

Heritage and Historically Black Universities (HBUs): the view from Fort Hare

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Introduction

This paper is about “heritage” in the context of historically black universities (HBUs), and especially the University of Fort Hare. While the inverted commas will be omitted henceforth, they should be imagined throughout, because heritage is a debatable concept. It is difficult to define precisely, often slipping between an emphasis on the material inheritance from the past and less precise emphases on particular approaches and attitudes to the past as currently created and utilised. In the South African context, the concept of heritage overlaps with those of memory, ownership and redress. This article suggests how history in itself moulds and influences the ways in which heritage is used, or not used.¹

Since the change of government in South Africa in 1994, a process of redefinition long in train in the academic literature has also been taking place in the public sphere. In part there has been a process of redefining old monuments and past events in a more inclusive way, as with the emphasis in the centenary commemorations of the South African war on the role of black

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 - 1. A starting-point in this field is research in the Western Cape on public pasts, as C. RASOOL, ‘The rise of heritage and the reconstitution of history in South Africa’, *Kronos*, 26 (2000): 1 –21. For further work in the same mode see <http://www.uwc.ac.za/arts/history/Research/Popps.htm>, and references therein. Issues of memory are discussed in, for instance, S. NUTTALL AND C. COETZEE, (eds.), *Negotiating the Past: the Making of Memory in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1998). There are good discussions of intercultural aesthetic and power relations in E. SCHILDKROUT AND C.A. KEIM, (eds.), *The Scramble for Art in Central Africa* (Cambridge, 1998).

participants and victims.² In part it has been a question of bringing to the fore artefacts and events from the past of the once marginalised majority of the population, neglected in terms of the public discourse of apartheid South Africa, except where they could be interpreted in terms of the racist stereotypes of the time. HBUs are centrally involved in this process, being physical sites to which a certain symbolic significance can be ascribed, where, also, history and heritage are studied, elaborated, and taught.

Universities as heritage sites

Universities are complex institutions with many roles. One role, which can coexist with the cosmopolitan dimension which is also part of the university ethos, is to act as symbol of the culture and of the intellectual achievements of a particular society or class within society. In South Africa, for example, Stellenbosch has a particular resonance for Afrikaner society, as have the universities of Cape Town or the Witwatersrand for many English-speakers. Though all of them attempt to do so, the ambivalent origins of most historically black universities, as creations of the apartheid state or of its homeland accomplices, make it difficult for them to play such a role vis-à-vis the African community. Fort Hare, however, with its long history and its many celebrated alumni, is in a better position to attempt to occupy this space.

In the context of an educational institution such as a university, the concept of heritage tends to lead to a group of other concepts, such as heritage education or cultural education, which relate to heritage and also require invisible inverted commas. Such terms seem to imply a reification and objectification of complex and constantly changing ways of thinking and acting that impoverishes the complex variety of life. If they are taken to point to a separation out of activities and beliefs that are defined as “cultural” vis-à-vis other aspects of life one is entering a questionable territory with borders policed by cultural brokers not accountable, in the end, to people - that is, to everybody - who live and make their own culture.

In discussing heritage and cultural education it is important not to oversimplify. Similarly, sweeping criticisms of institutions that include heritage and culture in their remit should not be made in the name of an inclusive definition of culture. However, to take some examples, it is

2. See, for example, G. DOMINY AND L. CALLINICOS, “‘Is There Anything to Celebrate?’ Paradoxes of Policy: An Examination of the State’s Approach to Commemorating South Africa’s Most Ambiguous Struggle’, *South African Historical Journal*, 41 (1999): 388-403, and articles with a similar emphasis in this special issue on the South African War of 1899 - 1902.

difficult to feel comfortable with heritage centres devoted to a nostalgic recreation of an image of coal-mining in areas of Britain where no mines remain, or with South African cultural villages that create a vision of stasis where there never was any, and where there certainly is none now.³

Such issues are relevant to historically black universities in South Africa. These are indeed institutions that are almost entirely attended by black students, but this is not because they were the product of progressive educational thinking. This is at best an ambiguous inheritance in terms of any liberationist agenda. These institutions have an ambivalent history, formed from the 1960s to create elites intended to play a subsidiary and ethnically-defined role under apartheid, and struggling more recently to define a role in ostensibly non-racial South Africa.

