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Griqua power and wealth; an analysis of the paradoxes of their interrelationship

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University of London

Institute of Commonwealth Studies

Postgraduate Seminar

THE SOCIETIES OF SOUTHERN AFRICA IN THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES

Paper for discussion on 9th November

GRIQUA POWER AND WEALTH:

AN ANALYSIS OF THE PARADOXES OF THEIR INTERRELATIONSHIP

by

Robert Ross

In the history of South Africa, the Griqua have a symbolic role far outweighing their actual importance in the development of the country. As perhaps the richest, as well as the fairest, coloured group within South Africa, their outcasting represents the decision of the white power block not to assimilate blacks en masse into the ranks of the governors, but rather to maintain a somewhat mythical white supremacy. (1) This paper is an attempt to describe the defeat of the Griqua Captaincy of Philippolis, which was established to the north of the Orange River in the 1820s and which remained a refuge for those forced out of the Cape Colony by the increasing racial pressures there. Finally, the spread of these same pressures dislodged the Captaincy so that it was driven to trek en bloc over the Drakensberg into Nomansland, subsequently renamed East Griqualand.

It is argued that it was the consciousness that the surrounding whites had of the Griqua as ethnically different from themselves that caused them to look upon the Griqua community as a competitor for the rich sheep lands of the Southern Free State rather than accept the considerable number of individual Griquas who conformed to all other criteria of "civilization" as equal members of the larger social entity that ruled South Africa. This competition became increasingly keen, in a process that has a number of parallels elsewhere in the development of colonial societies, after the growth of a widespread and moderately large-scale expansion within and around the Griqua community. Through this expansion, a considerable degree of interdependence was established so that the political power of the whites allowed them to manipulate the relationship until they were able to force the Griqua into a situation where there remained only two equally invidious choices. Either they could watch their society disintegrate around them and expect that, after their unity had gone, those who survived with some degree of wealth intact would be eliminated slowly and individually, or they could attempt to transplant their community into the new and superficially attractive soil of Nomansland. They chose the latter.

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On a simple level, the explanation for the Griqua decline is readily apparent. The development of the Afrikaner republics and the establishment, by Moshoeshoe, of hegemony over many of the disparate Sotho-Tswana groups of the Caledon River valley and the Drakensberg foothills altered the political environment in Transorangia as the whole scale of political interaction increased dramatically. Thus, without any diminution in their own resources - in fact, as will be shown, the opposite was the case - the Griqua of Philippolis ceased to be able to determine the course of events. This was aggravated by the fact that they lay athwart the path of the northward expansion of the Boers. From the foundation of Philippolis in the mid-1820s onwards, the Trekboers had been crossing the Orange in search of water and pasturage for their herds, to escape the devastations of springbok treks, locusts and drought. (2) Initially, there was conflict between the trekkers and the Griqua, but this settled down through the 1830s, and by 1840 a modus vivendi had been established. (3) They lived much the same sort of life as the Griqua, being nomadic pastoralists, and they recognized the authority of the Griqua over the land in which they were forced to live, paying rent for the use of farms that was at first intermittent but became increasingly permanent as a considerable community of Boers built up along the Riet River. By 1842, the emigrant Boers claimed to have paid the Griqua fractionally over £5,000 for the hire of some 105 farms, for periods ranging up to 45 years. (4) Even so, the Boers never admitted any Griqua authority over their persons, and indeed it is by no means certain whether they admitted that of anyone apart from their own leader, Michiel Oberholster. (5)

The tensions between Boer and Griqua, which were always present in the relationship of the two distinct groups utilizing the same natural resources, were very considerably exacerbated after 1842, when the British annexation of Natal caused militant republicans to trek back over the Drakensberg into the northern Free State and the southern Transvaal. Increasingly these voortrekkers came into conflict with the Griqua, as men like Jan Kock and Jan Moeke attempted to include all the land north of the Orange River, thus including the Griqua territory, in an Afrikaner republic. In this they were thwarted primarily because the British, in treaty relationship with the Griqua, became increasingly embroiled. Once it became evident that the British were prepared to use troops to quell Boer unrest north of the Orange, which was the case after 1843 when a detachment was sent up to Colesberg in case of need, the Griqua, in accordance with their agreements with the British, had the confidence to assert their authority over the so-called British subjects - in other words, the voortrekkers - within their boundaries. In consequence, in 1845, British troops were once more sucked north of the Orange and, after a short skirmish at Zwartkoppies, the dissident Boers were driven out of Griqua territory, into the Transvaal. (6)

