

# Commodity Cropping and the Delineation of Agricultural Space in Natal, 1850 – 1863

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**Abstract:** This paper recounts the efforts of Natal's first Secretary for Native Affairs, Theophilus Shepstone, to introduce cotton as a commodity crop among the colony's Zulu population. Generally considered as a response to Britain's dwindling supply of raw cotton, I argue that this push for cotton was fuelled by motivations that were political more than agricultural; that cotton was first and foremost about delineating African and settler space and establishing a political order. When cotton failed, blame was heaped on Zulu growers who were lambasted for their inferior work ethic. The second part of this paper investigates the abrupt failure of Zulu cotton cultivation in Natal, contending that environmental and economic factors explain the crop's failure more than cultural ones.

Keywords: cotton, Natal, Shepstone, Native Locations

## Introduction: The Question of British Cotton Supply

The 1850s were a prosperous decade for the British cotton industry. The quantity and value of exported cotton manufactures doubled in fewer than ten years, stimulated by growing international demand - especially in the United States, Australia, and Asia - improved spinning technologies, and rising prices. By 1860, cotton manufactures accounted for just under 40% of the total value of Britain's domestic exports, comprising just under seven percent of gross national income.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> D.A. Farnie, *The English Cotton Industry and the World Market, 1815-1896* (Oxford, 1979), 135.

This production boom caused many within the industry to fret about the empire's unstable supply of raw cotton. Raw cotton imports rose by 66% between 1850 and 1860, primarily from American stocks. American imports, which accounted for 75% of British supply, totaled over two and a half million bales annually by the end of the decade.<sup>2</sup> These imports dropped off dramatically in 1861, due primarily to the outbreak of the American Civil War. This crash in cotton supply, known as the Lancashire famine, persisted until American production recovered in 1865.<sup>3</sup>

Anxiety about an interruption in American supply preceded the so-called cotton famine by more than a decade and sparked interest in alternative sources of raw cotton. A Select Committee on the Growth of Cotton in India had been convened as early as 1848, as industry leaders sought to establish a reliable colonial source immune from foreign interruption. These concerns culminated in the formation of the Cotton Supply Association (CSA) in 1857. The CSA distributed over one thousand tons of seed in north and central India in less than a decade, offered prizes for quantity and quality of cotton grown, and sent out gins and presses to suitable applicants. It also initiated operations to expand infrastructure development (especially the construction of ports and roads) into the Indian

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<sup>2</sup> D.A. Farnie, 'Cotton Famine in Great Britain', in B. Ratcliffe, eds., *Cotton Famine in Great Britain* (Manchester, 1975), 153-79.

<sup>3</sup> Recent studies of the Lancashire cotton famine have emphasized the famine was a crisis in demand as much as in supply. The industry's productive capacity grew by 20% between 1856 and 1861, saturating markets in Europe, Asia, and the United States, and reducing the demand for British manufactures by as much as 65% in 1862. See Farnie, *The English Cotton Industry*, 138.

interior.<sup>4</sup> As a result of these efforts, cotton exports increased by more than 300% in fewer than five years.<sup>5</sup> Indian cotton's short staple, however, made it poorly suited for British mills.

Less coordinated efforts at stimulating cultivation were undertaken by business associations and aspiring entrepreneurs in the British West Indies, Egypt, Brazil, Paraguay, Angola and Mozambique.<sup>6</sup> The trajectory of efforts to stimulate cotton production in these satellites is well-rehearsed: concern over an interruption in supply fuelled increased prices, a surge in production followed, this declined once elevated prices fell. Micro-studies have recently been incorporated within a global analysis that has stressed the linkages between these peripheral supply sites, describing these networks as a 'worldwide web of cotton production'.<sup>7</sup> This perspective reduces each cotton production site to a cog in the global machine, a supply satellite whose production was sustained exclusively by demand emanating from the core.

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<sup>4</sup> P. Harnetty, 'India and British Commercial Enterprise: The Case of the Manchester Cotton Company, 1860-64,' *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 3 (1966), 396-416.

<sup>5</sup> Cotton exports from India increased from 563 000 bales in 1860 to 1 390 000 in 1863 and then to 1 866 000 in 1866. See W. O. Henderson, *The Lancashire Cotton Famine, 1861-65* (New York, 1969), 41 and J.F. Richards and M.B. McAlpin, 'Cotton Cultivation and Land Clearing in the Bombay Deccan and Karnata', in R.P. Tucker and J.F. Richards, eds., *Cotton Cultivation and Land Clearing in the Bombay Deccan and Karnata* (Durham, 1983), 68-94.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the search for reliable supply during the famine see P. Harnetty, *Imperialism and Free Trade: Lancashire and India in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Vancouver, 1972), 36-58, and Henderson, *The Lancashire Cotton Famine*, 35-51.

<sup>7</sup> S. Beckert, 'Emancipation and Empire: Reconstructing the Worldwide Web of Cotton Production in the Age of the American Civil War,' *American Historical Review*, 109 (2004), 1405-38.

In South Africa, however, local, internal factors were at least as important as imperial concerns over Britain's raw cotton supply in driving efforts to expand cotton production. In the 1850s efforts were focused exclusively on African peasant cultivation.<sup>8</sup> The colony's Secretary for Native Affairs, Theophilus Shepstone, moved to encourage cotton production by Natal's Zulu population as part of the colonial project of establishing political order.<sup>9</sup>

This rise in cotton production hinged on a broader political issue that engulfed Natal in the 1850s and 60s: the 'Native Question'. How fully, contemporaries wondered, should Africans be brought within the jurisdiction of British law and influence? Shepstone's cotton scheme was designed to entrench his vision of spatial segregation against those who favoured a more assimilationist policy.<sup>10</sup> The first part of this paper argues that this cotton scheme was motivated by goals that were more political than agricultural, that it was first and foremost a means of anchoring Zulu producers within bounded Locations rather than a

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<sup>8</sup> African identities were still relatively unstable in the 1850s and 60s as the region continued to suffer from dislocation and unrest stemming from the violence which accompanied the rise and consolidation of the Zulu kingdom) of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, known as the *mfecane*. While I refer to 'Zulu' cultivators in this paper, I recognize that such identities remained quite fluid during this time period.

<sup>9</sup> This emphasis on the political rather than the economic motivations behind cotton's imposition on an African population has also been made, in reference to another setting, by V. Bernal, 'Cotton and Colonial Order in Sudan: A Social History with emphasis on the Gezira Scheme', in A. Isaacman and R. Roberts, eds., *Cotton and Colonial Order in Sudan: A Social History with emphasis on the Gezira Scheme* (Portsmouth, 1995), 96-118. See also O. Likaka, *Rural Society and Cotton in Colonial Zaire* (Madison, 1997), 45-71.

<sup>10</sup> As will be explained below, Shepstone favoured a policy of bounded African Locations, where Africans would be exposed to European 'civilizing' influences which he believed would help accelerate the long-term process of assimilation. Others opposed his vision, favouring instead a more immediate integration of Africans as labourers in European enterprise.

commercial scheme to increase commodity production. Cotton was a means to an end, a tool, to assist in delineating settler and African space.

