Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Adam Kok III

Ross, R.J.

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Adam Kok III
1811–75

Great-grandson of Adam Kok I, Adam Kok III ruled the eastern Griqua at Philippolis from 1837 until the early 1860s, when he and his people trekked across the Drakensberg to found a new state in what became known as Griqualand East. After more than a decade of independence there, the Griquas suddenly found themselves taken under British control in 1874. Kok retained a measure of power, but died at the end of the following year.

The place of Adam Kok within nineteenth-century South African history derives essentially from the ambiguity of the Griquas within the Southern African social order. On the one hand they were dark-skinned, being the descendants of every conceivable racial group of South Africa. Among their ancestors were large numbers of Khoisan, so that the remnants of Khoi tribal organization may be rather dimly perceived in the patriarchal style of government of the first Griqua leaders, in particular Adam Kok's grandfather, Cornelis Kok I. On a linguistic level, this inheritance also remained of importance, Adam's wife, for instance, was not fluent in any other tongue except for the now extinct Cape Khoi. However, this language was slowly ousted by Dutch, clearly in one of its more creolized forms. This linguistic shift symbolizes the major tension within Griqua history, which Adam Kok recognized but could not resolve, because the solution was well outside the power of the Griquas.

But for the colour of their skins, the Griquas had all the aspirations, and many of the attributes, of the white ruling class which was slowly taking over control of South Africa. The Griquas were landowners, and, when they had the opportunity, orientated towards markets. They were receptive towards new economic opportunities. In the 1830s the Boers of the north-east Cape com-

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plained that the access that the Griquas denied them to the rich pastures north of the Orange—at least temporarily—gave the Griquas an unfair advantage in the cattle markets of Graaff-Reinet and Grahamstown, while two decades later the Griquas took to the keeping of merino sheep at least as quickly as did their Boer neighbours. They were also Christian, both in terms of the image they wished to project—the first code of laws the Griquas issued included an outlawing of polygamy—and in fact, although they naturally did not all satisfy the rigorous standards of the missionaries in this regard. They were, many of them, literate. Adam Kok himself had a large, legible, if somewhat unformed and schoolboyish hand. They were often employers of Africans as labourers, and sometimes reached the apogee of civilization by living as rentiers on the proceeds of African peasant farming. In short, they behaved in much the same ways as the Europeans of southern Africa. But their skin colour was 'wrong'. Therefore, throughout the century, pressure was exerted on them by those who considered putative skin-colour to be of importance for acceptance into the ruling class of South African society, to force the Griquas from their position of power. In this, probably unconscious process, the white ruling class succeeded. Except where they have 'passed' for white, the descendants of the Griquas are no longer landowners, nor particularly prosperous. But it was in the attempt to defend the Griquas from the erosion of their rights and position that Adam Kok spent the major part of his life.

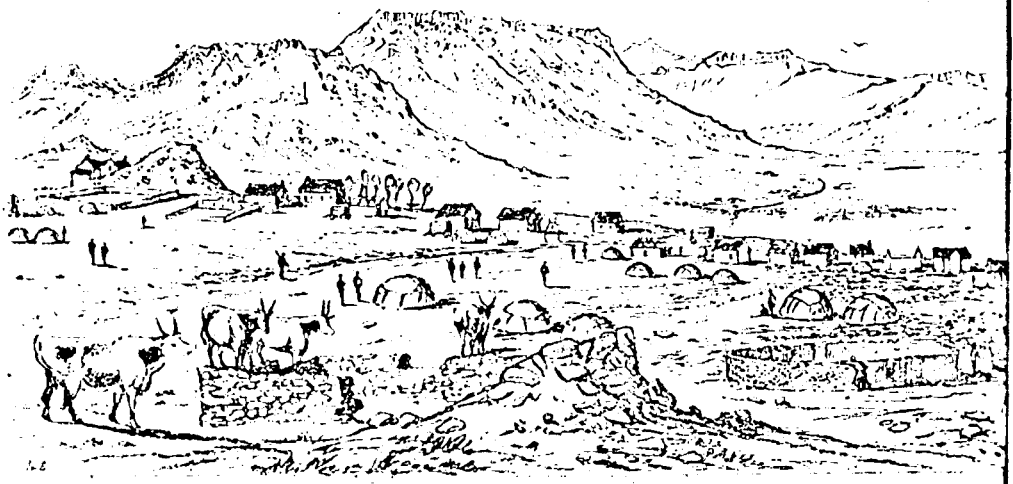
Before they could lose their heritage, however, the Griquas had to acquire it. Adam Kok was instrumental in helping the Griquas in the later stages of their search for wealth and respectability. He was born near what is now Griquatown in the northern Cape, on 11 December 1811.[1] This was about the time that his father, also called Adam, was taking over from Cornelis as head of the large Kok clan, which was the richest and most important in the half-caste Khoi society which had established itself along the Orange river valley. This society was, in many ways, the cutting edge of colonial society emanating ultimately from Cape Town. It formed the link between the Cape colony and the Tswana, trading cattle south and cloth and iron northwards, while it was itself a producer of cattle and of various grains. However, in the decade from 1816 to 1826, it was rent by a long series of civil wars, and eventually a large number of Griquas under the leadership of the elder Adam moved from the

