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The long southern African past: enfolded time and the challenges of archive

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ABSTRACT

The long southern African past before the advent of European colonialism remains neglected despite powerful post-apartheid impulses of various kinds for its recovery and celebration. In the last twenty years or so, outside of the specialist discipline of archaeology, there has been relatively little research undertaken to support those impulses. In this paper I offer my understanding of some of the things that have given distinctive shape to this field, attempt to account for its stalled aspect, identify the key challenges as I see them, and indicate some of the directions of new research currently being inaugurated. Amongst other things, I offer critiques of the prevailing periodisation, the entrenched and limiting effects of persistent thinking in terms of ethnicity, as well as of the portmanteau notion of oral traditions which operates in this field and its consignment out of the realm of political discourse. I make an argument for urgently needed intellectual histories of how this area of history became the preserve of certain disciplines and not others, and of how concepts migrated across these disciplines to become entrenched as the foundational elements in the history of the region. I go on to deal with the making and reshaping of the available archive for these periods and the methodological implications of how that making and reshaping is understood.

KEYWORDS

Archaeology; archive; chronology; colonialism; ethnography; history; KwaZulu-Natal; methodology; oral traditions; periodisation; pre-colonial; southern Africa

Introduction

In this essay I take up the editors' invitation to provide a personal reflection based on experience in a particular field – in this case the study of the southern African past before the advent of European colonialism – to assess the state of this area of enquiry. Accordingly, I do not offer a comprehensive review of the field. Rather, I identify the main challenges as I see them, and indicate some of the directions of new research currently being inaugurated. The core of the essay delineates the terminological problems, temporal complications, and methodological challenges of work in this area. My discussion focuses on the KwaZulu-Natal region where these particular complications, problems and challenges have received sustained attention. For this reason, the KwaZulu-Natal material is relatively easy to use illustratively in order to explain knotty methodological problems that are shared across

southern Africa. I nonetheless also refer to the wider region. Of course, contemporary borders had no meaning in the remote past, but they are relevant to how the past before European colonialism has been treated in subsequent times.

Marked appetite and meagre offerings

Critical assessment of this field is timely, taking place as it does in the context of a surge of interest in the long southern African past. A recent series of developments in the academy are one signal of this surge. The first of these was the Five Hundred Initiative begun in 2006 by a loose grouping of scholars self-consciously working in cross-disciplinary collaborations. This resulted in a conference publication in 2008 (Swanepoel, Esterhuysen and Bonner), a workshop on “History and Archaeology in Conversation – South Africa meets East Africa” held at Wits in July 2009,¹ and a special journal edition in 2012 (Delius and Marks). For the most part the Five Hundred Year Initiative marshalled the energies of established, mostly, though not exclusively, white, scholars and mostly archaeologists and historians. In 2012, under the auspices of the Minister of Higher Education, dedicated government funding through the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) was, for the first time, allocated to this area with the express purpose of “catalyzing” and “opening up” new avenues of scholarship (<http://www.nihss.ac.za/content/catalytic-projects-sthash.L44>, accessed 23 August 2017). It resulted in two national conferences directly on the subject. The first was a relatively small and low-key gathering in 2013 featuring mostly, but not exclusively, established archaeologists, historians and linguists. A second larger and more wide-ranging one was held in 2017, a hallmark of which was the animated contributions by a cohort of black scholars, many of whom were based in disciplines hitherto not active in this field, actively posing provocative new research questions.² Other recent, conscious attempts to set a new research agenda for the long southern African past include the small colloquium on “IziThunguthu: Southern African Pasts Before the Colonial Era, their Archives and their Ongoing Present/Presence,” held at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in 2015, as well as a number of projects focused on the Indian Ocean world, with research agendas reaching back to the eleventh century.³

In the last three years the research developments have intersected with animated debate raging in South African universities, and elsewhere, about the conduct of decolonised forms of research and the possibilities of decolonised university curricula. Indeed, in 2015, a lead article in the UCT student publication, *Varsity*, reported on student demands for “more pre-colonial history” in the university curriculum (Karim 2015). The call for “more pre-colonial history” is not confined to the academy. The extent of the public appetite is so wide-ranging that this essay can only offer a sense of it.

One area in which interest is marked is that of the long histories of the various component groupings subsumed in apartheid times under large ethnic categories like Zulu, Pedi and so on. A dramatic indication of this is provided by the historically significant Ndwandwe identity. The Nongoma area, today in the centre of the royal Zulu heartland, once lay within the large and powerful, but later little known, Ndwandwe kingdom. The Ndwandwe were defeated by the Zulu king, Shaka and either scattered far afield or were incorporated under Zulu rule in a manner that marginalised their Ndwandwe identity and history. Since the late 1990s they have been actively reclaiming their pre-Zulu history and identity (Buthelezi 2012). Also in KwaZulu-Natal, the Mkhize clan mobilises pre-Shakan history on multiple

fronts (McNulty 2014). In 2007, local historian Siyabonga Mkhize published in isiZulu, and then, presumably under political pressure, withdrew from public circulation, his history of the Mkhize, *Uhlanga Lwas'embo* (Mkhize 2007).

Such efforts in historical recovery are not confined to family groupings. The 2008 KwaZulu-Natal Heritage Bill set the scene for a provincial government initiative in these kinds of clan or family histories, the ambitious KwaZulu-Natal Family Tree project. As the premier at the time, S'bu Ndebele, put it, "This programme sees families, and even whole clans like the Embo, coming together to reconstruct their histories, in an effort to enhance their individual and collective identity and create cohesion among themselves" (www.info.gov.za/speeches/2008/08112810451001.htm, accessed 14 July 2011).

