THE BANTU AND THE STUDY OF HISTORY

It is a well-known fact that the teaching of history in South Africa has for at least a decade called forth a torrent of ideas and writings from the ranks of professional historians, educationists, leaders of culture, politicians and journalists.[1] The airing of views is still going on. Attention was mainly focussed on the state of history in European schools and universities, but very litle, if any, thought was given to the problem as far as the non-European schools or universities were concerned. If a European had dealt with the matter it was only in passing, and the non-European has on the whole preserved a stoical silence on the question of history teaching and to a large measure also in the field of historical writing. To the European South African and especially to the Afrikaner such a state of affairs is puzzling indeed, because it could have been expected that the Bantu would employ history as a component part of their political struggle — as the Afrikaner did when a mood of reaction prevailed.[2]

There has been much oral speculation on the teaching of history to the Bantu but very little, if any, solid research has been done by historians on the Bantu's traditional sense of history. It is only in the anthropological field that the methodology of utilizing and interpreting oral traditions and myths in the writing of African history has, in recent years, received vigorous attention.[3]

The incentive and stimulus for the sudden absorbing interest in African history was the realization by students of African affairs that here is a lacuna in their knowledge. The leaders of the newly independent African states want a past of their own to stand on.[4] Every self-conscious nation looks back upon its past to revive former glories, to discover its origins, to relate its history to that of other parts of the world and to arrive at a knowledge of the development of its political, social, economic and other systems. This brought history — hitherto not regarded as of great importance by the African — to the foreground.[5] It is to be expected that the Bantu of South Africa, fully alive to a new political and national consciousness, a consciousness which is related to the upsurge of nationalism in Asia and elsewhere in Africa, will evince the same urge for the study of their own history in time to come.

1. Vide F. A. van Jaarsveld, *Die Huidige Gesprek oor Geskiedenisonderrig* (*Standpunte*, no. 60, Aug., 1965, p. 44).
2. Cf. S. J. du Toit, *Die Geskiedenis van ons Land in die Taal van ons Volk.* Paarl, 1877.
3. Cf. R. Cornevin, *Histoire de l'afrique*, Vol. I; D. F. MacCall, *Africa in Time Perspective*; J. Vansina, *Recording of Oral History of the Bakuba* (*Journal of African History*, 1960, Vol. I); J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*; J. Vansina, R. Maury and L. V. Thomas, *The Historian in Tropical Africa*; D. Westermann, *Geschichte Afrikas.*
4. K. M. Stahl: *History of the Chagga People of Kilimanjaro*, p. 11.
5. Vansina, Maury and Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

But the dilemma is that the Bantu has no written history. He lives in time, realizes the time-determined development of his own groups (kinship and tribal) but has a rudimentary interest in regional or universal historical progress. This has, of course, changed for the urban African. Their urge to research and write has not been great. They have as yet not learnt that there is no more useful intellectual exercise than to seek to enter fully into the life of the past, to interpret it sympathetically, with its presuppositions and prejudices clearly held in view. Neither have they evinced much drive to understand the value of history "as a means of understanding another age or another society: of entering with sympathy into that age or that society".[6]

And who else than the Bantu historian, if steeped in the principles of scientific honesty and intellectual responsibility, could be better suited for the task of probing into his distant past? Without cutting himself off from the mainstream of historical thought, the Bantu historian will be admirably suited to take contemporary African mentality into account. At the same time he would be capable of penetrating the world of the tribe, the chiefdom or the clan, making use of oral tradition, myths and legends and data derived from the related disciplines of archaeology, ethnography, linguistics, physical anthropology, as well as astronomy and ethno-Botany[7]

The call for highly specialized Bantu research-workers is urgent because, not only are written sources scarce or non-existent but other sources are extremely fragile, and as Vansina says: "The old customs break down and the old men, keepers of the traditions, vanish. For instance, in 1960 an old person of eighty can testify about events that occurred around 1830, if he could have listened in 1895, when he was fifteen, to the stories of his grandfather born in 1815. It can then be said that every time a lucid and informed old African dies, a whole part of the historical landscape of his country is abolished".[8]

