

## 'A Paralysis of Perspective': Image and Text in the Creation of an African Chief

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This essay traces the history of the visual representation of an African man within and through the historiography of empire, from its origin as a photographic image of African authority a century and a half ago and its subsequent role in the creation of Victorian stereotypes of African savagery to its appearance in recently published books of African history. Although I refer to a number of images derived from a single photographic session, I concentrate on the most widely reproduced of these and argue that there is an intrinsic ambiguity in the photograph that has created a conflict between text and image, which has led to a 'paralysis of perspective' among observers. This phrase is taken from Mahmood Mamdani's *Citizen and Subject*, a book on African politics that examines the contemporary significance of that pervasive feature of colonial rule, segregation: territorial segregation through reserved locations; legal segregation under customary law; cultural segregation by the creation of the tribe and political segregation by systems of indirect rule that delegated local authority to selected African chiefs.<sup>2</sup> The legacy of this aspect of imperial control, which gave limited recognition to African political practice and authority, continues to influence profoundly not only politics, but also political analysis. Mamdani identifies 'two clear tendencies' in the debates on contemporary African affairs: the modernist, with its insistence on civil rights in civil society, counterposed by the Africanist call for a politics derived from precedents in African history and culture. In his attempt to resolve these two opposing approaches, Mamdani examines the colonial roots of what manifests itself today as African tradition.

Observers of contemporary South African politics will be well aware of the divisions and tensions created by the response of the advocates of these two approaches to the demands for recognition by traditional leaders. It is apparent from public and official debate that the authorities are finding it extraordinarily difficult to formulate a response to the call for the extension of powers of traditional authorities in a democratic state. In fact, evidence suggests an 'impasse' that goes beyond conventional difficulties of policy formulation and exhibits this 'paralysis of perspective'.<sup>3</sup> This metaphor helps to situate

Figure 1 (opposite).

Ngoza kaLudaba images in a settler photo album. Album c 59-048 to 052. Campbell Collections of the University of KwaZulu-Natal

1 Nessa Leibhammer took over the editing of this essay after the passing of Jeff Guy.

2 M. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, Cape Town: David Philip, 1996. The literature on indirect rule and segregation in its various forms is vast. The collection edited by W. Beinart and S. Dubow, *Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth-Century South Africa*, London: Routledge, 1995, is a useful starting point. Mamdani's book deliberately seeks to break the formidable barriers dividing South Africa and African studies, while D.A. Low, *Lion Rampant: Essays in the Study of British Imperialism*, London: Frank Cass, 1973, treats the subject with historical depth and breadth.

3 Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, p. 3.