When this venture collapsed, blame was heaped on Zulu growers who were criticized for adhering to traditional values deemed incompatible with capitalist economic development. African producers were dismissed as inferior, lacking the constitution necessary to cultivate a sophisticated commodity crop like cotton. As Colin Bundy's seminal work on the South African peasantry points out, dismissing African agriculture as inferior or rudimentary ignores a large proportion of growers who reacted enthusiastically to the expanding market economy with its new pressures and opportunities.<sup>11</sup> The second part of this paper investigates the abrupt failure of Zulu cotton cultivation in Natal. It emphasizes the environmental and economic factors – in the form of inferior soil conditions, persistent drought, and poor logistical planning – that combined to constrain Zulu cotton cultivation.

### Cotton as an African Crop

The notion that Africans were better suited than Europeans to propel Natal's cotton production originated with Alfred Southam, a Mancunian with ties to the cotton manufacturing sector. Motivated by the exaggerated prospects of Natal's potential as a cotton colony in circulation in Britain, Southam arrived in Natal early in the 1840s to plant Sea Island cotton along the coast north of Durban. However, he left the colony after failing to produce a single viable crop in three seasons. In an address to the Cotton Supply Association in 1850, he blamed his failure on cotton's demanding growing regime, arguing

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<sup>11</sup> C. Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry* (London, 1979).

that European farmers lacked the constitution for this intensive labour. The only way cotton would succeed in Natal, he argued, was as an African enterprise:

Blacks grow it in America; blacks grow it in India, and blacks must grow it wherever it is grown, as no white man could work at it under a broiling hot sun; nor could he compete with the black man in point of cheapness of labour.<sup>12</sup>

Southam's enthusiasm for African cotton cultivation was revived by Henry Francis Fynn, who had been one of the first Europeans to arrive at Port Natal in 1824. Fynn had served in a variety of government positions before becoming Assistant Resident Magistrate for the Lower uMkhomanzi Division in the southern-most part of the colony in 1853, a post he retained until his death in 1861.

In 1855 Fynn proposed the establishment of an industrial village where Africans would learn to cultivate export crops. His vision was to engage Zulus in commodity agriculture in order to expose them to European crops, technologies and cultivation methods. His was a civilizing project. Fynn's aim was to 'assimilate [African] customs to the Europeans whose government has saved them from destruction'.<sup>13</sup> He expected that the adoption of European crops would serve to eradicate the barbaric practices of cannibalism and the drowning of their own children, which he contended sensationally (and inaccurately) were rampant among the Zulu population.

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<sup>12</sup> Southam's address was reprinted in the *Natal Witness*, 29 Jan. 1858.

<sup>13</sup> Pietermaritzburg Archival Depot (hereafter PAR), Secreatry for Native Affairs (hereafter SNA) 1/3/6 Ref. 194, H.F. Fynn to Acting Colonial Secretary, 31 Aug. 1857.

Fynn's push for cotton reflects a broader movement by British administrators to use agriculture as a civilizing force among colonized populations. In North America, agriculture was perceived as the great panacea for the ills of the continent's indigenous peoples, as it was believed to impart an appreciation of private property and encourage a sedentary existence.<sup>14</sup> Colonial administrators viewed agriculture as a means of uplifting and molding Aborigines into the European ideal, and of bringing them one step closer to assimilation into European culture. In Australia, Kay Anderson argues that this linking of cultivation and human potential cemented a politics of exclusion by creating a 'cultivated space of white-nation building'.<sup>15</sup>

In the southern African context, the Comaroffs have expounded upon the civilizing, and especially the religious, dynamic that lay behind the encouragement of agriculture among the baTswana, noting that cultivation and salvation were inextricably linked. Agriculture, it was believed, would make Africans both civil and servile: 'blighted no more, the dark continent would become a "fruitful field", a rich rural periphery of the metropolitan centers of civilization abroad'.<sup>16</sup> In Southern Rhodesia, Wolmer and Scoones have revealed that scientific agricultural practices were founded upon a vision of linear, evolutionary agricultural change, in which each technocratic intervention was a 'step along the ladder of

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<sup>14</sup> S. Carter, *Lost Harvests: Prairie Indian Reserve Farmers and Government Policy* (Montreal, 1990), 5. Carter's book examines similar themes on the 'civilizing' element of agricultural policy in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Canadian context.

<sup>15</sup> K. Anderson, 'White Natures: Sydney's Royal Agricultural Show in Post-Humanist Perspective,' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 28 (2003), 422-41.

<sup>16</sup> J. Comaroff and J. L. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution Volume 2: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* (Chicago and London, 1997), 124.

advance'.<sup>17</sup> Fynn's industrial village was founded upon a similar belief in agriculture's civilizing potential: his introduction of modern, scientific practices provided an opportunity for Africans to escape their barbaric existence.

Convinced that persuasion alone would not overcome initial reluctance, Fynn proposed cultivating large, communal plots that would allow Zulu growers to experience the superiority of European crops first-hand. Fifty acres were to be planted to Sea Island cotton in 1857/58 and another fifty acres the following year, alongside smaller plots of coffee, sesame, and arrowroot. Fynn aspired to have all of the estimated 1133 African residents living between the uMzinto and uMkhomanzi Rivers cultivating cotton.<sup>18</sup>

Fynn established a village at Inyangwimi, a range of hills a few kilometers from the coast, south of the uMtwalume River. Elevations were as high as 500 metres and most of the land undulated steeply. The vegetation was primarily moist coastal forest that benefited from the heavy rains brought in off the ocean. Among the wide range of soil types, were shallow clays and deeper and better drained loams. Fynn believed these ecological conditions were ideal for cotton, and estimated that there were between 12 000 and 15 000 acres of similar land located along Natal's South Coast.<sup>19</sup>

In 1857, Fynn was allocated a Superintendent, Robert Struthers, to oversee the village's day-to-day operations, as well as a builder, a ploughman, a driver, and dozens of African labourers to aid in the erection of buildings and the preparation of land. Work began on 31 May 1857; delays began soon after. Heavy spring rains retarded construction; the site

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<sup>17</sup> M. Wolmer and I. Scoones, 'The Science of "Civilized" Agriculture: The Mixed Farming Discourse in Zimbabwe,' *African Affairs*, 99 (2000), 575-600.

<sup>18</sup> PAR, SNA 1/3/7 no. 168, Fynn to T. Shepstone, 20 Nov. 1858.

<sup>19</sup> PAR, SNA 1/3/7 no. 121, Fynn to T. Shepstone, 30 Aug. 1858.

initially chosen for much of the planting had to be abandoned as it was saturated with water. A single team of oxen had to be rotated between the erection of buildings and the cultivation of plots. Total expenses for the year were just under £300.<sup>20</sup> Input costs ballooned to over £2 per acre, putting the project's financial viability in jeopardy.

Despite delays, Fynn's growers planted some cotton before the end of 1857. Cultivation efforts continued throughout the spring rains of 1858, and by April 1859 they had over 30 acres of cotton under cultivation. Some growers achieved yields of almost 300 lbs per acre. By the end of the 1858/59 season, 3700 lbs of seed cotton had been picked.<sup>21</sup> Fynn predicted that more than 50 000 cotton plants would be in full bloom by the following growing season.

