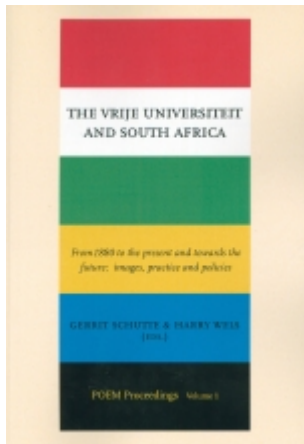# The Vrije Universiteit And South Africa ~ Some Trends In South African Academic History: Changing Contexts And Challenges

Seismographic social and political shifts introduced the 1990s: the end of the Cold War, the demise of communism abroad, and in South Africa the official end of apartheid and the subsequent instalment of a new democratic government. Given these developments it is reasonable to expect that historians, who construct their versions of the past in the present, and are at least to some degree influenced by that present, should, in the light of wider contextual changes, re-evaluate their approaches and revise their interpretations. The relationship between societal change and historical production is, however, not a simple one-to-one function.

It is against this background that this paper seeks to identify and briefly explore selective developments pertaining to the dynamics of the historical profession in South Africa and the intellectual correlates that help to define the current nature of the enterprise . The chapter focuses only on certain aspects and makes no claim to have covered the vast and treacherous area exhaustively.

Academic historians and the question of growth
The 1990s were not the most auspicious of times for the profession. Instead of bewailing this fact, it may be more profitable to apply historical insights to the phenomenon and to ask what are the conditions that are particularly conducive for the expansion of the historical enterprise as practiced professionally? This necessitates a brief look at the contextual forces that helped to shape the profession in South Africa.

The profession reached its high point during the 1980s. It was a period when the History Department at the University of South Africa could boast with a staff of 35 historians; today it is halved. The University of Stellenbosch had a staff of eight;

today it is almost half that number. Staffing figures at some other universities in the country would tell very much the same story.

To explain the growth up to the 1980s, one has to bear in mind that structurally job opportunities were limited for black people and given the lack of options many gravitated towards teaching (Crankshaw 1997: 23). This helped to swell the number of teachers and of those who included history as a subject in their courses. Moreover, since the 1960s the educational system rewarded teachers who obtained degrees financially and also those who sought to improve their qualifications. This served as a powerful incentive to engage with the discipline. Of course the system was skewed as it was largely whites (because of their higher participation rate in tertiary education) that benefited most, but black people were not excluded. Many teachers used the opportunities to gain higher degree qualifications in a teaching subject such as history. To oversimplify matters slightly – interest in history could be bought. But there were always those individuals who may have enrolled initially for pecuniary reasons, but for whom it also turned out to be an occasion to engage meaningfully with material that otherwise might have remained outside their ken.

The system almost inadvertently provided the opportunity for what can be called 'creative misuse', in that educators who were on top of their subject could introduce critical material that ran against the apartheid grain. In this way a mustard seed of doubt could be disseminated far and wide, undermining the spurious historical legitimacy for apartheid. The Minister of Education, Kader Asmal, has recently singled out for acknowledgement 'the role of many courageous historians, educators and practitioners who refused to abide by the official line at the time …' (The South African History Project Progress Report 2001-2003: 20).

Ideologically circumstances in SA since 1948 favoured the development of the historical profession as so much of what happened in the country since 1948 laid claims to a justificatory and legitimising historical base. Of course, in the process historians discovered much more than apartheid related matters and also cast their findings in a form which did not necessarily dovetail neatly with narrow political programmes of particular groupings. But by and large the politics and conditions in the country acted as a powerful dynamo for historical research. Peter Kallaway has highlighted the centrality of history from the late 1970s onwards: 'In the struggle for liberation from apartheid, history was an extremely

important tool for critical debate. It was a tool that empowered those who ruled and those who resisted. As a young teacher, history provided me with a fascinating and dynamic set of tools for engaging young people with the awful dilemmas of our nation' (Kallaway 2002: 28). It was a period which saw the academic eclipse of the Afrikaner nationalist school, and in its wake followed debates between liberal and radical historians as to what constituted the main driving forces in South African history. The intellectual fermentation was marked by the expansion of several history departments.