Codified oral traditions, as distinct from simple transmissions may be very useful documents (sometimes better than written documents) but they are also difficult to handle. Although they must be collected with great care, and require a lengthy, thorough analysis, the fact remains that they can serve as valid documents and add considerably to our knowledge of the Bantu past. However, in determining their weight of legitimacy the historian's abilities and training in historical criticism will be taxed to the utmost, but, as Stahl remarks, "he will have the advantage of dealing with a past which is near and living and continuous. He can strongly argue the past from the present, but he will suffer the disadvantage that oral traditions are to a great extent his only source. He can get at the past only scantily through archaeology, and not at all through writing, except for the comparatively late and often sparse writings left by

6. D. Perkins and J. Snell, *The Education of Historians in the U.S.A.*, p.
7. Vansina, Maury and Thomas, *op. cit.*, pp. 60, 75.
8. Ibid., p. 61.

foreigners".[9] The Bantu student of history should be made aware of the urgency of the collection of these invaluable and fast-disappearing sources.

Bantu students of history must realize that up to the present they have produced practically nothing in the field of scientific historical writing. European historians actually took up the cudgels for them and indicated to them how to see their own history. The Bantu did not produce a history and were quite satisfied to remain the object of study to the European. In South Africa the Bantu have been a subdivision in the image of the European's history; they were usually the objects of dispute. Nobody, however, has thus far written a scientific history of South Africa from the viewpoint of the Bantu.

Eleven years ago during the Van Riebeeck celebrations Nosipho Majeke[10] and "Mnguni"[11] (an anonymous writer), tried their hands at such writing, it is true. Majeke quotes the sources of other authors and Mnguni bases his facts on published sources and a variety of literature, but the reader would look in vain for the scholarly approach, impartial judgment and objectivity in these highly censorious, and pragmatic writings which emanated from a spirit of bitterness.[12] Measured against accepted scientific standards this kind of historical writing may not be worth much, but it illustrates the Bantu style of historical representation and the image which the authors want to create. Prof. Van Jaarsveld very appropriately comes to the illuminating conclusions that "this image . . . differs so radically from the traditional 'white' interpretation, that one might well speak of 'Umvertung aller Werte' " and say that the viewpoint expressed in these publications "is the start of a development of which we shall have to take notice".[13]

The educated Bantu will in future give serious thought to their position in Africa, South Africa in particular, and the world, and we can expect to hear the voices of their historians in future. A scientifically well-documented History of South Africa or penetrating probings into aspects of South African or Banty history by Bantu historians will not only receive international recognition, but will be widely acclaimed by South African historians. This can readily lead to an invigorating reinterpretation of South African history as well as to the possibility of the triangular historical debate of which we are in dire need. It can also lead to an improvement in the argument among those more passionately involved in cultivating the historical dimension of human thought "which", in the words of Norman Cantor "is worthy of cultivation and intense inquiry because it offers meaningful explanations of what and why we are".[14]

9. Stahl, loc. cit.
10. *The Role of the Missionaries in Conquest.*
11. *Three Hundred Years, a History of South Africa.*
12. Cf. F. A. van Jaarsveld, *The Afrikaner's Interpretation of South African History*, pp. 151-154, and C. F. J. Muller, *Die Groot Trek* (*Mededelings van die Universiteit van Suid-Afrika*, B.19, 1963, pp. 67-71).
13. Ibid., p. 154.
14. N. F. Cantor, *Some Thoughts on History Today* (*The World of Wiley*, New York, Spring 1965, p. 1).

This is especially true of the Great Trek — the movement which was essentially responsible for the ushering in of the present order in South Africa. In a recent symposium which dealt with the reorientation of South African history, Professor Muller stressed the necessity of a Bantu viewpoint on the Great Trek. In his opinion it is highly necessary that a Bantu point of view be developed through the thorough and scientific scrutinizing of sources, especially those left by missionaries. He also propounds that anthropological and South African ethnological studies can be of great help in this regard. If, as he says, the best guarantee for a more satisfactory interpretation of the problematic Great Trek episode is a patient and understanding entering into the spirit of those times, then also the Bantu historian is confronted with an exciting and challenging task.[15]