northern Cape east to what is now the southern Orange Free State, where they centred their community on the London Mission Society station of Philippolis.

Philippolis

The area around Philippolis over which the Griquas slowly spread was good cattle and sheep country, although in the course of the nineteenth century the veld slowly deteriorated as karroo bushes spread north at the expense of the highland sweet grass-veld. Rains were too uncertain to make agriculture a viable proposition, especially as there was not enough permanent water to allow irrigation, but this did not greatly trouble the Griquas who, like their Boer reference group, were accustomed to an essentially pastoral economy. But such an economy, when connected with rapid population growth of both humans and stock, demands a continually expanding land area in order to be viable. Thus the Griquas found themselves in the main path of expansion of the trekboers of the north-eastern Cape, who were being forced by a series of droughts to spill north of the Orange in the movement that culminated in the Great Trek. From the beginning of the 1830s onwards, there were always Boers residing, more or less permanently, in the area which the Philippolis Captaincy claimed as its territory.

Politically, although the Kok family remained in nominal control of Philippolis, the leading figure in the Captaincy was the Government Secretary, Hendrick Hendricks. He was Adam Kok III's brother-in-law, but he owed the maintainance of his position not so much to nepotism as to the sharpness of his political intelligence. Especially while the elder Adam, who could not read, was alive, Hendricks held the conduct of the relationships of the Griquas with other peoples mainly in his own hands. He also played a leading role in the labyrinthine internal Philippolis politics, especially as they developed around the problem of succession to the elder and ailing Adam. Until 1829 everything was clear. Dam, as he was known, was planning to retire in favour of his eldest son, Cornelis. But in that year Cornelis died. The Griquas were then left with a choice between his two remaining legitimate sons, Abraham and Adam. The two brothers represented very different tendencies within the Griqua state. Abraham the elder son who was illiterate, and still lived in a Khoisan mat hut, seems to have seen the Griqua future



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as essentially predatory, either ruling Africans or, preferably, stealing their cattle. In particular, the vast Ndebele herds exercised a fascination for him, as they had for many Griquas over the previous decade. Many others, however, saw that such a mode of existence was no longer viable in the long term, as the expansion of Boer settlement and, in its wake, British colonial authority could only lead to a general pacification of the interior of southern Africa, or at least to an ordering of conflict which would place those who behaved as Abraham beyond the pale of the society to which the Griquas (many of whose ancestors, it must be remembered, had been outcasts from the colony) aspired. It was this latter party that Adam headed.