Such developments, private and governmental, happen across the country. In 2005 the Mpumalanga Provincial government initiated a heritage project aimed at rediscovering the province's past, including, importantly, the past before the advent of the first Europeans (see <http://www.mpumalanga.gov.za/mpumalangabook/history.html>, accessed 31 August 2017) while in the Cape the broad-based Khoisan revivalist movement continuously highlights its attachment to an historical identity traced back to the period prior to the arrival of the Dutch.

Online manifestations offer another line of sight on the extent of public interest in the past before European colonialism. Siyabonga Mkhize's book, *Uhlanga Lwas'embo*, mentioned above, has been used as a basis for entries on Mbo history on Ulwazi, a project run by the Ethekwini Municipality to create a collaborative, online indigenous knowledge resource (wiki.ulwazi.org, accessed 14 July 2011; also see McNulty 2014). At the time of writing, entries also existed on Ulwazi for aspects of Duma, Khuzwayo, Ndlela, Qadi, Shange and Shezi clan histories, with more expected. In 2010, the activist Archival Platform established an online initiative on ancestral stories that attracted astonishing public interest (www.archivalplatform.org). Facebook pages for a variety of kinship-groupings have proliferated and are sites of animated discussion of the past (for example, www.facebook.com/AmaHlubi-Amahle-169290819757816).

A Google search of websites concerned with *izithakazelo* (a form of clan address names and linked praises with extensive historical reach) confirms popular interest in the subject especially where more substantial historical narratives about the distant past are lost or unavailable. The *izithakazelo* address the lineage ancestors, offer poetic tributes to them and make deep historical allusions. The forms in which they are embraced on the internet suggest that they have a great capacity to be mobilised to tend the psychic wounds left by the policies of the colonial and apartheid states, which effectively denied black South Africans a recognised archive pertinent to the remote past.

The remote past is also the object of attention from heritage practitioners working within the framework of government policies that acknowledge these wounds and prioritise their healing within a policy framework for the promotion of indigenous knowledge.⁴ And, in yet another manifestation, contemporary artists, writers and intellectuals wrestle with the challenge of how to recover this past outside the notions of primitive tribalism and immutable ethnicity in which it has been entrapped for the last 150 years (Ntombela 2016).

In addition, there are many ways in which the legacies of the past before European colonialism are invoked in contemporary contestations over resources and authority. In KwaZulu-Natal some 11 traditional leaders used the opportunity of the national Commission on Traditional Leadership and Claims hearing held in mid-2007 to stake claims, rooted in

the region's history before the reign of King Shaka (c.1816–1828), to the rights, privileges and resources of royalty. The media carried reports that the claims were seen by some Zulu royal councillors as “treason” and had provoked “war talk” in certain circles, while the head of the Commission described the hostility that the claims had generated as a potential “national danger” (Hlongwane 2007).⁵ Though the claims were not ultimately successful, the historical activity undergirding them continued. A year after the Commission's sitting, in a move probably connected to the high-profile Nhlangwini claim on a historically ancient kingship, yet very much about self-discovery, Nomanda Ndola opened a museum in two rooms in her home in the remote southern KwaZulu-Natal village of Harding, declaring, “My aim about my research is to keep Nhlangwini material and history for people to see and recognize. That is why I want to open my own museum” (www.cavershamcentre.org/newsletters/Hourglass_Jan09.pdf, accessed 14 July 2011). This kind of interest was repeated across the country wherever the Commission held its hearings.

For all the demand, there is precious little to feed it in the public domain. School students are little rewarded by what is on offer in the school syllabus or in the extra materials – mostly stories of heroes – now occasionally produced by publishers who sense the gap in the market (Wylie 2011; www.saheritagepublishers.co.za, accessed 28 October 2017). In the museums, there is next to nothing. And, if the offerings in KwaZulu-Natal are slender, the available resources in the rest of the country are more meagre still (Mdanda 2015). What there is mostly presented as consumable heritage like the visitor centre at Mupungubwe, a small number of other stone ruins (mostly poorly presented) and numerous “cultural villages,” as well as the occasional statue of a past hero. Intellectuals, community historians and heritage workers, as well as researchers undertaking work for chiefs and other claimants of various kinds, find their way into libraries and archives to consult published texts and archived documents. In KwaZulu-Natal, investigators might end up consulting materials like the James Stuart collection of recorded oral materials (see below), Magma Fuze's book *Abantu Abamnyama Lapa Bavela Ngakona* (1922), and A.T. Bryant's *Olden Times in Zululand and Natal* (1929). These texts are far from straightforward sources open to easy reading for past truths. The researchers will struggle, however, to find much scholarship that they can draw on, beyond a sprinkling of articles, a handful of theses and a few published accounts.

There are many more indications that I could cite that show in a compelling way that, in its own right, the history of southern Africa in the many eras before European colonialism is a matter of widespread active public interest and concern that is only weakly served by scholarly research. There can be no doubt about its relevance to people all over southern Africa, and to their sense of place in, and understanding of, the world. There is also a further imperative in paying attention to the region's neglected long history, and what it can contribute to the imagining of new and different futures. Such imaginings are rendered urgent by the extent of present failures on so many fronts: politically, economically, socially and environmentally, locally and globally. Rooted in the nature of the current world order, the failed present is also shaped in powerful ways in this region by the legacies of European colonialism that so forcefully negated the region's deeper history. To make points of this kind about the relevance of the long past in the present and for the future is not to try to go back to atavistic forms of existence, or to haul past institutions and ways of doing things, insofar as we can recover them, into the present and to endorse them as tradition or as models. Rather, it is to make them available as resources to fuel creative thinking about the future.

