I

THE PRODUCTION OF PREINDUSTRIAL SOUTH AFRICAN HISTORY

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INTRODUCTION

A new and distinctively post-apartheid historiography has yet to find its feet in relation to the period covered by this volume. Since 1994, when the first democratic elections were held in South Africa, there have been significant changes in the nature of public discourses about South Africa's past. Settlerist and narrow nationalist (notably Afrikaner and Zulu) historical projects have, unsurprisingly, largely lost their impetus. Government efforts led by the African National Congress to invoke a new national past rooted in the black struggle against oppression have focused primarily on the twentieth century. The effort to achieve reconciliation and unity initially moved to deflect public discourse away from attending to the past except as it was manifested in the proceedings of, and the texts that flowed from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up in 1995, and in a handful of legacy projects undertaken by the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology. Concomitantly, the 1990s saw the rapid growth of the particular genre of history commonly known as heritage – celebrating, commemorating, and often commodifying selected aspects of the past. Although heritage and public history courses and research have flourished, universities have experienced a sharp decline in the numbers of students enrolled in mainstream history courses, and the substantial cohorts of graduate students undertaking primary historical research, a feature of the radical history movement of the 1980s, have evaporated.

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Small but encouraging signs of things to come are discernible in a variety of areas. Significant challenges lie in how to approach, or augment, the available archive for the period covered by this volume – an archive for the most part powerfully shaped by the colonial and later apartheid eras in which it was established – to facilitate new kinds of research. Key secondary texts that have given definition to how this period is understood themselves require critical review. Likewise, the exclusion of other texts from the historical canon may warrant reassessment. In the chapter that follows we draw attention to the signs of new developments and attempt to provide an account of the production of history in South Africa that contextualizes the methodological challenges contemporary students of South African history face.

The chapter first draws attention to how little we know about the way understandings of the past were produced in precolonial times. We go on to identify key arenas of the production of history in the colonial period, from the earliest accounts produced in the Cape Colony to the emergence of a fully fledged settler historiography. The chapter teases out the contributions of missionaries' administrators and their local interlocators to the archiving and interpretation of the early history of the region, as well as the contributions and challenges offered by an emerging black intelligentsia. It situates the development of professional history in South Africa in the context of segregation and apartheid and tracks the initial consignment of precolonial history to the disciplines of "Bantu Studies," ethnology, and anthropology. The formal establishment of professional history based in the universities did not, of course, bring history production in other settings to a halt. This production continued, and indeed flourished, in a variety of forms. In the second half of the chapter, in which we track the development of the disciplines concerned with the preindustrial past, we give attention to those initiatives outside the disciplines that either shaped professional history in important ways or presented professional history with significant political or intellectual challenges.

The chapter further draws attention to how some accounts of the past came to be acknowledged as histories whereas others were designated sources and how certain texts were selected for preservation and accorded the space and expensive apparatus of conservation, as well as the way in which certain documents of the archive were chosen for publication and thus made to stand for the archives in the public domain. The chapter looks at what was excluded from the archive and dispatched to museums or oblivion, and how, in some cases, that material has been recovered.

The history of preindustrial South Africa – its key events, issues, processes, and drivers, as much as their interpretation – was powerfully shaped by the imperatives of colonial power, its engagement with conflicting settler and missionary agendas, and with increasingly subjugated African polities.

The written history that emerged was steadily concentrated in the hands of designated experts, backed up by authoritative archival evidence and a veritable panoply of devices for containing the expression of, and establishing control over, preindustrial, often oral, forms of knowledge.

This chapter, and those that follow in this volume, attempt to grapple with the double legacy of historical scholarship in South Africa. The first part of that legacy, dealt with primarily in this chapter, is the role played by the discipline of history and certain of its precursor forms in the making of colonial and apartheid subjects. The second part, manifest in the chapters that follow, is the outstanding scholarship of a generation of radical historians and their archaeologist colleagues in the provision of accounts of the preconquest societies of Southern Africa, based largely on excavations and on recouping oral sources. Their analyses of the far-reaching reorganization of relations of production that accompanied and drove conquest, and of attendant developments in the transformation of consciousness and the construction of identities that occurred in the period covered by this volume, provide an essential foundation for understanding the shape of modern South Africa and for future programs of historical work. Only by appreciating the effects of these two legacies are we able to understand the complex processes that have resulted in the current state of historical knowledge about the preindustrial past and the almost complete exile of black historians from the academic production of accounts of that past.

