in the process, became Sobhuza's friend, confidante and official biographer. They along with a number of prominent and, ironically, progressive South African politicians like the ANC founder Pixley ka Seme and the so- called Natives Representative MP Hyman Basner helped Sobhuza construct an ideology and practice of monarchical dominance which emerged triumphant in the decolonisation process over the somewhat more modernist forces of petty-bourgeois nationalism.

As fascinating as the role of myth and myth-making is Levin's discussion of the agrarian question in the Swazi context. He reveals not only how it has been central to the factors of control and material enrichment mentioned above but also to 'the process of class struggle itself' (p7). Particularly intriguing is his discussion of how the Swazi monarchy has used its control over the allocation of communal land and of the country's mineral resources to acquire a stake in the modern economy. This it has done through a royalist-controlled corporation, the Tibiyo Fund, which has pursued a vigorous programme of acquiring shares in a sweeping range of foreign-owned enterprises operating in Swaziland. This has not only provided the monarchy with considerable financial resources but also cemented its alliance with foreign - largely South African and British -capital. The Swazi monarchy provides us a classic study of the making of a compradore class.

Levin's study is a rich and welcome addition to the literature on Southern Africa and he is to be complimented on his groundbreaking work. Let us hope that a generation of Swazi scholars will emerge to take his work forward. There is still much about recent Swazi history that needs to be unveiled and, given the complexity of Swazi society, Swazi scholars are best placed to meet this challenge.