Nevertheless, in the leadership election, held on 26 January 1836, four months after old Dam's death, Abraham won by 168 votes to 68. He seems to have done so because he received the support of those who valued his legitimacy as the elder brother and, at the same time, considered that he was sufficiently weak in character to be effectively controlled. Moreover, the mission party was temporarily in bad odour and much of this rubbed off on Adam, their evident representative. However Abraham was an unmitigated disaster. His attempt to raid the Ndebele failed

badly and he was deserted by most of his followers, including, most significantly, Hendricks. By the middle of 1837, he was ousted, and, after being repulsed in his attempt to regain power by coup de main, he disappeared from the scene. He must have died shortly afterwards because, in what must have been an attempt to reconcile some of Abraham's supporters, Adam shortly afterwards married the woman who had been Abraham's wife and who belonged to the influential Pienaar family. This clearly consolidated his position and he reigned unchallenged for the subsequent thirty-eight years of his life. The marriage did not prove fruitful, however, and Adam left no descendants.

When he assumed power, Adam was still a young man, aged twenty-five. He had already had a certain amount of experience as an assistant to his father and in arranging a treaty with Andries Waterboer, the head of the other Griqua state, centred on Griquatown, but in the first years of his reign he did not dominate the political life of Philippolis. Only slowly did he assert his position against that of Hendrick Hendricks, who remained Government secretary until 1850. Nevertheless, Adam seems slowly to have begun to take decisions himself, and came to be seen as more than a figurehead, even if he left much of the oratory to the eloquent Hendricks. It was a time when the Griquas needed strong leadership, and in general they seem to have got it.

Throughout the 1840s, the Captaincy was at the heart of the conflict between the Voortrekkers and the British government as to the exercise of authority on the High Veld. Following the British annexation of Natal, the more militant Afrikaners had returned across the Drakensberg and laid claim to all the territory north of the Orange river, which formed the northern boundary of the Cape Colony. This claim would therefore have included the Philippolis Captaincy, although at times such Boer leaders as Potgieter disclaimed any intention of ruling anyone except the Voortrekker community. Nevertheless, the Griquas saw their own independence threatened by the establishment of Boer power—correctly as events turned out—and attempted to preserve it by reliance on the British. This was in effect their only alternative, even if it was to prove no more valuable or lasting. It was thus very largely the Griquas who were responsible for bringing the British troops north of the Orange to contest Boer control of southern Transorangia. Thus in 1842, it was Kok who informed the British authorities of the Boers' intention to

raise a standard at Alleman's drift on the Orange, proclaiming their sovereignty over the land to the north, an action, which, after a certain amount of to-ing and fro-ing, led eventually to the bloodless dispersal of the Boer laager by the redcoats under Lieutenant-Colonel Hare. Two years later, Kok again almost provoked war by arresting a Boer named van Staden and sending him to Colesberg, in the Cape Colony, to stand trial for murdering an Englishman, and by imposing regulations on the amount of brandy that Boers could carry north of the Orange. This did not lead to a major confrontation only because the Boers were then occupied in reorganizing their own society, setting up Potgieter as the head of a theoretically united *maatschappy* stretching from the Orange to the Limpopo. A year later, when Kok attempted to arrest another Boer, this time for the more minor offence of kidnapping two Tswana subjects of the Griquas, conflict did break out. For about two weeks, the Boers and the Griquas fired shots at each other, at the extreme range of their rather inaccurate weapons. Casualties were minimal, but the Griquas lost a large number of their cattle, which they did not recover even after the British troops had once again come north and dispersed the Boers in a single charge at the battle of Zwartkoppies.

Clearly, the political structure of the interior of southern Africa was far from stable at this time. After two bouts of treaty-making had failed, the British government decided to annex the area between the Vaal and the Orange early in 1848 in an attempt to establish a more lasting order and to develop an alliance with the most likely class of collaborators in the area, the Boers. At least, this is to be charitable to them and to ascribe coherent geopolitical motives to the eccentric governor, Sir Harry Smith, who saw the solution to all problems in the strength of his own personality and the imposition of his own prestige. In his efforts to set up the Orange River Sovereignty, he was forced to compel the Griquas to agree to the abrogation of the treaties they had made with the British government over the last decade. This at least gave them some protection against the alienation of their land to the Boers who were settling on it and paying a nominal rent to the poorest members of the Philippolis community. Smith was able to do this by the simple, if brutal, expedient of threatening to hang Adam Kok. In this way, despite their protests, the Griquas became for a time British subjects, but the Orange River Sovereignty solved no problems and only in-

volved the British in paying for, and losing wars against the Sotho. After six years, therefore, they managed to extricate themselves from the obligations they had taken on and arranged for the founding, first of the South African Republic in the Transvaal and then for that of the Orange Free State, whose official area of jurisdiction included the whole area of the Captaincy of Philippolis.