Originally conceptualized as a short preface to this volume, our pursuit of these lines of inquiry opens up numerous new horizons of research concerning the production of historical knowledge, horizons to which the chapter in its current form is only able to point. We hope that for all its limitations, and its inevitably uneven coverage, it provides sufficient material to stimulate future generations of work by historians.

HISTORICAL PRODUCTION IN THE ERAS BEFORE THE ADVENT OF WRITTEN TEXTS

The concept of history is often taken for granted and thought of as a universal phenomenon, although like many universal phenomena it is in fact specific to time and place. Introduced into southern Africa in the colonial era, this concept was first denied to the precolonial societies of the region and then written for them. Ideas about history, or related concepts concerning knowledge of the past, which may have existed before colonialism, have been little explored. We begin our discussion of how histories of preindustrial South Africa have been produced with an exploration of precolonial ideas about, and productions of, the past. We do this for two reasons: One is that we believe it to be an important step in highlighting the

almost complete absence of work on the intellectual history of South Africa in precolonial times (we discuss the few exceptions below), the second is that it is an essential foundation for understanding which precolonial ideas were taken up in the colonial production of history, which were neglected, ignored, or unrecognized, and how all this gave shape to colonial, and later apartheid, resistance and postcolonial understandings of the preindustrial past, and the meaning and significance of its history.

None of the exceptions discussed below reflects a precolonial view of the past unmediated by colonialism in some form or another. Most are situated temporally on the cusp of precolonial and colonial times, and rely, to varying degrees, on a combination of along-the-grain readings of colonial texts for the logic, conventions, and consistencies of information/misinformation that characterize those texts and against-the-grain readings for their sutures, gaps, and silences. Even where texts (oral, material, or visual) exist that are squarely precolonial in their genesis, their analysis is frequently mediated in one way or another by colonial texts or recording practices themselves demanding sensitive examination. Colonial authorities and missionaries were often acutely interested in the history of the colonized, for they sought in that history information and materials capable of facilitating their respective projects. To that end they frequently undertook substantial investigations into the history of precolonial South Africa, laying down selected information in colonial and missionary archives and early historical accounts.

The ways in which indigenous societies *themselves* produced history, or related forms of knowledge, before the advent of the first literate recorders, is a topic little treated in its own right by historians and historiographers. Until the mid-twentieth century this was a consequence of the view held by most western scholars that sub-Saharan Africa had no history prior to the coming of Europeans, never mind accounts of such history.[1] This perspective was underpinned by a series of developments across the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, which not only assumed that an intellectual practice like that of history production was beyond the ability of what were regarded as primitive societies, but which also classified potential historical source material, which might confound the claim that the colonized had no history for western historians to reconstruct, as cultural (read "timeless"), artifacts, or myth (read "fantastical" or "spiritual"), and saw to its exclusion from the historical archive, which was defined as factual and documentary.

The idea that Africa had no history prior to the advent of colonialism was robustly challenged in the course of the struggle for political independence on the continent. By the late 1950s a demand for decolonized African

[1] J. D. Fage, "The development of African historiography," in J. Ki-Zerbo (Ed.), *General History of Africa*, vol. I (London: Heinemann, 1981), p. 31.

history written from African perspectives emerged in new African universities. The campaign was accomplished through the collaborative efforts of both African nationalist and white liberal historians.[2] This historiography was characterized by what was viewed as the critical and scientific use of oral evidence for historical reconstruction, drawing on Jan Vansina's seminal methodological work, which proposed rigorous procedures for its utilization. The result was that once historians had worked on the oral traditions, rehabilitating them as viable sources, they mined them for nuggets of information that they attempted to corroborate with material from other sources, notably archaeology, latter-day ethnography, climatology, ecological analysis, and linguistics.

The characterization of oral traditions as oral sources was thus regarded as a revolutionary move that facilitated new academic research and ensured that the history of the subcontinent before contact with Europeans could be reconstructed by professional historians with the necessary methodological expertise.[3] In the act of reclaiming oral traditions as viable historical *sources*, however, this methodological breakthrough effectively denied the oral texts the status of historical *accounts* and intellectual projects in their own right that negotiated contemporary understandings of the past. The production of history was claimed as the output of the professionally trained academic historian, whereas oral texts were deemed "traditions," that is, sources fraught with subjectivity and bias and denuded by their oral transmission over time, requiring careful, professional interpretation. The possibility that precolonial intellectuals were themselves busy producing histories, or epistemological equivalents thereof, was not entertained.