Such scientific historical writing based on sound and systematic research will do its share in disseminating knowledge in such a way that it will assist the Bantu to cultivate their own healthy vision on history, a vision of balance and prespective that should also give credit to the positive contributions of the European in this country and in the continent of Africa. Therefore Bantu historians should acquire breadth of historical knowledge which will acquaint them with human activity on a broad basis. This again will help them to see relations in perspective and, inter alia, truly to understand the factors through which they were detribalised and which have brought them into the orbit of world opinion. Also for the Bantu historian it would perhaps be wise to keep in mind that history is the cement which brings unity in the diversity and that in a multi-cultural society honesty is the best policy. By developing perspective he (as well as his European colleague) will contribute not only to his own profession but to every literate and intelligent member of his own people and other peoples. He may thereby help to liberate the peoples of South Africa from the pre-occupations of the moment and also assist us all to place ourselves and our age in relation to other persons and other times. "History is never more valuable", wrote Lecky almost a hundred years ago, "than when it enables us, standing on a height, to look beyond the smoke and turmoil of our petty quarrels, and to detect in the slow developments of the past the great permanent forces that are steadily bearing nations onwards to improvement or decay".[16]

At university level and in the schools the content of history syllabi presents the history-image of the European to the Bantu student and pupil. Necessarily so, and the Bantu must realize that he lives in a European orientated South Africa, steeped in the ideas and achievements of Western civilization. Obviously, the teaching of history by the European to the Bantu will be beset by a number of severe problems as a result of the fundamental outlooks involved. But the European teacher should not

15. Cf. Muller, *op. cit.*, p. 72.
16. Quoted by Perkins and Snell, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

underestimate or fail to appreciate the rôle of the Bantu in the European's history, when teaching history to the European or to the Bantu. Neither should the Bantu teacher be blind to the fact that the European had a tremendous share in his uplifting. Teaching with responsibility, with justice and fairness, teaching without hidden meanings and ulterior motives is necessary in a high degree. The formation of the outlook of Bantu youth will therefore depend in part on the scholarly and objective qualities of their historians.

Therefore I am of opinion that more should be made of local tribal history and the regional history of the Bantu. The Bantu are more "people-centred" than "thing-centred"[17] and in our history teaching and their research into history their group-interest and the interest that they take in their own great men in so far as they are the external representations of the group, should be exploited. The mass of mankind and the great majority of students are interested in ideas and systems and concepts of social movements, but most of all in human personality. Bantu history is rich in colourful historical figures and much can be learned from their virtues, their accomplishments or their mistakes. "If history is philosophy teaching by example, it is by the example of the individual that it communicates some of its most precious lessons".[18]

Bantu students reveal a remarkable aptitude for the study of the triangular group conflicts in South African history and the class conflicts during the French Revolution. Because they are interested in the survival of the group, a policy of self-realization of distinct groups will become intelligible to them. A study of their own local history, of their own group, can lead to the furtherance of mutual respect for the other individual's way of life and his point of view. The Bantu historian should know that the thorough study of his history is imperative if his compatriots must become intimately acquainted with the society to which they belong as well as the fostering of the natural pride they have in their own people and its way of life. History, like charity, should begin at home.

It has been said that "Africans have no conception of history, no capacity for apprehending notions of time and sequence and the relatedness of events".[19] It must, however, be kept in mind that the Bantu student's historical perspective is of necessity short. He may not think in terms of dynamic development, cause and effect, and so on. He thinks more naturally in terms of personal relationships, which is clearly seen in Bantu social structure — of father and son, of family traditions, etc. His symbol of an era may be the name and characteristics of a certain chief. But all this surely does not mean that he has no conception of history. It does mean that he has quite a different attitude to history from that which the

17. E. A. Nida, *Message and Mission*, p. 117.

18. Perkins and Snell, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

19. B. Sundkler, *The Christian Ministry in Africa*, p. 218. See also *International Missionary Council, Report, Part III*, 1953, p. 46.

