

Are they physically or mentally maltreated? Why have more than 40 people died while in detention for interrogation?" This leads Kentridge to dismiss the report as "a scholarly and elaborate irrelevance".

Sooner or later those questions must be answered by the government which now rules us. It is vitally important that we should keep asking them, if only not to allow our government to seek shelter behind a pretence of ignorance of the facts. And as we ask the questions, and look at the facts as we know them, a terrible apprehension begins to grow. We ask ourselves why it is that the Government has sometimes paid substantial sums of money in "ex gratia, out-of-court, without prejudice" payments to the dependents of detainees who have died in detention. In 1971 the widow of the Imam Haron was paid R5 000. In 1979 the widow of Mr Joseph Mdluli was paid R15 000. Also in

1979, the widow and children of Mr Steve Biko were paid R52 000. Why are these amounts paid if the Government denies responsibility for the deaths? Is it possible that in a civil court, where the facts must be proved on balance of probabilities, and not beyond a reasonable doubt as in a criminal trial, the jealously guarded secret might come out? Is it because the Government cannot bear the thought of a court of law formally proclaiming the awful truth? That the Security Police have caused, directly or indirectly, the deaths of more than forty South Africans? By means of a law sanctioned by Parliament?

Yes, the questions must be answered and we must keep on asking them. We, as South Africans, who must share the burden of guilt if these things are true, have a right to know what is being done in our name and for our alleged protection. □

THE STUDY OF SOUTHERN AFRICAN PRECOLONIAL HISTORY: "BANTUSTAN PROPAGANDA"?

By C.A. Hamilton

The student of southern African pre-colonial history is increasingly forced to examine the purpose of his or her work, to assess the function and impact of pre-colonial studies on contemporary society. This is the case particularly in the face of that sort of criticism which condemns the pre-colonial historian as a producer of 'Bantustan propaganda'. The basis of such opposition to pre-colonial history lies in an objection to the ethnic divisions which have characterized and sometimes defined pre-colonial studies. These divisions are repeated and emphasised in the text-books, in which the histories of the different language groups of southern Africa are treated separately, and cultural differences are stressed. Obviously, the continued presence and manipulation of ethnic divisions presents an immense tactical problem for anybody working for change in South Africa, and it is from such a position that these denouncements are made.

Similar criticisms are made of the emphasis, within pre-colonial history, on aspects of tribal authority such as rule by a hereditary monarch or a royal lineage, and on the

ideological bases and symbols of their power (for eg, amongst the Zulu, the **ubukosi** of the kingship, and the **inkatha**, the symbol of the unity of the nation; two often cited types of identification of the people with the tribal authority). This kind of emphasis is considered to contribute substantially to the legitimation of present day tribal authorities, since it provides an historical precedent for their position. It also obscures the reality of their meaninglessness today.

It is in terms of such present day effects, that the study of pre-colonial history is rejected. "History consists," in the words of Carr, "essentially in seeing the past through the eyes of the present, in the light of its problems." (1) In this sense all relevant history must take the present as its point of departure. Consequently for those opposed to current government ideology, pre-colonial history is rejected as having no meaning or function today, in no way enabling man "to increase his mastery over the present." (2).

Typical of this sort of criticism is that recently voiced by Jan Theron, General Secretary of the Food and Canning Workers Union, of a series of history booklets. (3).

“The books deal with prehistory rather than history – as such they are at best not particularly informative, and at worst, as regards some aspects of tribal society, eg. the role of the chief, can prevent workers from appraising the role of tribal society today.

I would have thought that the object was not to counteract the myths portrayed in school textbooks but to provide a history that is alive and relevant to workers – who are the people most likely to read them.” (4)

While completely accepting the negative impact of both ethnically divided histories and emphasis on traditional authority, I do not consider that this warrants the complete rejection of pre-colonial history. In this paper, I intend to demonstrate that pre-colonial history that moves well beyond ethnic divisions has been, and continues to be, produced; and secondly, that to analyse traditional forms of authority is to examine them critically, not to exalt them. Furthermore, I will suggest a multiplicity of ‘relevant’ functions for pre-colonial history within a present day, specifically South African and ‘anti-Bantustan’ context.