The legacy of the Vansina intervention has been so influential that there have been very few attempts to look at oral texts as complex intellectual productions in their own right. In the 1970s and 1980s in South Africa this was compounded by the emphasis on the political–economy approaches of the Marxist historians on relations of production and reproduction, and the operation of power, in precolonial societies, often at the expense of an interest in intellectual, philosophical, religious, literary, and cultural developments. It has also been inhibited by the persistent interpretation of certain oral texts as myths that are understood not to aspire to be factual and that are then subjected to structuralist analyses or treated as literary genres without significant historiographical impulses.

Scattered exceptions to this trend, although not centrally focused on establishing historiographical traditions that may have existed prior to

[2] Among the torchbearers in this broad effort were the Nigerians Kenneth Dike and Jacob Ajayi, who helped to establish the Ibadan History Series and the *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, important fora for the publication of this new historiography.

[3] This can be seen most vividly in the first three decades of publication of the journal *History in Africa*.

the advent of literacy, provide pointers to alternative ways of probing the dynamics and imperatives that gave shape to inherited oral historical narratives.[4] In some instances this has led to the detailed reconstruction of the histories of key oral texts showing how historical accounts that played important roles in local political struggles were often contested and repeatedly reworked in light of historical argumentation from opposing parties that reflected the biases and backgrounds of both their composers and subsequent chroniclers; the intellectual currents of their times, demonstrating significant debts to one another; and adherence to well-established limits of credibility. Political and social struggles were key determinants in the making of these texts. The studies offer the beginnings of a periodisation of such historical accounts and identify moments of intense or elaborate historiographical contestation, notably concentrated around succession disputes and political crises.[5]

Any reconstruction of the intellectual history of precolonial times demands the existence of substantial archives of oral texts originally framed in terms of precolonial epistemologies and recorded in ways that keep intact something of that framing. The now almost fully published *James Stuart Archive of Recorded Oral Evidence Relating to the History of the Zulu and Neighbouring Peoples* is one such corpus, comprising almost 200 individual testimonies. Named after its compiler, the colonial official James Stuart, the archive has generated considerable debate about the extent and nature of Stuart's intervention in the texts, and researchers using the archive attend closely to Stuart's agenda in doing the collecting, his shaping of interviews, his methods of collection, interviewing, transcription, translation and annotation, augmentation, and excision. Nonetheless, the sheer extent of the archive opens up the possibility of discerning beyond Stuart's interventions the cognitive procedures, genre choices, narrative strategies, and rhetorical tactics that characterized the original spoken accounts. Archives of materials that purport to be verbatim transcripts of early African oral texts are rare and are seldom sufficiently extensive to offer insights into precolonial epistemologies.[6]

[4] See, for example, I. Hofmeyr, *"We Spend Our Years as a Tale That is Told:" Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Chiefdom* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1993).

[5] See, for example, C. Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty: The Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical Invention* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); S. Ndlovu, "The Changing African Perceptions of King Dingane in Historical Literature: A Case Study in the Construction of Historical Knowledge in 19th and 20th Century South African History," unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of the Witwatersrand (2001).

[6] The archive of Tswana chiefly praise poems, of which Isaac Schapera's published collection is the centerpiece, while much smaller in scale, warrants noting in this regard

Material considered by missionaries and other recorders to refer to precolonial religious ideas, and typically labeled "belief," "myth," "ritual," or "custom," offers another entry point into precolonial epistemologies, albeit one as yet little explored explicitly as a source for the reconstruction of the intellectual history of precolonial times. Acknowledgment of the potential of such materials requires recognition of the absence in precolonial cognition of a distinction between sacred and secular knowledge. Many early African intellectuals, starting with Robert Balfour Noyi in his 1848 "Ama-Xhosa history," and including Tiyo Soga, writing twenty years later, and the historian William Gqoba, writing in 1885, in their accounts of precolonial history worked explicitly across the sacred/secular knowledge divide.[7]

These studies begin to illuminate the processes by which knowledge was produced in precolonial times, drawing attention to how a case was constructed, what protocols and conventions of argument were observed, what was regarded as historically persuasive, as well as how historical materials were conceptualized, marshaled, and interpreted. They begin to suggest an epistemological status for such accounts that may well be different from that of contemporary academic histories, a difference far from the unthinking assertions of a lack by earlier generations of historians.