The University of Fort Hare

The University of Fort Hare, the oldest historically black university in the country, has a more complex and varied history than other HBUs. Sharing many of the characteristics of other HBUs but with a longer and more varied historical background, it is a touchstone for reflection on heritage in the sector. The current spate of scholarship on Fort Hare reinforces this point.⁴

Founded in 1916 and run for many years by a consortium of three Protestant churches, Fort Hare has been formed by many influences. These include nineteenth-century Cape liberalism and missionary paternalism, and late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century African elite aspirations. Amongst these were those such as John Tengo Jabavu who threw their weight behind the mission and governmental project to create an institution of higher education that would insulate black South Africans from the radical ideas emanating at the time from the United States, and those such as Walter Mpililo Rubusana who hoped to create a more autonomously African

3. See, for example, C. RASSOOL AND L. WITZ, 'South Africa: a world in one country: moments in international tourist encounters with wildlife, the primitive and the modern', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 36, 143 (1996): 355 – 371.

4. D. MASSEY, "'Who would not have been aware?'" The History of Fort Hare and its Student Activists, 1933-1973' University of Fort Hare MA, 2002; S. MORROW AND K. GXABALASHE, 'The Records of the University of Fort Hare', *History in Africa*, 27 (2000), 481-497; Z. NGWANE, 'The Politics of Campus and Community in South Africa: a Historical Ethnography of the University of Fort Hare', University of Chicago Ph.D., 2001; D. WILLIAMS, *A History of the University College of Fort Hare, South Africa – the 1950s: the Waiting Years* (Lewiston, NY, 2001).

institution.⁵ For forty-five years Fort Hare was the only institution in all of anglophone Southern and Eastern Africa devoted to the production of African graduates. However, Fort Hare - and here its history converges with that of the other incipient HBUs - was also formed by the takeover of the institution by the National Party government in 1959-60 and the attempt in the subsequent thirty years to turn Fort Hare into an ethnic institution for Xhosa-speaking people, reinforced by the declaration of the Ciskei homeland in 1981.⁶

Fort Hare is also the product of its students, not only those from South Africa, but, until 1960 and again in recent years, from many parts of Southern Africa and beyond. To 1960, many of the most capable members of the small group that managed to reach secondary school-leaving level in South Africa and in the British colonies of Southern and Eastern Africa ended up at Fort Hare. Many of the most energetic participated vigorously in political or quasipolitical activities, moving outside the boundaries that most of their teachers would have wished to set for them. These new explorations and commitments, mirroring but also influencing forces at work in the wider African community, included the communism of the young Govan Mbeki and the Africanist ideas that were strongly represented in a vigorous branch of the African National Congress Youth League. These tendencies contributed both to the ANC, and later, through people such as Robert Sobukwe and A.P. Mda, to the Pan Africanist Congress. Fort Hare subsequently became a centre of Black Consciousness, coexisting for some years, sometimes uneasily, with political tendencies aligned to the ANC. From this mix came a variety of subsequent political positions amongst alumni, consisting for the most part of African nationalism in different forms. Fort Hare was a crucial centre for the elaboration and diffusion of such positions from South Africa as far north as Kenya and Uganda. In South Africa, these ranged from the Trotskyism of I.B. Tabata and the Soviet-oriented Communism of Chris Hani, to the ethnic regionalisms, combined in differing amounts with nationalism, of such as Mangosuthu Buthelezi and Kaiser Matanzima.⁷

5. C. HIGGS, *The Ghost of Equality: The Public Lives of D.D.T. Jabavu of South Africa, 1885-1959* (Athens, Ohio, 1997); S.J. NGOONGO, 'Mpilo Walter Benson Rubusana, 1858-1910: the making of the new African elite in the Eastern Cape', University of Fort Hare MA, 1996.