In many ways the whole episode would appear to have been a success for the Griqua, as it led to the expulsion of their main rivals for control over the southern Free State. In fact, the reverse was to prove the case. In order to lessen the chances of their being forced to move north again, the British not only established a resident north of the Orange - in itself an almost certain guarantee of further entanglements, especially as the post was long held by a man of almost unrelieved incompetence, Major Henry Warden (7) - but also imposed a settlement of affairs between the Boers and the Griqua that was to lead to continual trouble. By the Maitland Treaty of 1846 (8), the Griqua territory was divided into two sections. In the northern part Griqua were to be allowed to lease out land, while the area south of the line was to be reserved for Griqua alone. In principle, this seems to have been a reasonable measure, ensuring that part at any rate of the Griqua country remained sacrosanct, for they could not hope to retain control of the considerable territory, stretching north to the Modder River, that they had claimed but could not by any means utilize. In the event, considerable problems arose from the fact that the boundaries of the Inalienable Territory in no way coincided with the division between Griqua and

Boer areas, as marked out in the agreement between Adam Kok and Oberholster of 1840. (9) The consequence was that some 59% (85 out of 143) of those farms that had been let were within the Inalienable Territory, while only 40% (58 out of 146) of the farms in the Alienable Territory had been leased. (10) The problem was made worse when Sir Harry Smith set up the Orange River Sovereignty two years later. By threatening to hang them all (11), he extorted from Adam Kok and his council an agreement whereby such farms as were leased by the Griqua for 40 years or more, 42 in all, were to be converted to freehold, and then proceeded to treat all the farms within the Alienable Territory, another 104, of which 16 had been let for shorter periods, as falling within this category, thereby depriving the Griqua of a very considerable area of land. (12) When, some 6 years later, the British government, in one of the reversals of policy that bedevilled its actions in South Africa, scuttled out of the Orange River Sovereignty, the Griqua once again lost out. Not only did they fail to recover the farms that they had been swindled out of, being liberally insulted by the British Resident into the bargain (13), but also such land as was sold by Griqua passed out of the jurisdiction of Adam Kok to that of the Orange Free State, in accordance with an agreement that was not published until 1857. (14)

The line of argument that they lost their land, and consequently their power, through the double dealing of the British government has considerable attractions. It was, for instance, believed by Adam Kok himself, who dragged it out on various more or less suitable occasions. (15) An analytic view of the whole episode perhaps would rather stress the need of the British to switch collaborators when it was proved that the Griqua were unable to control the area north of the Orange to any degree, and lay less emphasis on British perfidy than Kok and his mission apologists (16), but the general effect would be the same. Ultimately, it was the control that the whites possessed over the Political Kingdom and exercised in the way outlined above that led to the Griqua defeat, but such an explanation by itself is too simple. If either the growth of new polities that might, in a Social Darwinian sense, be seen to be competing with the Griqua or the loss of land and power owing to the machinations and mistakes of politicians were held to account for the failure of the Griqua captaincy and its trek into Nomansland, then it would be easy to predict that the period after 1854 would be one of decline on all fronts. In fact, except in so far as diplomatic weight was concerned, the opposite was the case. It is thus necessary to view the effects of the loss of land in a far more sophisticated framework if any sense is to be made of the developments as a whole.

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W. B. Philip, the last minister to the Griqua at Philippolis, later recorded his memories of life in and around the town in the last years of its occupation. He wrote as follows:

"About the time this movement was necessitated, the people were in a prosperous state; they had titles to their farms, in which they had built substantial cottages and out-buildings; orchards, stocked with good fruit trees, garden grounds and land for cultivation were in many cases enclosed with stone walls; good stone kraals and one or two dams were to be found on most farms; troops of from twenty to one hundred horses, about the same number of cattle, and hundreds of well-bred woolled sheep, were running on these farms, and many a man brought his ten, fifteen, twenty, and twenty five bales of wool for sale at once;