### Cotton and Containment

Southam's arguments in favour of African cotton cultivation and the early successes of Fynn's industrial village inspired Theophilus Shepstone, the architect of Natal's Native administration policy, to implement a colony-wide cotton program. The son of a Methodist missionary, Shepstone spent his youth among Africans in the Cape and became fluent in many of the southern uNguni languages, including isiXhosa and isiZulu. He spent his early professional years working as an interpreter for his father's missionary colleagues, and then applied his linguistic skills in the service of the British administration. He rose quickly

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<sup>20</sup> PAR, SNA 1/3/6 Ref. 193, Report of Preliminary Operations for the Formulation of a Native Industrial Village at Inyangwini, 31 Aug. 1857.

<sup>21</sup> PAR, SNA 1/3/8, Fynn to T. Shepstone, 17 Oct. 1859, 48.

through the ranks and, after being stationed in Grahamstown for seven years as Diplomatic Agent to Neighbouring Tribes, was promoted to the newly-created post of Diplomatic Agent to the Native Tribes in Natal in 1845.<sup>22</sup>

At much the same time, over 100 000 African refugees flooded into Natal to escape aggression in the north. In 1847 a Native Commission was formed to manage this influx, with Shepstone as its most influential member.<sup>23</sup> Shepstone's missionary ideals framed his approach. He remained deeply committed to ideals of improvement, as he sought to undertake the 'Christianizing and civilizing [of these] 100 000 degraded human beings'.<sup>24</sup> He mapped out a system of centralized control in which Africans would be spatially segregated from settlers within vast tracts of land known as Locations. Shepstone reaffirmed tribal hierarchies – refugees without specific allegiances had new ones created for them – and used this authority to maintain law and order, while positioning his personally-appointed magistrates in a supervisory role with consolidated executive, legislative and judicial power. Thus, the administration of Natal's Africans flowed entirely through Shepstone, the top tier of the pyramid, who entrenched his hierarchical system of control by allowing Africans to

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<sup>22</sup> R. E. Gordon, *Shepstone: The Role of the Family in the History of South Africa, 1820-1900* (Cape Town 1968), 117.

<sup>23</sup> The Commission originally consisted of Shepstone and two others, Natal's Surveyor-General Dr. W. Stanger and an American Missionary, Reverend Newton Adams. A Lieutenant and a second Missionary were added later. Shepstone's intimate knowledge of African languages and customs made him the most influential voice at the table.

<sup>24</sup> PAR, SNA 1/8/3, T. Shepstone to Secretary of Government, Apr. 1846 in D. Welsh, *The Roots of Segregation: Native Policy in Colonial Natal, 1845-1910* (Cape Town and New York, 1971), 19.

govern 'according to the principles of their own laws, customs and usages'.<sup>25</sup> He expected that the influence of centralized European control and private property, alongside heavy investment in Native Police, European schools and agricultural instruction would convert these enclaves into 'active agencies of civilization', in which outdated and barbaric African notions of polygamy, witchcraft and *ilobola* (bride-selling) would be easily eradicated.<sup>26</sup>

Shepstone realized that humanitarian justifications alone would be insufficient to convince his superiors in London of the merits of his Location System. To realize his vision of spatial segregation Shepstone also needed to sell his plan as financially viable. As the most influential member of the Location Commission of 1847, Shepstone outlined his vision for creating enclosed African spaces which would serve both economic and humanitarian ends. He argued that the key to wealth generation in the colony was in solidifying the exploitation of Natal's rural economy based on African production:

The native Locations will become centres of industry and improvement, the whole of the native population in the district and gradually those beyond it, will become consumers of imported articles and producers of articles for export, and after a time with a judicious system of taxation will defray the expenses of their own establishments and furnish an excess to the treasury of the district.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Memorandum by T. Shepstone, 12 Aug. 1848 in B. Kline, *Genesis of Apartheid: British African Policy in the Colony of Natal, 1845-1893* (Lanham, 1988), 13.

<sup>26</sup> E. Brookes and C. de Webb, *A History of Natal* (Pietermaritzburg, 1965).

<sup>27</sup> PAR, Colonial Secretary's Office (hereafter CSO) 179/5, Report of the Location Commission, 1847. In: H. Slater, 'The Changing Pattern of Economic Relationships in Rural Natal, 1838-1914', in S. Marks and A. Atmore, eds., *The Changing Pattern of Economic Relationships in Rural Natal, 1838-1914* (London, 1980), 148-70.

Inspired by Fynn's success at Inyangwimi, Shepstone made cotton the central component of his plan to augment African tax revenue through the cultivation of export crops. In 1856 he wrote that his goal was to 'induce [Africans] to raise from the soil some exportable and permanently marketable product'.<sup>28</sup> He saw cotton as the most suitable choice because it could be grown successfully through the whole district, its cultivation was very simple and similar to that of maize, it could be planted once and then yield returns for many years, and its market value did not fluctuate so it would always fetch a good price.<sup>29</sup>

To undergird his grand design, Shepstone sought revisions to the colonial tax structure to provide incentives for cotton cultivation. He recommended that cotton be accepted in payment of the Native hut tax initiated in 1849 as a means of bolstering stagnating colonial revenues.<sup>30</sup> As further incentive, those who refused to cultivate cotton would be charged 10 shillings instead of the usual hut tax of seven shillings. Shepstone estimated that an acre of Location land would produce just under 100lbs of seed cotton. Assuming even the low price of one penny per pound, a single acre planted to cotton would yield enough to cover the hut tax and more.

Shepstone's support for cotton reinforces historiographical accounts that emphasize his approach as flexible and responsive to changing local conditions. Rejecting previous characterizations that stress Shepstone as rigid and unyielding in formulating his Location

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<sup>28</sup> PAR, SNA 1/1/6 no. 116, T. Shepstone, Memorandum on the Feasibility of Inducing the Native Population of Natal to Grow Cotton and the Manner in which it is Proposed this should be Accomplished, 11 May 1856.

<sup>29</sup> PAR, Selected Documents Presented to the Legislative Council (hereafter LC) 4/1/1/-4/1/1/3 C52 no. 1, Native Reserve Fund, 1858.

<sup>30</sup> PAR, *Natal Blue Book*, 1854. The annual 7s. tax had raised more than £8 000 in its first year and contributed over one-third of Natal's revenues throughout the 1850s.

system,<sup>31</sup> more recent accounts suggest that Shepstone's vision for Native Affairs in Natal was not imposed monolithically but rather shifted in response to the colony's fluctuating political and economic climate.<sup>32</sup> Shepstone's strategic embrace of cotton as a means of furthering his Location system supports this characterization.

The strongest opposition to Shepstone's plan for cotton cultivation came from Natal's second Lieutenant-Governor, Benjamin Pine, who arrived in the colony in 1850.<sup>33</sup> Pine resented the autonomy with which Shepstone ruled over the colony's Native Affairs. Reflecting the interests of coastal farmers and large landowners, Pine criticized Shepstone's Location System for creating 'enormous and unwieldy reserves' which he considered dangerously large.<sup>34</sup> Pine appointed a Commission of Inquiry into Native Administration in

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<sup>31</sup> Welsh, *The Roots of Segregation: Native Policy in Colonial Natal, 1845-1910*, 7-31.

