

**TO SWIM WITH CROCODILES: LAND, VIOLENCE, AND
BELONGING IN SOUTH AFRICA, 1800–1996**

by JILL KELLY

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*T*O *Swim with Crocodiles* opens with a general discussion about the scope and complexity of the history of African people in the Kwa-Zulu-Natal region during the last two centuries, suggesting that the general narratives of control and submission are insufficient to explain much of the violence and contestation that occurred, particularly around the civil war in the region between 1988 and 1996. At the centre of this conflict was the assassination of Chief Mhlabunzima Maphumulo of the Table Mountain area outside Pietermaritzburg. Kelly uses the idea of *ukukhonzha*, the relationships between chiefs and their subjects, as the key to understand the role of Maphumulo, his adherents and the political systems operating at the time; to unpick the causes and effects of this phenomenon.

The first chapter considers the ‘genealogical imagination’ that led to the formation of the different groups in the area. Kelly engages with the complex shifting politics of the people of the region, focusing on Nomsimekwana who was considered charmed, having escaped cannibals by diving into a river with hippos. Indeed, Kelly grapples with the idea of cannibals itself, cannibals long being connected with Table Mountain, by looking at a number of definitions and explanations over the years. She completes the chapter at the time of the arrival of the Boers in 1838, suggesting that Nomsimekwana deployed genealogical imagination to justify a long-term residence at the time of the British arrival, in order to

cement an ancestral claim to the land and inheritance of a chiefly title.

Kelly continues by describing the disjunction between chiefs with ancestral claims and other chiefs who were appointed. She gives significant detail about the conflicts between these two, focusing on Ngoza Majozi who was resident in the Table Mountain area at the time. Embedded in a lengthy discussion around contestation between chiefs, she probes the ‘creation’ of the Maphumulo people in the Table Mountain area. Kelly successfully merges slippery concepts of space, place and inheritance, oral evidence and officialdom into a convincing narrative when discussing early twentieth century events of war, rebellion, Union and legislation.

In a chapter entitled ‘The Nagle Dam and forced removals’, Kelly addresses the lead up to land expropriation for the construction of the dam: the ground was broken in 1937, but the process to reach that point was bound up in requirements for expropriation and removal, purchase of land, and discourse around betterment schemes that commenced in the late 1930s. While Kelly’s focus remains on the threads of patronage and place making, the narrative of the construction of major infrastructure and its impact on people is of great interest. She describes the impact of forced removal, resettlement and betterment scheme proposals as a result of Nagle Dam, as minimising Maphumulo reactions to the further agitations experienced by African people on location lands at the end of the 1950s. Significant and

poignant, however, is her description of rural women in the New Hanover and Camperdown areas destroying dipping tanks as resistance to ‘development’ and subjugation, supporting their urban counterparts in the well-publicised beer hall riots of 1959.

Kelly addresses the rise to chiefship of the young Mhlabunzima Maphumulo and his compromised position between allegiance to a school friend, Goodwill Zwelethini, and Mangosuthu Buthelezi’s rise to power and the creation of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). For almost a decade, the political impasse continued, meaning that Maphumulo’s position as a chief on the KwaZulu Legislative Assembly was precarious to say the least. Importantly, his leadership at this point is marked by acting for his people, rather than engaging in specifically internecine politicking. His assertive and committed stance to providing development including schools, clinics and other facilities marked him as an authoritative leader. Appointment as president of the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa allowed Maphumulo to further his aims of progressive leadership, but also at the same time incurred the wrath of

Buthelezi and the IFP. Kelly negotiates this difficult period of regional history in clear fashion.

The final chapter wraps up the last few months of Mhlabunzima’s life, and tells of his assassination in 1990. This chapter is used to probe the tensions in understanding the roles of the chief, establishing that even this concept has different interpretations. *To Swim with Crocodiles* is not only a well-illustrated and thoroughly referenced work; it is also an intelligent read. Jill Kelly clearly states her theoretical position right at the very beginning, and this foregrounds the text all the way to the end of the work.

For the reviewer, a compelling thread runs through the book – the nature of naming and ‘place-making’ as a mechanism to create access to land, inheritance and genealogy. It is an important concept in understanding the differing perceptions of land and access to land that exist in contemporary South Africa. This makes this book a vital companion for all South Africans curious to unravel for themselves the impasse around land issues that is currently so pressing.

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