
Archives of Times Past: Conversations about South Africa's Deep History

Edited by: Cynthia Kros, John Wright, Mbongisene Buthelezi and Helen Ludlow

Publisher: Wits University Press, Johannesburg

ISBN: 9781776147274

Reviewed by

Sue Krige

suek@global.co.za

Independent historian, author, and heritage consultant

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2223-0386/2023/n30a13>

Simple people

On a visit to a museum in the city of York some years ago, I came across a visual illustration of the construction of the cathedral, a sketch of people passing rocks to each other. The label read, “These people were simple, but not simplistic.” This label may well apply to *Archives*, which focuses on researching Deep History when no written records exist. The book is simply written in clear, accessible language without sacrificing complexity.

Kros attributes her ability to write and explain with meaning to her years teaching history at a state high school in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg. She had to develop an approach to concepts such as “the military-industrial complex”¹. The editors have all had experience in teaching and/or teaching-related careers.

The use of language links to another aspect of the book: the use of personal journeys to demystify and enliven the research process. The authors describe their engagement with archives of many kinds, with pleasure but without underestimating the hard work involved. Nomalanga Mkhize tells of how school history did not speak to her the way her father’s knowledge of places and spaces did. Another fascinating story is that of Sekiba Lekgoati, whom Kros and Wright interviewed over a number of days. The format of the interview

1 This is a concept I taught to Grade 9s.

adds to the feeling of being in the room with the people involved. The title of the interview is, *From herd boy to professor*, which says it all. The editors' commentaries thread throughout the book, integrating the insights of the contributors as well as their own.

One of the most readable and sophisticated pieces is that of recording and writing African history from the 1800s. Each phase is carefully contextualized. The debates about decolonizing knowledge, particularly history, emerged from the #Fees Must Fall student movement from 2015 onwards. There is ongoing dissatisfaction with existing history, which, they argue is written and taught from the perspectives of the colonisers. They see the "elders" as important sources of alternative, decolonised knowledge, though these also have their limitations (Chapters 4 and 19). These critiques can be read alongside *The Black archive* (pages 51-52).

What constitutes an archive?

In the last two decades or so, the term "archive" has been expanded to include pictures, photographs, objects, maps, landscapes, rituals, songs, performances, oral testimony, in addition to books, collections of papers and museum holdings. This requires an interdisciplinary approach to research and exhibitions, among other activities. Many of the archives have digitized their collections. One of the most impressive is the Rock Art Research Institute at the University of the Witwatersrand, and the wonderful *The Archive in Pictures: A Visual Essay*, picks up the themes in this book comprehensively.(Chapter 21). Student unrest and Covid have pushed academics and teachers to reconceptualise their teaching and research for an online medium.

Reading ethnologists and missionaries

While all the contributions and commentaries in the book have merit, a couple of topics in *Archives* stand out. One is the concern of a number of ethnologists, missionaries, and ethnologist-missionaries, all male², about the loss of African "cultures" in the face of industrialisation and urbanisation. The question of the relationship of authors with their material and how the material can be seen and used in different ways raises its head. Their work, mainly in the Transvaal and Lesotho, constitutes the only sources of Deep History, which has replaced the term "precolonial history", which implied that little significant history existed before colonists arrived.

2 They are Nicolaas Van Warmelo, Paul-Lenert Breutz, Rev. Carel Hoffman, Rev. David Ellenberger and Rev. AT Bryant.

The relationship between the beliefs of the ethnologists and those of funders and the Native Affairs Department (NAD) raises the question: how they squared their spiritual beliefs with their attitudes towards their subjects. Two of them, Nicolaas van Warmelo and Paul-Lenert Breutz, both worked for Native Affairs for a long time. Van Warmelo was head of the Ethnological Section of the department. He studied the history and culture of the Transvaal Ndebele, but his influence lay in developing handbooks for administrators and magistrates on the location and culture of each “tribe” in the reserves. He also developed a research model that included a set of questions for interviewing chiefs and headmen. Breutz’s work among the Setswana-speaking men used Van Warmelo’s list of questions. The reports were sent to the NAD.