<sup>32</sup> See for instance Kline, *Genesis of Apartheid: British African Policy in the Colony of Natal, 1845-1893* and T. McClendon, 'The Man Who Would Be Inkosi: Civilising Missions in Shepstone's Early Career,' *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 30 (2004), 339-58.

<sup>33</sup> Natal's first Lieutenant-Governor, Martin West, died abruptly in 1849 following a bout with dysentery. Described as 'an unimaginative, stodgy sort of civil servant', West lacked the decisiveness and the desire to contest Shepstone's plans. He allowed Shepstone free reign to implement his vision for African-settler relations in the colony. See Gordon, *Shepstone: The Role of the Family in the History of South Africa*, 156. More on the personal antipathy between Shepstone and Pine can be found in J. L. Hall, 'Government Policy and Public Attitudes during the Administration of Natal by Lieutenant-Governor Benjamin C.C. Pine, 1850-1855' (M.A thesis, University of Natal 1969), 31- 48.

<sup>34</sup> The plantation sugar industry was a high-capital, high-input enterprise, requiring a steady supply of labour on a much larger scale than inland farmers (mostly mixed farmers with a combination of sheep, cattle and maize) whose labour requirements were much lower, and who were unwilling to support measures that provided incentive for Africans to abandon their lands to seek work on coastal plantations. Coastal farmers also had in their corner the colony's large absentee-landlords. The two largest, Jonas Bergtheil and Adolph Coqui, with

1852 dominated by land-owning colonists, a direct rebuke to the previous Commission of 1847 that had articulated Shepstone's vision of spatial segregation. Pine's Commission predictably concluded that the Locations were far too large, having 'dried up the source whereby an abundant and continuous supply of Kaffir labour for wages might have been procured'.<sup>35</sup> Pine's vision, articulated by his new Commission, envisaged a process of gradual assimilation. He urged that the Locations be broken up into smaller, more integrated plots where Africans could be more readily assimilated into settler culture, an idea that was anathema to Shepstone.

Cotton emerged as the hinge upon which these competing visions for African-settler relations within the colony turned. For Shepstone, cotton was a means of anchoring Africans within his Location system, and it would thus help to entrench his vision of spatial segregation:

I think it unnecessary for me to [detail] at any great length upon the special advantages which would follow the attainment of the object I propose in this paper – industry, and among savages that kind of industry especially which induces the cultivation of soil is essentially a civilizing element – it affords the most perfect guarantees

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holdings of 106 100 acres and 62 165 acres, respectively, campaigned heavily in favour of developing a new Native Policy that would force Africans to seek employment with white farmers. The competing interests of coastal and inland farmers was a major axis for conflict within the white community of Natal. See H. Slater, 'Land, Labour and Capital in Natal: The Natal Land and Colonisation Company, 1860-1948,' *Journal of African History*, 16 (1975), 257-83 and footnote #46.

<sup>35</sup> PAR, Report on Land Settlement 1852, 4, from Brookes and de Webb, *A History of Natal*

for the peace of the country because it fixes in their minds a practical and ready manner the individual property in land, and most effectively checks the disposition to move from place to place.<sup>36</sup>

Pine opposed cotton because it threatened his vision of an African proletariat. He sought to break up the Locations to undermine their viability and force Africans out of *imizi* (homestead) production into cheap and ready labour on coastal sugar plantations.<sup>37</sup> The struggle over cotton was fundamentally a struggle over how economic surplus should best be extracted from the colonized population.<sup>38</sup>

### Zulu Cultivation Efforts

Shepstone's plans were much more favourably regarded by Natal's third Lieutenant-Governor, John Scott, who arrived in the colony to replace Pine in 1855. He immediately supported both Shepstone's vision for Native Locations and the use of cotton to entrench their permanency. He recognized that 'there are many difficulties to overcome in this experiment', but decided that 'any scheme pointing at such great advantages as would result

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<sup>36</sup> PAR, SNA 1/1/6 no. 116, T. Shepstone, Memorandum on the Feasibility of Inducing the Native Population of Natal to Grow Cotton and the Manner in which it is Proposed this should be Accomplished, 11 May 1856.

<sup>37</sup> Pine also had a considerable personal stake in heading the campaign to free up labour for the colony's sugar farmers and large landowners. He was a landowner himself and accepted a post as one of the directors of the Umzinto Sugar Company upon his retirement. See *Natal Mercury*, 14 May 1857 in B. J. Leverton, *The Natal Cotton Company: A Study in Failure* (Pretoria, 1963), 43.

<sup>38</sup> This insight comes from Slater, 'Land, Labour and Capital in Natal'.

from this colony becoming, through the instrumentality of its numerous natives, a cotton-growing company... merits every exertion'.<sup>39</sup>

In November 1858, Lieutenant-Governor Scott allocated funds to Shepstone's scheme from the £5000 set aside for the benefit of Natives under the 1856 Charter by which Natal was separated from the Cape colony and administered independently.<sup>40</sup> Shepstone focused his efforts along the uMkhomanzi River, where Fynn was having success with his industrial village. He appointed two Superintendents in charge of cotton cultivation, Fynn's former manager Robert Struthers in the Lower uMkhomanzi and his younger brother, John Wesley Shepstone, in the Upper uMkhomanzi.<sup>41</sup> In all other districts Resident Magistrates were charged with implementing Shepstone's vision: he informed them that seed would be forthcoming, and instructed them to convince the Africans residing in their district of the merits of cotton cultivation.

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<sup>39</sup> PAR, British Parliamentary Papers (hereafter BPP) Vol. 127, X Report on The Past and Present State of Her Majesty's Colonial Possessions 1857, 195.

<sup>40</sup> This move infuriated members of the newly elected Legislative Council who objected to the continued administration of this fund by the Crown. The Department of Native Affairs thus constituted a sort of '*imperium in imperio* which, without responsibility to the legislature, was able to thwart settler attempts to gain a regular labour force from Natal's African population'. From P. Harries, 'Plantations, Passes and Proletarians: Labour and the Colonial State in Nineteenth Century Natal,' *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 13 (1987), 372-99. For more on this tension between the Legislative and Executive branches over control of Native Affairs see Kline, *Genesis of Apartheid*, 40-4, and J. Lambert, *Betrayed Trust: Africans and the State in Colonial Natal* (Pietermaritzburg, 1995), 63-4.

<sup>41</sup> Each superintendent was given a salary of £150, plus £50 for traveling expenses. PAR, SNA 1/8/6, Memorandum from the Office of the SNA, 23 Nov. 1858, 456.

Seed was dispatched a few months later. Although records are fragmentary, it appears that Shepstone favoured the Sea Island variety. His instructions on how best to introduce Africans to the crop were vague: 'your own good sense will suggest to you arguments most prudent to be used in enforcing the importance to the natives themselves as well as to the colony'.<sup>42</sup> He recommended a growing regime for cotton identical to that of maize, noting only that cotton should be more thinly spaced. He further encouraged his magistrates to visit growers from time to time, as it was their responsibility to explain to Africans the 'benefit that will accrue to themselves should they persevere to success in producing the article'.<sup>43</sup>

The first growing season of 1858/59 was a marginal success. All seven magisterial districts reported some cotton planted. By June 1859 Africans were cultivating over 120 acres with 50 acres in the Lower uMkhomanzi and 39 acres in the Upper uMkhomanzi. Over 6500 lbs of cotton were picked within Natal's Locations.<sup>44</sup>

The success in the Upper uMkhomanzi division was due largely to John Wesley Shepstone's six month tour undertaken in late 1858 and early 1859. During this tour

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<sup>42</sup> PAR, SNA 1/8/7, T. Shepstone to G. Potter, 10 Apr. 1861, 346.

