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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this short paper is to look at the similarities between personal reminiscences and Africanist historiography and to suggest reasons for such similarities. I hope to show that even though Africanist historiography is bourgeois, the reminiscences of the people from the lower ranks of society do smack of the idea at the centre of Africanist historiography, namely romanticisation of the past. (1) Topics that draw from or are based on personal reminiscences touch on a lot of other related areas and being unable to go into some of them here is unavoidable. One such area has to do with fitting our informants within a specific class category. The concept of class has proved extremely difficult in Southern Africa in general and, in particular, when applied to people of similar experiences as those whose testimonies we present here. Added to problems that scholars have identified in this area, the difficulty that those working in oral history have to confront is that of self-perception among the people who are interviewed. (2) The point that we might make in parenthesis here is that, as is well-known, the development of clear class consciousness is not a linear process because of the intervention of countervailing factors in such a process. In the specific case of our informants, it has to be borne in mind that colonialism did not decompose all features of social relations in colonies like Basutoland. Hence, in many ways, people such as those we interviewed have to be seen as 'having, throughout their lives, experienced or lived through two forms of social relations each with its own specific characteristics. (3) Consequently,

¹ The word 'past' is used here to refer to two periods: the past as the precolonial era- the terrain of Africanist historiography- and our informants' past life-experiences which fall within the colonial era.

² The problem of class in oral history is, in fact, so widespread that it has also being encountered in industrialised countries like Britain. At a conference there on Oral History and Labour History, held in May 1986, it was being argued that, on the basis of evidence, the concept of 'class consciousness' is not as useful as 'subjective consciousness'. In other words, the problem is a huge one which, it seems to me, still needs to be worked out. Robin Cohen discusses this and other related issues in his article "Resistance and Hidden Forms of Consciousness among African Workers", in Hazel Johnson and Henry Bernstein, (eds.) Third World Lives of Struggle, London, 1982.

I have used a rather nebulous phrase, "the ordinary people", for purposes of distinguishing between our informants and another section of society referred to here, that is, the petty bourgeois African leaders.

Testimonies.

Personal reminiscences that are to be presented here are a part of a collection of the Oral History Project of the Institute of Southern African Studies at the National University of Lesotho. Between October 1982 and October 1985 we interviewed some twenty men who had experiences as migrant workers in various sectors of the South African economy. All but informant worked in the mines. The one informant who did not work in the mines altogether worked in the Orange Free State farms as a boy during school vacations and spent most of his adult working life as a dockworker in the Cape. The ages of our informants ranged between 51 and 82 and the most formally educated informant said he had gone as far as standard six. Most of them started working in the mines in the nineteen thirties. One informant said he started working in the mines in 1928. (1)

Drawing from the experiences of people of these ages might at first seem an absurdity: obviously all our informants were born and lived during the colonial period and hence we might question the validity of juxtaposing the romanticisation of the pre-colonial era- in Africanist historiography- and romanticisation of the past that falls within the colonial era- the past of our informants which Africanism views with abomination. What makes such juxtaposition possible, however, is the fact that our informants experienced some of the precolonial institutions and social practices: some in their traditional form, some in their modified forms, but all, it may be argued, in their different stages of transition. In this way then, we can see, in each case, romanticisation of social practices and institutions from the precolonial era.

¹ The Oral History Project of the National University of Lesotho was funded by the Ford Foundation.

AFRICANIST HISTORIOGRAPHY AND PERSONAL REMINISCENCES

Africanism is a creation of the independence movement in Africa. It was used as a mobilising slogan by the elites who were to become African leaders at independence. In mobilising the ordinary people, they pointed out to them how the African heritage- the African culture, social organisation and political institutions had been undermined by colonial domination. The reference to all these precolonial institutions and practices was, by implication, a rejection of a suggestion by the colonial historiography that Africa had no history.⁽¹⁾ Used as a political slogan, the African past had to appeal to the ordinary people if it were to be effective. Thus the precolonial economic system was described as having been egalitarian with those who had helping out the needy; the political systems as having been democratic allowing every adult male to participate in the decision making processes and society in general as having been so ordered that the whole community resembled a family.

This is the view that our informants held of the past in which they lived. Here also, we are given the impression that the past was a Garden of Eden. This message comes out very vividly in the informants' descriptions of the social fabric: in the olden days people loved, helped and had mercy towards one another. The point that has to be made about this perception is that it is independent of the sloganeering of the leaders of the Africanists: these people are talking about what they experienced not that they learned from Africanist teaching. I shall present here reminiscences of four informants who are comparing life today and life in the earlier days. The significant point to bear in mind here is that they were interviewed at different places, at different times and yet their reminiscences have a lot in common.