The Berlin Mission Society (BMS) sent many missionaries to the Transvaal, who acted as unpaid observers and witnesses to its Deep History. The BMS funded them and expected copious reports in exchange. Hoffman wrote many reports and articles for the BMS, including those about Northern Sotho speakers, and other projects such as compilations of folk-tales and a Sotho-German dictionary. It would be interesting to know whether these reports fed into the material used in the development of “Volkekunde” curricula in German universities during the 1920s and 1930s.³

David Ellenberger was a French-speaking priest in the Swiss Mission at Morija in Lesotho. As a missionary, he studied the history and cultures of the Basuto. His magnum opus was *A History of the Basuto, Ancient and Modern*, which was published in 1912. He also wrote two books about King Moshoeshoe. He wrote in Sotho, French and English. *The History of the Basuto* is still used as a source of Deep History.

In 1883 Rev Alfred Bryant joined the Trappist brethren and lived with them at a mission station at Marion Hill, Natal. In 1887 he was ordained as a Catholic missionary. His magnum opus was *Olden Times in Zululand and Natal*, published in 1929, with government funding. The book, shortened by the NAD before publication, covered events from the fifteen hundreds, up to the assassination of Shaka.

Most of the men⁴ mentioned here regarded their subjects as inferior and uncivilised. (Ellenberger made some concessions regarding the Basuto. He saw them as the most civilised of all the “native tribes”). Yet they spent years collecting oral testimonies about every aspect of African lives and histories. However, those who wrote during the 1920s and 30s contributed directly or indirectly to the state project of “retribalisation” via the

3 HF Verwoerd studied *Volkekunde* in Germany during the 1930s. It formed part of the Sociology curricula.

4 The men mentioned in this article did not interview women or ordinary people in general.

NAD⁵. How they were able to reconcile their views of Africans with their Christian faith and spiritual life is not clear.

These men used interlocutors when interviewing chiefs and headmen, even if the men could speak their languages. It is only recently that researchers have asked questions about who the interlocutors were and how their testimony and translations contributed to the overall reports and published material. It is difficult to find out much about them as, for example, only their first names appear in the researchers' notes.

All the material mentioned here has been used by historians until the present day. They afford indispensable sources of South Africa's Deep History. The questions asked by contemporaries should bear this in mind and contextualise the materials accordingly. The attempts by missionaries convert the people around them, which was their primary goal, should be seen in this context, (Chapters 6 - 9).

Imagining Mapungubwe

This excellent piece is particularly relevant for teachers. The author makes two salient points about how Mapungubwe is treated in the CAPS Social Sciences and History curricula. The first is that Mapungubwe is dealt with early – Grade 6 (Standard Four). The second is that this is the history of elites only. This chapter is a great source for reconceptualising what is in the curriculum. Hard-pressed teachers do not have to carry out research on this topic – it's all there in Chapter 18.

Questioning archives

In Chapter 20 there is an outline of the fundamental questions that researchers should ask of an archive or a collection of archives in preparation for work which is both "hard and rewarding".

- What are the available resources?
- Who made them - when, where and why?
- Why have some sources survived and others not?
- What is the particular nature of the archives on South Africa's Deep History?

Engaging with archives has consequences

5 The policy of "retribalisation" predated apartheid. The identification the location of distinct "tribes" and their cultures in the reserves made for easier for Native Administration.

This aspect of engaging with archives is not covered in the book. In this section, I will consider the impact of doing so. I will look at archives from the other end, so to speak.

To do so I go back to the year 1979, which was the centenary of the battle of Isandlwana, in the Anglo-Zulu War (January to July 1879)⁶. It was also the year historian Jeff Guy wrote his pioneering article on the causes of the War. In it, he argued that the war was not about neutralising the “warlike and thieving Zulu” who threatened Natal. Instead, the War aimed to destroy the Zulu kingdom to free up labour for Natal farmers and the Kimberley diamond fields.⁷

A history tour with an agenda: knowing and unknowing

In July 1979, four teachers (including Cynthia Kros and I) from two Johannesburg high schools took 25 standard tens on a tour of the battlefield and environs of the battle of Isandlwana. It is the site of the famous clash between the Zulu and British armies, and the only battle where the Zulus prevailed. While the archives had yet to be so broadly defined and the apartheid state tightened its hold on schooling, these teachers acted intuitively, engaging with people, landscapes, places and spaces. And so did the students.

