

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

The African e-Journals Project has digitized full text of articles of eleven social science and humanities journals. This item is from the digital archive maintained by Michigan State University Library. Find more at:

<http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/africanjournals/>

Available through a partnership with



Scroll down to read the article.

Introduction

The University of Botswana's undergraduate history research essay course began in the early 1970s when the Gaborone campus was still a small outpost of the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland. Initially it was a course run by Thomas Tlou, the first Head of the History Department and later Vice-Chancellor. In 1976 it was expanded into a seminar course involving all the department's lecturers, and in this form it was nurtured over many years by Michael Crowder and Leonard Ngcongco as heads of the History Department. The course has continued to follow the basic lines established in the 1970s, though with some experiments and innovations. One experiment consisted of concentrating the whole research class each year in a particular district, with each student taking a thematic subject. This was abandoned after a few years due to technical problems, especially linguistic limitations in non-Setswana-speaking regions. With the foundation of the Archaeology Unit, the course expanded with the addition of archaeology students, whose presence has helped to foster interaction between the historians and archaeologists—which requires effort but benefits both groups.

A notable feature is the department's collective involvement: although each student has an individual supervisor (or occasionally two), the selection of projects and the marking of essays is done by the entire staff collectively. That is, every lecturer attends every presentation and marks every essay. Entry to the course is selective, and takes place towards the end of the third year. After preliminary work and consultation with the supervisor, the research students depart for the field. This preliminary planning is important since many students, working in remote areas, are largely out of touch with the supervisor, though the supervisor will make at least one field inspection.

The students return for the new academic year and begin writing up their findings, making a first presentation in the first semester. In many cases a small amount of additional research can be done in the Christmas break. In the second semester the second draft is presented. On the basis of the discussion, the students then write their third and final draft, which will in due course be deposited in the University Library. The deposited essays were described as "B.A. dissertations" until the 1990s, and now as "research essays". In some cases field notes have been appended.

Although the research essays are basically a training exercise, they are also a serious contribution to the history and archaeology of Botswana. As a training exercise, the students are required to interpret their data and present arguments, and often this has produced works of considerable interest. However, even when the interpretation is weak or questionable, the data recorded by the students may be of great value to future researchers. In some western countries, it often seems that a student reaches Ph.D. level before really producing important new research. In Botswana there is so much to do that even an average undergraduate research student may well add significantly to our knowledge.

The essays included here are only a sample. Some of the best essays have already been published in other journals. It is hoped that this selection is in some degree representative, or at least indicative of the range of subjects. Kenneth Manungo's essay was written in the course's second year, while Cheneso Maphorisa's was completed in 1999.

When the Botswana historians took up Sir Seretse Khama's famous call for the rediscovery of the African past, they were starting, if not from scratch, at least from a

dearth of written history. In hindsight, it can be seen that the development of Botswana historiography follows a logical sequence not unlike that of many other countries. Narrative political and administrative history, concentrating on public actors and events, can easily be criticized for a narrow focus, but it seems to be a natural starting point and a foundation and framework for other types of study. Kenneth Manungo's frequently-cited 1977 essay on the Native (later African) Advisory Council is an excellent example of this sort of foundation work.

Political history has continued to interest Botswana students. As well as the colonial state, interest has focussed on the politics of the chiefdoms, as in Titus Mbuya's 1984 essay on legitimacy and succession in the BaKwena state, and Theophilus Mooko's 1985 essay on BaNgwato royal women. In both cases the authors analyse the interaction between the traditional political order and the superstructure of the colonial government, to show how this produced innovation. In both cases also, the authors identified topics which have been of great interest to subsequent scholars and indeed the general public. Theophilus Mooko's paper takes a view of the conflicts among the BaNgwato elite with which not everyone will agree; but his paper is undoubtedly a good starting point.

Botswana's minority groups have not been neglected. Students who come from minority language groups have taken advantage of their background to conduct research among their own people. Although there are no examples of this particular type in this collection, there are two notable essays on minorities: Phaniel Richard's 1980 case study of Basarwa subordination, and George Manase's 1984 essay on the Ovaherero refugees who settled in Ngamiland after the German war of extermination. Both are notable for their close attention to specifics, which give substance to generalities: a great deal can be learnt from Phaniel Richard's study about *how* subordination came about.

Economic history is represented here by Lily Mafela's 1982 essay on the colonial dairy industry. A convincing analysis of the reasons for the industry's rise and fall is set within a broader (and more controversial) framework based on the dependency theory then current.

Although a number of students have been interested in women's history, essays have tended to have more to say on individuals than on general gender relations. An exception is the 1991 essay by Gael Sobott on women's experience during the Second World War.

Religious history in Botswana has benefited from the attention of some of the most notable historians of this country, including John and Jean Comaroff and Paul Landau. Cheneso Maphorisa's 1999 essay on the Zionists of Lentswe-le-Moriti focusses on a group of religious dissidents who founded their own independent village. Maphorisa shows that despite their group's origins in a political dispute, the religious dynamic is primary. He also shows that, while African Independent Churches are often seen as representing a rejection of European authority, they can also involve a rejection of elements of the surrounding African secular society. Thus, our survey of research essays began with a student laying the essential foundations of political history, and ends with a student whose work challenges the single political-nationalist master narrative. It is in no small part thanks to the more than two hundred students who have written these research essays that Botswana is most definitely no longer "a nation without a past".

Bruce Bennett