European brings to it.[20] As Cantor remarks: "The historical attitude to things seems to be a fundamental dimension of human thought. No man is without some conception, however naive and ill-considered, of historical change. It is natural to man to consider himself and the world around him from the point of view of how things came to be the way they are".[21]

This brings us to the Bantu's sense of time and the difficulties involved for the Bantu student studying European history. Evans-Pritchard found that the Bantu have no expression equivalent to time in our language, and they cannot, therefore, as we can, speak of time as though it were something actual, which passes, which can be wasted, can be saved, and so forth. They can hardly ever experience the same feeling of fighting against time or having to co-ordinate activities with an abstract passage of time, because their points of reference are mainly the activities themselves, which are generally of a leisurely character. Events follow a logical order, but they are not controlled by an abstract system, there being no autonomous points of reference to which activities have to conform with precision.[22]

The Bantu system of time — reckoning within the annual cycle and parts of the cycle is a series of conceptualizations of natural changes in which the heavenly luminaries play an important rôle as determinants of time. Another Bantu concept of time is that which reflects their relations to one another in the social structure, which is called structural time.[23]

For us space is like a great container that stores, arranges, and holds everything together; space is also the place where we live, breathe, and can expand freely. Time plays a similar rôle for the Bantu. Their consciousness is like a container in which their whole life from childhood on and the realities which they experienced or of which they had heard are stored. Because every person is and remains identical with himself, a consolidating unity adheres to each person's physical content which could be expressed thus: all this is my world, my existence. Seen from the inside, an individual's personal experiences form a unity, a world; in that world he moves freely and with ease. Thus, even while the Bantu lives in time, his timedistinctions are discrete (referring to the annual cycles of work, physic and biological stages of life, decisive events in the development of clan and tribe, etc.) and they are not measured against wider time scales, or a universal one, unless where teaching in school, church or party has been effective.

Consciousness comprises an entire life as a unity and cannot be divided like space; even an event is a coherent whole. It is essentially inadmissable to break up or analyse this unity into a series of segments or rapidly consecutive points of time. The people's consciousness of itself

20. *International Missionary Council, Report*, loc. cit. See also Van der Leeuw, *De Primitieve Mensch en de Religie* and Barnes, *The Perception of History in a Plural Society* (*Human Relations*, Vol. IV, No. 3, Aug., 1951, pp. 295-303).
21. Cantor, loc. cit.
22. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*, p. 103.
23. Ibid., p. 104.

as a unity, as an individual, is expressed in the notion of a chief "whose person is the sum and substance of the whole community".[24] Their time-notion is therefore, centrifugal and events round them lead to the representative symbol, viz. the chief.

Regarding the content of time for the Bantu we can say that, as we give attention to the peculiarity of things, so the Bantu mind stresses the peculiarity of events. Time is for us an abstraction since we distinguish time from the events that occur in time. The Bantu do not do this; for them time is determined by its content. Time is the notion of the occurrence; it is the stream of events. Occasionally we, too, characterize time by its content when we speak of wartime, peacetime, hard times, etc., but to us this is an exception, and is hardly thought of by us as "proper" time.

I trust that I have to some extent made it clear that we cannot for one moment say that the Bantu possess no time notion. It should also be clear what difficulties are experienced by the Bantu in truly grasping the European's thinking of time as a line on which we ourselves stand at a given time at a point called "now" with the future lying before us and the past which stretches out behind us. We are all aware how difficult it is to inculcate a "time sense' 'in the European child and, in the light of the above, do we find it strange that the Bantu child or student often leaves his teaching institution with a feeling of confusion and bewilderment about history? There is no doubt that the main source of this confusion lies in the failure to grasp the right order of historical events.

On this score the Bantu scholar has great obstacles to surmount and the Bantu as well as the European historian is presented with a few nice problems. But this hazard of "time" surely constitutes a most interesting challenge and invites vigorous and dedicated experimentation.

Bishop L. Beecher of Nairobi states in connection with the teaching of Church History that, "he and his students traced Church history backwards and having reviewed this history in reverse from a highly selective viewpoint, the process was then changed and the ordinary chronological sequence could be followed — although once again definitely selective".[25]

P. D. Fueter, with experience of teaching in a Bible School and Theological College in Tanganyika, laments the African's lack of the fundamental ability of thinking whilst reading and states that the using of names instead of figures for measuring history brought him somewhere. He suggests that "if a further course was given making the link between names and figures, they would be up to our conceptions of history".[26]

Sundkler propagates the study of African local history to partly over-bridge the question of "time sense"[27] and R. E. Crookall, an African

24. J. V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision*, p. 135.
25. Sundkler, op. cit., p. 223.
26. Ibid., pp. 223-224.
27. Ibid., p. 223.

history teacher of Western Nigeria, stresses the importance "of the use of as many kinds of time-charts and record-charts as the ingenuity of teachers is able to invent".[28]

When Bantu under-graduates enter university and especially a history class, it is obvious (as is also the case with European students) that they are often the victims of a system of teaching.

