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"... my poetic for history begins with an exploration of two declarations. One declaration is that histories are not the past but all the varied ways of knowing the past. The other is that histories as ways of knowing the past are the socialising process insofar as that process is conscious and symbolic."

from 'A Poetic for History'
by Greg Dening

Introduction

The Swaziland Oral History Project (SWOHP) is a research programme on precolonial history. The chief aim of the project is the collection, preservation and analysis of oral traditions about the precolonial period of south-east African history. The project is based in Swaziland as Swazi oral traditions are amongst the richest in all of southern Africa. The project is making its collection of oral tradition, and its research findings available in published form to the wider community.

Published Precolonial History

The 'popularizing' and publishing activities of SWOHP are a response to the need throughout southern Africa for more easily accessible African

history. They are also informed by the need to continue to counteract still prevalent racist myths about pre-white Africa and the ideological manipulation of tradition by power-seeking 'tribal authorities'.

The most significant reasons for the near-absence of published precolonial history are to be found in the ideological needs of the apartheid regime from the 1960's onwards: justification of white monopolization of the land and of white domination, through reference to the historical myths that the interior of southern Africa was largely empty of people when the first white settlers arrived, and that blacks were 'a savage, ignorant and heathen people' who gained access to civilization technology and religion through subordination to white rule.

The historical justification of apartheid underwent a shift in emphasis with the institution of the policy of 'separate development' and the creation of the self-governing homelands. These policies are legitimated through reference to the historical myth that, since time immemorial, the Bantu-speaking inhabitants of southern Africa have been divided into separate and mutually antagonistic ethnic identities. It is argued that it is only the firm hand of white control that prevents deeply-entrenched historical differences from plunging the sub-continent into 'inter-tribal conflict and chaos'! These claims about immutable ethnic diversity are used to justify the establishment of the Bantustans apart from white South Africa, and each other, and underpin South Africa's notorious migrant labour system. Obsessively promoted, these myths and various mutations thereof, are responsible for the particular biases of precolonial history as it appears in many ethnographic histories, school textbooks and other official or semi-official publications.

In the last decade and a half, historians working within more Africanist and/or Marxist paradigms have begun to challenge these myths and to provide alternative and more historically accurate accounts of the precolonial past. The existence of farming communities south of the Limpopo as early as the third century AD is now well-known. Detailed studies of the technology and socio-political systems of the early hunter-gatherers, and the later arrivals, the Bantu-speaking pastorialists, have finally dismissed the image of the 'simple native',

at least from the pages of academic studies.

While these advances have begun to correct the more notorious of the racist historical myths, many recent accounts of the precolonial past continue to be dominated by notions of ethnicity and ethnic categorization; to focus on the origins and early migrations of 'ethnic' groups; and to reproduce the history of prominent historical rulers and great battles. The work of the radical historians on pre-twentieth century history is, moreover, largely concerned with the processes of colonization, and black-white interaction. There are few detailed and comprehensive studies of precolonial societies in their own right. Problems of this kind also characterize more popular accounts of precolonial history where they are compounded by a tendency to romanticize pre-white life in southern Africa. Rulers and ruled are represented as living in harmony; chiefship is depicted as being responsible and responsive to the people; poverty and need are unknown, and life is one long rural idyll.

Some of these limitations reflect the nature of the available evidence. Oral traditions are the single most important source of evidence for the period. On the whole, they tend to be framed in ethnic terms, and to be concerned with the history of past rulers and epic battles. It is not surprizing to find this material shaping the historians' accounts. The corpus of relevant oral data is itself not extensive. The problems faced by the guild historians are compounded for the popularizers or textbook writers of this history; for the most part the historians' discussions of evidence are highly academic; recourse to evidence drawn from other disciplines (archaeology, linguistics, demography, ecology, etc.) to augment the oral data demands a command of a variety of technical vocabularies. The result is that written precolonial history is often slender, tedious and complex.

Oral Traditions and precolonial History

Oral traditions lie at the heart of the reconstruction of precolonial history. They invest it with narrative coherence and interest, making it come alive! Of course, like written precolonial history itself, they are not objective, true representations of the precolonial past. They are

affected by the vagaries of human memory, and are often repeatedly subjected over time to manipulation in the pursuance of specific interests.

Nor do oral traditions exist in a value-free context in the present. Today, oral traditions are largely the preserve of either the elders of rural communities (often people without any formal education), or the modern tribal authorities. Oral traditions related by the former group are frequently dismissed as 'fireside tales', myths or 'primitive mumbo-jumbo'. A pervasive view amongst school teachers in particular is that written history is more authoritative and reliable than oral history.

Oral traditions actively promoted by tribal authorities or institutions such as Inkatha, are used to justify their monopoly of power and resources. In such cases, oral traditions are presented as intact survivals from the past. These relics are considered to be accurate and unchanging accounts of the remote past.

