

Blood, Sweat and Tears in a Mountain Range

John Wright and Aron Mazel, *Tracks in a Mountain Range. Exploring the History of the Ukhahlamba-Drakensberg*

Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2007

155 pp

ISBN 978-1-8681-4409-9

R190.00

The Unesco Declaration of the Drakensberg World Heritage Site celebrates scenic beauty, biodiversity and the cultural value of an exceptional rock art heritage. *Tracks in a Mountain Range*, on the other

hand, does not celebrate. Instead, it depicts struggles of all kinds: culture against nature, settlers against autochthones, British against Boer, indigenous kingdoms against one another, rich against poor, conservationist versus farmer. This study portrays the Berg's *real* history, not the Disneyland version of tourism brochures. You will find neither hunter-gatherer romanticism and nostalgic, nor epic stories of pioneer heroism. The protagonists of this narrative are land-hungry farmers and power-crazy leaders, scheming magistrates, rebellious chiefs, raiders and traders, hunters and hunted. *Blood, Sweat and Tears in a Mountain Range* might have been a more appropriate title for this study.

The first chapter introduces *The Mountains and the Storytellers*. The discussion of the Berg's geomorphology, climate, vegetation and fauna is brief and to the point. The authors are more concerned with introducing the different participants in the many histories of the Drakensberg to the reader. By the same token they create a basic timeline, a structure for the presentation of the facts and artefacts in the next chapters.

Three major strands of history are identified. The indigenous histories of hunter-gatherers and early black farmers, we are told, have survived only indirectly in the archaeological evidence preserved in mountain shelters: the subject matter of Chapters 2 and 3. The remaining chapters of the book present the colonial subjugation of the region. The authors combine an "early contact period" (1800-1840) and "the Berg as colonial frontier" (1840-1870) in Chapter 3. *The Closing of the Mountain Frontier* (Chapter 5) depicts an era of militarization highlighted by the so-called Hlubi rebellion. The final chapter, *Modernisation in the Mountain* (Chapter 6) is a critical look at the socio-economic "development" of the region from the initial domestication of the Berg (1890-1940), through the apartheid era to the present.

The Excavated Past (Chapter 2) starts off with a short but thorough overview of the presence of hunter-gatherers in the Berg. This is supplemented with an informative discussion of the history of archaeological research in the region, and with an archaeological timeframe. The discussion of archaeological sites, which makes up the greater part of the chapter, pivots around Mazel's personal experience in Clark's shelter, Diamond 1 (1980-1981), Mhlwazini Cave (1987) and Collingham Shelter (1988). The authors succeeded well, I believe, in familiarizing the reader with the nature and scope of archaeological work and also with the possibilities, limitations and challenges posed by the artefacts.

The Drakensberg sites have produced some amazing prehistoric findings, mainly in the form of organic materials (for example wooden pegs, a piece of fishing-line, a digging-stick, a fire drill and a leather bag). Even a sample of knotted grass has been preserved. Many of the sites have raised new questions and provided interesting data contributing to existing debates within the discipline: the seasonal mobility hypothesis, trade, the age of rock paintings, the arrival of maize in Africa, the occurrence of metal and pottery within Stone Age hunter-gatherer contexts, et cetera.

There is no shortage of exciting archaeological material in the region. Regrettably, there is not much excitement in the way the data is communicated to the reader. To be sure, the presentation is lucid and comprehensive. I feel particularly pleased with the user-friendly discussion of the dull and dry subject of lithic technology: stone artefacts, their manufacturing and use. However, apart from the short moments of relief brought by the discussion of the “hunter’s kit” (discovered in the Eland Cave in 1926) and a few anecdotes on Mazel’s shelter experience, the discourse remains, on the whole, as unattached as is the case elsewhere throughout the book.

The same sober discourse dominates Chapter 3: an unfortunate stylistic choice, in my opinion, for the representation of that magnificent rock art heritage. It is not that the authors have entirely overlooked the riches and quality of the repertoire. Rather, the twenty page discussion of the paintings does not really explore this point further. Instead, it perpetuates the belief, commonly held by archaeologists, that aesthetics is not relevant to the meaningful analysis of artefacts. As such, the authors deliberate on standard archaeological issues like dating, technology, classification, formal analysis, paleo-ecology and the socio-economic life of the hunter.

To be fair: the discussion is extensive and the analysis penetrating. There is also an excellent historical overview of the changing approaches to rock art and an excursion into rock art conservation concerns. Not less than a third of the chapter is dedicated to the analysis of the subject matter contained in the images on the rock. The final section presents Lewis-Williams’ interpretive approach and the shamanic model.

The first section of *Black People, San and European Colonists* (Chapter 4) identifies the different chiefdoms in and around the Drakensberg during the early contact period. The authors then go on to describe how these became affected by the radical socio-political changes

in the wider region. Peaceful chiefdoms changed into militarised kingdoms competing with each other for new trade goods and control over the trade routes that supplied ivory to the colonists. Populations were constantly on the move, fleeing from marauders and predatory groups or establishing new alliances and consolidating land and power.

In the second half, the authors describe the circumstances that have led to the creation of the Colony of Natal. They explore British measures aimed at gaining control over the region. Of particular interest is the resettlement of the African population in eight reserves. The Hlubi, it is emphasised, were strategically placed in a location that served as a buffer between San cattle-raiders and white stockfarmers. By the 1860s, the same nation had become a prosperous farming and trading community, envied by those settlers who struggled to make a comfortable living. The scene for the “rebellion” is being set.

The chapter concludes with an extensive and insightful section on the San raiders and traders, based on Wright’s monograph *Bushman Raiders of the Drakensberg 1840-1847*.

Further acts of colonial warfare on the indigenous population form the theme of *The Closing of the Mountain Frontier* (Chapter 5). Approximately two thirds of the discussion is dedicated to the analysis of the subjugation of the Hlubi, the remaining third to the colonial take-over of East Griqualand and Basutholand.

The story of the “Hlubi rebellion”, or more accurately, of the military expedition against Chief Langalibalele, details one of the most shameful moments in the colonial history of Natal. After making the reader familiar with the course of events, it is suggested in the subsequent analysis, that land-hungry local settlers, affected negatively by the 1860s economic depression and the 1871 discovery of diamonds at Kimberly, created the opportunity for power-hungry politicians to set into action their plans for total control of the colony. The Zulu wars and the Moorosi and East Griqua rebellion, the authors propose, can essentially be read in the same fashion.

Chapter 6, *Modernisation in the Mountains*, concludes this progressive history of the Berg with a critical look at the social and economic developments in the twentieth century. A wide variety of topics (perhaps too many?) come under scrutiny: tenant labour, the decline of the homestead economies in the reserves, commercialisation and mechanisation of farming, a changing landscape, the exploitation of

Book Reviews

natural resources, conservation and tourism, the influence of big business, the apartheid/homeland policies, popular resistance ... The study ends with some critical comments on the post-1994 era.

Tracks in a Mountain Range, in terms of its scope, contents and analysis, ventures well beyond the limited intellectual realm of a basic, popular publication. It is a perfect monograph for undergraduate history students. I sincerely hope that the colourful jacket of this book, depicting the scenic mountain and the artistic heritage of the San, will tempt many innocent tourists into buying a truly critical history of the region. It certainly fooled me!

Jean-Marie Dederen
Anthropology and Archaeology Section, School of Social Sciences
University of Venda