To unlock these resources is to ask and attempt to answer a wide range of questions about the past. What political, cosmological, ontological and epistemological ideas held sway before the establishment of European colonialism? What forms of past consciousness or past ideas of the common good might we find illuminating or inspiring today? What ideas of political contestation, of publicness, of social consensus, of mediating collective life, of accommodating incomers, of the balance between freedom and responsibility, of the relationship between knower and what is known, of what it is to be human, of relationships between humans and animals and the biosphere existed before the arrival of the first Europeans? How did ideas about legitimacy, illegitimacy, sovereignty, power, authority and classes of citizens, and indeed, subjects, play out in social and political life and how did they change across time, eventually to become what the ethnographers of the 1920s and 1930s wrote about, using a host of imported concepts to analyse them? In posing questions of this kind the English language in which this essay is written inexorably roots concepts in Ancient Greek and Roman times. What versions, or alternatives, with different origins, prevailed in this region and how do the languages of this region attest to alternative intellectual roots? Such information about the past would resonate with its contemporary residues in the present. It would help to make sense of those residues. It would be likely to appeal to and gain purchase with those who are directly affected by such residues. It would have similar effects in public life more generally where those residues have a presence. Outside a small body of structuralist-orientated archaeology which draws heavily on twentieth-century ethnography and its key concepts heavily invested in notions of culture rather than politics (discussed further below), there is almost nothing that speaks to a deep history of ideas, concepts and political discourses, traces of which are yet discernible, and operate with various forms of relevance, in the present. The task is to recover a neglected past and do so with methods, concepts and theories that are not trapped in European colonial legacies. The list of questions to be asked is inexhaustible, the scholarly challenge in responding to them immense.

Some of these issues and linked research questions framed in these terms are beginning to be raised and asked in the latest rounds of conferences and publications.⁶ What is clear is that many of the older, more established methods of enquiry rooted in the small set of disciplines and well-worn methods that have long dominated the study of the remote past – archaeology, linguistics, anthropology and history – are often not conducive to questions posed in this way, and may need some rethinking to be able to contribute as fully as possible to the answers.

Periodisation

An initial bit of rethinking concerns the readily used term “pre-colonial.” Not only is the term imperial in its imposition of a periodisation orientated around a later foreign domination, but it also entrenches a number of unsustainable assumptions. The first of these is that it collapses together the many eras and epochs that preceded European colonialism, thereby suggesting an unchanging past. Without the qualifier “European” it forecloses on the possibility of other, earlier empires operating within the region. It further proposes the existence of a sharp break associated with the imposition of European colonialism, where in fact, historians know that many aspects of life in the late independent era prevailed, with some adaptations, long after the establishment of formal European overrule. Finally, and this is a point developed more fully below, it resists increasingly demanding conceptual and

methodological imperatives to understand how enquiry into the many eras of the remote past is folded into, shaped by and giving shape to, the periods that follow them. Much of the methodological complexity that is involved in conducting research into periods before European colonialism follows from how that enfoldedness is understood and negotiated.

The academic discipline of archaeology offers a number of period-marking specialist terms of its own, based on technologies, such as Early and Late Stone Age, and Early and later Iron Age, which break up the uniform “pre-colonial.” The discipline further makes use of terminology appropriated from linguistics and ethnography, sometimes combined with production descriptors, in order to name past populations, such as Khoi pastoralists and Bantu farmers (also Nguni and Sotho farmers, or increasingly, Bantu-speaking farmers). But these terms, while providing needed descriptive handles, present their own problems. Archaeologists, of course, do not have evidence of the names and terms used in the past; they deal in forms of material culture, and human, animal and plant remains. The discipline’s naming practice, based as it is on borrowings from historical linguistics and on a form of analogical reasoning that makes use of twentieth-century ethnographic studies, assumes continuities in cultural practices and social arrangements across time. At best the naming practice is utilitarian. It is, however, quite obviously mired in the issues that flow from the enfoldedness of time referred to above and elucidated below. In addition, much of the nomenclature involved was given particular shape and meaning under segregation and apartheid in ways that make it unpalatable today, the term “Bantu” being a case in point as a central element in the apartheid government’s vocabulary.⁷

Consigned out of history

While the object of considerable interest to early European travellers, chroniclers, colonial officials and missionaries, the history of southern Africa before the arrival of the first Europeans was accorded relatively little serious academic attention before the 1950s. In part the lack of academic⁸ research was a result of political pressures in the segregation and apartheid eras that played down African occupation of the region before the arrival of the first European settlers in favour of the idea that black farmers arrived south of the Limpopo at roughly the same time as the first white settlers established themselves in the Cape. It also followed from long-held stereotypes about most of the continent having no history worth discussing, as being “the unedifying gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe” (Trevor-Roper 1969, 6). At the root of these claims was the belief that there could be no history where there were no documents. If, however, in the time of segregation and apartheid Africans were understood to have no history to speak of, they were credited with customs and cultural traditions. For the most part these were deemed to be the subject of anthropology and ethnology, or ghettoised in Bantu Studies, and were regarded as largely unchanging across time.

Incoming powers, we know well from situations the world over and across time, typically put in place new interpretations of the past to justify their rule and to neutralise opposing historical claims. Incoming Europeans initially had little purchase on how local Africans thought about the region’s past, though some officials, like Theophilus Shepstone and later James Stuart in Natal, attempted to harness historically charged local ideas about sovereignty and authority, to their processes of rule (Hamilton 1998). Intimately tied up with ancestors and ancestral matters that the colonised viewed as vitally important arbiters of the

present, it was a past that could not be easily forsworn by the indigenous population. Even the forms of Christianity that were imported into the area had to accommodate ancestral matters. So local claims were largely dealt with by the incoming power by being displaced out of politics. Pre-existing ideas, processes and practices thus repositioned could continue as politically neutral custom and culture rather than potent political history, becoming the domain of the ethnic subject as opposed to that of the political citizen (Mamdani 1996). Paradoxically, the elaborate sequestering out of time of a past that was, and had been for centuries, of consuming interest to the indigenous inhabitants of the region, was a recognition of its political salience and of the need for it to be effectively bridled.