<sup>43</sup> PAR, LC 4/1/1/1-4/1/1/3 C67 no. 8, Circular from T. Shepstone, Native Affairs, 1859.

<sup>44</sup> PAR, LC 4/1/1/1-4/1/1/3 C90 no. 18 1860, Circular from T. Shepstone, Native Reserve Fund, 12 July 1860. The impact of coerced production schemes on African families differed according to a multitude of social factors including gender, kinship, and class. While there is little archival evidence attesting to the specifics of these differentiated impacts within Shepstone's scheme, studies elsewhere on the continent have underlined the unequal impacts of forced cotton cultivation. See for instance: A. Isaacman, 'Chiefs, Rural Differentiation and Peasant Protest: The Mozambican Forced Cotton Regime 1938-1961' *African Economic History*, 14 (1985), 15-56, and some of the chapters in A. Isaacman and R. Roberts, eds., *Cotton, Colonialism, and Social History in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Portsmouth, 1995).

Shepstone distributed seed to growers while exalting cotton's potential, and often stayed with each *induna* (headman) long enough to help set up a cotton garden in each homestead. But he was unable to replicate his success the next growing season. Instead he reported widespread failure which he attributed to inferior growing conditions.<sup>45</sup> He noticed a discernible pattern to this collapse. All the cotton planted on the exposed ridges and hills around the Ifafa and uMzimkhulu Rivers had failed. Only cotton planted in five gardens, situated on the immediate banks of the uMkhomanzi River and amounting to about ten acres in total, had flourished.<sup>46</sup> Planted on the deep alluvial soils of the valley floor, this cotton was also sheltered from the wind and hail that pelted the crops planted on higher land. There was so much fibre on the bolls by mid-July that Shepstone requested an extra four dozen sacks for collection.

This led John Wesley Shepstone to focus cotton cultivation in protected valleys during the 1860/61 growing season. Over 1300 lbs were cultivated, exclusively in the low-lying areas of the uMkhomanzi Valley.<sup>47</sup> Although only six bales reached buyers in Britain, the Cotton Supply Association lauded the cotton's potential, declaring it ideally suited for British mills.<sup>48</sup> Reports were so encouraging that the younger Shepstone requested extra seed for the following growing season in hope of expanding production even further.

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<sup>45</sup> PAR, SNA 1/1/10 no. 22, J.W. Shepstone to T. Shepstone, 22 Mar. 1860.

<sup>46</sup> PAR, SNA 1/1/10 no. 9, J.W. Shepstone to T. Shepstone, 20 Sep. 1860.

<sup>47</sup> PAR, SNA 1/1/11 Ref 26, J.W. Shepstone to T. Shepstone, 18 Mar. 1861. All the residual cotton planted on high ground by Illovo and uMkhomanzi Rivers failed again this year. See PAR, SNA 1/1/11 Ref 38, J.W. Shepstone to T. Shepstone, 1 Apr. 1861.

<sup>48</sup> PAR, SNA 1/1/11 Ref: 51 G.R. Haywood, Cotton Supply Association to T. Shepstone, 3 May 1861.

But then output fell. Magistrates and Superintendents across the colony reported a sharp drop-off in African cultivation, beginning in the summer of 1861. Africans nearly unanimously shifted their efforts away from cotton towards traditional foodstuffs. Within twelve months cotton had been completely abandoned by Zulu growers. This failure stunned officials. All blame was focused on the African growers. Fynn argued that Zulus were too sluggish and too slow for cotton's demanding growing regime. During the planting stage, he alleged, they were unwilling to dig deep into the soil, preventing cotton's deep roots from extending more than a few inches, and thus limiting germination.<sup>49</sup> During the picking stage, Fynn claimed that they accumulated cotton that was too soiled and dirty to have any real value. He estimated that over 60% of the total cotton planted at Inyangwimi was lost due to neglect.<sup>50</sup>

Resident Magistrates argued likewise. The Magistrate of the northernmost uThukela Division complained that Zulus were disinclined towards any type of meaningful labour. He was convinced that stronger methods of coercion were needed for them to adopt a new labour-intensive crop like cotton.<sup>51</sup> The Magistrate in Victoria County was pessimistic about Zulu willingness to adopt any crop that did not satisfy the grower's immediate needs: 'hunger alone will rouse the native to labour – that though he loves tobacco and sweet potato he is, generally, too lazy to cultivate them – it is no longer a matter of surprise that the prospect of merely gain should fail to induce him to cultivate the cotton plant'.<sup>52</sup> Theophilus

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<sup>49</sup> PAR, SNA 1/3/7 no. 121, Fynn to T. Shepstone, 30 Aug. 1858.

<sup>50</sup> PAR, Natal Almanac 1863, Report on the Growth of Cotton in Natal, 45. See also PAR, Fynn Papers 1/1/7/7 A1382 no. 273, R. Struthers to Fynn, 11 Dec. 1859.

<sup>51</sup> PAR, SNA 1/3/12 Ref 81, Resident Magistrate of the Tugela Division to T. Shepstone, 25 Apr. 1863.

<sup>52</sup> PAR, SNA 1/3/8, Magistrate of Inanda Division, County Victoria, to T. Shepstone, 11 Oct. 1858, 53.

Shepstone also reserved his greatest criticism for the Zulu grower, whose work ethic and inexperience with picking he listed as the major impediments to success:

With reference to the cultivation of cotton by the natives, I have come to the conclusion that as long as they remain in their present savage state they will never, generally, steadily continue the cultivation of any article which they do not themselves use, or which will not bring them a decidedly higher money value than they are able to obtain by their own customary article of cultivation. They are easily discouraged by failure, and are deficient in the perseverance which is necessary to prosecute an enterprise which does not accord with their natural habit and customs.<sup>53</sup>

This refrain, demeaning Africans as lazy and incompetent, reduced the explanation of cotton's failure to cultural distinctions.<sup>54</sup> As Anne McClintock explains in other colonial contexts, officials emphasized this discourse of idleness – this 'stigmata of degeneration...[this] stigma of racial unworthy' – to mark themselves from the colonized.<sup>55</sup> This denigration of African labour was a discourse on work, used to distinguish between desirable and undesirable labour. Demeaning Zulu growers was part of the broader imperial agenda to replace subsistence livelihoods with revenue-generating export crop production. It exaggerated the degree to which Africans were culturally or temperamentally resistant to growing cotton as it neglected the contextual factors – environmental and economic – that help explain the failure of Shepstone's push for cotton cultivation.

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<sup>53</sup> PAR, *Natal Almanac* 1963, 45.

<sup>54</sup> See also Carter, *Lost Harvests*, and Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution, Volume 2*.