Throughout these twists and turns of British policy, the Griquas remained loyal to the belief that, in the end, the British would not let them down and their best interests would be served by persuading the British to impose a state of equal competition between Griqua, Boer and Briton. In this they were sorely mistaken, but it remains a puzzle why their policy seems to have been so uniformly short-sighted. Hendricks, right at the end of his career, may have attempted to forge an alliance with the Boers on the basis of their common position as land-owners and employers of labour, but even here the evidence is uncertain. No such initiatives, however, came from Adam Kok. In large part, this derived from the desire of the Griquas to be accepted as civilized members of the southern African community, which they associated largely with the British.

However, there was a deeper level of confusion in their attitude—to ally with the Boers and the British on the basis of their common landowning would have forced the richer Griquas to slough off their poorer fellows. This they were never prepared to do. Adam Kok clearly saw himself as the leader of his people, not as the leader of the richest section of them, even during the 1850s when the wealth of many individual Griquas, including Kok and his immediate family, was increasing fast as a result of merino sheep and the widening commercial opportunities presented by the northward spread of the Cape trading network. It remains an open question how far their fellow landowners would have accepted the Griquas as equals if they had cut themselves free from their community. Probably, by the middle of the century, no such accommodation was possible, as the structure of southern African society was already based on racial ascription, which the Griquas tacitly accepted. Kok wished to remain as leader of a Griqua community on a par with the most powerful in southern Africa, rather than to enter that ruling class as a wealthy Christian in his own right. He was too much the leader of his people, and in a real sense their representative, to do otherwise.

Griqualand East

The fact that the community, by choice and circumstance, had to hold together can be seen from the decision to uproot the whole community and trek across the southern Drakensberg to what is now Griqualand East. They went because their authority over their land was being eroded by the Orange Free State government and because there was an area of apparently fertile, relatively empty land on which they could hope to re-establish their pattern of living.

Initially, Adam Kok had to conduct a certain amount of delicate negotiations with the government in Cape Town, but on the other hand he had little contact with the African chiefs of the area. He only went to visit Moshoeshoe, through whose territory the Griquas would have to trek, after the decision to leave had been made and many farms sold to the Boers. But the trek was a heroic undertaking, as the Griquas cut a wagon road across the high passes of the Drakensberg. It took them two years before they could finally debouch into the green valleys of the northern Transkei, an area which must have seemed a land of milk and honey to a people used to the aridity of the highveld, and it cost them about nine-tenths of their stock. Instead of embuing them with new energy to reconstruct their society in the new environment, the trek seems to have left the Griquas in a demoralized state from which they were only beginning to emerge when, some fifteen years later, their polity was finally annexed and extinguished by the British.

Adam Kok himself certainly shared in the general malaise. In the first years after the trek he seems to have retreated from the day-to-day running of the community, which he left more and more to his cousin, known, somewhat confusingly, as Adam 'Eta' Kok. Adam himself could not give the leadership necessary to extricate the Griquas from the collective melancholia and listlessness which travellers reported at this time. For a few years, most of the Griquas lived in the laager, a rather ramshackle, dirty collection of huts on the southern slopes of Mount Currie. Kok travelled a good deal and even had the dispiriting experience, especially for a man who had been the richest member of a prosperous community, of being distrained for debt in Port Elizabeth. At the same time, he was now well into his fifties and had lost the keen edge of his energy.