The life of today is much more difficult than that of of the olden days...this one is much more difficult... this one of nowadays...the one of the earlier days was actually a very good life because people loved each other...even if I did not have a cow, I could still eat milk in those days...now this nowadays I can not

¹ The brief outline of Africanism presented here is the one that is immediately relevant the discussion in this paper. For a fuller discussion on Africanist perspectives see, for example, Henry Bernstein and Jacques Depelchin, "The Object of African History: A Materialist Perspective", *History in African*, 5 and 6, 1978; and A. Temu and B. Swai, *Historians and Africanist History: A Critique*, London, 1981.

eat milk if I do not have a cow....(1)*

The second reminiscence is by an informant who talked about there having been a lot of rain in the past because there was love:

....even the people of the earlier times saw a lot of rain pouring down it- it- er, they had love....

and then continued:

In the earlier days it did not matter whether you were a poor person, you will be ploughed for, it did not matter whether you were a poor person, you will eat milk, it did not matter whether you were a widow who did not have anybody she could turn to, you will find that you are still living like a woman who has a husband....Your yield is fetched from the fields....(2)

Another informant talked about the compassion, love and mercy towards one another as well as the respect that the youth used to have for elderly people:

Ache, the life of today is difficult...it is difficult because it is useless...in the earlier days life was good...because people were compassionate towards each other...these nowadays the people of today, he is looking forward to another getting into trouble...that is the big thing that one, another person should be left there to suffer so that he can see, whereas in the earlier days it was not like that...when a person was in trouble he would be helped by the others...and they would get rid of that thing trouble...these days- the life of nowadays is not life, altogether...it is bad.... Er, in fact, I would like to speak this way: the people of the earlier days they used to love each other...they had mercy, there was such a thing as I could borrow- even a cow I could borrow it from you and you could lend it to me...er, a person who has a child and the

¹ Informant 8, aged 74 at the time of interview. Interviewed at Ha Leshoele in the Leribe district in April 1983. Promoted to the position of Sergeant Major while serving in Italy during World War II; became mine induna responsible for two mines and a shaft in the Orange Free State mines.

² Informant 6, aged 76 at the time of interview. Interviewed at Ha 'Mamathe in the Teyateyaneng district in February 1983. Had extensive experiences as a worker in both the mining industry and the farms. Came home in the late nineteen sixties and worked at Letseng-la-Terai diamond diggings as an individual prospector but later left and settled on agriculture.

* These translations from Sesotho into English have been left as literal as possible. Three dots within a quotation indicate a pause while four indicate that some words have been omitted. Dashes have been used to show false-starts in informants' speech. The words that have been underlined are the untranslatable ones. Words within square brackets have been inserted to make quotations clearer.

one who does not have a child, they could not be differentiated...if there were animals in the village here, that boy when he takes his family's animals out to graze, he would take all those animals...a boy did not eat in one house...yes, a young man of your age, if cattle are being looked after by a small boy in the grazing area there, he would go and relieve that boy from the grazing area...now as for you these days, when it rains there, le kena ka phepheseleng and you drink joala, the rain is killing the child that side... (1)

For another informant, hatred and fear among people towards each other are characteristic of the life of today; one can no longer go and borrow from a neighbour:

The big difference about which I can complain which in fact is a big one, I realised- it is- it is that the children of today they are afraid of each other, they are afraid- they- they- they hate each other...that is the difference that I see of the hatred that exists among us people....ha ho motho ea okhang mollo, have you seen motho ea okhileng mollo? He would regard himself as a very low person who is making himself cheap in the eyes of that person...even that one to whose place he is going to ask for fire he says: "How can you come and ask for fire at my place? Fire? People do not ask for fire at my place..." If you go and ask for salt, "My salt does not go out..." There is no helping each other here, there is no cooperation among the people here...we have failed in our families....

The informant went further to talk about politics in which, as he put it, "....we are killed of what is imagined of us...."; about how the authority of the chiefs has been undermined; how family scandals are no longer kept within the concerned family and concluded by pointing out,

....we were put in positions of respect...banna!
the way we were living in a nice way! (2)

In short, just as the African precolonial era is romanticised in Africanist historiography, so did our informants see the past in which they lived as the time of glory and splendour and the present as the time of difficulties.