To begin with, the criticisms outlined in the first two paragraphs take no cognizance of current developments in the study of the pre-colonial period. Recent theses by Marxist historians focus on pre-capitalist relations of production. They are concerned to examine the extraction of surplus in order to explain certain phenomena such as the increased power of hereditary chiefs and the expansion of ruling lineages in the immediately pre-colonial period. (5) In thus emphasising relations of exploitation, these works militate against, on the one hand, panegyric approval and uncritical acclaim of tribal authority, and on the other hand, the consonance of interest of king and subject assumed by some to characterize tribal society. (6).

The two notions which I have challenged above, have firm origins in the surviving oral traditions (7). From there they have been uncritically appropriated, and variously utilised, giving rise to abundant censure of the kind noted earlier. The reinterpretations of pre-colonial history proposed by the Marxist historians, are often a result of subjecting oral traditions to an analysis of hitherto unimagined sensitivity. Guided by the perceptions of Jan Vansina (8), they have distinguished between the function of oral history, and its real historical content. An example which illustrates this point most clearly, pertains to the close and consistent identification of subjects with a ruling lineage, Emphasis on such consistency within an oral tradition has been shown to indicate not a common origin for the ruling lineage and its subjects but rather a disjuncture, where the oral tradition functions to mask that disjuncture, usually in order to bond together the various elements and groups of the society. Frequently oral traditions function in a similar manner to legitimate the position of the ruling lineage. The difficulty of moving beyond the level of appearance in an oral tradition, in order to effect this kind of reassessment, is particularly demanding of the modern pre-colonial historian. He must

be as much a linguist, archaeologist and ethnographer as an historian, since these disciplines provide the essential background against which oral history can be re-evaluated. In such hands, “oral history certainly can be a means for transforming both the content and the purpose of history.”(9)

It should also be pointed out that in these recent works on pre-colonial history, the areas of study are not delimited according to the official ethnic divisions of South Africa today. One scholar specifically notes that the subject of his thesis, the Pedi polity,

“was a geographically fluid entity and the period under consideration witnessed marked changes in the area and peoples which fell under its sway. The subject population was not ethnically homogeneous . . . The history of the polity is a clear illustration of the fact that political and cultural boundaries were far from co-terminaries in nineteenth century African society in southern Africa.”(10)

Similarly the works of another two Marxist historians, Slater and Hedges are not ethnically delimited, since they are concerned with a geographical area, which encompasses two linguistically distinct groups, Nguni and Thonga, and the intermediate dialects. (11)

The problems and phenomena approached by these researchers frequently transcend ethnic boundaries. The modern pre-colonial historian desires to present a dynamic picture of pre-colonial society. His emphasis is, more often than not, on the processes of change. He wishes to acknowledge a continuous process of social and political innovation, economic improvement, and technical change. It is his expressed intention to challenge the myth that the African past was more or less static, or at best repetitive. Such a picture, all too prevalent in South Africa, contains no element of periodisation, and frequently confuses the present culture with its historical antecedent of the same name. Uncritical acceptance of historically erroneous continuities of this sort lies at the heart of the philosophy of separate development – which sees ethnic groupings as historically and culturally immutable.

Stereotyping of the pre-colonial period in this manner has crucial implications for the ideology of the present government. The most obvious instance of this is in the constant reiteration of the simultaneous colonization of southern Africa by blacks from the north, and whites in the south. This argument is used to legitimate the continued presence of whites in South Africa in the face of colonial withdrawals elsewhere in Africa. The following extract from a speech by Verwoerd demonstrates the importance of the historical dimension in endorsing the creation of the Bantustans, and in the moulding of the ideology of Apartheid:

“The Whiteman who came to Africa, perhaps to trade, and in some cases to bring the Gospel has remained and we particularly, in the southernmost portion of Africa, have such a stake here that it has become our only motherland. We have nowhere else to go. We settled in a country that was bare. The Bantu too came to this country and settled certain portions for themselves. It is in line with thinking on Africa to grant them there those fullest rights which we, with you, admit all people should have. We believe in providing these rights for these people in the fullest degree in that part of southern Africa which

their forefathers found for themselves and settled in. We believe in allowing exactly those same full opportunities to remain within the grasp of the White Man who has made all this possible.”(12)