Slowly, things began to pick up. More and more Griquas began to move away from the laager and set up farms in the

countryside, as they began to learn the agricultural and pastoral regime necessary in their new environment. Also, of course, this dispersal of settlement required peace with the neighbouring African tribes. As far as the Griquas were concerned, this meant that they had to dominate the Africans. A large proportion of the income of the Griqua government came from the hut-tax collected from the Hlangweni, Mfengu and Sotho of the area. From the beginning of the 1870s, they also began to extend their hegemony to the west, over Hlubi and Bhaca, especially after a short campaign in 1871 demonstrated that Griqua military might was far greater than that of their neighbours, as a result of their long familiarity with firearms. However, the African population was probably as free under Griqua rule as under any other form of alien domination; for instance, they never had to carry passes and, in some cases, assimilated to the Griquas. In large measure this was due to the personal influence of Adam Kok, who, without any children, was probably more concerned with the general, long-term good than with his own advantage. In particular, he was able to restrain the Griquas from settling on land already occupied by Africans and would punish his subjects for excessive use of force against anyone.

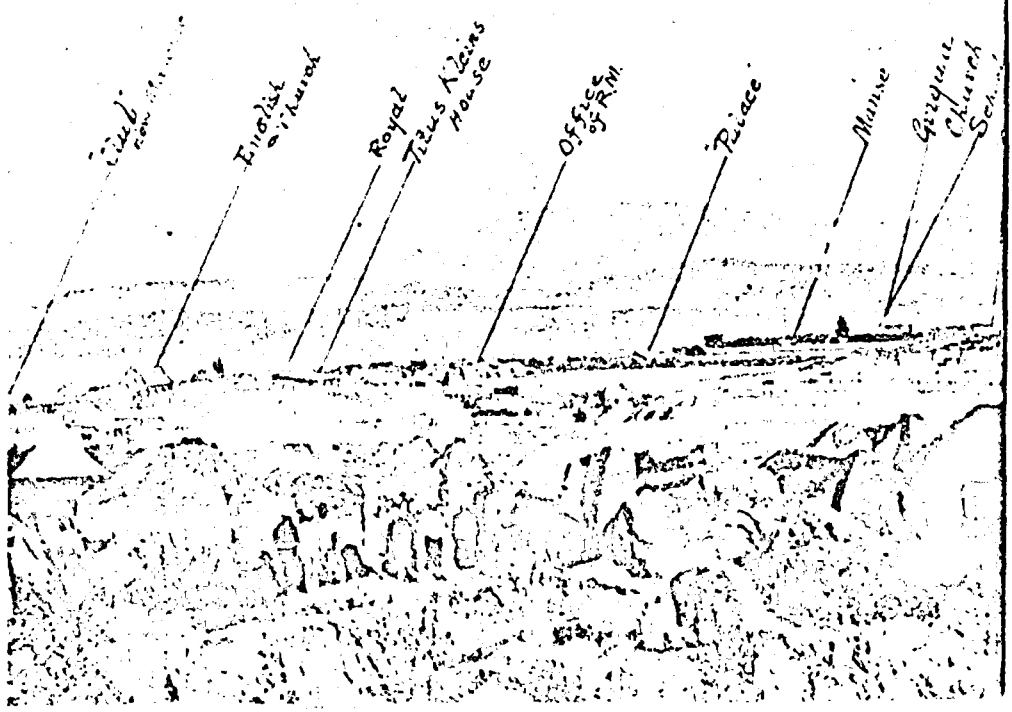
In his later years, Adam Kok's character comes through the sources more strongly than before, largely, it would seem, because he was more firmly in control than previously. Before the Griquas left Philippolis, travellers who visited them did not in general give a description of his character. From the late 1860s until his death in 1875, in contrast, it is much easier to gain an impression of the kindly, astute, rather melancholic old man he had become. He was always most courteous and was particularly fond of children, but he was clearly seen as a firm leader trying to help the Griquas make up for the time they had lost after the trek across the Drakensberg. This is perhaps best exemplified by the process whereby the Griquas abandoned their squalid laager and moved down the slopes of Mount Currie to found the town of Kokstad. It was clear that the site, on a bluff above the Mzimhlava river, was the right one, but it was politically difficult to make it the town because one of the leading Griquas had already claimed it and erected a mill. Kok therefore persuaded the Griquas to allow a missionary to choose a site for them, and pointed him at the land in question, so that he chose it. It was thirty years before the missionary, William Dower, discovered how he had been used.[2]

Even after the town had been laid out, it took some time before Kok could rouse the Griquas from their inertia and move down the hill to take possession of their *erven*, so that Kok could move into his new house (built, incidentally, by his erstwhile fellow Captain of Griqualand West, Nicholas Waterboer). This was situated across the main square of Kokstad from the church, and the town itself was neatly arrayed along a regular grid of narrow streets. It did not, however, have either public parks or a garden. When asked why not, Kok's reply was characteristic.