6. For the context see L. SWITZER, *Power and Resistance in an African Society: The Ciskei Xhosa and the Making of South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg, 1993).

7. For South Africa, see MASSEY, "'Who would not have been aware?' ..."; for a suggestion of the influence of Fort Hare in other African countries, see MORROW AND GXABALASHE, 'The Records ...'.

In the 1990s, returning exiles, many of them Fort Hare graduates from an earlier period, attracted to Fort Hare by the opportunities opened by an internal coup against the National Party-appointed university administration, grappled with the bitter legacy of apartheid. This legacy included not only the mostly conservative white staff, but also an often equally conservative black staff that had benefited from the homeland dispensation. Both groups tended to feel threatened by the new arrivals. Ironically, when many of the newcomers departed in 1994 with the opening of political and administrative opportunities, the position of the conservatives was once again strengthened. However, other forces were now coming into play: for example, the institution was destabilised by its inability to sustain its role as an employer of substantial amounts of labour in a highly impoverished area, leading to resentment and demonstrations. With serious administrative inadequacies, allegations of corruption and a fragile academic base, such factors led to a further change of leadership.⁸

This new leadership did not, however, serve the interests of the conservatives who in any case had little to offer in the new circumstances. Instead, the new administration aspired to a form of managerial rationality that sought to resolve the administrative crisis and, by invoking a form of academic organization where power and decisions flow downwards from management, to grapple with intractable problems of academic quality and performance.⁹ All this was overlaid awkwardly on the mass of historically-generated and often conflicting tendencies outlined above.

The point in the present context is that no university, and certainly not Fort Hare, is or should be in a position to interpret and educate in the field of culture in a way that implies it has any overarching claim to authority. They are not calm academies where South African heritage can be dispassionately interpreted. They are themselves ingredients in the South African cultural mix, and they have their own contested and ambiguous heritage that itself interacts with whatever interpretative tasks they set themselves or that

8. The 1990s are poorly documented. This and the following paragraph are based on a reading of various documents and on the writer's observations as an academic at Fort Hare from 1992 to 2002. For the beginning of the decade, see, for instance, Saleem Badat, 'Reformist strategies in black tertiary education since 1976', in E. UNTERHALTER *et al.*, *Apartheid Education and Popular Struggles* (Johannesburg, 1991): 73-94. Developments later in the decade can be inferred from, *inter alia*, University of Fort Hare, 'Institutional Evaluation Study and Strategic Planning Proposal', Fort Hare 1992; 'Report to the Minister of Education, the Honorable SME Bengu by Emeritus Professor SJ Saunders', *Government Gazette*, 19842, 12 March 1999; University of Fort Hare, 'UFH Review Report', Fort Hare 1999; University of Fort Hare, 'Strategic Plan 2000', Fort Hare, 2000.

9. See University of Fort Hare, 'Strategic Plan'.

“society” sets for them. There is no certainty here: without carrying relativism to extremes, and while remaining convinced that interpretation of this sort does operate within limits set by an objective “reality” of some sort, it is also true that the best that can be done is to recognise the limits imposed by the present-ness of the historian. The past can then be approached with the humility derived from awareness of our own fallibility and respect for the people of the past, which was their present, in which they operated with doubts and uncertainties as real as ours today.