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while the shopkeepers found them as good customers for clothing, groceries, saddlery, carts, and furniture as any of the Boers. Of course there were many poor people, whose poverty had been brought on by their own laziness, pride and drunkenness." (17)

The impression he gives is substantiated by the actual figures for the subscription to the church, which run as follows: 1856 £381; 1857 £457; 1858 £511; 1859 £584; 1860 £612 (18) - and by a letter from Philippolis after the Griqua had left, which considered that several of the 6 stores in the town were likely to fold up as "Merchants and others are now feeling the truth that the Griqua nation have left, and where many shops here took a few months ago cash sales of £15 or £20 per diem, they now take about as many shillings. (19) It is true that the takings of shops during 1861 would have been increased by Griqua using the proceeds of their final winding up to provision themselves for the trek, but the general picture is nevertheless clear.

There would thus seem to exist the considerable paradox that simultaneously with the very considerable diminution of power of the Griqua Captaincy of Philippolis its wealth increased to a level unprecedented in the group's admittedly short history. In order to resolve this seeming contradiction, it is necessary to examine closely the bases of Griqua wealth that mushroomed from around 1850.

Primarily this new prosperity was founded on wool. Hobart Houghton has pointed out that "the economic impact of international markets was carried into the interior not in the waggons of the Voortrekkers but upon the backs of merino sheep" (20), and it would appear to have reached the Griqua as soon as it did their Boer neighbours. It is true that some Griquas derived considerable profit from various subsidiary activities. There is a certain amount of evidence that they conducted a moderately large trade in horses, which were driven as far as Barotseland, and, as they lived on the northern limits of the area that is permanently free from horse-sickness, such activity is inherently likely. (21) Similarly, a certain income was no doubt derived from trading and transport riding. As early as 1843 the community had as many as 50 waggons and received £538 for their use by the British forces who were coming to protect them. There is also much evidence of the Griqua role in the opening of the interior of Southern Africa, particularly in the penetration of Ngamiland and Barotseland from the south, and such activity was, of course, undertaken primarily in search of ivory and other trade goods. Though most of the individuals in question appear to have been baseless or to have hailed from Griquatown (23), some at least of the prominent Griqua of Philippolis also took part. (24) Nevertheless, it was from woolled sheep that the Griqua gained their considerable income. In early 1856 some 200 bales of wool were sent south, at a value of about £2,000, and it would appear that the total rose considerably after that. (25) Simultaneously, of course, the Free State Boers were also turning over to merino sheep, but there is nothing to suggest that they reacted appreciably faster than the Griqua to the new opportunities. (26)

Now this raises the very considerable problem as to how the Griqua were able to buy the merino rams from which to breed their flocks. It should be pointed out that the Griqua were not dependent on their flocks and herds for subsistence, as to a large extent they lived off the game that still abounded in the Free State. Indeed, their continual demand for ammunition supplies, and the repeated attempts of the Orange Free State government to persuade the Cape Colony not to allow this, may have been occasioned by the desire to maintain control over the herds of game and thus allow the build-up of sizable flocks. (27) In other words, arms and ammunition were seen as much, if not more, the means

of production as the means of destruction. It is also true that the flocks that produced the wool were in fact brought into being by the crossing of the hairy Cape sheep that formed the original Griqua herds with a small number of merino rams. (20) There are no figures for the proportion of wool-bearing sheep among the Griqua - indeed, there is no reliable estimate for the total number of Griqua sheep - but some indication of the speed of the spread of the merinos may be gleaned from the Free State stock census of 1856 (29): by that time 87.5% (1,011,603 out of 1,155,533) of the sheep belonging to Free State burghers were described as wolgevende, and it may be surmised that a very large proportion of these were the product of crosses between merine rams and hairy - or, in time, half-caste - sheep.

Nevertheless, the expenditure necessary to build up the Griqua flocks was considerable. In 1855, for instance, the best Saxon rams were selling in Bloemfontein for between £40 and £50. (30) To add to the difficulties of amassing the necessary money, the 1840s had been a period of considerable hardship for the Griqua, primarily in consequence of the political disturbances of that decade, which not infrequently coincided with drought. (31) Some evidence of this can be seen from the fact that the Griqua had on occasion to request from the Civil Commissioner of Colesberg the means wherewith to purchase ammunition, which was in the circumstances a necessity of life, and without doubt the first priority for Griqua cash. (32) There could be no more telling index of their lack of liquid funds.