<sup>55</sup> A. McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (New York, 1995), 252-3.

## Environmental and Economic Contexts

The sharp decline in African cotton production in the summer of 1861 coincided with a prolonged drought that began in November. The absence of rain stunted the crop; both planting and germination require immediate moisture to be successful. John Wesley Shepstone reported that the entire crop of the Upper uMkhomanzi suffered heavily from the extreme dry weather.<sup>56</sup> All cotton planted without direct water access had shriveled up and died. Even Shepstone's own prized ten acres planted directly alongside the river, which had produced the bulk of the region's cotton over the previous two years, was reduced to almost nothing.

The drought had similar consequences for African growers in the Lower uMkhomanzi. Robert Struthers, Cotton Superintendent for the region, listed dozens upon dozens of growers whose crops were destroyed by the absence of rain.<sup>57</sup> One farmer, uDumisa, had planted with some success in 1859/60, but his next two plantings were scorched by the sun. Another nearby farmer, uMasimula, had planted in each of the two preceding seasons, but in the first the seed did not germinate due to the lack of rain, and in the second the plants shriveled up due to droughts. So severe was the shortage of water that many farmers took their cattle south of the uMzinkhulu River to find water; many cotton fields were abandoned and burnt by grassfires.

Historical ecological research has revealed the cyclical occurrence of drought in southern Natal during the last half of the nineteenth century. A deficiency in rainfall

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<sup>56</sup> PAR, SNA 1/1/12 Ref 37, J.W. Shepstone to T. Shepstone, 8 Apr. 1862

<sup>57</sup> PAR, SNA 1/1/12 Ref 5, Struthers to T. Shepstone, 14 Jan. 1862.

occurred on average every six or seven years. Data from the Pietermaritzburg rainfall monitoring station – the only station operating at this time – reveal that dry conditions prevailed during the length of Shepstone’s scheme: 1859-1861 were the three driest consecutive years in Natal between 1850 and 1890.<sup>58</sup>

Year	Pietermaritzburg	Gardens Cliffe	Durban	Ottawa
1854	50.56	-	-	-
1855	42.77	-	-	-
1856	50.98	-	-	-
1857	-	-	-	-
1858	27.42	-	-	-
1859	28.40	-	-	-
1860	30.60	-	-	-
1861	22.41	-	-	-
1862	29.97	-	-	-
1863	34.66	-	-	-
1864	37.31	-	-	-
1865	31.08	-	-	-
1866	30.27	-	48.54	-
1867	31.49	25.95	33.08	-
1868	-	44.36	-	-
1869	-	30.83	-	-
1870	-	30.63	-	34.87
1871	-	32.26	-	36.22
1872	-	44.98	-	56.71
1873	-	36.50	42.22	41.33
1874	-	45.60	53.80	49.78
1875	-	37.08	54.78	30.31
1876	-	38.52	35.22	26.56
1877	-	33.91	35.65	35.37
1878	-	26.72	28.24	26.57
1879	-	42.29	44.46	41.13
1880	-	46.18	47.63	-

<sup>58</sup> W. B. Tripp, 'Rainfall of South Africa 1842-86,' *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Meteorological Society*, 14 (1888), 108-23. See also C. Ballard and G. Lenta, 'The Complex Nature of Agriculture in Colonial Natal: 1860-1909', in B. Guest and J. M. Sellers, eds., *The Complex Nature of Agriculture in Colonial Natal: 1860-1909* (Pietermaritzburg, 1985), 151-80.

Year	Pietermaritzburg	Gardens Cliffe	Durban	Ottawa
1881	-	37.62	37.08	38.77
1882	-	39.25	36.21	28.72
1883	-	37.49	44.52	37.43
1884	-	38.33	44.56	40.15
1885	-	-	34.48	-
1886	-	-	31.79	-

Table 1: Rainfall Recorded at Rainfall Monitoring Stations in Natal, 1854-1886, in inches. Source: W.B. Tripp 'Rainfall of South Africa 1842-86', *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Meteorological Society* 14 (1888), 108-123, p. 116-7.

As Table 1 shows, the most severe drought conditions occurred in 1861/62: this coincided with the third planting of Shepstone's cotton scheme, and the most dramatic drop-off in planting rates recorded by Magistrates and Superintendents.<sup>59</sup> El Nino Southern Oscillation (ENSO) events appear to have contributed to these drought episodes in 1857 and 1862; twentieth-century climatologists have estimated that these low phase (warm weather) events triggered below average rainfalls further exacerbating drought conditions.<sup>60</sup> Climatologists estimate that just over 20% of rainfall variance during this period was due to ENSO events.

Harsh rainfall conditions were made worse by red locusts (*Nomadacris septemfasciata*). Locusts had caused only minor damage in previous growing seasons, but the

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<sup>59</sup> Dendroclimatological records confirm that the 1861/62 growing season was one of the driest on record. See M. Hall, 'Dendroclimatology, Rainfall and Human Adaptation in the Later Iron Age of Natal and Zululand,' *Annals of the Natal Museum*, 22 (1976), 693-703.

<sup>60</sup> J.A. Lindesay and C.H. Vogel, 'Historical Evidence for Southern Oscillation-Southern African Rainfall Relationships,' *International Journal of Climatology*, 10 (1990), 679-89.

dry conditions were particularly suited to the hatching of eggs, which produced an irruption of these creatures and intensified the devastation they wrought on all types of vegetation.<sup>61</sup> Although locusts generally prefer monocotyledons such as grass, maize or sugar cane, the widespread drought had greatly reduced growth of these species, with the result that locusts turned to almost any living plant for food, and devoured hundreds of young cotton plants. Heavy losses were reported throughout the colony. In a last-ditch attempt to rekindle the enthusiasm of African residents for cotton John Wesley Shepstone convinced farmers in his district to put sixty acres of good land on the protected uMkhomanzi Valley floor under cotton in 1861/62. By January the crop was wilted, and locusts were attacking what remained. Not a single boll of cotton was plucked from the entire sixty acres.<sup>62</sup>

African foodstuff production also suffered heavily from these poor conditions. Food shortages were widespread throughout Natal. The younger Shepstone reported that growers were increasingly reluctant to devote their efforts to cotton, 'there being such a scarcity of food'.<sup>63</sup> Most growers gave the prevailing famine as their primary reason for abandoning cotton. One unnamed African grower who had previously enjoyed significant success with the crop pleaded with Struthers:

Look at our lean bodies, where is our strength to cultivate cotton, we are eating wild roots like pigs, and it requires all our strength to dig them up, we are starving, we have no mealies to plant, and you white people

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<sup>61</sup> C. Ballard, "'A Year of Scarcity': The 1896 Locust Plague in Natal and Zululand," *South African Historical Journal*, 15 (1983), 34-52.

<sup>62</sup> PAR, SNA 1/1/11 Ref. 38, J.W. Shepstone to T. Shepstone, 1 Apr. 1861.