Large states and “oral traditions”

The decolonisation of much of Africa in the 1950s and 1960s, however, generated active academic interest in that neglected past and resulted in studies like John Omer-Cooper’s *The Zulu Aftermath*, (Omer-Cooper 1978) which sought to celebrate the achievement of the early Zulu kingdom. Decolonisation also stimulated academic enquiry into the use of oral sources. Jan Vansina’s (1965) *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* (first published in French in 1961, and in English in 1965), was the seminal publication in this area, and rapidly became something of a methodological handbook for a new generation of historians of the long African past. It established the existence of “oral traditions” as potential sources and offered tools for their analysis.

Inspired by these developments, and animated by the promising possibilities of the application of materialist analyses and Marxist theory (notably of the French Marxist anthropologists like Claude Meillassoux [1972] and Maurice Godelier [1977]) a generation of southern African scholars did intensive fieldwork recording oral traditions, and used them to write histories of a number of large states that flourished in the late independent era. In the early 1980s a series of monographs appeared, including Jeff Peires on the Xhosa kingdom (1982), Philip Bonner on the Swazi state (1983), and Peter Delius on the Pedi polity (1984). For the most part these studies set up the existence of independent states on the eve of European colonialism, usually in an introductory chapter or two, and then went on to document their loss of sovereignty.

This wave of scholarship mined transcribed, often translated, summaries of the newly recorded oral material for nuggets of fact, using the Vansina toolkit. Southern African historians also began to pay increasing attention to bodies of already recorded oral materials, like the substantial collection of interviews undertaken in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by the colonial official James Stuart, and housed in the Killie Campbell African Library in Durban. In later years this kind of raiding of recorded texts for facts began to be challenged by a variety of scholars, mostly located outside the discipline of history, drawing on ideas and concepts in performance studies and literary analysis (see for example Hofmeyr 1993). My own work of the time, itself influenced by literary theory, focussed on contradictions between accounts, seeing them not as the effects of faulty transmission and depredations over time (in the manner suggested by the Vansina approach of the time), but as patterned indications of interventions in, and contestations over, understandings of the past (Hamilton 1987).

In this period archaeologists employing radiocarbon dating decisively pushed the chronology of Iron-Age settlement back to the early centuries of the present era.⁹ They began to

pay increasing attention to sites occupied by what they described as Iron Age Bantu farmers, focussing in particular on settlement patterns and site layouts, ceramic classification and farming economies. This work made extensive use of analogies drawn from twentieth-century ethnographies for insight into past social and political relationships and cosmologies (Huffman 1986). Another source of evidence that increasingly caught the attention of academic researchers in the 1970s and early 1980s was that provided by the countless rock paintings and engravings, attributed to “Bushmen.” The emergent field of rock art studies, positioned as a branch of cognitive archaeology, focused on what was understood to be discrete hunter-gatherer cosmology, and initially remained separate from the domain of research into the history of the region. While early work by John Wright (1971) and Patricia Vinnicombe (1976) inaugurated a minority historical approach,¹⁰ for the most part the often mixed nature of the groupings from whom the painters came and their interactions with settled farmers were neglected topics.

As the 1980s proceeded, the struggle against apartheid in South African escalated dramatically and many academic historians who had worked on the history of the loss of independence of the large states turned their attention to historical research with immediate relevance to the prevailing political turmoil and contestation, notably to twentieth-century labour, social and popular history. In the KwaZulu-Natal area, however, the violent political struggle between the United Democratic Front/African National Congress and Inkatha was heavily inflected with claims about the historical existence of a unified Zulu nation. This was accompanied by the aggressive promotion of the figure of its founder, King Shaka, by Inkatha. In the face of the conservative Zulu nationalist organisation’s attempts to assert a view of the long past that served their Bantustan-based political interests, historians like myself and John Wright (1989), as well as Mzala (1988) and others, were prompted to provide alternative readings of the history of the early Zulu state, and precursor formations in the region. This was a key reason why in the 1980s interest in what was at the time termed the “pre-colonial” (and sometimes “precolonial” without the hyphen in an early attempt to signal dissatisfaction with the assumptions inherent in the term) was stronger in the KwaZulu-Natal area than anywhere else in the country.

Research into the long history of the KwaZulu-Natal region was further fuelled by the existence of the James Stuart collection (partially published in translated and annotated form Webb and Wright [1976–]). The collection exceeds in its extent and scope any other corpus of recorded oral materials pertinent to the late independent periods, other than perhaps, the Bleek and Lloyd archive focused on the |xam people historically resident in the central southern interior of the country. It was also, in part, a consequence of the inordinately high profile – for a multitude of reasons – of the figure of Shaka, both in South Africa and internationally (Hamilton 1998).

Suspect sources, the production of European colonial knowledge and the colonisation of consciousness

In the 1990s scholars of the region began actively to read and make contributions to the growing field of post-colonial studies, paying attention to colonial modes of the drawing of difference, the creation of the inferior, exotic, colonial “other,” the colonisation of the consciousness involved in imperial domination and to the processes behind the establishment of colonial subjects as stable, knowable objects (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Pratt 1992; De Kock 1993).

A corollary of this was hesitancy amongst researchers concerning the use of colonial-era sources and suspicions about colonial recordings. In the late 1980s and the 1990s scholarly and public debates proliferated about the extent to which early texts by white writers were “myths,” “fantasies” and “tainted” sources. Scholars focussed critical attention on the particular forms of influence that colonial recorders exerted on the texts that they recorded (Cobbing 1988; Hamilton 1998; Lalu 2009). For much of the 1990s and early 2000s historical research pertinent to the long past, outside archaeology, was concentrated on these kinds of questions. This resulted in detailed studies of many of the most used and significant sources. The accounts of early travellers, missionaries, reports of colonial officials, and the compilation work and collecting avocations of people like A.T. Bryant and Stuart were the subject of study in their own right (Wright 1989, 1991; Pridmore 1994; Hamilton 1998; Wylie 2000; Wright 2012; Maclean 1992).