In the 1990s, at a time when a significant number of black scholars could have been expected to enter the fold, a complex set of pressures impacted on the profession to undercut potential growth. One set was the immediate and institutional forces that bore directly on the circumstances and practices of historians and their discipline, and another was the pressure exerted on by historians by events and processes originating in their society but 'outside' their workplace.**[i]**

These two categories can be briefly explicated. South African universities were late but zealous converts to the creed of affordability, efficiency and rational resource allocation. These were often market driven and history departments had to restructure and downsize as they could not offer any immediate market-related product. In addition school curriculum design in the 1990s did not favour history which had a knock-on effect on the supply of history teachers and hence also history lecturers at university. Right up until 2001 there was sufficient reason to be concerned about the impact of outcomes based education on history teaching as the subject ran the real risk of being marginalized (Grundlingh 2001: 315). There was also a growing gap between what the academy had to offer and what the state required. The discourses of the market and macro-economic policy did not dovetail with the language of historians and the general thrust of their work.

However, as far as policy is concerned, wiser counsels prevailed in the corridors of power and the curriculum was adjusted to allow sufficient room for history and new history syllabuses were drafted accordingly. Through the South African History Project, initiated by Asmal, a concerted effort has also been made since 2002 to re-invigorate the study of history in South African schools.**[ii]**

At societal level the profession was affected by developments in the public/political realm. Anti-apartheid white academic historians found that with the

dissolution of apartheid they were stranded in some ways, bereft of a persuasive political purpose and oppositional cachet they had previously enjoyed. Historians who were neutral about apartheid or pro-apartheid in their political outlook could hardly in a new context flaunt their earlier disquisitions with any manner of conviction, so they retreated into safe and rather pedestrian topics outside the mainstream of historical debate. In addition, in wider society with the rapid rise of a black middle class there was, with a greater variety as well as better remunerated employment opportunities available than ever before, a greater emphasis on material consumption. Without wishing to imply that this class has become a-political, overt politics and the past have now come to matter somewhat less. One scholar has observed that

… the black South African subject of the 1990s bears very little resemblance to the feted 'revolutionary worker of the struggle' as she/he hurries home fitted out by Sales House, in an entrepreneurial taxi, to watch The bold and beautiful on television (Bertelson 1998: 240).

Their children joined the 'Nike generation' and share the obsession with fashion and culture common to young people. The world view of some members of a new generation of post-apartheid young black people does not appear to be infused and directed by an acute sense of past grievances.**[iii]**

Having outlined and contrasted the contextual factors that impacted on the profession, we are faced with the question whether these will continue to have an adverse effect or whether it will be possible to allow for the emergence of a new generation of historians who will be predominantly black.

A return to the 1980s is of course neither possible nor desirable. The growth during this period can be seen as quite artificial as so much depended on apartheid; structurally in terms of lack of open-ended career opportunities for black people and ideologically as an issue that by force of circumstance informed much of academic debate and historical writing. In a new context it will perhaps be possible to discern a less spectacular but more steady growth based on more realistic premises than the unsound fundamentals which buttressed the spectacular growth in the 1980s. In addition, while the country moves further into a post-apartheid future and the current present becomes the past, South African history may incrementally acquire a semblance of normality as it edges towards more inclusive narrative of events which despite possible different emphases will at least pertain to all groups as fully fledged South African citizens.

To accommodate and ensure that such a scenario can develop, it is, however, necessary for the foundations to be laid in the present. In terms of tertiary education it implies that institutions should be alive to the impact of market related measures on the humanities and the attenuating effects it can have on subjects such as history. For the discipline to renew itself and to create the space for the nurturing of new talent, a measure of institutional financial support is essential.