<sup>63</sup> PAR, SNA 1/1/11 Ref 173, J.W. Shepstone to T. Shepstone, 9 Dec. 1861, and SNA 1/1/11 Ref 178, J.W. Shepstone to T. Shepstone, 23 Dec. 1861.

bring them out here in your waggons [sic] and demand an ox for a sackfull, which we used to sell you for three or four shillings...we are dead.<sup>64</sup>

Struck by these objections, Struthers refused to press cotton cultivation: ‘against such reasoning any arguments I could induce in [its] favour were of little avail’.<sup>65</sup> Fynn confirmed a similarly desperate state of affairs at Inyangwimi. Zulu growers who had opted to cultivate cotton when growing conditions were more favourable were now refusing en masse:

So great is the scarcity of food in [this] division, that the natives are mostly depending on wild roots, the consequences are that very few have seed to plant, or strength to cultivate in preparation for the seed which their first crops may produce...it therefore becomes a heavy task to require their cultivation of cotton one day in seven in their present famished state.<sup>66</sup>

Maize cultivation in Fynn’s district had dropped to the point that even European settlers were unable to procure any, despite their willingness to pay inflated prices.<sup>67</sup> He was forced to request 30 lbs of grain as rations to nourish his own staff.<sup>68</sup>

Severe food shortages led Zulu growers to deemphasize cotton and shift their efforts to subsistence production. Cotton growing entailed a burdensome addition to the agricultural routine of peasant households, to the effect that cotton could only be grown at the expense of

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<sup>64</sup> PAR, SNA 1/1/12 Ref 5, Struthers to T. Shepstone, 14 Jan. 1862.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> PAR, SNA 1/3/7 no. 168, Fynn to T. Shepstone, 20 Nov. 1858.

<sup>67</sup> PAR, SNA 1/3/7 no. 135, Fynn to T. Shepstone, 2 Oct. 1858.

<sup>68</sup> PAR, SNA 1/3/7 no. 147, Fynn to T. Shepstone, 23 Oct. 1858.

foodstuffs. During times of famine, crops whose value was only in exchange were de-emphasized as African growers chose to privilege subsistence over commodity production.

Even before the drought, officials reported widespread Zulu resistance towards cotton cultivation. This was rooted in the growers' unwillingness to abandon maize as their favoured crop. Struthers noted that many growers in the Lower uMkhomanzi refused cotton for financial reasons, suggesting that maize provided a more remunerative return.<sup>69</sup> Fynn's experience at Inyangwimi confirmed these accounts: when he approached growers and told them cotton would be a means of assisting in the payment of the hut tax, they answered that 'they had enough money for that, without cultivating cotton'.<sup>70</sup> In his 1861 assessment of the failure of Shepstone's scheme, Lieutenant-Governor James Scott emphasized 'the difficulty to induce the native to grow it, on account of its being less remunerative than the crops of Indian corn (maize) which they are accustomed to grow'.<sup>71</sup> In the following year's report Scott was even more precise, arguing that the plan to introduce cotton cultivation among Africans failed because the current price of cotton on the international market was so much lower than the local price of maize it gave no incentive to turn to cotton.<sup>72</sup> Theophilus

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<sup>69</sup> PAR, SNA 1/1/12 Ref: 5, Struthers to T. Shepstone, 14 Jan. 1862.

<sup>70</sup> PAR, SNA 1/3/8, Fynn to T. Shepstone, 27 Jan. 1859, 326. Elsewhere, Fynn maligned the prosperity that most Africans found themselves in, complaining that until their 'wealthy, independent' state was changed there would be no motivation for them to adopt cotton. See PAR, SNA 1/3/8 Fynn to T. Shepstone, 27 Jan. 1859, 326.

<sup>71</sup> PAR, BPP Vol. 128, XII Report on the Past and Present State of Her Majesty's Colonial Possessions 1861, 33.

<sup>72</sup> PAR, BPP Vol. 128, XIII Report on the Past and Present State of Her Majesty's Colonial Possessions 1862, 34.

Shepstone also recognized that cotton would never succeed while maize offered such significant returns: 'so long...as mealies command so high a price, it is not likely that the Natives will enter very largely into the cultivation of cotton'.<sup>73</sup>

As John Tosh notes, the success of African cash cropping was crucially dependent on the relationship between the particular cash crop and the established complex of food crops.<sup>74</sup> The Zulu farmers' resistance to cotton was rooted primarily in their preference for maize, which functioned as both a subsistence crop and a commodity sold to settler markets. Maize was by far the dominant crop in nineteenth century Natal: invariably, it accounted for more than half of all the acreage cultivated by Zulu farmers. This was especially true in the northern sections of the Upper and Lower uMkhomanzi districts which were within easy reach of the major settler markets in Pietermaritzburg and Durban, respectively. John Lambert argues the relative absence of settler agriculture in these districts offered a boon to Zulu farmers who took advantage of rising maize prices to expand their acreages in the 1860s and 70s.<sup>75</sup> Maize sales remained the most significant form of income for almost all *imizi*.

Cotton's growing cycle clashed with that of maize. Both needed to be sown after the first rains in October/November, and both had to be harvested in early autumn. Labour requirements for cotton were also notoriously demanding: carefully-timed planting, seeds sown at precise intervals, regular thinning, and quick and careful harvesting to avoid spoilage. Other studies on cotton cash cropping in Africa have concluded that cotton offered

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<sup>73</sup> T. Shepstone quoted in Welsh, *Roots of Segregation*, 186.

<sup>74</sup> J. Tosh, 'The Cash-Crop Revolution in Tropical Africa: An Appraisal,' *African Affairs*, 79 (1980), 79-94.

<sup>75</sup> Lambert, *Betrayed Trust*, 47. Maize prices rose due to expanding European settler numbers. Settler agriculture was hindered by a lack of capital and equipment and an irregular supply of labour, leaving Africans as the major maize producers in the colony through most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

a lower return for labour than did most food crops: 'given the choice between traditional production of food and other crops for local markets plus leisure and heavy labour on an uncertain and unremunerative new export crop, peasant farmers quite naturally chose the former'.<sup>76</sup>

Other constraints hampered the realization of Shepstone's cotton scheme. Growing practices initiated by his Superintendents were inadequate. At Inyangwimi, where growers received the most instruction, seeds were sown in lines, with four or five seeds planted in holes, three feet apart, and a space of six feet between the rows. The intent was to weed out the extra plants leaving only the healthiest stock. The agreement entered into with local *izinkosi* (chiefs), however, limited the availability and flexibility of labour. One agreement between Fynn and one local *inkosi* uMakuta, for instance, limited the availability of ten workers on the fifty acres under cotton at Inyangwimi to every Monday for eight weeks during the planting season. Generally speaking one acre of cotton under hoe cultivation requires about a minimum of 200 hours of work per year. Without sufficient thinning, young plants compete for water and sunlight and hamper each other's development. Weeds became rampant.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> R. Dumett, 'Government Assisted Agricultural Development in West Africa: Cotton Growing Experimentation in Ghana in the Early 20th Century,' *Agricultural History Review*, 23 (1975), 156-72. Ugandan farmers rejected cotton in favour of food crops for similar reasons around the turn of the century. See M. J. Hay, 'Economic Change in Kowe, Luoland, 1890-1945' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1972) and J. Tosh, 'Lango Agriculture during the Colonial Period: Land and Labour in a Cash Crop Economy' *Journal of African History*, 19 (1978), 415-39.