“Here the Bantu occupied certain parts of an uninhabited country and the Whites occupied other parts.” (13)

The exposure of this myth is the particular work of the prehistorian, who has demonstrated that southern Africa has been inhabited for well over 1000 years. By 300 A.D. the first farmers were settled as far south as present day Durban. (14) The earliest Iron Age sites south of the Limpopo, such as Silver Leaves in the Transvaal, Enkwazini in Zululand and Mzonjeni in Natal have been radio-carbon dated early in the first millennium. At Broederstroom, (a 5th C site) west of Pretoria, Early Iron Age type of pottery and evidence of smelting have been found in association with negroid skeletal remains (15). From about 500 AD, numerous villages were scattered over the Lowveld and the river valleys of Zululand, Natal and Transkei. The presence of livestock bones at many of these sites indicates a long history of pastoralism in Southern Africa (16). Evidence of large settlements suggests the existence of “flourishing communities, well-adapted to the possibilities of their environment.”(17). 1000 AD (or thereabouts) marks an abrupt change in the pottery recovered, and the settlement patterns of the pastoralists. Some debate exists as to whether Bantu languages are to be associated with the Early Iron Age farmers of the first millennium, or with the later Iron Age (18). Either way, the beginning of the second millennium is the most conservative date suggested for the settlement of Bantu-speakers south of the Limpopo. The deep chronology obtained through the correlation of linguistic and archeological evidence causes some tremors in the official ideological edifice. Consequently, the evidence of pre-colonial history is permitted only a limited existence, usually in the form of legend or oral tradition, given the inherent proclivity of these two forms to telescope generations and the limitations on time depth imposed by oral, (not written) transmission. Amongst urban blacks however, even these traditional sources of history, usually related by the old folk, are seldom available, for the breakdown of family life is one of the consequences of the creation of Reserves. African history is not available to any meaningful degree in museums or monuments (19) and is given cursory treatment at school.

Misconceptions about the nature of pre-colonial Africa proliferate in our society today, amongst black and white alike. They are perpetuated by the limited and often crude ‘history’ that is taught in the schools, occurs in the textbooks, and is strictly determined by the official syllabus. This ‘history’ denies the existence of a real and vital African past in southern Africa. The negation of the history of pre-colonial times stems from assumptions about the unstructured form of early societies, presumably reliant on a precarious subsistence existence and without political institutions or activities of any significance. Hugh Trevor Roper described it thus:

“History (or African history) is the unrewarding study of the gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe.”(20)

When and where pre-colonial history is acknowledged to have any existence at all, the focus is usually on the barbarity of tribal life, the savagery of terroristic despotisms and the associated atrocities of such regimes. The following extract from a popular history text-book gives ample indication of this attitude.

“When the Voortrekkers crossed the Orange River in 1836, they found a huge expanse of territory which had been almost entirely depopulated as a result of barbaric warfare among the Bantu tribes. The region eastward of the Drakensburg now comprising the province of Natal, had been swept almost clear of inhabitants, between the years 1812 and 1828 by Chaka, the chief of the Zulus, who had pursued a policy of extermination of other Bantu tribes.”(21)

Emphasis on the destructive aspects of the Mfecane and the Tshakan regime is designed to suggest a picture of societies in violent, irrational turmoil, which only the civilising influence of colonization was able to moderate. These were the views of the early colonial authorities who were anxious to justify their extended presence in southern Africa. These views are still held by the South African government, despite the fact that they have gradually lost credence in other parts of Africa which have since been decolonized. They have been upheld because they are a crucial aspect of the ‘upliftment’ in separate development.

This is yet another foundation of Apartheid ideology that the pre-historian is concerned to shake. A combination of archaeological evidence and oral traditions suggests for the Iron Age at least, increased specialization and localized commodity production associated with trade. It also indicates substantial continuity in societies, and gives evidence of their dynamic nature and ability to adapt responsively to a changing physical and cultural environment (22). This picture of rational interaction with the ecosystem considerably negates the notion of the aimless “gyrations of barbarous tribes”.