Currently approximately 27 per cent of university staff members involved with the study of history are black (other than white) (South African History Project 2003).**[iv]** Given this percentage much is made in the report of the South African History Project of the necessity for a 'strong study of history in school' as the 'essential bedrock for producing new generations of black and female historians to supplant the current white and largely male domination of the South African historical profession' (The South African History Project Progress Report 2001-2003: 40). Those classified along these lines and earmarked for extinction may perhaps take umbrage at such a summary dismissal, but it should be read as a policy comment and not necessarily as an indictment of their intellectual contribution. Given the state's equity policy and the aging profile of the predominantly white academic community as a whole (Mouton 2002: 7; *Mail and Guardian* 31 July 2003), it would be make little sense to predict anything else.

Within the next five to ten years a whole range of historians at South African universities will have reached retirement age and in terms of equity policy their replacements will then have to come mainly from the designated groups. The professional outlook for young white male historians is exceptionally bleak in the short term, though it may perhaps improve in the medium to long term. Given these policy determinants and the structural position of white male historians who lived through a period of extraordinary growth in the profession, it is probably, if not superfluous, certainly less than fruitful on their part to agonize about their own historicity.**[v]** Structurally in terms of policy the prospects for black graduates will remain favourable.

This is not to imply that there is a phalanx of young potential historians eagerly waiting in the wings. There are valid reasons to be concerned about the number of black potential academics who prefer the boardroom to the lecture room as it creates a situation that militates against a new and intellectually vibrant cohort making their mark (Grundlingh 2001: 314-5; *Mail and Guardian* 2 July 1999;

Saunders 1999: 50). In the highest government circles there is also a measure of concern about what students expect to gain from a university education (Ryklief 2002: 116-7; see also *Daily News* 16 April 1999). As far the history field is concerned, there are currently 86 doctoral students registered for history and history education (The South African History Project Progress Report 2001-2003: 11). The total falls broadly within the band for other social science subjects, but the number of black students remains relatively small. If not addressed, a disjuncture between policy aims and actual implementation is likely to arise in the not too distant future.

The postmodernist and post-colonial challenge
Apart from staff developments within the profession, at the level of underlying and embedded change South African history as a scholarly pursuit also had to face the charges of post-modernism. Of particular importance here is the textual turn: evidence, truth, and the nature of historical enquiry itself came in the firing line.

There are those scholars though who, slightly mockingly, invoke the postmodernist and post-colonial debates of the 1990s in the tones of a circus ringmaster: 'Welcome to postmodernism: world of the media spectacle, the disappearance of reality, the death of Marxism, and a host of other millenarian claims' (Stabile 1995: 90).

In a broad sense postmodernism with no readily discernable centre can be seen as a cultural response to late 20th century capitalism a post-industrial West. In the South African context with its different historical trajectory, it would be more appropriate to employ the notion of post-coloniality. Whereas post-modernism in the West can vacillate from left to right, but mostly right, depending on the slippages underfoot, post-coloniality has a more firmly embedded political agenda in that it pays sustained attention to the imperial process in colonial and neo-colonial societies and is intent on subverting the actual material and discursive effects of that process (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffen 1995: 117-8). The thrust of post-coloniality is of particular concern to the historian as not only is the 'normal' methodological procedures of textual criticism of his material called into question, but the whole system of academic knowledge of which historical writing is a part, is regarded in itself as a western and colonial edifice outside of which no western scholar can stand (Vaughan 2002: 2-3).

Of considerable importance here is the issue of language, and the freight of often unsubstantiated assumptions that is 'inscribed' in language. Leon de Kock, writing on missionaries and African converts in the 19th century eastern Cape, has emphasized the pervasive impact of English:

The 'English' of economic empowerment, or of social mobility and political influence within the revised hierarchies of power, also carried in its very substance new narratives of personhood, of the proper presentation of the body, of the best moral choices, of the most suitable organisation of the land and the dwellings thereon, of a new cosmological scheme, of the very clothes one should wear, the thoughts one may think and the manner in which work – and rest – should be performed (De Kock 1986: 189).