Both of these views of oral traditions are unsatisfactory and need to be taken account of in the promotion of precolonial history. The first view of oral traditions as a load of 'mumbo-jumbo' ignores the valuable core of historical data contained in oral traditions. It implicitly reinforces the racist stereotype that Africans have no history.

The second view of oral traditions as authoritative accounts of the remote past fails to acknowledge that oral traditions are open to political manipulation, selective promotion and the depredations of faulty memory. The particular accounts of the precolonial past advanced by these tribal authorities are often difficult to challenge as alternative versions of past events are repressed and critical content analysis is made difficult. This situation is exacerbated by the ease with which official traditions and accounts of the precolonial past gain for themselves the mantle of 'progressive' history because precolonial history is largely free of white activity.

The writing of popular or textbook precolonial history needs therefore to challenge both of these views of oral traditions, to offer analytical tools for people to assess both the strengths and the weaknesses of the

oral traditions with which they are confronted in daily life, and which form the primary sources of precolonial history.

Accessible alternative precolonial history aims, among other things, to counter the yet pervasive view that southern African blacks had little history worth recording before the arrival of the first whites; and to demonstrate clearly that precolonial societies were not 'static', 'inferior' or 'simple' societies by illuminating the complex relationship of precolonial societies to their environments, the interface between different societies at different points in time (such as the interaction between Khoisan and Bantu-speaking peoples and the widespread processes of the incorporation and absorption of the former by the latter). This focus moves away from a preoccupation with the processes of colonization to reclaim a long and rich African history. It suggests that the very term 'precolonial' is an inadequate description of its content, for the term collapses together many different eras and epochs, and implicitly asserts that the moment of European colonization is the major marker in African history..

Accessible alternative 'precolonial' history must go further however and challenge the essentially romantic and racist ideas about the 'precolonial' past which suggest that life in Africa before the advent of the first whites was a rural idyll. It must explore rather than obscure the differences between rulers and ruled in 'precolonial' times and illuminate the processes whereby the ruled came to be subordinated to and, indeed, exploited by their rulers. It can show something of the processes behind the emergence and dissolution of ethnic identities (many now no longer known) in 'precolonial' times, and of the roots and development of the ethnic identities now current. This emphasis on development and change can provide an important corrective to the pervasive idea of modern ethnic identities as fixed and historically immutable, situating the phenomenon of ethnic mobilization in the constantly shifting contexts of competition over time for resources.

The significance of a focus within 'precolonial' history on evidence, and on oral traditions in particular, is that instead of being presented with an alternative account of the past, readers and students are stimulated to consider versions of history critically. This approach

opens up an opportunity for the construction of 'history' to be shown to have multiple locations. One such location becomes that claimed by the readers and students themselves through activity. This approach focuses attention on the contests and the research that produce, reproduce and change historical knowledge.

Producing Texts on 'Precolonial' History for Use in Schools

Motivated by the concerns outlined above, the SWOHP investigated the feasibility of producing two kinds of texts on 'precolonial' history: inexpensive booklets for a general readership; and/or materials for use in schools. On the whole, the channels for the distribution of popular history booklets which exist in South Africa (trade unions, literacy groups, women's organisations, community organisations) are not available, or not favourably disposed towards this kind of project in Swaziland. The absence of an appropriate distribution network for adult material, coupled with a movement towards a revised schools history in Swaziland, led the SWOHP to concentrate on the production of materials for use by secondary school students.

Revision of the Swazi secondary school history syllabus is necessary as only 6% of the present syllabus deals with Swazi history (and of that, the percentage of the amount allocated to the 'precolonial' period is minimal). Southern African history as a whole is more comprehensively treated, but the overwhelming emphasis of the syllabus is on colonial and European history. Teachers and students experience considerable difficulties in coming to grips with the enormous body of foreign history. Furthermore, the section on Swazi history makes little attempt to engage with notions of tradition and culture which are pervasive in Swazi society, and which are taught as a separate school subject. The deficiencies of the existing syllabus are widely recognised, but changes have been slow in coming because of the absence of suitable and better teaching materials.

The materials which the SWOHP is producing are likely to provide the basis for a major syllabus revision in Swaziland. These materials will significantly increase the amount of 'precolonial' and Swazi history

taught in schools. The focus of the materials on oral tradition will attempt to make Swaziland's rich heritage of oral traditions accessible to students, at the same time providing a basic understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of oral traditions as historical soures, and of the role which oral traditions play in modern Swazi society.