Fort Hare as a heritage and cultural centre

Because of the many things that it is and has been, and that it is still held to stand for, Fort Hare has been given tasks and resources and has generated expectations that, on the whole, have not been given to other HBUs, or for which other HBUs have had to struggle. No doubt its survival as an independent institution in the present reorganisation of higher education, where it is anticipated many other HBUs will disappear as separate bodies, is in large part a contemporary acknowledgement of this assigned and acquired status.¹⁰ These resources include a major gallery of South African fine art by black artists;¹¹ a museum with a unique collection of mainly South African beadwork, grasswork, weaving, metalwork and other material;¹² the papers of Fort Hare itself;¹³ the physical fabric of Fort Hare and the ground on which it is built, which are palimpsests of the history of the Eastern Cape;¹⁴ the papers of some major South African literary and political figures such as

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10. For Fort Hare’s anticipated role in the new higher education dispensation, see ‘A New Institutional Landscape for Higher Education in South Africa’, in <http://education.pwv.gov.za/Policies%20and%20Reports/2002>
 11. E.J. DE JAGER, *Images of Man: Contemporary South African Black Art and Artists* (Alice, 1992). See also E. MILES, *Land and Lives: a Story of Early Black Artists* (Johannesburg, 1997).
 12. S. MORROW, “‘The things they have made will live forever’: The Estelle Hamilton-Welsh Collection in the F.S. Malan Museum, University of Fort Hare’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 22, 2 (1996): 271-285; J. LOUW, *Catalogue of the Estelle Hamilton-Welsh Collection (Housed in the F.S. Malan Museum)* (Fort Hare, Alice, 1964).
 13. MORROW AND GXABALASHE, ‘The Records ...’.
 14. C.G. COETZEE, *Forts of the Eastern Cape: Securing a Frontier 1799-1878* (n.p. [Grahamstown], n.d. [c.1996]).

A.P. Jordan and Lionel Forman,¹⁵ and the remarkable archives of major South African liberation movements such as the ANC, PAC and AZAPO.¹⁶

It has been seen that Fort Hare has its own set of complexities deriving from its ambiguous history. How does such an institution of higher education deal with these equally complex objects and documents from the past, and struggle – or perhaps not quite struggle enough - with the interpretation, and conservation, of this material? The museum, the art gallery and the archives will be concentrated on here.

Several important collections, notably the museum, the art gallery, the A.C. Jordan papers, the PAC papers and the papers of several other liberation movements, are in the care of a body that incorporates “heritage” and “culture” in its name, the National Heritage and Cultural Studies Centre (NAHECS). Amongst these is the museum, the largest and most significant element in which is the Hamilton-Welsh Collection. This important collection was assembled by the wife of a white trader in the Transkei, and especially by her daughter, Estelle Hamilton-Welsh, the wife of an officer in the Cape Mounted Rifles.¹⁷ Some items in the collection go back to the mid-nineteenth century. Both women were fluent speakers of Xhosa, and Estelle Hamilton-Welsh strongly believed that she was preserving the artefacts for a future when the descendents of their makers would no longer be familiar with such things. The collection is therefore a monument both to African creativity, and to the systematising and classifying gaze of white South Africa, albeit with unusual gender dimensions. It is unfortunately also a monument to contemporary neglect, the original museum having been cleared, the collection being considerably disrupted in the process, and with the few items that are currently on display in the art gallery inadequately described. The last catalogue, long out of print, was produced in the 1950s, and there is no current catalogue or guide for the student or visitor. This great collection of objects made by the people of the Eastern Cape and other parts of South Africa, has, in some ways surprisingly, not been taken up and encompassed within contemporary concepts of heritage.

The De Beers Centenary Art Gallery contains what is probably the most important collection in the world of fine art by black South African artists.

15. S. FORMAN AND A. ODENDAAL, eds., *A Trumpet from the Housetops: the Selected Writings of Lionel Forman* (Claremont, 1992); P. NTANTALA, *A Life's Mosaic* (Cape Town, 1993) (for Jordan).

16. T. STAPLETON AND M. MAAMOE, ‘An Overview of the African National Congress Archives at the University of Fort Hare’, *History in Africa* 25 (1998): 413-422; L.B. MAABA, ‘The Archives of the Pan African Congress and Other Black Consciousness-orientated Movements’, *History in Africa* 28 (2001): 417-438.