Some of the same terrain is traversed, though by very different means, in the work of Jean and John Comaroff in their explorations of Tswana historical consciousness, contained in genres they describe as "distinctly non-Eurocentric."[8] They find evidence of these genres in the symbolic actions and cultural practices of everyday life, which, drawing on accounts of nineteenth-century, mostly white, literate observers, earlier twentieth-century anthropological work in the area, and the historical writings of early twentieth-century black chroniclers, they consciously instate as their archive. The Comaroffs' work has been criticized for failing to recognize that, along with these genres of everyday cultural practices, Batswana also expressed their historical consciousness in narrative forms. At the core of this debate is the question of whether Batswana were exceptional in Southern

(I. Schapera, *Praise Poems of Tswana Chiefs* – Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965). The testimonies reproduced in various Native Affairs Department publications, such as N. J. van Warmelo (Ed.), *History of Matiwane and the Amangwane Tribe as told by Msebenzi to his Kinsman Albert Hlongwane* (Department of Native Affairs Ethnological Publications, Pretoria: Government Printer, 1935), may yet come to be seen to fulfill these conditions.

[7] See J. Hodgson, *The God of the Xhosa: A Study of the Origins and Development of the Traditional Concepts of the Supreme Being* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1982), Chapter 3.

[8] J. Comaroff and J. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), vol. 2, p. 43.

Africa in not having elaborated historical annals and narratives of descent and accession.[9] By not acknowledging Tswana narrativity, John Peel and Terence Ranger imply, the Comaroffs repeat the act of denying that Africans produced precolonial histories of their own. Although the Comaroffs' work on the other genres undoubtedly expands our understanding of historical consciousness, the matter of whether precolonial Batswana made use of historical narratives turns on the extant documentary archive and its careful analysis as archive, a task yet worthy of attention.

Although these advances begin to tell us something about how precolonial farmers produced something akin to the modern idea of history, and about other forms of their historical consciousness, a far greater silence surrounds the history-producing activities of early hunter–gatherers and pastoralists.[10] The lacuna in the case of hunter–gatherers is exacerbated by the perception that they had no need for history because they supposedly did not need to lay claim to ownership of land, nor did they need histories to support the monopolization of power by leaders, because their societies were represented as egalitarian. The result was the establishment of the view among historians and anthropologists that the foragers, collectively termed San and identified as a homogenous cultural grouping, had "myths" or "folklore" rather than "histories." The substantial Bleek/Lloyd archive of recorded oral accounts by San informants (discussed below) has typically been read as a collection of such myths. The silence is also the consequence of grave difficulties in establishing a nuanced chronology for the other primary source of cognitive material pertinent to a foraging way of life – the rock art – and, flowing from that, a strong structuralist emphasis in the work of the leading rock art scholars, despite their commitment to materialist approaches.

In the case of pastoralists similarly culturally classified, in this case as Khoe or Khoekhoe, the absence of extant cognitive archives like the Bleek/Lloyd collection or the rock art is still more telling; a situation compounded by the almost total obliteration of established pastoralist communities by 1810. Indeed, when the first Europeans encountered the Khoekhoen in the Cape, they denied them the capacity for language itself, never mind "knowledge" of any kind. Khoekhoe activities, expressed in ritual or dance, were interpreted as religious, or in the numerous instances where any form of consciousness was considered skeptically, as merely

[9] See the Comaroffs' responses to their critics in the introduction to vol. 2, *Of Revelation and Revolution.*

[10] E. Gellner, *Plough, Sword and Book: The Structure of Human History* (London: Collins Harvill, 1988), chapters 2 and 3 on cognitive transformations. Our chapter explicitly leaves open for further deliberation the limits of the extension of the term "history," the issue of its form (Is history by definition narrative in form?), and the possible notions of time it may encompass.

expressions of pleasure. Regarded as being without reason, the inhabitants of the Cape were deemed to have neither rights to land nor, in extreme instances, any religion. The work of David Chidester shows how in the 300 years that followed the first contacts, European discussions of Khoekhoe religion – the only area in which the possibility of some form of Khoekhoe knowledge was entertained – fluctuated between denials and discoveries; shifts that can be correlated with growing or diminishing pressures to control land and people in a frontier situation. European commentators denied the existence of Khoekhoe religion when resources were directly contested, but in intervening periods religion was the object of their discovery and intensive investigation, and the information was taken up and made part of the establishment of effective colonial administration.[11]

