2 The Colonial Conquest of Zambia

WHITE SUPREMACY IN THE SOUTH

White supremacy, firmly entrenched in Southern Africa by the end of the nineteenth century, was conspicuous in the British war of 1899–1902 against the Boer Republics. Both sides refrained from recruiting blacks to fight their battles. They participated, if at all, only as non-combatants. Africans took advantage of the breakdown of social controls to ignore taxes, forced labour and other exactions, but for the most part continued to work on farms whose owners were away on commando. British troops burnt farms and crowded the occupants into concentration camps which, at the end of the war, had 200,000 inmates, including 80,000 Africans segregated in separate camps (Walker, 1964: 498).

Oakes (1988: 258–9) has recorded scattered but significant signs of revolt among the Kgatla, Venda and Pedi of the northern and western districts of the Transvaal Republic, spreading fear among the owners and their families, some of whom abandoned their homesteads. In May 1902, during the last month of the war, a commando seized Zulu cattle near Vryheid, capital of the Boer New Republic proclaimed in August 1844, and challenged the Zulu to recover them, which they did with spears and firearms, killing 56 Boers for the loss of 52 of their own men.

When Coloured and Africans in the Cape Colony, many of whom were parliamentary voters, asked for arms to protect their lives and property, rural Afrikaners threatened to rise in revolt. The danger was real enough. Boer commandos which invaded Cape districts compelled blacks and Coloured to supply them with livestock and products without the payment of compensation. Abraham Esau, leader of the Coloured in Calvinia, organised a defence force in defiance of the magistrate who feared an Afrikaner mutiny. On 10 January 1901 an OFS commando with Cape rebels, headed by Commandant Charles Niewoudt, rode into the town, shot and beat resisters, threw Esau and local officials into jail, and ordered him to be flogged for speaking...
against the Boers and attempting to arm his supporters. The assault was repeated during the next two weeks. ‘Finally, on 5th February, he was placed in leg irons, tied between two horses and dragged for about a kilometre out of town, where he was shot.’

A few weeks later Niewoudt’s commando left Calvinia.

The Vereeniging Peace Treaty of 31 May 1900 provided an amnesty for most rebels, guaranteed that none of those tried would be sentenced to death, and contained a clause which kept blacks off the electoral rolls in the two former republics. This gross piece of racial discrimination gave rise to the election of an all-white male parliament in 1910 under the South Africa Act passed by the British parliament. Africans responded to the betrayal by forming in 1912 the South African Native National Congress, forerunner of the African National Congress (ANC).

The centres of African power shifted from chiefdoms and segregated reserves to urban townships and slums, where the remnants of the old, traditional society mingled with Western forms of religion, family, politics, economics, sport and art (Simons, 1987: 1–88). These drastic changes, Leonard Thompson noted (1969: 5), were distorting and eliminated living traditions at an extremely rapid rate. A systematic recording of oral evidence from competent informants might add much of value, but could not compensate for the study of societies undergoing change.

LIGHT FROM THE NORTH

Northern Rhodesia under colonial rule provided opportunities for such a study. The Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, founded in 1937, had as its Director Godfrey Wilson, an anthropologist, ‘a word which aroused the greatest possible apprehension in the minds of government officials and settlers at the time’ (Audrey Richards, in African Social Research (ASR), 1977: 277).

The Institute operated during Zambia’s transition from the status of a Protectorate to that of an unwilling partner in a Federation and from there to the position in 1964 of a sovereign independent state. The anthropologists who directed the Institute and conducted its fieldwork were alive to the contradictions and conflicts between the professed aims of the colonial administrations for the ‘moral uplift’ of the African population and the harsh realities of migrant labour, broken homes, starvation wages,