Post-colonial theorists regard language as integral to social reality, if not in a deterministic way then at least in a constitutive manner. Historians have not been oblivious to language as a social agent, but post-colonialists go further in alerting us to the inescapable encodedness of language, the irreversible contamination of a language like English, which itself is rooted and embedded in the whole colonial process. Post-colonialism does not preclude some purchase on 'historical reality' through the conventional historical interrogation of sources – a difficult enough process at the best of times – but it complicates access to that which historians regard as discernable fragments of the past. Although historians have long been aware of the instability of their sources and the contingent nature of the facts they uncover, they are now confronted with the additional and daunting prospect that their very medium of communication, instead of explaining things, has itself become an object that needs to be elucidated and indeed justified.

What is an appropriate response to this? Although there are no easy or definitive answers, historians are not helpless in defence. It can be pointed out that the critiques emanate primarily from the field of literary and cultural studies or anthropology and speak in the first place to practitioners in those fields, and only then to historians. Erecting disciplinary boundaries to ward off the challenges of post-coloniality may be seen as an evasive strategy, but it has to be recognized that historians themselves have not been inactive in subjecting their discipline to much the same criticisms. Within their own ranks historians have readily admitted that their practice is a discursive one, that truth-telling about the past is a variable which is dependent on a changing context and to some extent on the language employed, and that the notion of 'objective-scientific' history is often

part of the seamless web of wider political projects.**[vi]** These are conditions and imperfections historians have come to live with.

There are, however, those analysts who would argue that post-coloniality also calls into question the relationship between historical writing and power. Power in this sense does not only imply simple domination or repression, but refers to a set of relationships or processes that produces and/or controls certain broadly determined outcomes. The production and acceptance of academic history as 'approved' knowledge are seen to be largely governed by specific conventions and rules. These criteria, such as standards of inclusion and exclusion, measures of importance and ways of evaluation, are not regarded as value-free but as bearing the stamp of a particular political environment with its own dimensions of power.**[vii]** While such linkages can be readily acknowledged, the question can also be raised as to whether these are so limiting that there is no space for loosening the hold of the thought-context mode without implying that it can be completely severed.

Moreover, the over-emphasis of intellectuals as agents of power, is also problematical for another reason. Although such an analysis may at first appear radical, it can easily turn out to be self-serving. By elevating and emphasizing the position of the intellectual to the extent that it does, can be seen as potentially damaging to those who are not intellectuals. The supposed power of intellectuals as a conceptual tool per se is accentuated, and not that of class or other categories. In this sense then, the self-critique of historians and intellectuals can actually be regarded as 'a critique of intellectuals which has been transmogrified into a tool to confirm the centrality of intellectuals' (Scalmer 1996: 161).

Apart from the emphasis on the author, post-modernist thinking also tends to highlight 'difference' and 'differences'. It is an area in which neo-Marxian social history had somewhat of a blind spot as culture was underplayed in the more rigid class versions of this mode of analysis. At times tribesmen lost their cultural identity too readily to become peasants and Van der Merwe lost his red neck, Calvinist blinkers and holy covenants too easily to become a fully-fledged proletarian with little sense of culture. While this shortcoming has to be admitted and in some revisionist writing of the 1990s it has also been avoided (see for example Van Onselen 1996), one equally has to be aware of the negative side of an overemphasis on ethnic culture and cultivating 'difference', particularly in South Africa. As Norman Etherington has explained:

Liberals and Marxists in their own peculiar ways purported to see through difference to a common human condition which anyone might articulate or understand. Some post-modern poses replace this with an opacity of otherness, whose corollary is that only the other may speak for herself/himself. When this opacity extends to ethnicity and culture the intellectual ghost of apartheid walks again (Etherington 1996: 41).