It was not that the Griqua were totally without resources, but merely that the considerable resources in land that they possessed were not being utilized in such a way as to produce either a steady income or any accumulation in the capital. They were, so to speak, frozen, and could be made productive only when further capital, basically in the form of productive stock, could be injected.

It would thus appear that the Griqua were caught in a vicious circle, in that they were unable to make productive use of their lands without large flocks of merino sheep, that they could only develop with the products of the land. There was, however, one way to break the circle, and this was the one that was actually adopted: to alienate their own land and to invest the rent or the proceeds of the sales in the developing of fully productive flocks for other farms. Yet, while this led to a brief flowering of Griqua wealth, it had political consequences that were finally to ruin the Griqua.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to demonstrate absolutely that such a process occurred. All that can be done is to point to the fact that there must have been a considerable injection of cash into the Griqua economy at this time; that this could not have been acquired through agriculture, which was always uncertain around Philippolis (33); and that it seems highly unlikely that there was a sufficient volume of trade with the area north of the Orange for the Griqua cut to have been sufficient for the purpose. It can, however, be shown that the Griqua did receive very considerable sums for the hiring and sale of their land. By 1842, according to Adam Kok's lists, a total of £5,010 had been paid to Griqua for the hire of their land, while data on the sale of lands, although incomplete, give a minimum figure of £27,800 received by the Griqua by the end of 1855.

There remain two problems with such an interpretation. In the first place, it has to be shown that there remained sufficient land for the Griqua themselves to flourish on, although the fact that they did would appear to be sufficient proof. In fact, some 143 farms were hired out, all before the

establishment of the Orange River Sovereignty in 1848. Another 88 were lost to them by the arrangement of Sir Harry Smith in that year, and there were also some 63 sold during the subsequent seven years. It would not, however, appear that there was great land shortage among the Griqua: 122 farms remained, mainly in the vicinity of Philippolis itself, and generally in the south-east of the old Griqua domain. In any case, much of the land that was hired or sold to the Boers had never been utilized anyway, but was merely part of the Griqua territorial claims that had been agreed to from c. 1830 onwards. It may be, however, that such land would have been taken into production by younger sons and immigrants from the colony, and that the lack of such land built up pressures within the colony that had some part in impelling the Griqua to trek to Nomansland.

Secondly, it can be shown that many individuals who sold or hired land had access to other farms on which they could run those sheep that - according to our hypothesis - they bought with the proceeds of their land sales. Moreover, it is highly likely that the sheep were allowed to run on the farms of relatives or friends. This certainly appears to have been the case in East Griqualand after the trek. Thus, the fact that a man did not formally possess a farm need not have precluded his making a considerable income from the profits of sheep-farming.

If, then, there was a certain rationale for all Griqua to alienate a certain section of their land to acquire the capital with which to utilize the rest, it should also be realized that the society was not economically homogeneous. Here again data are, to all intents and purposes, non-existent, and a fair degree of a priori reasoning unfortunately becomes necessary to elucidate various events, but the distinction that was frequently drawn between the Griqua - "an indolent people neither understanding nor caring for the value of land" - and the Bastards - "the more civilised portion ... of colonial descent" (34) - would appear to gain such validity as it has from nascent economic stratification rather than from racial divergence. It can thus be assumed that the great expansion of the Griqua cash economy was attended by the development of sizable wealth differentials within the community, although it would be a mistake to consider that they had been non-existent earlier. The vagaries of disease, pasture, war and personality would bring this about. It is thus highly likely that some of the Griqua who held land would, from time to time, become destitute, or, at any rate, would not be able to live at the level of considerable display to which the community as a whole was becoming accustomed. (35) It is, therefore, to be expected that they would sell their land, which, in the circumstances and given the availability of credit, they could only do to whites. Thus, yet more of the Griqua gebied would be alienated and would never return to Griqua hands. In this way, the contradiction between the homogeneity necessary to preserve the integrity of the Griqua power and the heterogeneity of economic status consequent upon the development of large-scale cash farming led further to the erosion and destruction of Griqua power.