The boon of learning history with insight did often not come their way in high school education and the lecturer is confronted with a matriculated product that possesses ability to memorise mechanically and ably at that, but to whom certain history terminology is nothing more than verbalisms, empty of meaning, idle clap-trap and high-sounding nonsense. The matriculant had learnt his history, but he did not learn. As Burton says: "He had accumulated an astounding amount of ignorance in the form of inert facts".[29] Thence the need for the well-equipped Bantu historian with a firm grip on and sound knowledge of his subject; and if he becomes a teacher, a person acquainted with the didactical principles involved in the learning process.[30] The Bantu teacher, conversant with these principles will be admirably suited to teach his subject to his young compatriots. Because he knows their limitations, especially those of abstract thinking and background, when confronted with subject-matter of a specifically Western European orientation, he will readily make use of the observational or audio-visual method of teaching.[31]

Bantu undergraduates in history are subjected to the same nature of training as European students. Their period of study extends over three years and the stress falls on the factual side of our discipline and breadth of knowledge. The vast majority of them are preparing for a teacher's career and the idea seldom enters their minds that by embarking on a study of history they are actually stepping over the threshold of the career of the professional historian. Few, however, eventually choose this career.

The fact is that these undergraduates, preparing for a career of teaching, mostly in high schools, will eventually also teach relatively broad courses dealing with fields in which the knowledge is so wide that they will seldom get to the bottom of specific problems in terms of intensive research.

28. R. E. Crookall, *Handbook for History Teachers in West Africa*, pp. 119-128. For more information on time-charts see also Van Jaarsveld and Rademeyer, *Theory and Method of Teaching History*, pp. 139-143.
29. W. H. Burton, *The Guidance of Learning Activities*, p. 95.
30. Some Bantu schools which I have visited were poorly equipped with audio-visual aids to facilitate the teaching of history — a matter that should be a grave concern to Bantu educationists. For this reason the Department of Education of Fort Hare recently organised an exhibition of Teaching Aids in the different school subjects for the benefit of Bantu teachers and students. The Department of History gladly co-operated in this laudable attempt and I think that to most teachers also this display was an eye-opener.
31. Cf. Burton, op. cit.; Burton, Kimball and Wing, *Education for Effective Thinking*; Duminy, *The Desirability of Renewed Didactical Reflection*; —, *Learning and the African Child*.

And here is one of the shortcomings of history teaching to undergraduates. They are in no way initiated into the exhilarating world of the research, they never encounter or hear something of the satisfaction of the historian at creating a coherent whole out of a multitude of formerly relatively untouched, loose and undigested facts hidden in obscure documents. Undergraduates are sometimes also deprived of the privilege of hearing their lecturer on his special field of study. Furthermore, they know very little or nothing at all of the nature of history as a science, or of historiography or theoretical history, all of which are actually imperative if our history students must know never to surrender the desire to know more and to know more deeply. And knowledge of the above aspects of history is also necessary if our students are to become teachers who can make the past live — teachers who have grasped the truth that their teaching of history will only be effective in so far as they communicate, "not facts alone, but the wisdom, experience and insight that lie behind the facts".[32] After all, the undergradute level is where enthusiasm for the life of the scholar is engendered.

The undergraduate level is also where the early recruiting for our discipline is to be undertaken. Now is the time to see to it that they commence their studies in foreign languages if we wish to prepare them for postgraduate study. In this respect the Bantu student of history in the past and to some extent also of today, is seriously handicapped in that he has very little access to primary and secondary sources in languages other than English. And as far as I can make out he is as yet not possessed of the urge or sufficiently alive to the necessity, to study foreign languages to meet the exacting demands and implications of historical research. At Fort Hare this situation is gradually changing for the better.

As the situation now stands in regard to postgraduate study and particularly in the Honours Course, the Bantu student's spontaneous embarking on this enterprise is to some extent frustrated because of the language problem, but there are hopeful signs that this impediment to further study, will in due time be overcome.