These are intricate issues which cannot be fully explored within the confines of this paper. However, one can tentatively suggest that working with an either/or dichotomy is probably counterproductive. A re-configuration and extension of the boundaries of the ways in which we think about the past can be the first stepping stone in trying to incorporate 'difference' without allowing it to dictate. Indian subaltern studies, though not without its own internal contradictions, have attempted to encapsulate such a broader sense of history.**[viii]** Widening the historical lens, conceptually and methodologically, can create the opportunity to 'defamiliarise the familiar and to unfold the unfamiliar' (Amin 2002: 38)**[ix]** – a process through which 'difference' may be problematised.

Heritage contexts
During the 1990s most South African university history departments developed courses which in one way or the other engaged with heritage matters. In part it picked up on an increasingly salient global trend, but it was more pertinently a pragmatic attempt to arrest falling student numbers, in that heritage, particularly if linked to tourism, appeared to have a marketable commercial edge to it.**[x]**

This development also correlates with wider trends. In the post-apartheid context the earlier radical social history perspective (developed mainly though not exclusively at former predominantly white universities) with its emphasis on the fault-lines in society and class in particular, appeared increasingly inappropriate as the new South Africa slipped into nation-building gear. The disaggregating imperatives of social history and the conforming impulses that guide nation-building make for a very grating gearshift, if at all.**[xi]** What the marginalized in society – for example the black underclasses and 'poor whites' which loomed large in social history analyses – represents, is too jarring or too ideological dissonant to be accommodated within the homogenizing fold of a new nation eager to display neat and tidy modernising African unity as opposed to ugly unravelling strands of a society frayed at more than just the capitalist edges. The time for a 'socially responsible past' has arrived and heritage is very much part of

it.**[xii]**

The broader cultural purchase of new legacy and other heritage projects, however, cannot be automatically assumed and its hold on an audience at large appears to be uneven. While the appeal of the great and good will certainly have a certain resonance, such heritage can also be limiting. This is clear from experiences of a former history lecturer, Neil Roos, at the University of the North West (UNW) in Mafikeng:

*My teaching experience at UNW, where most of the students are from rural areas and country towns, has alerted me to the pitfalls of 'national' history, and suggests a need to move beyond the iconographic level, with its predictable focus on 'big' national events and figures … I teach a course in heritage studies, and my students have frequently expressed frustration at the tenuous connections between their own lives and the way in which the emerging national narrative (e.g. the Sharpeville massacre, the symbolism of Robben Island; Mandela-ism) is commemorated … I have tried … to [encourage them] to recall their own family and local stories of poverty, oppression and resistance … experienced mainly in the Bophuthatswana homeland.***[xiii]**

Heritage is, moreover, important for economic reasons in being the object of what has been called 'the ultimate commodification of the tourist dollar' (Cobley 2001: 618). Indeed, 'a heritage worth millions', read the headlines in a recent South African newspaper (*Mail and Guardian* 31 January-6 February 2003: 4). It was not an exaggeration. André Odendaal, a former director of the Robben Island Museum, has provided valuable information on the financial scope of some of the undertakings of the heritage industry: Robben Island Museum (R200m), Freedom Park (R350m), the Gauteng 'Blue IQ' projects (R750m) and the Apartheid Museum (R90m). These developments according to Odendaal will have important implications and he draws the conclusion that

[A]lmost as if by stealth, while complaints about the decline of history abound, a whole new billion rand heritage infrastructure is being out in place which will fundamentally reshape the heritage and public heritage environment in future, and create more opportunities for historians, educators and heritage practitioners (Odendaal 2002: 9-10).