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When the material is shorn of its details and reduced to a pattern, it would appear that there were three stages in the process whereby the introduction of a large-scale cash nexus north of the Orange led to the Griqua being forced to leave that region.

1) With the growth of new economic opportunities, a quick response was made, at any rate by some individuals within the society, leading in all probability to a considerable increase in internal stratification, which diverged

somewhat from the pre-existing patterns. The Griqua were, moreover, dependent on the white-dominated economy of the Cape Colony, to which they may be seen to be in the position of satellite, and their own economy owed its origin to a large degree to the surrounding Afrikaner population, who both provided capital, albeit unwittingly, and formed a community large enough to persuade Cape merchants to extend their operations northward.

2) This initial influence gave the white power bloc, both of the Cape Colony, where the government was becoming increasingly conscious of its reliance on local agricultural and commercial interests (36), and of the Orange Free State, which was dominated by the Griqua's main competitors (37), a lever wherewith to exercise over the Griqua an influence that was increased by their own reluctance to jeopardize their newly acquired standard of living. In any case they were too weak in numbers to cope effectively in any military sense. Thus the whites were able to put through the various measures that successively deprived the Griqua of large parts of their land, while the only opposition that was presented to them was but ineffective invective.

3) In time, the situation became so intolerable for the mass of the Griqua that, against the advice of the missionaries (38) and to the detriment of their immediate economic situation, they trekked over the Drakensberg. Only in this way could they maintain themselves as the political unit they had been for the previous 35 years, and no doubt they recognized that, without some such political bloc, the wealth of those who had it would be slowly whittled away.

The alternative to trekking could only have been to remain behind in the Free State and watch the degradation of many Griqua while a proportion remained wealthy. They understood that the relation of imperium in imperio in which they stood to the Free State was inherently unstable, and the timing of their exodus is probably explained as much by the failure of Sir George Grey's federation scheme of 1859 as by the publication of the secret clauses of the Bloemfontein convention. Undoubtedly, they realized that acceptance into the Afrikaner community of the Orange Free State was impossible. Sir Charles Warren described colonial opinion accurately when he claimed that, although the Griqua "... is just as white in many cases as the darker Boer and quite as much civilized, yet he must be classed among the blacks and have no right to land". (39) Griqua society had been founded and had prospered as a refuge from the growing discrimination in the Colony. Despite its economic flowering, it fell when that society once more engulfed it.

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Notes

- (1) This is not to suggest that the white group has remained totally impermeable to penetration from below, but rather that this is done only by individuals on the basis of a fair skin. See G. Watson, Passing for White (London, 1970).
- (2) P. J. van der Merwe, Die Noordwaartse Beweging van die Boere voor die Groot Trek (Den Haag, 1937), chs. VI & VII.
- (3) See the treaty between Kok and Oberholster, 16.6.1840, enclosed in Hare to Napier 22.8.1842 (Cape Archives [hereafter CA], G.H.8/10).
- (4) See list enclosed in ibid.