¹ Informant 7, aged 62 at the time of interview. Interviewed at Ha Telukhunoana in the Teyateyaneng district in February 1983. Worked in the mines and saw the 1946 mine workers' strike; got involved in the Evaton bus boycott as Lerashea but very tongue tied about his experiences as Lerashea.

² Informant 15, aged 57 at the time of interview. Interviewed at Ha Mofoka in the Maseru district in August 1984. Became a priest of one of the 'informal' churches as a result of the general hazards of working underground and specifically because of an accident which he experienced and in which a cousin of his died.

Romanticisation of the past in Africanist Historiography.

As pointed out earlier, Africanism started as one of the mobilising slogans of the independence movements. The leadership of these movements consisted of the African elites whose major disgruntlement with colonialism was that they were excluded from the decision making machineries in their countries and denied the benefits of the colonial economy. Their attempt to change this state of affairs could not succeed if they could not secure the following of the other sectors of society. Securing such a following, on the other hand, necessitated finding aspirations with which the rest of the population could identify. In other words, they could not receive the support of the masses if the latter could not see themselves gaining anything from the proceeds of a course they were being asked to support. This common ground then, was found by denigrating colonialism and denouncing everything that had resulted from it; colonialism was portrayed as a system that had negatively affected every member of society in a similar manner. On the other hand, the memory of "the good old past" was invoked with a promise that as soon as colonialism had been defeated, things would be restored to what they used to be. In this, the African elites were talking to people most of whose view of the past was as has been illustrated with reminiscences quoted above and to who, therefore, the course sounded worth supporting: the defeat of colonialism and the restoration of a society in which people had mercy towards and helped each other out; a society in which there was no difference between the poor and the rich.

Now, once in power, the new leaders encouraged the writing of the kind of history that would perpetuate this view, Africanist historiography. To this end, as Temu and Swai have pointed out,

Departments of history and Institutes of African studies were established, conferences held, and results of the scholarly enterprise published in learned journals. The various disciplines of anthropology, linguistics, biology and archaeology were brought to bear on the recovery of the African past. (1)

Where colonial historiography had portrayed Africa before the advent of

¹ Temu and Swai, Historians and Africanist History, p. 21

colonialism as the 'dark continent', the Africanist social scientists were expected to dig out the 'facts' and write of the African past that had been deliberately obliterated by prejudices of colonial historiography. In this sense and like most other things about neo-colonial Africa, Africanist historiography differs with metropolitan bourgeois historiography only in content but not in terms of the questions asked. Seen within the context of this latter point, as Temu and Swai have suggested, Africanist historiography is, in fact, a branch of metropolitan bourgeois historiography. (1) Also, just as bourgeois historiography is an element of bourgeois ideology, so is Africanist historiography an element of petty bourgeois nationalism in Africa in the first place, and of bourgeois ideology in general in the last instance. Or, to put it differently, just as bourgeois historiography is directly connected with bourgeois ideology and social relations, in the same way, this is true in the case of Africanist historiography, and neo-colonial social relations in Africa. The purpose of writing history in both cases is to justify the socio-political order. It is not that African regimes themselves take this kind of history seriously. As Professor T. O. Ranger has pointed out, the younger generation of African historians have expressed dissatisfaction with Africanist historiography on this score. The latter, he points out, argue that

The African past has been important as a source of pride and sometimes as a legitimising charter for the present regimes...and, in any case, contemporary regimes merely manipulate a version of the past and in practice display a commitment to modernist transformation which disregards African realities. (2)

The point is clear: people's perceptions of and sentiments about the past have been drawn into petty bourgeois nationalist ideology and enhanced by presenting a particular version of the past in order to popularise petty bourgeois nationalism and to legitimise the regimes that came to power at independence.

¹ Temu and Swai, Historians and Africanist History, p. 5.

² T. O. Ranger, "Towards a Usable Past", in Christopher Fyfe, African Studies since 1945: A Tribute to Basil Davidson, London, 1976. p. 22.

Romanticisation of the Past in a General Context.

However, we still remain with another problem, namely, the reason for romanticising the past among the ordinary people. The most useful way to approach this problem is to advance an observation of the way the past is remembered in all strata of society, that is, an observation which applies not only to the ordinary people but in society in general. Such an observation must, however, remain tentative.