Increasingly scholars started to move beyond a relatively simple notion of myth-making and fantasies and to grapple with the complexity of the processes of the making of the sources. They began to pay close attention to the people from whom recorders like Stuart solicited information, and to what experiences and inheritances shaped their accounts (Hamilton 1998; Lekgoathi 2009; Wright 2011, 2015; Kriel 2016). They explored the various documented views of the past held, and actively promoted, by a large and diverse range of people of the region. In KwaZulu-Natal these views range from those of the Zulu king Cetshwayo kaMpande (recorded in 1881) (Webb and Wright 1976), through authors like Petros Lamula, who published *UZulukaMalandela: A Most Practical and Concise Compendium of African History* in 1924 (Lamula 1924; La Hausse de la Louvière 2001) and Magema Magwaza Fuze, who published *Abantu Abamnyama Lapa Bavela Ngakhona* in 1922 (Fuze 1922; Mokoena 2011), to Socwatsha kaPhaphu, in terms of quantity the most significant of James Stuart’s interlocutors, recorded at various times between 1897 and 1922, and eventually published in a Reader produced by Stuart (Stuart 1925; Wright 2015). The majority of such men (and there were many of them), and the few women that researchers know about, were involved, in different ways, in the complex politics of their times. The giving of close attention to who they were, what they were doing, and why and how they concerned themselves with historical matters, allows us to grasp something of the intellectual and political manoeuvring, and the conceptual frameworks brought to bear in that manoeuvring, that was going on across KwaZulu-Natal in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in response to rapidly changing local and international circumstances. Similar forms of attention are increasingly being paid elsewhere in the region to political thinkers drawing on history in similar ways and under similar circumstances (Schoots 2014; Kriel 2016).

The making and shaping of the available archive across time

My Terrific Majesty: the Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Invention published in 1998, was one of the first attempts to grapple not only with specific sources, but with the larger forces and factors at work across time that made, shaped and reshaped what came to be the available wider archive, in this particular case, the archive of Shakan times. One aspect of the challenge, as I understood it, was not simply to grasp how a particular source was produced but how across time some things, mostly documents, came to enjoy the status of archive, and benefit from an expensive apparatus of preservation, while others were

repressed, or consigned to other domains such as ethnological records and ethnographic museums.¹¹ A landmark study by Sekibakiba Lekgoathi picked up the issue of ethnological consignment and tackled the making of the vast archive of the government's Ethnological Bureau, brimming as it was with information, textual and photographic, about what were at the time termed "tribes," and later "ethnic" groups (Lekgoathi 2006).

Increasingly what seemed to me, to be the particular archival challenges involved in the study of the remote past started to emerge as problems characteristic of *all* uses of archive, even those relevant to the recent past, but more obvious and more sharply etched in relation to the remote past. The notion of archive that generations of southern African students had been inducted into through the discipline of history became the object of my critical enquiry. In 1998 I was part of a group of scholars, radical archivists and artists who collaborated in a seminar series and workshop programme that raised a wide variety of critical questions about the notion of archive. This resulted in the production of what is now recognised as something of a seminal text in what is termed "the archival turn," viz., *Refiguring the Archive* (Hamilton et al.), published in 2002.

The term refiguring had a number of valences. The archive, the book asserted, "– all archive – every archive is figured" (Hamilton et al. 2002, 7). The book laid out the challenge involved in getting a grip on that figuring. In South Africa this involved investigation and understanding of how what was established as the available archive was shaped by apartheid, colonialism and even by configurations of power and structures of knowledge that existed before then. The book further suggested that much the same questions needed to be raised wherever the notion of archive was in play. Amongst other things, *Refiguring the Archive* drew attention the way in which many (but of course, not all) archives are the products of state or institutional machineries, where the record was, and yet is, part of the bureaucratic apparatus, prompting approaches that enable, what anthropologist Ann Stoler already named back then in *Refiguring the Archive*, "reading along the archival grain" (Stoler 2002).

Geared to activities of understanding better and critiquing inherited archives, these kinds of approaches treated archives not simply as collections of *sources* for research but also as *subjects* of critical enquiry in their own right. As a result, histories and ethnographies of archives began to examine how the inherited archives *were* made in the past, and how archive-making goes on in the present in countless settings within and outside the official public repositories, as well as what work archives do, and how archives were and are used (Stoler 2002; Rütther 2012; Byala 2013; Greenwood 2013; Hamilton 2013; McNulty 2013; Molins Lliteras 2013; Twidle 2013; Weintroub 2013). Much of this critical work on archive/s is inherently inter-disciplinary, with key insights being contributed from outside archive's traditional lair in the discipline of history. While many historians abandoned attempts to write about the periods before colonialism, those who did pay attention to the remote past proceeded by devoting this kind of attention to the available archive.

Structuralist archaeologists initially proved immune to the effects of this interrogation of archive and continued to use early twentieth-century ethnographies and ideas of stable cultural groups relatively uncritically to interpret their findings concerning much earlier periods. They forged ahead, producing confident typologies, Tom Huffman's 2007 *A Handbook to the Iron Age: The Archaeology of Pre-Colonial Farming Societies in Southern Africa*, being a case in point. In rock art research, however, historically minded scholars were making extensive use of archival sources, notably the Bleek and Lloyd archive, but also elsewhere, with some of the most novel work paying attention to the interactions between

groups of people on the margins of the large states of the late independent period (Blundell 2004; Challis 2012).