- (5) of M. C. E. van Schoor, "Politieke Groepering in Transgariep", Archives Year Book for South African History, pp. 1-5.
- (6) For a fuller analysis of these events, see J. S. Galbraith, Reluctant Empire (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1963), Chs. IX & X; and C. F. J. Muller, Die Britse Owerheid en die Groot Trek, 2nd edition revised (Johannesburg, 1963), pp. 206-220.
- (7) See B. J. Barnard, "n'Lewensbeskrywing van Majoor Henry Douglas Warden", Archives Year Book for South African History, 1948, I.
- (8) See G. W. Eybers, Select Constitutional Documents illustrative of South African History (London, 1919).
- (9) See footnote 3.
- (10) These figures and all subsequent ones are gleaned from the land Registers of the Orange Free State (OFS Archives A.K.T.2/1/11, 2/1/12, 2/1/51, 2/1/52, 2/1/121 & 2/1/138), the registers of the forty years' money (CA, C.M.K. 1/140), and Kok's lists of farms leased for less than 40 years (CA, G.H. 10/4/B).
- (11) Bizarre as such a method of negotiation seems even when concluded by the most colourful of colonial governors, it would appear to have been that used. Certainly the Griqua took him to mean this, and Adam Kok nursed a grudge against him till he died. See W. Dower, The Early Annals of Kokstad and Griqualand East (Port Elizabeth, 1902), p. 8; H. Hendricks to Stockenström, printed in the Cape of Good Hope Observer, 28.8.1849. For a debate as to whether Smith actually threatened the Griqua, in which the weight of the evidence would seem to be that he did, see The Friend of the Sovereignty, 8.3.1852 and 20.3.1852.
- (12) British Parliamentary Paper [969] of 1847-8: Further Correspondence Relative to the State of the Kaffir Tribes, p. 62. See also Rev. G. Christie to Rev. W. Thompson, A word on the behalf of the Downtrodden (Cape Town, 1854), p. 10.
- (13) Sir G. Clerk to A. Kok 1.4.1854 in Cape Parliamentary Paper A118'61: Correspondence Relative to the Occupation of Nomansland by Captain Adam Kok and the Grikwas, pp. 6-7.
- (14) Ibid., pp. 13-14.
- (15) See, for example, his statement before the Commission of Enquiry into the Affairs of Griqualand East, CPP G37'76.
- (16) eg Thompson, op. cit., and The Grikwas (Cape Town, 1854).
- (17) "The Grikwas and their Exodus", Cape Monthly Magazine, December 1872, pp. 354-5.
- (18) W. B. Philip to W. Tidman, 10.2.1858 (IMS, South Africa Boxes 31/2/B); id. to id. (loc. cit.), 11.2.1859; id. to id. 15.2.1861 (32/3/A).
- (19) The Friend of the Free State, 6.12.1861.
- (20) M. Wilson & L. M. Thompson (eds.), Oxford History of South Africa, Vol. II, p. 4.
- (21) See R. G. Cumming, Five Years of a Hunter's Life in the Far Interior of South Africa, Vol. I (London, 1856), p. 139. D. and C. Livingstone, Narrative of an Expedition to the Zambesi and its Tributaries (London, 1865), p. 268.
- (22) W. H. Macmillan, Bantu, Boer and Briton, 2nd edition revised (Oxford, 1963), p. 245.
- (23) See E. C. Tabler, "Non Europeans as Interior Men", Africana Notes and News, XIII, December 1959, pp. 291-8.
- (24) eg CA, CMK 4/16 Griqualand West, VIII.

- (25) Solomon to Tidman 22.12.1856 (IMS 28/1/A).
- (26) H. B. Thom, Die Geskiedenis van Skaapboerdery in Suid Afrika (Amsterdam, 1936).
- (27) See Boshof to Grey 29.12.1855, in Oranje Vry Staat Volksraad Notule, Vol. II (Pretoria, 1956), pp. 340-2. F. W. Rawstone (Civil Commissioner of Colesberg) to Sec. to Gov. 4.7.1855 (CA, G.H. 10/4), Kok to Grey 10.2.1857 (CA, G.H. 10/4).
- (28) Thom, op. cit., p. 94.
- (29) O.V.S. Volksraad Notule, Vol. II, facing p. 264.
- (30) The Friend of the Free State, 3.3.55.
- (31) Solomon to Tidman, 7.1.1846 (IMS 22/1/C).
- (32) F. W. Rawstone to the Assistant Secretary the Lt. Governor 10.12.1844 (CA, LG 199).
- (33) See eg Melville to Secretary IMS, 2.4.1827 (IMS 10/2/B), W. B. Philip to Tidman 2.8.1859 (31/3/B), J. Freeman A Tour in South Africa (London, 1851), p. 29.
- (34) Boshof to Colonial Secretary, Cape Town, 29.12.1855, loc. cit.
- (35) Solomon to Tidman, March 1857 (IMS 30/3/A).
- (36) This, surely was the logic behind the instigation of the Cape Parliament, and for that matter the scuttle from the Orange River Sovereignty.
- (37) One of the Constituencies of both the "Raad van Representaaten" of February 1854 and of the Volksraad itself was Sannah's Poort (later Fauresmith) within the Inalienable Territory of Griqualand. See O.V.S. Volksraad Notule, Vol. I, pp. 3 & 31.
- (38) See W. B. Philip to Tidman, 9.2.1860 (IMS 32/1/A).
- (39) Sir C. Warren, On the Veldt in the Seventies (London, 1902), p. 272.