17. MORROW, “The things ...”.

However, little has been acquired in recent years. For present purposes, the history of the collection and how it is used in terms of culture and heritage is the concern. The collection originates in competitions run for black artists under the aegis of Professor Otto Raum, an eminent German anthropologist and educationist at Fort Hare in the period after the Second World War who had previously lived in and worked on Tanganyika. It was expanded greatly under E.J. de Jager, who was for many years Professor of Anthropology at Fort Hare. In 1989, the de Beers mining company built a new gallery for the collection. Though it lacked storage facilities and any infrastructure for study, preservation or treatment, itself perhaps an indication of a preponderance of symbolism over serious commitment to artistic and scholarly excellence, it is an impressive structure.

There are many things one could say about this outstanding collection, which includes major works by Gerard Sokoto, George Pemba, Gladys Mugundlandlu, Dumile Feni, Azaria Mbatha and many others. It is, first of all, an art collection conceptualised on the basis of race. It originates in an ethnographic tradition which arguably, and especially in the case of South Africa where racial divisions have been deeply entrenched, has in the past tended to see Africans, and other colonized races, as *sui generis* in their art as in other aspects of their lives. This is in spite of this being a collection of fine art in cosmopolitan mode – portraits and landscapes in water-colour and oils, sculptures, lithographs and so on. In 1989, on the point of profound political change in South Africa, the de Beers Gallery was opened, attaching the kudos of this pivotal company to the collection, and, at a crucial time in South Africa, the kudos of the collection to de Beers.

The gallery seems now to have made the transition - like Fort Hare and perhaps HBUs in general - from a position where black artistic achievement was placed within a segregationist paradigm, to becoming a badge of such achievement in the context of a now formally non-racial society.

Perhaps the most fascinating issues are raised by the archives of the various liberation movements deposited at Fort Hare. In brief, the ANC, PAC and other liberation movements decided, in the early 1990s, against strong competition from other institutions, some with a much longer record of formal archival expertise, to assign the records of their activities in exile to Fort Hare. Fort Hare is rural, relatively isolated, and had at the time little in the way of professional expertise or appropriate housing for the records. What was going on?

The answer may be found once more in the area of heritage. At first sight, the archives may seem to have little in common with, for instance, the art collection. In fact, as Williams and Wallach have argued persuasively in a recent paper, these documents have been assigned a powerful symbolic

role.¹⁸ They are not just ‘sources’, they have also collected around themselves and been given meanings that are in a sense separate from whatever scholarly uses to which they may be put. They are a sort of monument, for which Fort Hare is considered an appropriate home. This may explain some of the debates within the institution and with the owners of the documents about where they should be located and by whom they should be managed. These are actually debates, though rarely described as such, about which tendencies and individuals should have the power to articulate the meaning that it is assumed these documents have for the people of South Africa.¹⁹ Meanwhile, the rich papers of Fort Hare itself, which could be interpreted in a similar manner but perhaps less easily and directly so, remain uncatalogued, unsorted, and unemphasised. Only the occasional scholar makes use of them, with some difficulty on account of the lack of filing guides, and with, now and again, some information being extracted from the papers when the University is honouring an eminent alumnus or previous staff member.