In recent years the development of a handful of collaborations between historians and archaeologists across the country has marked a movement away from the resolutely structuralist approach mentioned above (Swanepoel, Esterhuysen, and Bonner 2008; Delius and Marks 2012). In some cases this movement still sees the mining of what are regarded as the “oral traditions” (see, for example, Bonner 2008). It remains the exception rather than the rule that scholars give close attention to the making and reshaping of these materials over time. Many continue to work with translations in English rather than using original vernacular materials where they are available, thereby missing, amongst other things, the immense history of concepts that opens up when language itself is treated as an archive.¹² In particular, the mining approach fails to take advantage of what we might think of as the “Rosetta stone” archives.

The “Rosetta stone” analogy points to the capacity of a small number of key archives to enable the interpretation of other texts and sources. It is a capacity derived from the combination in these particular archives of discursive extensiveness, vernacular content, attempts by the respective recorders to capture the words of their interlocutors, variant narratives on a single topic provided by multiple speakers, variant narratives on a single topic given over time by a single speaker, and their contemporary accessibility.

The James Stuart collection is one of these archives.¹³ It comprises more than 100 notebooks and numerous loose sheets of papers, on which Stuart recorded his discussions with over 200 different people, mostly Africans, whom he regarded as well informed on the history and affairs of the region that is today KwaZulu-Natal and neighbouring Swaziland. The notes were meticulously dated, the circumstances of the conversations were often recorded, his interlocutors were named and numerous details of their ages, statuses and affiliations noted. Large swathes of the notes were recorded in isiZulu, much seemingly verbatim, with peculiarities of expression or dialect often discussed directly with the speakers. Some of the topics covered were obviously introduced by Stuart, others by the speakers. There is now a fairly substantial body of scholarship that deals in detail with the respective extents to which these texts were shaped by Stuart and by his interlocutors. While there is debate on these matters, it is clear that these notes are quite different from Stuart’s own writings on many of the same topics, and in numerous respects are characterised by the use of concepts and rhetorical forms that were not Stuart’s. Many of these concepts and rhetorical forms depend for elucidation on the wider context in the first instance of the full account given by the speaker, and in the second instance, of the entire corpus. Scholars using this corpus can trace the use of concepts by different speakers across many hundreds of pages, thereby managing to explore their meaning to an unusually extended degree. The editing, annotation and publication with an index of a large part of this corpus, has meant that researchers can do this with relative efficiency. When fully contextualised and interpreted in relation to the wider corpus, a factual nugget extracted from it often fails to bear up as the fact that it purports to be, but yields rich returns when treated as an element of discourse. More and more the Stuart collection, handled with increasingly sophisticated methodological care, enables the interpretation or reinterpretation of forms of evidence found in other settings often more firmly tangled up in a European colonial conceptual apparatus.

Acknowledging forms of political discourse and political theorising

One of the spin-offs from working with an extensive corpus like the Stuart collection has been the way in which it has enabled scholars to lift their heads out of the detail of a story of origins, a particular migration or a conquest – three dominant story lines – to discern across those narratives the lineaments of past modes of political discourse and forms of political theorising, the very politics that the categorisation of these materials as custom and culture worked to obfuscate.¹⁴ In particular the research breakthroughs that have happened have been concerned with how understandings of the past were mobilised in relation to political changes in the late independent period, and earlier. The primary challenge here has been how, methodologically, to recognise aspects of this mobilisation pertinent to political changes at the time of the recorded conversation (at various points between 1897 and 1922) – the *context* of the conversation – as well as what might be relevant to political changes in earlier eras like the Shakan period, which might have been the *subject* of the conversations recorded around 1900 (Hamilton 1998, 55–69).

Signs of indigenous political discourses and political theorising are also to be found in the archive that language and names constitute. In this area, the work of Paul Landau on the chiefdoms of the southern Highveld has been insightful in revealing the existence of the kinds of political consciousness and organisation that preceded European colonialism. Giving attention to brotherhoods, rankings and amalgamations, as evidenced very often in language forms, his argument is that in place of the received notion of fixed tribal identities, or discrete ethnicities, we need to see hybridity as lying at the core of a flexible long standing sub-continental political tradition that was geared towards the accommodation of strangers (Landau 2012).

More recently the project on *Tribing and Untribing the Archive* examines closely *how* the idea of tribe came to be imported into Natal in the nineteenth century (Hamilton and Leibhammer 2016). It looks at how European concepts were mapped onto indigenous ideas in a manner that shaped what was laid down as knowledge of the region's inhabitants, notably as timeless tribal people, in ways that we yet struggle to free ourselves from. Unpacking the legacies of the European colonial conceptual apparatus requires both close historicisation and comparative perspectives from across and beyond the continent (see for example, Etherington 2011) that are attentive to the cross-genealogies of the tribal and the modern. This underpins growing critical interrogation of the clutch of inherited concepts like tribe, ethnicity, kinship and tradition that have long been the staples of the study of this time and of the idea that anthropology, linguistics and archaeology are the appropriate specialist disciplines for its study. Increasingly concepts from intellectual history, literary theory, gender studies, cultural studies and other disciplines more usually concerned with European metropolises and later periods are being used to ask new questions and gain new perspectives on the remote past, with great purchase.

Tribing and Untribing the Archive took as its central focus the challenges of using evidence in the form of collected material culture, found mostly in ethnographic museums and art galleries. The publication traced how this material came to be marooned in the collecting institutions, often mislabelled, divested of details of provenance and dates of production, in effect doomed to attest to timeless forms of cultural identity. The essays in the publication undertake the kind of research necessary to rehabilitate these materials as historical sources.

There now exists a small, highly specialised subfield concerned with the making and shaping over time of the available sources, carefully situated in changing political and intellectual contexts, and concerned as well with what has been repressed, occluded or consigned elsewhere in the making of that archive. At the same time, the critical work on archive has opened the remote past to new forms of theoretical and conceptual thinking. This, I have argued, allows researchers to go beyond ideas of bias in any collection or archive to recognise how public, political and academic discourses and practices constitute archives, and how in turn archives change those discourses and practices, each shaping and reshaping each other over time in a mutually constituting spiral (Hamilton, [in preparation](#)).