The latter, more methodological purposes of the project's materials suggested that the publications should not take the form of additional teaching materials, but rather that of the prescribed textbook. In the form of additional materials, published oral traditions run the risk of being taken at face value (of ending up being used in the 'tradition and custom' class rather than the history class); of being treated as myth; or of being read solely for entertainment. An already weighty history syllabus in which teachers struggle to complete the textbook leaves little opportunity for the use of additional materials. In addition, the Swazi education system places the burden of purchasing additional materials on the teacher. The textbook is provided free of charge. Swazi history teachers are, on the whole, undertrained and lack the necessary confidence and motivation to use new material. The Ministry of Education, in turn, is reluctant to introduce and promote additional materials. The result is that additional materials are seldom used in Swazi schools. Finally, the existing textbook lacks both the necessary substantive content and methodological focus to provide an adequate context for the kind of material produced by the SWOHP. These considerations prompted the SWOHP to undertake the production of a 'precolonial' history textbook for Form 1 pupils.

Problems Particular to the Writing of a 'Precolonial' History Textbook

Perhaps the most striking features of most accounts of the 'precolonial' past is that they are boring and complex. The SWOHP is attempting to enliven the proposed textbook through the reproduction of numerous oral texts to illuminate points of method or of historical substance. For example, a split in a family that occurred in remote 'precolonial' times is explained in the oral traditions but a number of versions exist as to how the split occurred. In the one account, a contest between two brothers, Hlubi and Dlamini, is arranged to determine who will be their

father's heir. The contest takes the form of a beast-skinning competition. But the father favours Hlubi over Dlamini, and gives him a sharper knife. Soon the smoke is rising over Hlubi's camp - his beast is skinned and being cooked, and his people are celebrating his victory.

In the second version, a young boy, Hlubi, is described as being the rightful heir. A plot is hatched to kill him, and replace him with his brother, Dlamini. In a bid to save her relative, Hlubi's aunt scorches his right hand with a burning coal. A left-handed person cannot accede, so Hlubi loses the succession, but remains alive.

The two stories make lively reading, and ultimately pose the question of how and why they differ. This raises simple methodological issues for students. Exercises centered on the two stories explore these issues. The students are introduced to the informants from whom the two versions emanate, and learn how they are articulating conflicting claims about seniority relevant to modern-day political office-holding.

Swazi oral traditions are perhaps uniquely rich in amongst the corpus and oral traditions in southern Africa. They deal in detail with events and processes that go back well into the eighteenth century. Differing regional traditions exist which illuminate the pre- and early state formation periods of Swazi history from new angles. These traditions form the basis for lessons about the forces for and processes of historical change and serve to introduce local rather than the better-known royal historical actors. In summary, the oral traditions bring the 'precolonial' past to life, filling it with interesting characters and exciting events that happen at places locatable on a map. They illustrate vividly some of the drier issues of historical analysis such as strategies of political incorporation ('it is well-known how the Mkhonta people joined the Swazi. It is the story of our name 'Mkhonta'. To khonta is to come and give allegiance. It happened like this ...'); processes of disaggregation ('the Nhleko people under Hlekwako rose up against the Mamba chiefs. The impi of Hlekwako fought and defeated the Mamba. The Mamba went to lift up the blanket (to ask help from) of the king, Mswati. Mswati sent an impi to harrass Hlekwako. Mswati's impi returned with the cattle, those which had been taken by Hlekwako, the rebel. After that, there came a great famine. Just then, a hippopotamus

was found inside the cattle byre at the Nhleko place. 'Awu', called the Nhleko people, 'Let us eat it'. Not long after that, Hlekwako fell ill and died. Then all the people got scattered. Some went as far as Ngozi, in Zululand; some went up here, past Ntubane and on up to Ngwavuma ...'); or of land settlement ('so it was that Sibandze found our grandfather Ndzatu, and that is how we got the land. He found him making a fire on the hill. Sibandze said 'Who is that lunatic making a fire on the hill at night? Catch him for me!'. The men caught him and brought him down from the hill. Our grandfather Ndzatu said 'I have something special to alleviate pain and suffering'. So Ndzatu was taken to the king who was ill. He helped him. Then Ndzatu returned to the hill. But the king wanted him nearby. So he gave him this land. There are many other stories about Ndzatu!')

Another problem of particular seriousness for the production of a school textbook is the complete absence of contemporary visual images from the 'precolonial' period. There are no illustrations or photographs of people or places of the early nineteenth century. Nor are there any contemporary descriptions. Isolated illustrations and descriptions exist for the period after 1830, but in many cases they are framed through the eyes of early European travellers and need to be used with caution. A temptation exists to use images from a later period to illustrate an earlier period. In an attempt to avoid suggesting continuities over time which may be inaccurate, the SWOHP has used two different strategies to provide a richly illustrated text. The first is to provide photographs of the evidence which survives in the present - the caves where the historical actors hid, the mountain fortresses which they occupied, or the pottery shards which were used in the past. In some cases, the pictures are powerful images and are self-explanatory. In other instances they need to be made more interesting and understandable through artistic intervention (eg. drawing in the rest of the pot of which only a fragment survives). Where considerable artistic license is necessary, the device of providing two different artistic reconstructions of the same feature or event underscores the point that the evidence is fragmentary and that the image is not 'true' but rather illustrative and has been interpreted. This device underlines the approach of the whole textbook; to present history, not as a narrative of past events, but as a study of the way in which the past is reconstructed in the present.