> *What, General! a* Park *and a* Garden, *like that I saw in Cape Town? General, you don't know this country, nor do you know the weaknesses of our people. Garden! Park! Oh, no; the trees would bring the birds, the birds would eat the ripe corn and we would have no bread! The shade, too, would be so nice; my people would want to sit under it all day long, instead of cultivating their farms, and by-and-by they would be beggars. No, General! we must 'wacht een beetje' for these nice things.*[3]

Clearly, it was Kok's intention to let the Griquas develop into a farming aristocracy. In their initial reconaissance of East Griqualand, they had been to Natal and had been much impressed by the plantations there. Slowly, the Griquas began to

15 Kokstad, 1878



develop the infrastructure necessary to emulate the Natalians. Land was registered, a postal service instituted and, when colonial currency was in particularly short supply, a stack of 10,000 banknotes were printed, though never issued. But this was a forlorn hope. It was not a propitious time for this sort of agricultural enterprise even for white Natalians, while the Griquas suffered the disadvantage of living much further from the ports and, paramountly, of having to face the opposition of the white colonial establishment. To have had any hope of success, the Griquas would have needed to have remained independent for a long period, but in October 1874, during an attempt to reach some sort of stabilization in the Transkei, the British government announced to the stupefied Griquas that they were taking over the government of the country. Clearly, this spelt the beginning of the economic ruin of the Griquas just as it ended their independence. The habits of a generation prevented them from resisting, at least for five years. And by this time, Kok, who could have restrained the 'rebels', was dead, run over by the wheel of his cart after a driving accident on 30 December 1875.

Kok's achievement, during his long reign, was not spectacular, nor such as to make him a heroic figure. It could not be otherwise, since, from the late 1840s when he effectively took the government of the Griqua state into his own hands he was always engaged in a holding operation. His main concerns seemed contradictory, attempting on the one hand to preserve the Griquas as a viable communal entity, and on the other to bring them to legal and economic equality with the whites who were imposing themselves as the ruling class across the whole of South Africa. This meant that the Griquas could not shed their poorest members and others judged the community by them. The measure of his success was that the Griqua state did not disintegrate earlier. His subjects also certainly thought this a great achievement: At his funeral, his cousin and colleague, Adam 'Eta', spoke as follows:

> *We have laid in the grave a man you all knew and loved. He is the last of his race. After him there will be no coloured king or chief in Colonial South Africa. Of Kaffir tribes, there may still be chiefs; of coloured chiefs he is the last. Take a good look into that grave. You will never look into the grave of another chief of our race. Do you realize that our nationality lies buried there? The deceased was the friend of you all. Did you ever hear of* Adam Kok *making an*

enemy? Political enemies he had, unfortunately more than his share; private enemies he had none. He had his faults—we all have; but you will bear me out, he was generous to a fault—too indulgent and gentle and yielding for a chief. There lie the remains of the one South African chief who never lifted arms nor fired a shot at a British soldier, though sometimes provoked beyond human endurance. There is not a single man here who has not received favours at his hand. If you are ever tempted to forget him, turn to the titles of your properties and see there his familiar sign manual. I have yielded to the temptation to add this much to what the minister has said because I am his near relative, and he honoured me with his confidence, and occasionally delegated to me his authority. . . . Let all questions of politics rest. Let us go home and mourn in secret and in silence, and prepare for the funeral services.[4]

NOTES

[1]The date on the memorial to Adam Kok in Kokstad.

[2]*The Kokstad Advertiser*, 19 December 1902: review of W. Dower, *The Early Annals of Kokstad and Griqualand East* (Port Elizabeth, 1902).

[3]Dower, *Early Annals*, p. 50.

[4]Dower, *Early Annals*, p. 77.

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