In general, when Khoekhoen spoke and were recorded, they did not provide extensive descriptions of their societies' past as they saw it. Even in Peter Kolb's massive ethnography of the Cape Khoekhoen in the early eighteenth century there is only one short paragraph in which Khoekhoe reflections on their past are given – to the effect that they had once known how to sow and reap but had forgotten how.[12] Neither such traditions as there may have been nor Khoekhoe mythology and folklore were of interest to the literate until the nineteenth century. Even then, such descriptions were few. This was in part because it was among the Khoekhoen who had converted to Christianity and come to live on the mission stations that it was possible for such texts to be collected. These people had consciously rejected "the Devil and all his works," which were thought to include their preconversion life and experiences, which may, in any case, have been too painful for them to want to remember. In 1821, the leading missionary at the Moravian mission station of Genadendal, the Rev. H. P. Hallbeck, wrote that he was attempting "to collect their traditions respecting their origins and early history. Our Missionaries here always thought that they knew nothing about it, but the fact is, that they were ashamed and afraid to tell their tales, as on their conversion to Christianity they were led to despise their old sayings and customs."[13]

[11] D. Chidester, "Bushman Religion: Open, Closed and New Frontiers," in P. Skotnes (Ed.), *Miscast: Negotiating the Presence of the Bushmen* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 1996), pp. 51–59. Also see his essay "Mutilated Meaning: European Interpretations of Khoisan Languages of the Body," also in *Miscast*, pp. 24–38, even pages only.

[12] P. Kolb, *Caput bonae spei hodiernum, das ist Vollständige Beschreibung des Africanischen Vorgebürges der Guten Hoffnung*, 2 vols., Nürnberg (Peter Conrad Monrath, 1719), vol. I, pp. 353–4.

[13] Letter from H. P. Hallbeck, August 6, 1821, *Periodical Accounts relating to the Missions of the Church of the United Brethren, established among the Heathen*, VIII, London, pp. 197–8 (The "Bushmen" were described as "run-away Hottentots").

Hallbeck convinced various old men that they could talk to him of such matters without fear and managed to provide some description of what the Genadendal Khoekhoen thought of their past; notably their ideas as to the origin of the "Bushmen." What survived, both on the Moravian stations and elsewhere, were personal testimonies. They were, in the first instance, spiritual autobiographies, which every Moravian was required to produce and which other converts generally had to enunciate to demonstrate their acceptance of Christianity. As was so often the case, though, the distance between public confession and the description of the evils suffered in the past was short. Khoekhoe politics from about 1800 to the early 1850s was thus based on what was to be a typically South African combination of the personal histories of oppression and the political demand for the rectification of abuses.[14]

The idea of Khoesan inhabiting a self-contained universe in which there was no relevance for historical material is rendered questionable by the now substantial studies – focused primarily on the San rather than the Khoekhoen – that show that, rather than constituting culturally separate communities, the activities of hunting and gathering were frequently the resort of the most marginal groups in a society, specifically of those excluded from patron–client pastoral relationships, from access to land and other forms of accumulating wealth and power. Over a decade of revisionist scholarship has shown that even when practicing a foraging mode of existence, such communities interacted extensively with their neighbors (see Chapter 2). In practicing a hunting and gathering way of life, such groups laid claim to the resources of particular territories, inhabited regular settlement nodes, and followed established, flexible, annual migration routes, over which they sometimes fought to assert rights. Kinship relations, as well as gift-exchange networks that cut across kinship ties, were critically important subsistence strategies that were often long delayed. The recall of and commitment to them required maintenance in memory.

The idea of San having no need for history also rests on primordial assumptions about the nature of San identity. These persist even in recent

[14] In general, on this process see E. Elbourne, *Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799–1853* (Montreal & Kingston, Ithaca & London: McGill University Press, 2002); S. Trapido, "The Emergence of Liberalism and the making of 'Hottentot Nationalism,' 1815–1834," *Collected Seminar Papers of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London: The Societies of Southern Africa in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, 17 (1992); R. Ross, "The Kat River, Rebellion and Khoikhoi nationalism: the fate of an ethnic identification," *Kronos: a Journal of Cape History, 24* (1997), pp. 91–105; the clearest expression of these views is to be found in the *South African Commercial Advertiser* September 3, 1834.