In short, heritage, culture, and cultural education are potent, yet often inexact concepts. HBUs, themselves ambiguous products of a contested history, have sometimes tried, many of them it would now seem without ultimate success, to hitch their chariots to these temperamental steeds. Fort Hare, an institution with a deeper and more complex history than its fellow-HBUs, has used arguments drawn from these areas with greater success.²⁰ In terms of the current dispensation, other HBUs can for the most part only mobilise the harsh memories of apartheid-era homeland education, within which, with good reason, almost the only honourable tradition for those who were once their students is that of opposition to and rejection of their *alma maters*. Fort Hare can mobilise the still ambiguous, but not similarly unacceptable traditions of an institution that to a just sufficient degree represented a joint

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18. B. WILLIAMS AND W.K. WALLACH, ‘Documenting South Africa's Liberation Movement: Engaging the Archives at the University of Fort Hare’, *Comma: International Journal on Archives*, 1/2 (2001): 45-67.
 19. Similar questions are discussed in relation specifically to the SOMAFSCO papers, part of the ANC archive, in S. MORROW, B. MAABA AND L. PULUMANI, ‘Revolutionary Schooling? Studying the Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College, the African National Congress liberation school in Tanzania, 1978 to 1992’, forthcoming in *World Studies in Education*.
 20. This is a constant theme in Fort Hare’s publicity material. See, for example, a brochure produced by the University of Fort Hare Division of Marketing and Communication, ‘The Crucible of African Leadership’ (Alice 2000), where images of Z.K. Matthews and others from the past are placed beside those of contemporary political and academic leaders, and where a ‘Fort Hare Chronology’, linking the past and the present temporally, occupies half the brochure.

project between students, lecturers and college authorities at a period before the imposition of Bantu Education; this may be an important reason for its survival as an independent institution in 2002.

Conclusion

Fort Hare is itself a political and social icon of considerable significance, and is heir to remarkable historical experiences. It houses unique and important artefacts and documents that are invaluable sources for the political, social and cultural history especially of the majority black population of South Africa. However, these artefacts and documents have also, apart from their potential for scholarship, been reified as potent symbols of a previously neglected past, as part of the African heritage that South Africa needs to elaborate. This has been an important element in the argument that the university has successfully advanced to justify its survival and continuing autonomy.

Heritage is a difficult concept to pin down. It is not the same as the sceptical discipline of history. That Fort Hare, and to a lesser and more contested extent other HBUs, are now being envisioned as sites of significance to the heritage of a new South Africa is itself a historical tendency of some significance. It is certainly true that they are of considerable significance, but often in more ambiguous ways than it is convenient to acknowledge. Historians should therefore carefully examine the construction of HBUs as heritage sites, alert for questionable reinterpretations and the glossing over of awkward facts. To end normatively, to work at any university should impose an obligation on scholars and students within the institution to go beyond superficial and static conceptions of the past and of the material and documentary record. The changing meanings of heritage, culture, and the artefacts and documents that are their manifestations, need to be constantly examined. We should not only revere them, but, to the best of our ability, also try to understand them, critically and historically.

Opsomming

Erfenis en die Historiese Swart Universiteite (HSUs): die uitsig van Fort Hare

In hierdie artikel word ondersoek ingestel na histories swart universiteite as erfenisbestemmings. Daar word geargumenteer dat universiteite simbole is

van intellektuele en kulturele prestasies van bepaalde gemeenskappe of klasse. Die uiteenlopende oorsprong en verlede van histories swart universiteite in Suid-Afrika maak dit moeilik vir sodanige instellings om daardie rol met betrekking tot die swart gemeenskap te vervul: Fort Hare sou dit straks met groter oortuiging kon doen weens die universiteit se langer en meer komplekse geskiedenis. Hierdie artikel skets die geskiedenis wat dit moontlik maak vir Fort Hare om 'n simbool te wees van die prestasies van swartmense deur die beskrywing van die galery, argiewe en museum as voorbeelde van die fisiese en intellektuele manifestasies van hierdie prestasies. Die uitgangspunt is dat die oorlewing van Fort Hare as 'n onafhanklike entiteit in die huidige voorgestelde reorganisasie van hoër onderwys in Suid-Afrika baie te doen het met hierdie erfenisrol van die universiteit. Ten slotte word erfenis tog beskou as 'n nie-eksakte en betwisde konsep en dat dit veral by universiteite krities en histories ondersoek behoort te word.