School histories however, continue to perpetuate such stereotypes, and underplay Black achievement. They characterise pre-colonial history as static. Their focus and emphasis on the advent of the white settlers suggests by implication that in pre-colonial times Blacks had reached some sort of maximum level of attainment, beyond which they were genetically incapable of advancing without assistance: White assistance. Perpetuation of outdated and confused Social Darwinism of this kind, is designed to foster an acceptance of inferior status as ‘natural’. In this way, distorted historical notions are used to mould attitudes, to an acceptance of a designated policy. They are administered through the medium of Bantu Education and contribute towards ensuring a state of socialised inferiority. Through the use of what Althusser calls Ideological State Apparatuses, (23) (education, schools and the media) the threat of internal conflict is contained. History, or the lack of it, is used to pacify, inhibit and divide racial groups.

At this level, the perversion of history is considerably more insidious and all-encompassing than the mere telescoping of time depths in order to lay claim to the country. It is particularly effective in this respect, since history is an area of knowledge crucial to a person’s self-perception, dignity, identity and sense of personal direction. The preoccupation of Blacks all over the world with the inadequate historical picture of their origins has been forcefully arti-

culated by the Rastafarian movement. Marcus Garvey stated it simply and effectively,

"A people without knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots." (24)

Given the particular historical circumstances of the development of Apartheid, it falls to the pre-colonial historian to illuminate the history and achievements of Africa prior to its involuntary tutelage by its invaders. In attacking the

very tenets and apparatuses of government ideology on the grounds of historical invalidity, the pre-colonial historian is able to contribute meaningfully to a process of change.

"The justification of all historical study must ultimately be that it enhances our self-consciousness, enables us to see ourselves in perspective and helps us towards that greater freedom which comes from self knowledge."(25) □

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- (1) Carr, E. H. **What is History?** page 30.
- (2) **ibid.**
- (3) The booklets referred to here are the Learn and Teach history series, which aim to provide reading material for newly literate adults, of the kind that stimulates discussion in learning groups, about existence in South Africa.
- (4) Extract from a letter to Learn and Teach, 25 Nov., 1980.
- (5) Many recent studies fall into this category. However, the thoughts formulated in the following paragraphs are with reference specifically to the following:
Hedges, D. "Trade and Politics in southern Mozambique in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries", unpub. Phd., Univ. of London, 1978.
Slater, H. "Transitions in the Political Economy of South-East Africa", unpub. Phd., Univ. of Sussex, 1976.
Delius, P. "The Pedi Polity under Sekwati and Sekhukhune, 1828-1880", unpub. Phd., Univ of London, 1980.
Kinsman, M. "Notes on the southern Tswana Social Formation", unpub. seminar paper presented to Wits History Workshop 1981.
- (6) For example, Slater (**op. cit.**) focuses on the transition to absolutism in the early Zulu state and examines surplus extraction by the paramountcy. He highlights the distress amongst social groups whose modes of existence were re-organised in an attempt to pin down a "semi-servile peasantry" in new and more intense forms of dependence and exploitation.
- (7) Oral traditions frequently reflect a picture of a society as a dominant lineage would have it appear. Amongst the Zulu for example, the **izibongo**, or praise poems, which comprise a not inconsiderable body of oral history, function under royal patronage in order to maintain chiefly authority. In listing the ancestors of the chief, they assert the legitimacy of his reign. Successful incidents in the chiefs reign are embellished, glorified and savoured. Presumably this functions to suggest the futility of opposition, and to underline the abilities of a particular ruler. On the whole, the **izibongo** convey a picture of harmony, contentment and strength within the kingdom, even for periods when this was patently not the case.
- (8) Vansina, J. **Oral Tradition; A study in Historical Methodology**, London, 1965.
- (9) Thompson, P. **The Voice of the Past, Oral History**, O.U.P., 1978, page 2.
- (10) Delius, P. **op. cit.** page 1.
- (11) Hedges, D. **op. cit.**
Slater, H. **op. cit.**
- (12) Speech of thanks, address to Macmillan, U.K. prime minister, 3/12/60.
- (13) **ibid.**
- (14) Hall, M "Early Farming Communities of Southern Africa; A Population Rediscovered." unpub. paper, 1981.
Also "The Ecology of the Iron Age in Zululand", unpub. Phd., Cambridge, 1980.
- (15) Phillipson, D. W. **The Later Prehistory of Eastern and Southern Africa**, 1977, page 120.
- (16) Maggs, T. "The Iron Age Sequence south of the Vaal and the Pongola Rivers: Some Historical implications", in **Jnl. African Hist.** 21, 1980.
- (17) Hall, M. (1981) **op. cit.** page 3.
- (18) Phillipson, D. W. **op. cit.** and Huffman, T. N. "The Early Iron Age and the spread of the Bantu." **S.A.A.B.** 25
- (19) The Stanger and Lower Tugela Museum situated in the heart of historic Zululand is a case in point. The curatrix has no knowledge of pre-colonial history. Although the museum is built virtually on the gravesite of the greatest Zulu monarch, the contents of the museum are mostly colonial memorabilia—old ball gowns and regimental dress. However, the monument to the battle of Blood River, built on the site of the infamous laager, strikes a harsher note, that of the 'superiority' of fire power. Victory of the Boers is thus celebrated, with barely a passing reference to the thousands of Black lives forfeited. It is to be hoped that the recently created Zululand Monuments Commission will redress this all-pervasive imbalance, at least to some extent.
- (20) Trevor - Roper, H. **Historical Essays** 1957
- (21) De Kock, M. H. **The Economic Development of South Africa**, 1936, page 32.
- (22) Hall, M., (1981), **op. cit.**
- (23) Althusser, L. "Ideological State Apparatuses" in **Lenin and Philosophy and other essays**, 1972.
- (24) Garvey, M. **Philosophy and Opinions.**, Garvey was bold and virulent in the defence of African History, and the Rastafarian movement became in his hands a creative instrument for social change.
- (25) Thomas, K.