<sup>77</sup> PAR, SNA 1/3/8 Fynn to T. Shepstone, 27 Jan. 1859, 326.

Seed arrived late and prevented growers from planting immediately after the spring rains. In the 1858/59 planting was set back into February and March when seed did not arrive until early in the new year.<sup>78</sup> Not surprisingly, yields were paltry. Cotton planted in dry soil had little chance of germination. Young plants that did germinate were overtaken by frost before the cotton was ready to pick.

A lack of proper tools also constrained cultivation efforts. Fynn recognized that soil conditions at Inyangwimi were marginal and that growers needed implements – oxen, horses, ploughs – to help them break up the soil sufficiently to allow cotton’s deep roots to penetrate.<sup>79</sup> But Shepstone refused requests for such tools, strictly adhering to Lieutenant-Governor Scott’s message to minimize expenses.<sup>80</sup> Zulu growers were left with only indigenous hoes made primarily from sneezewood which were prone to breakage and rot. Fynn recounted one instance in which 150 growers arrived on site without a single agricultural implement between them.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> PAR, SNA 1/3/7 no. 121, Fynn to T. Shepstone, 30 Aug. 1858.

<sup>79</sup> PAR, SNA 1/3/7 no. 138, Fynn to T. Shepstone, 4 Oct. 1858, and PAR, SNA 1/3/8, Fynn to T. Shepstone, 12 Mar. 1859, 268.

<sup>80</sup> PAR, SNA 1/8/7 Ref 43, T. Shepstone to Fynn, 28 Mar. 1859. See also SNA, 1/8/7 T. Shepstone to Fynn, 28 Mar. 1859, 43. Fynn and Shepstone did eventually come up with a plan in which fifteen ploughs would be loaned out to African growers which were to be paid back in cotton revenue after three years. The cotton scheme ended in failure before this was initiated, though this program did end up lasting all the way until 1872, with sales increasing every year until the program’s termination. See PAR, SNA 1/3/8, Fynn to T. Shepstone 20 Oct. 1850, 45.

<sup>81</sup> PAR, SNA 1/3/6 Ref 193, Report of Preliminary Operations for the Formation of a Native Industrial Village at Inyangwimi, 31 Aug. 1857.

Transport was also inadequate. Shepstone was inundated with requests from Magistrates who had collected some cotton but lacked the means to get it to market. Fynn had a wagon full of cotton transported up the coast to Durban destroyed by rain, yet his follow-up request for a covered wagon was still refused. Subsequent requests for better storage facilities to prevent collected cotton from being damaged by rain and rats were also ignored.<sup>82</sup> Further north, in uMvoti County, the Magistrate suggested that the poor returns in his district (only three sacks were ever collected), were primarily a function of the great distance – between 15 and 20 miles – that growers had to transport cotton to market.<sup>83</sup>

Shepstone's cotton plan failed not because Zulu growers were inherently resistant to commodity production, but due to a specific interplay of ecological and economic factors that made the prospects of cotton cultivation less attractive. As other continental case studies of peasant commodity production reveal, Africans responded to export crops when they were remunerative and easily integrated into local growing systems.<sup>84</sup> Zulu growers were willing experimenters with cotton while growing conditions remained favourable. When faced with scarcity, African growers chose to re-dedicate their agricultural efforts to foodstuff production.

### Conclusion

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<sup>82</sup> PAR, SNA 1/3/8, Fynn to T. Shepstone, 17 Sep. 1859, 86 and PAR, SNA 1/3/8, Struthers to T. Shepstone, 3 Sep. 1859, 94.

<sup>83</sup> PAR, SNA 1/3/10, H Windham, Resident Magistrate of Umvoti County to SNA, 28 Mar. 1861, 67.

<sup>84</sup> See T. J. Bassett, *The Peasant Cotton Revolution in West Africa 1880-1995* (Cambridge, 2001), and R. L. Roberts, *Two Worlds of Cotton: Colonialism and the Regional Economy in the French Soudan 1800-1946* (Stanford, 1996).

The control and management of colonial subjects was the most pressing issue facing British colonial administrators in the nineteenth century.<sup>85</sup> The ‘Native Question’ – how far should Africans be brought within the jurisdiction of British law and influence? – was considered the greatest moral dilemma of colonization. Herman Merivale’s *Lectures on Colonies and Colonization* capture much of the British soul-searching over this question.<sup>86</sup> Merivale preached the ideals of protection and civilization which British rulers owed to their colonial subjects.<sup>87</sup> He remained unequivocal that the assimilation of indigenous peoples was the only viable option for ensuring long-term political stability within the British colonies.

Such uncompromising visions for Native-settler relations often became muddled by colonial realities. Alan Lester has shown how spatial strategies for addressing the ‘Native Question’ in the Cape were determined largely by local political and cultural forces.<sup>88</sup> Lester chronicles the contradictory strategies implemented by the British to manage the Xhosa

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<sup>85</sup> See R. Robinson and J. Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* (London and Basingstoke, 1961); J. Galbraith, *Reluctant Empire: British Policy on the South African Frontier, 1834-1854* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1963). For the Canadian context see L. Upton, 'The Origins of Canadian Indian Policy,' *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 8 (1975), 51-61.

<sup>86</sup> D. McNab, 'Herman Merivale and the Native Question, 1837-1861,' *Albion*, 9 (1977), 359-84.

<sup>87</sup> H. Merivale, *Lectures on Colonization and Colonies : Delivered Before the University of Oxford in 1839, 1840 & 1841* (London, 1861), 511.

<sup>88</sup> A. Lester, 'Cultural Constructions and Spatial Strategy on the Eastern Cape Frontier, 1806-1838,' *South African Geographical Journal*, 78 (1996), 98-107, and A. Lester, 'The Margins of Order: Strategies of Segregation on the Eastern Cape Frontier, 1806 – c.1850,' *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 23 (1997), 635-64. See also J. Robinson, 'A Perfect System of Control? State Power and "Native Locations" in South Africa,' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 8 (1990), 135-62.

majority, arguing that policies shifted according to local perceptions of security: when the British population felt threatened they favoured strict policies of containment, when they felt secure about their military capabilities (usually following a Xhosa defeat), they became more lenient and inclusive towards their colonial subjects. Lester's work emphasizes that there was no unified imperial vision for how to delineate between African and settler space – these issues played themselves out in particular colonial contexts.

Attempts to integrate cotton as a commodity crop in Natal in the 1850s and 60s hinged largely on this contentious political question. Theophilus Shepstone seized upon cotton as a means of anchoring Zulus within his carefully carved out Locations. Such a profitable and highly desirable commodity crop was key to making production within the Locations financially viable. It would also serve to quell the increasingly vocal objections from Lieutenant-Governor Ben Pine and white agriculturalists who favoured breaking up the Locations to make more Africans available for work on white farms. Shepstone embraced cotton as a means of entrenching his vision of spatial segregation, which he viewed as the most effective strategy for the European assimilation of Africans.

When cotton failed, Shepstone and his cotton superintendents blamed Zulu laziness and incompetence. But such explanations minimized the role of Zulu growers in rejecting cotton based on sound economic and environmental rationale. This cotton failure was the result of a specific interplay of economic and ecological factors that convinced Zulu growers to abandon the crop.

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