The second part of our agenda was to expose the pupils to the aims and implementation of the homeland system. We planned to drive through Nquthu, then a rural slum about 50 kilometres from the battlefield. Before we embarked on the tour, we handed out Guy’s article and briefed the pupils on the homeland system.

My first port of call had been the history master at St John’s College who often took school tours of the Natal battlefields, including that of Isandlwana. I asked him how he dealt with the causes of the Anglo-Zulu war. “Oh no”, he said, “ We don’t do causes.” I was speechless.

The tour started on a high note. At the entrance we met an elderly man with his grandson.⁸ He gave an account of the battle from the Zulu perspective. I remember how he described the way the Zulu army came over the Nquthu plateau, humming like bees. A regiment of British soldiers, which was camped below the Isandlwana hill, must have been terrified. They were also vulnerable because they were woefully short of ammunition. The

6 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-Zulu_War

7 In 1979 I had a centenary pamphlet containing Guy’s article but have been unable to find it. Guy’s *The Destruction of the Zulu Kingdom: The Civil War in Zululand 1879-1884*, is excellent, moving, and a great read.

8 The following year the elderly man was no longer at his post. His grandson had taken his place.

Zulus overran them and pursued them along the Buffalo River (a tributary of the Tugela) as they made for the mission station at Rorke's Drift. There are white cairns along the trail the soldiers took. Each cairn indicates where a British soldier fell.

We went on to walk up the Isandlwana hill. At the summit, a pupil took over the tour. He had acted in the film *Zulu Dawn*, so he was the ideal person to set the scene. He recommended that we walk to Rorke's Drift, following the cairns. He also reminded us that the battle took place during a torrid January, when the river would have been in full flood.

At this point the tour began to disintegrate. One party decided to follow the river rather than stick to the cairns. Two pupils promptly fell into the relatively shallow water. The other party found themselves sliding down the steep banks of the river and could not easily get up again. Eventually the two parties met up and we retired to our base, a converted convent in Dundee.

The next morning, we set out for Nquthu. It was a rural slum where women and children had been dumped after being sent "home" from the "white" cities. Their menfolk, working in the mines as migrant labourers, were absent. I was a naive 24-year-old teacher who had not prepared the pupils and the teachers sufficiently for what we might find. Also, I did not think about what it would look like having white teenagers gawking at the population of this sad place. The atmosphere in Nquthu was one of resentment, lethargy and anger. We left there as soon as we could.

That evening, the pupils were somewhat subdued. One young man with tears in his eyes came to me. "Ma'am," he said, "how can you unknow what you know now?" Behind this question was another: "How will I fit in as a young white man, now that I know something new and upsetting?" Our archives around us and our readings had affected him deeply. Many years later we met on Facebook, and he told me that the tour had changed his life. This is an extreme example, but it illustrates the fact that engaging archives can be life-changing.

Engaging archives can confirm the trajectory of a person's research. However, the process may require a different direction, which could undermine the original thesis. Or the researcher could decide to "follow the archives" and produce an almost entirely new work. Amanda Esterhuysen tells of her excavation of the cave of the Kekana people, where they were besieged by the Boers in 1854. Boer accounts of the siege, Kekana oral testimony, and human and other remains in the cave create a fascinating story, which had, until then, been told only from the Boer perspective. However, her journey was not over yet. She presented her findings to the Kekana Royal Council, but there was a split in the Council. The two sides argued about the reburial of the human remains. So, the remains reside in the

care of the University of the Witwatersrand, until the factions can come to some agreement. (Chapter 14)

What is missing from *Archives*?

Archives does not cover the Eastern or Western Cape areas. Perhaps including them would have made the book unwieldy. I hope that the editors (or a new set) will compile a volume that includes these areas.

Who should read and/or buy this book?

I recommend *Archives* to a wide range of people, including academics, teachers and students, but its accessible nature means that people, such as Grade 12s, would enjoy it and It could provide a basis for their history projects. Members of the public who read history and archeology for pleasure would find it fascinating. I urge you to buy it; it could transform your approach to history education.