Traces in social practice

Significantly less theorised as historical sources than colonial records or recorded oral accounts are traces of the past that persist over time in social life, subject both to continuity and change in the process. Such traces are readily described as “tradition,” and are understood to be the doing of things in the present in the ways that they have always, or long, been done. Social practices of all kinds are typically flexible and often what goes as immutable is paradoxically precisely where change takes place, such that some things change, while others hold their ground. The challenge for historians seeking to use traces in a contemporary practice, whether residual or substantial, or as recorded in an ethnography at a particular time, as sources about the distant past is to understand the concept of repertoire at work; the history and conventions of the practice itself as well as of any form of recording of such a practice; the forces that have changed either the practice or the recording over time; and the factors that might have allowed some elements to continue across time in reasonably intact forms of practice; and finally, what “reasonably” might mean in a particular case.¹⁵

Enfolded time and contiguous space

Developments of these kinds in research using established archives and traces in social practices have prompted me to think in new ways about the contingency of time. Elsewhere I have argued that this involves understanding that past events that are objects of inquiry or reference are perceptible in the present only because of a history across time, and because particular knowledge production processes have brought them into view in a particular way. Materials invoked in contemporary practices that reference the remote past and the documentary sources that researchers might locate in archival folders, are not survivals of past times in the present, but travellers across time that have changed shape and accrued new meanings through time. Such travellers, I argue, were not merely affected by their contexts, but also affected them in turn.¹⁶ The past that is the object of interest is thus not firmly in a place distinct from the present time of enquiry. Rather, both are folded into each other and into what lies in between, and, indeed, into the way in which a hoped for future influences how we handle traces of the past and “sources” in the present. To engage the materials that attest to the past in order to think about the past is to explore this enfoldedness. It requires an approach that tacks backwards and forwards across time, paying attention to the double-storiedness both of events in the past and of the traces of them in the present. It is a double-storiedness that involves thinking simultaneously about the story of the making of

the trace over time, and the making (of the story) of the past to which the trace refers, also often a matter extended across time and itself involving change (Hamilton 2015).

The European notion of archive that took hold in the course of the nineteenth century resists this sense of enfoldedness by establishing archival items as embalmed material, usually documents, produced at a particular point in time – ideally the time to which they offer archival testimony – and then preserved to arrive in the present in forms as close as possible to their originary ones. It was this notion of archive, as a product of colonial bureaucracy, that was exported to colonies like those in southern Africa. In relation to this notion of archive, so-called traditions, notably oral traditions, but also traditional practices, are regarded as degraded or less satisfactory testatory forms because they are manifestly affected by the periods between their originary moments and the time of their “capture” through some form of recording. In turn, this epistemological doubt is all too often countered through assertions of the purity of traditions as unsullied by time.

There are (at least) two problems with ideas that counterpose embalmed archival documents and malleable oral traditions. The first is that under close scrutiny the archival item almost always turns out to have shaped, and been shaped by, the intervening periods, itself then being an item enfolded in time, rather than cutting through it. The second problem is that so-called traditions are often less victims of time than the dominant European epistemological view would have it, being under ongoing pressures across time to preserve their integrity even as they enter time’s folds. Pressures understood to be exerted by ancestors are one of the factors that limit the changes that take place. Plausibility is another (Hamilton 1987, 2015). Such materials are nonetheless seldom as innocent of time’s enfoldings as the champions of purity would have it, often shaping and being shaped by the intervening periods as surely as the archival item. If an Enlightenment notion of time is strictly linear, seeing the present as the product of the past, a sense of time as enfolded understands that the past is equally the product of the present and of all the time between.

Similarly the position of southern Africa in world history requires consideration independent of the dominant axis of European discovery. The out-of-timeness of southern Africa before European colonialism has long been understood to be an effect of its remoteness from Europe. In the twenty-first century many other former colonies have revised their European designated remoteness through recognising their historical situatedness, and centredness, in other axes of trade, travel and connectedness, such as that of trans-Saharan routes, the Silk Road or exchanges across the Indian Ocean. In relation to these increasingly prominent networks of interaction, southern Africa remains a persistently distant edge. While much is written about trade routes, centres and nexuses, outer margins are seldom theorised as being nonetheless vital, fully relational parts of the larger whole. To be such a margin is not to be insulated and out of the flow of ideas, people, goods and technologies but to be in a particular place with particular dynamics, themselves influenced inevitably by events in other places. The challenge then is to place southern Africa at any point in time firmly in world history and geography, connected to the world if not, or only occasionally, by grand arteries, then by vital capillaries, as well as osmotically by small connections amongst ever contiguous neighbours.

All of this makes it clear that we are now surely beyond the limited temporality of European colonial history, the architecture of anthropological time that Johannes Fabian critiqued so powerfully in 1983, and the sweeping arrowed black lines of archaeologically discerned population movement and European “discoveries.”

Conclusion

There is today a clear recognition that the long southern African past cannot be only an introductory chapter to European colonialism, nor can it be confined to being the subject of archaeology. The teleological terms “prehistory” (not much used today) and “pre-colonial” (fairly persistent), unpalatable archaeological periodisations and linguistic categories, and the lingering effects of disciplinary specialisations for tribal pasts – all of these are ripe for critical engagement. The taking of a long view of history seeks to subvert persistent habits of treating the past before European colonialism as another country, and the advent of that colonialism as the effective starting point of the region’s history, with only a passing nod to, or introductory chapter on, what went before. What happens when histories of ideas, modes of thought, institutions and practices, and the changes which they have undergone, are traced across the early state, late independent, early European colonial, apartheid and even post-apartheid eras, is a pressing question. Even this latter, provisional, periodisation would itself be open to debate and question. The taking of a long view is an opportunity full of possibilities for breaking out of congealed epistemic coloniality.