The work of psychologists with human memory provides a useful starting point here. Broadly speaking, psychologists are agreed that the process of memory storing is a selective one: people tend to remember those things in their life experiences which are regarded as pleasant, whether because they are socially acceptable or because they enhance the person's prestige. By implication, unpleasant experiences are either genuinely forgotten or deliberately suppressed when the past is talked about. (1) In so far as it is those things enhance the prestige of the individual that are 'remembered', this action of human memory can be seen as utilitarian. (2) And, it seems to me that this utilitarian nature of reminiscences can be extended and used to provide explanations of a more practical nature as to the romanticisation of the past within a broad context. That is, explanations derived from concrete daily life

¹ Debates on memory in oral history are extremely complex. Obviously on other factors such as the recentness of the event, the background of the individual and a host of others have a role to play in what is remembered, the way it is remembered, what is forgotten and what is deliberately suppressed. Another point that needs to be made here is that it is also true that depending on the mood of the interview, unpleasant experiences can be recalled and, in fact, can just as utilitarian. In so far as the testimonies we collected are concerned, there seems to be a transition in which experiences that were unpleasant at the time when they happened are now eulogised. For example, most informants remembered how, during their boyhood days, a stranger could just catch a boy looking after animals and beat him without reason. This is an experience which they now recollect with relish. For more detailed discussion on memory in oral history see for example, Allan Baddeley, "Limitations of Human Memory: Implications for the Design of Retrospective Surveys", and, Diana Gittins, "Oral History, Reliability and Recollection" both in L. Moss and H. Goldstein, (eds), The Recall Method in Social Surveys, London, 1979; Don Locke, Memory, Macmillan Press, 1971; David Henige, Oral Historiography, Longman, 1982; and more recently, A. Seldon, and J. Pappworth, By Word of Mouth: Elite Oral History, London, 1983.

² Aristotle went so far as to suggest that people "are continually talking of the past, because they enjoy remembering", which suggestion is similar to saying people remember those experiences that are enjoyable to remember. Quoted in Robert N. Butler, "The Life Review: An Interpretation of Reminiscence s in the Aged", Psychology, 26, 1963. p. 65.

encounters and experiences.

There seems to be a way in which romanticisation of the past is related to problems or 'crises' of the present. At times like this, the past is remembered as that time when problems of a certain kind did not occur. Or, alternatively, similar problems of the past and strategies of solving them are recalled. In the latter case, the point that is stressed is the fact that it used to be easy to solve problems in the earlier days- whether because resources were there or the social atmosphere made it possible. We have seen how, for example, the young men in the old days used to relieve young boys from looking after animals when it rained while the young men of today "ba kena ka phepheseleng.... and drink joala". Thus, at one level, it can be argued that a specific theme unites both the ordinary people's perceptions of the past and Africanism. And, that theme seems to be the lack of theory with which to understand and explain the present.

Yet there are significant differences of detail for romanticisation of the past in the ordinary people's perceptions of the past, on the one hand, and in Africanism, on the other. Reminiscences of the past among the ordinary people are not intended and do not pretend to be scientific, let alone theoretical. This does not mean that they do not have their explanations for changes and present problems. I asked some of our informants reasons for changes that have occurred during their lives resulting in these 'difficult' times. Responses that I obtained were always related to colonialism.

British colonialism in Lesotho did not lead to the introduction of social relations similar to those that existed in Britain itself. Instead, it engaged in a selective process of dismantling those precolonial practices that hindered the type of colonialism that was to be introduced in Lesotho, on the one hand, and leaving out the useful and/ or 'harmless' ones, on the other. Most of our informants, as the reminiscences presented here illustrate, experienced the latter and they lived to see them fade or undergo certain modifications under colonial and neo-colonial rules. These changes were new, unfamiliar, and bad as compared to the experienced, known 'good old' social practices. It is one of those practices that our informants experienced in their 'original',

'traditional' form which, however, changed in their lifetimes that provide a good example. We shall follow the case of an informant who talked about the erosion of parents' control over their children- one of the signs of the evolution of individualism- as an example. The informant attributed this change to a specific aspect of colonialism in Lesotho, the introduction of the magistrates' courts:

Yes [life] is difficult...you can also see, look at the dresses of the women of today...are they (newly weds) given dresses when they come here [i.e. when they first arrive at the bridegroom's home]? Is she dressed and shown dresses for women [by the groom's family]? Is it not that you yourself [the young man of today] come with her already having dressed her? From court? Your father Court has instructed you...and dressed her...laughter...he gave you the rules...khelek...ache...laughter... (1)

However, idealism lies at the bottom of all attempts to understand such changes more meaningfully. Hence colonialism is not understood as a feature of capitalism but as one of the acts of Satan. Again let us take three testimonies starting with that of the informant above:

As for me I do not know, I think [these changes] are caused by Satan...the Devil....(2)

Truly I am not able to know but when I am alone me I think that [these changes] are caused by time, time, it is it that- that- that has come that one that the Bible said in later days you will see by events, er, families will fight each other, the daughter-in-law will clash with the mother-in-law, the son will clash with his father er, there will be great confusion... within the country- the spirit of wars just like we are- all these we see, are they not there? Now in my awareness and thinking I think it is time...(3)

And the third informant:

It (change) is caused, as for me when I look at it I see that time has come...yes, time is running out... Just like it is said that things will go and go, people will eat each other like animals...this is the time. this one...like you can already see these killings of each other that are there ...now the time has come... the only thing that is remaining is the judgement, that

¹ Informant 15.

² Informant 15.

³ Informant 6.

is the only thing that is left...(1)

Of course Africanism also has a tendency to blame colonialism for what is wrong in African today without looking into the inner workings of capitalism and is also heavily streaked with idealism. To illustrate the point, we shall take a writing by one of the African leaders, Jomo Kenyatta, as our example. One of the chapters in his Facing Mount Kenya opens with the words "The Kikuyu system of government prior to the advent of Europeans was based on true democratic principles" and ends:

The annexation of the ancestral lands by the Europeans has robbed the African of the use of the productive asset on which his entire economic life depended. It has also interfered with the whole tribal organization whose genuine cooperation is based on constant communion with the ancestral spirits through which tribal law and custom, morality, and religion are maintained. (2)

However, even though, in common with personal reminiscences, Africanism lacks theory, the significant difference is that in Africanism theory is consciously rejected as, it is argued, it is ideological and 'biased'. As a result, the task that was set for Africanist historians by the neo-colonial regimes was that of digging the 'hard facts' and 'letting them speak for themselves'. Now, some of these 'hard facts' were obtained from oral traditions and personal reminiscences and we have already seen the tendency towards romanticisation with the latter. By their very nature, oral traditions are a collection or recollection of carefully selected facts, events, genealogies and social practices of the past. Thus, rejecting and therefore lacking theory, these traditions and personal reminiscences were presented by Africanist historians as "true" African history as opposed to African history as written by European historians. Hence, the problem here is that of methods. As Bernstein and Depelchin remarked about the early issues of the journal, History in Africa, the definition of method in Africanist historiography is a limited one. They wrote:

The great majority of contributions [to the early issues

¹ Informant 9, aged 69 at the time of interview. Interviewed at Alwynskop in the Quthing district in April, 1984. Worked in the Kimberley diamond mines for a while before joining South African Railways where he worked until he was pensioned in 1980.

² The chapter is reproduced in Wilfred Cartey and Martin Kilson, The African Reader: Independent Africa, Vintage Books, 1970. pp.19-28.

of History in Africa⁷ have seized on a narrow and limiting definition of method as the development of techniques of collecting and evaluating data. (1)

Writing within this limited definition of method, and faced with informants' romantic reminiscences of the past, Africanist historians fail to realise that those who tell stories about the past, to use Robert Gray's words,

tell their own story but as very historian knows, that story has had to be discovered by a complex process of reading and 'decoding' the sources; and this process involves a 'dialogue' between the evidence and the conceptual framework of the historian. (2)

As a result and in service to contemporary regimes, they

preach contentment, speak of the wonderful past, and reiterate how difficult it is to write a work of history. (3)

while those they work for point to the difficulties in restoring things to what they used to be.

But because theory is consciously rejected and fiercely guarded against in Africanist historiography, we have to locate Africanism within a wider context of social change and resistance to it. Africanism as an official ideology of present regimes has been used as a point of convergence of interests in social formations otherwise composed of social groups with differing interests and aspirations. In a case where it can be argued that the ordinary people desire change and the African petty bourgeois nationalists pretend to want change while in fact "committed to modernist transformation", Africanism can be best seen as a facade behind which is hidden divergent aspirations of different social groups. And, more importantly, the propagation of Africanism has to be seen within the context of a 'struggle' in which the maintenance of the status quo- the neo-colonial order- depends on the continued acceptance of Africanism among the ordinary people.

¹ Bernstein and Depelchin, "The Object of African History", p. 1. Italics in original.

² Quoted in Temu and Swai, Historians and Africanist History, p. 12.

³ Temu and Swai, Historians and Africanist History, p. 8.

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