Furthermore, the Bantu student's financial position is usually of such a nature that he is not free to do research and he is bound to flinch from the rigid requirements and excruciating expenses of study beyond the Honours level. The M.A. is usually taken on a part-time basis which is unsatisfactory because of the short periods that can be devoted to research during holidays and the reluctance or apathy about taking a year's study leave for intensive research. This often leads to an unncessary stretching out and prolonging of the research programme with the result that the towel is eventually thrown in and the post-graduate study is permanently abandoned.

Very few Bantu students have attempted the rigors of doctoral training which takes a long time involving years of research and sometimes

32. Perkins and Snell, op. cit., p. 2.

necessitates extensive travel. There have been cases where promising Bantu students have been lured overseas by the enticing grants of extensive scholarships — which is also a pity because we need the research talent of these people in our country to do research on topics in South African history and in South African archives, and to work under South African professional historians.

Prof. C. G. Coetzee

Bibliography

Barnes, J. A., *The Perception of History in a Plural Society* (*Human Relations*, Vol. IV, No. 3, August 1951).
Burton, W. H., *The Guidance of Learning Activities*. New York, 1962.
Burton, W. H., Kimball, R. B. and Wing, R. L., *Education for Effective Thinking*. New York, 1960.
Cantor, N. F., *Some Thoughts on History Today* (*The World of Wiley*, New York, Spring 1965).
Cornevin, R., *Histoire de l'Afrique*, Vol. I. Paris, 1962.
Crookall, R. E., *Handbook for History Teachers in West Africa*. London, 1960.
Duminy, P. A., *Learning and the Bantu Child* (Inaugural address at Fort Hare, Sept. 1965).
—, *The Desirability of Renewed Didactical Reflection* (Fort Hare Papers, Sept. 1963).
Evans-Pritchard, E. E., *The Nuer*. Oxford, 1940.
Hermann, F., *Symbolik in den Religionen der Naturvölker*. Stuttgart, 1961.
International Missionary Council. *Report of a Survey of the Ministry in Africa, Part III*.
MacCall, D. F., *Africa in Time Perspective*. London, 1964.
Majeke, N., *The Role of the Missionaries in Conquest*. Johannesburg, 1952.
Mellonby, K., *Establishing a New University in Africa* (*Minerva*, Vol. I, No. 2, Winter 1963).
Mnguni, *A History of South Africa . . .* Cape Town, 1952.
Molema, S. M., *Three Centuries of Wrong*. Melanchton Publishers, 1952.
Muller, C. F. J., *Die Groot rek* (Mededelings van die Universiteit van Suid-Afrika, B.19, 1963).
Nida, E. A., *Message and Mission*. New York, 1960.
Perkins, D. and Snell, J., *The Education of Historians in the U.S.A.*, New York, 1962.
Singh, A. K., *The Impact of Foreign Study: The Indian Experience* (*Minerva*, Vol. I, No. 1, Autumn 1962).
Stahl, K. M., *The History of the Chagga People of Kilimanjaro*. London, 1964.
Sundkler, B., *The Christian Ministry in Africa*. London, 1960.
Taylor, J. V., *The Primal Vision*. London, 1963.
Van der Leeuw, G., *De Primitieve Mensch en de Religie*. Groningen, 1952.
Van Jaarsveld, F. A., *Aangaande ons Huidige Geskiedbeoefening*. (*Standpunt*, no. 58, April 1965).
—, *Die Huidige Gesprek oor die Geskiedenisonderrig* (*Standpunte*, no. 60, Aug. 1965).
—, *The Afrikaner's Interpretation of South African History*. Cape Town, 1964.
Van Jaarsveld, F. A. and Rademeyer, J. I., *Theory and Method of Teaching History*. Johannesburg, 1964.
Van Rooyen, T. S., *Van Prehistorie na Geskiedenis — Die Deurbraak in Afrika* (*Journal of Racial Affairs*, Vol. 13, No. 2, Jan., 1962).
Vansina, J., *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*. London, 1961.
—, *Recording of the Oral History of the Bakuba*. (*Journal of African History*, Vol. 1, 1960).
Vansina, J., Maury, R. and Thomas, L. V., *The Historian in Tropical Africa*. London, 1964.
Westermann, D., *Geschichte Afrikas*. Köln, 1952.