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1

'You don't need a document to get there.'
'But I thought it's a foreign land.'
'No no, my dear, you must get it clear:
It's all a sleight of hand.'

2

Dr Hendrik Verwoerd
sank into a trance,
a deeply creative
socio-religious daydream.
He was meditating, as ever,
upon the future of South Africa,
which he alone could foresee,
which he alone could plan and make.
Into his field of vision
there floated dimly an object,
which he recognized at once as symbolic.
But at first he couldn't make it out.
It was multi-coloured,
which suggested God's variety
It was circular,
which showed that it was mystical,
a revelation of good to come.
And it moved, dynamically,
like the horsemen of the Apocalypse.
Then his vision clarified,
and he beheld in awe
the answer to his hopes and prayers:
a roulette-wheel.

3

So this is the way the homelands work,
with many a monetary click and quirk.
In this sick air no truth can stand:
a one-armed bandit rules the land.

4.

The cars choke up the South Coast road,
all drawn by the magnet to the south;
people of every type and mode
are gobbled by a laughing mouth.

5

Behind the red ropes
in the new casino,
the women are wearing
handsome dresses,
plum-coloured, formal.
They do not smile
as they do their work.
The men, in dress suits,
are serious, sober:
nothing is brisk or brash.
The whole air
is silent and solemn,
religious even,
as it needs to be
for this elaborate ceremony
of the handing over
of cash.

6

In an odd sort of way it's all half-gay,
people seem able to relax;
the thing's not a mess, one has to confess,
and the whites accept the blacks.
But it's sad to say that your pinko-grey
(to be more precise as to hue)
seems only sane or at all humane
when some profit is in view.

7

'Let's go to the Casino
to see if we can win;
the cards are stacked against us,
but trying is no sin.'
Aha, my friend, please do attend:
that's the Holiday Inns' big sell;
and behind that dream is the selfsame scheme
for the 'national states' as well.

8

The concrete palace by the sea
in a wilderness of poverty:
it's a perfect balance, of the kind
that pleases the official mind.
Inside, there's a wealth of goodly fare;
outside, the cupboard and the field are bare.
Here, there's a constant flow of rands;
there, children beg with skinny hands.
Visiting whites are fat and free,
but blacks — 'independent' — bend the knee. □