The second device employed by the SWOHP to provide visual hooks for the text is to attempt to produce carefully researched illustrations that avoid the use of anachronistic details and which strive for historical accuracy. The artistic style is an important element of these illustrations, at once easy to interpret yet eloquent in human drama, and vibrant with action. Numerous maps and diagrams add to the corpus of visual material. Finally, the layout design used (borders and section dividers) are not just designs, but patterns made up of objects from the text (eg. types of archaeological evidence - bones, artefacts and figurines).

Many of the difficulties concerning the provision of visual material are repeated in the provision of historical narrative. The historical reconstruction of the 'precolonial' past is, at best, patchy. At this stage, the available evidence is such that many questions remain unanswered, many details unknown. Moreover, ongoing research is liable to alter the historical picture. Teachers and students accustomed to the detailed, unbroken narratives of history and itemized causes and results do not adjust easily to the paucity of 'facts' about the 'precolonial' period, the gaps in the historical story, and the speed with which historical reinterpretation and new data replaces older accounts.

The SWOHP approach to these problems is to centre the textbook on the concept of historical investigation, explicitly anticipating that new finds and information will alter the picture of the past. The narrative thread and the continuity in the textbook is provided, not so much by the events in the 'precolonial' past, but rather by the activities of modern-day investigators of the past.

The SWOHP found that different kinds of oral traditions survive concerning different periods of Swazi history. Obviously, oral traditions about the pre-nineteenth century past tend to be much more fragmentary than traditions about the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; official traditions are richest for the reigns of the more successful kings, while regional and resistance traditions survive better for periods of less centralized rule. These kinds of differences in the type of available oral evidence lend themselves to different kinds of

treatment in the textbook. Each section of the textbook therefore explores slightly different methodological points about oral traditions, and the blend of method and substantive content varies across the text. For example, oral traditions about the remote past rely heavily on the device of the textbook's modern-day investigator of history for their contextualisation and explication. Traditions about the nineteenth century Swaziland can be interpreted more literally and tend to be more complete. In the latter case, the interventions of the historical investigator are less necessary to render the traditions coherent, and are less frequent. Where they continue to occur, they serve to reinforce the methodological points introduced in the opening chapters. They are a reminder that historical reconstruction is a process, not an accomplished fact: that historical knowledge of the past is a contested terrain and that new research continually alters the picture of the past. The body of oral traditions about the later period of Swazi 'precolonial' history is much denser than that available for the earlier period. It is possible to use a range of oral traditions from different points of view to get a bearing on events of the period. Still closer to the time of colonization the availability of written sources increases, and these can be used in conjunction with the oral traditions. These features demand a somewhat different way of presenting the traditions relevant to different periods of Swazi history.

One of the primary aims of the textbook is to encourage students to engage actively in the process of reconstructing history, and to handle tradition critically. In the opening chapters of the textbook, the students are introduced to the experiences of a group of students just like themselves who researched and wrote up the history of their school. There are photographs of the students conducting their research, and an account of their difficulties and their successes. Likewise, throughout the book, the investigators of history are personalities familiar to the students with whom they can easily identify. These devices suggest that it is possible for ordinary people like themselves to gather history. The final exercise of the textbook is the completion of a history project in which the students are asked to research and write their own history, eg. the history of their school, a famous landmark, or that of their family.

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The final aim of the textbook is not to present a dry set of 'facts' about the 'precolonial' past, although it does provide a strong sense of the changing world of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in south-east Africa. Rather, it seeks to animate students in the study of history and to teach through experience. Suggestions for skill-building exercises and classroom games abound in the textbook. The games teach points about oral tradition and history through the medium of student activity. One example is the broken-telephone game which illustrates vividly the way in which oral messages alter through transmission. A group of students listen to a message passed in a whisper down a line. The first person then compares the original messsage with the final product. The results are startling, and often hilarious. In one case, trainee teachers discussing the problems of the oral transmission of evidence played the game. The original message was 'the cows are milked in the evening and not at dawn'. The final result was 'History should be written down'!

The other emphasis of the textbook is on evidence. Through its focus on oral traditions, the textbook seeks to introduce students to historical evidence, helping them gain some of the necessary skills to handle evidence confidently and critically and to process the past outside the work of the guild. History as an activity, rather than the presentation of alternative facts to passive recipients, can move beyond the countering of centuries of propaganda, to empower people to act creatively in the present, to achieve a control over the way that they 'know the past', and thus of 'the socialising process insofar as that process is conscious and symbolic!'

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