To my mind the critical work on archive has become a key activity in effecting an epistemic shift in enquiry into the long history of southern Africa. It is fundamental in preparing the ground to meet the challenges of transformation, as articulated in, for example, the demands for curriculum changes and “more pre-colonial history.” The point is succinctly made by Njabulo Ndebele: “There can be no transformation of the curriculum, or indeed of knowledge itself, without an interrogation of archive” (<http://www.apc.uct.ac.za>, accessed 31 August 2017).

Notes

1. The workshop papers were published in 2010 *African Studies* 69 (2).
2. Since the late 2000s scholars working in this area have been able to apply for research funding from South Africa’s National Research Foundation’s African Origins Platform (AOP). However, the focus there is weighted towards projects with a deep time depth, notably palaeontological and archaeological projects. The NIHSS was established in 2013. It provides funding and support for a series of catalytic projects including the “pre-Colonial Catalytic project” (<http://www.nihss.ac.za/content/catalytic-projects#sthash.L44ZJUvB.dpuf>, accessed 31 August 2017) The first conference of the pre-colonial Catalytic Project held in 2013 resulted in a volume of conference proceedings (Ntsebeza and Saunders 2014). The second conference was held in March 2017, at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, and a second volume of papers is currently in preparation.
3. See, for example, the project, Re-Centering Afro-Asia: Musical and Human Migrations in the Pre-Colonial Period 700–1500AD (<http://www.sociology.uct.ac.za/news/re-centring-afroasia-musical-and-human-migrations-pre-colonial-period-700-1500ad>, accessed 31 August 2017); and the conference “Concepts from the Global South,” Centre for Indian Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, October 2016.
4. See, for example, South Africa’s National Indigenous Knowledge Systems Office, Department of Science and Technology (DST) and the DST-NRF Centre on Indigenous Knowledge (National Research Foundation 2015).
5. The newspaper article by Hlongwane listed as the claimants “Mzondeni Alfred Hlongwane of the amaNgwane tribe, S D Mngomezulu (Mngomezulu tribe), Mboneni Absolom Mavuso (amaNgwane tribe), Melizwe Zeluxolo Dlamini (Nhlangwini tribe), Mabhudu Israel Tembe (amaThonga tribe), Mbhekeni Shadrack Ndwandwe (amaNguni tribe), Michael Mfanafuthi

Miya (amaZizi tribe), Dumisani Elias Msomi and Vusimuzi Andries Madlala,” together with the leaders of the Nhangwini and Hlubi.

6. See Buthelezi (2016), as well as the conferences “Concepts from the Global South,” Centre for Indian Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, October 2016; and “IziThunguthu: Southern African Pasts Before the Colonial Era, their Archives and their Ongoing Present/Presence,” University of Cape Town, July 2015.
7. Nowhere is this more vividly expressed than in contemporary parody. See, for example, McKaiser (2012).
8. While it is the purpose in this section of the paper to discuss *academic* research, in a host of other forms in public life – plays, novels, clan-focused ancestral repertoires and much more – the history of the eras before European colonialism has been the object of ongoing attention, largely within counter public spheres of various kinds (see discussion of this in, for example, Petersen 2000; Hamilton, Mbenga, and Ross 2010).
9. See Norman Etherington’s (2010) discussion of the legacy of the discredited short Iron Age, and his argument that the implications of the longer chronology for the rise of large states have yet to be fully explored.
10. See, however, Lewis-Williams (1982), and then as the 80s proceeded, Campbell (1986, 1987) as well as work by Penn (1987).
11. A landmark study by Sekibakiba Lekgoathi picked up the issue of ethnological consignment and tackled the making of the vast archive of the government’s Ethnological Bureau, brimming as it was with information, textual and photographic, about what were at the time termed “tribes,” and later “ethnic” groups (Lekgoathi 2006).
12. Where vernacular concepts are deployed this typically involves the use of such concepts as documented and interpreted by twentieth-century ethnographers. In some cases the extrapolations are illuminating, but methodological reservations remain that can be cleared up through explicit investigation of the history of the concepts. See, for example the work of Gavin Whitelaw (2016).
13. The already mentioned Bleek and Lloyd archive is another “Rosetta Stone” archive, comprising some 45000 pages of notes, over 1000 drawings, maps, photographs and genealogies and tens of thousands of dictionary slips elucidating words. Much of the recorded material follows as closely as the recorders could manage, the original words of the speakers. The collection, scattered across a number of institutions, is now available in a digitised form online. The page calculation takes note of the cited figure of +/- 13 000 numbered pages (see Skotnes 2007, 42) but factors in an estimation of unnumbered facing pages. I am grateful to Pippa Skotnes for her assistance with this.
14. This was first argued in my early work on ideology in the Shakan kingdom (Hamilton 1985), developed further in relation to questions of the nature of rulership and sovereignty in *Terrific Majesty* (1998), then tellingly conceptualised as a form of political theorising in Landau (2012), and built on by Hamilton and Wright (2017).
15. See, for example, Buthelezi’s account of the survival over time of attenuated Ndwandwe historical discourse in Ndwandwe rituals (2012) and my discussion of the custodial imperatives at work in ancestor rituals (Hamilton 2015).
16. The idea that archival documents change once they have been placed in a repository is, of course, not an unfamiliar idea to scholars of Europe in Ancient and Medieval times. Indeed, such changes in documents relevant to those periods are the subject of extensive research. The idea of a more unadulterated and stable archive is a legacy of nineteenth-century developments in European government archives, a Rankean approach to history and the export to European colonies of a resultant notion of archives as immutable and reliable records.

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