Coupled with this assertion is the belief that heritage will almost be a panacea, galvanising the study of history in general:

Heritage with its relatively accessible public, oral and 'living' history dimensions,

*political relevance and greater level of black leadership and involvement will play
an important role in this. The growth of the heritage sector is a visible indication
of the broadening of historical studies in general over the past decade* (ibid.: 33).

There is almost a kind of crusading edge to this emphasis as 'history' and
'heritage' are conflated seamlessly:
*The claim of heritage to be 'history' can no longer be denied. In a real sense
'heritage' is the advance guard of post-colonial history in South Africa and
developments there presage the changes to come in the professional history
sphere at the universities* (ibid.).

Without wishing to deny the importance of the work that has been done in this
area, such an assumption can do an injustice to both 'history' and 'heritage'. In
his influential book on the heritage industry, David Lowenthal has drawn a
nuanced distinction:
*The historian, however blinkered and presentist and self-deceived, seeks to
convey a past consensually known, open to inspection and proof, continually
revised and eroded as time and hindsight outdate its truths. The heritage
fashioner, however historically scrupulous, seeks to design a past that will fix the
identity and enhance the well-being of some chosen individual or folk. History
cannot be wholly dispassionate, or it will not be felt worth learning or conveying;
heritage cannot totally disregard history, or it will seem too incredible to
command fealty. But the aims that animate these two enterprises, and their
modes of persuasion, are contrary to each other. To avoid confusion and
unwarranted censure, it is vital to bear that opposition in mind* (Lowenthal 1998:
xi).

In short, memory is not the same as history and memorialisation is not the same
as historical writing. It is not necessarily a completely watertight division though.
A particular framing of pastness can draw from a variety of historical dimensions;
for example, from writing, visual imagery, oral traditions, memory and political
perceptions of the past (or usually an amalgam of these) which in turn, if deemed
worthy of memorialisation, can in a truncated form feed into and reinforce a more
general historical consciousness.

It is furthermore conceptually important to distinguish between the terms
'heritage and/or the production of heritage' on the one hand and the 'study of the
making of heritage' on the other. The terms cannot be used interchangeably as

they deal with divergent activities. 'Heritage' and the construction thereof can be viewed as the product while the 'study of the making of heritage' is the disaggregation of that which is produced. This is of course not to imply that the production of heritage proceeds without substantial historical verification, but its ultimate aim differs from those who seek to interrogate the making of heritage from a variety of angles.

Nor, in an attempt to clear the conceptual undergrowth, is it the intention to convey the impression of a hierarchy of knowledge and that the writing of history is any way a superior zone to the unpacking of heritage. On the contrary, at times the latter can be analytical more challenging as several layers of understanding over time have to be unravelled. Writing on the dynamics of dealing analytical with 'commemorative history', Peter Carrier has emphasised the kind of interpretative problems that arise as 'meaning derives from elements of both the original event and the new context within which the commemorative "event" takes place' (Carrier 1996: 435). In South Africa a considerable amount of work of this kind has already been done most notably by some historians from the University of the Western Cape. By focusing on public pasts and the complex and often contradictory processes that impinge on the making of heritage, they have opened up a fruitful and multi-dimensional area of enquiry.**[xiv]**

A critical study of heritage may also allow some of the more intriguing counter ideas, relating to ways of remembering and/or non-remembering, to emerge. The questions asked by Shahid Amin in the context of India, can be equally relevant in South Africa: 'Can we at all remember without commemorating? Can we recollect without celebrating; recall without avenging? Why are national histories invariably encrusted in a lapidary mode?' (Amin 2002: 36).

The contexts of an 'African voice'
It is well known that Afrikanerdom used and shaped history to further its own political agendas. In general Afrikaner historical works, though often reflecting a great deal of archival research, were conceptually and interpretatively limited. Early and influential works by white English speakers displayed similar shortcomings and showed marked Eurocentric biases. Paul Maylam has made the salutary point that too often Afrikaner historians have become the only target:
This tendency to associate Eurocentric historical writing exclusively with Afrikaner nationalism is part and parcel of a larger tendency – to blame the apartheid system on Afrikaner nationalism. It has often been convenient for

English speakers, conservative and liberal, to scapegoat Afrikaner nationalism. In the English quest for self-absolution, Englishness is separated from the harshness of the racial order: the blame for apartheid is cast on to others, while the fruits of the system are enjoyed (Maylam 1993: 4).

Particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, substantial work has of course been done predominantly by a later generation of white English speaking historians of either the liberal or radical persuasion to correct this situation and to uncover large swathes of hidden black histories. The historical landscape has been altered well before major political shifts occurred. But it is true that even well into a decade of epoch making change in South Africa since 1994, a general and authoritative history of South Africa with a distinctly Africanist point of view is yet to appear. Given the myriad of ways Africans have been excluded in the past from being accepted as full South African citizens, it is understandable that some academics have raised their concerns about the perceived absence of what can be termed an essentialist national 'African voice'.**[xv]**

It is common for new governments to recast history in terms which they regard as in keeping with their self-image and political programs. For example, with the introduction of communism in Eastern Europe after the Second World War intellectuals were implicitly or explicitly expected to help with the consolidation of a new order. The effect of this was that:
While intellectuals were once distinguished by their ability to think independently, in the new philosophy, intellectuals were to be part of the stream of history, moved by its own dialectical laws, which were in turn supported by a new state machinery that guaranteed the success, or failure, of an intellectual career (Kennedy 1991: 98).

Closer to home, the passing of the colonial era in Africa paved the way for triumphalist nationalist forms of historical writing. Looking back on this, C. Neale has remarked:
To some [historians] it now seems regrettable, both from a political point of view in that it [nationalist history] served the interest of new regimes which in hindsight were not what historians hoped they would be, and from an intellectual point of view, in that historians concentrated on narrowly political themes at the expense of social and economic ones (Neale 1986: 120-1).

And even closer to home, the notion of committed history happily resided in the

home of Afrikaner nationalists. Here the 'main aim' in the 1940s was, as H.B. Thom, a foremost Afrikaner historian pointed out, 'to search for the truth in an honest way, and to keep that aim pure, but at the same time we had to do that in the midst of the volk' (Grundlingh 1990: 7).

Of course, by drawing these comparisons one does not imply that Afrikaner nationalism was qualitatively the same as current black nationalist impulses in South Africa, nor that the way in which such developments in South Africa may play themselves out will necessarily have the same results as in the rest of Africa. But there remains a fine line between a history of nationalism and a nationalist history.

The notion of an authentic 'African voice' may also turn out to be simply misleading. As the well-known historian, Eugene Genovese proclaimed at the height of a similar debate in the United States of America:
*'There is no such thing as a black theology, or a black point of view. Rather there are various black-nationalist biases, from leftwing versions such as that of the Panthers to rightwing — 'cultural nationalists'. There are also authentic sections of the black community that retain conservative, liberal, or radical integrationist and antinationalist positions. Both integrationist and separatist tendencies can be militant or moderate, radical or conservative. All these elements have a right to participate in the exploration of black historical and cultural themes.***[xvi]**

Whether such a layered approach will prevail which will allow a multiplicity of 'African voices' to speak, remains to be seen.

In essentialising the notion of an 'African voice' in nationalist terms, a further possibility is that voices on the periphery may well be drowned out by the cacophony of such an overarching discourse. The importance of submerged voices has recently been illustrated by the micro-history of the trials and tribulations of Nontetha Nkwenkwe, a prophetess from the Eastern Cape during the 1920s and 1930s, and the way in which her religious visions and memories of her after she had been confined to a mental hospital in Pretoria, inspired rural followers for a considerable period of time (Edgar and Sapire 2000). Although some of the issues that she and her followers raised overlapped with those of nationalists, their movement was not cast in overtly political terms. Her story is one that shuns elite consciousness and she is unlikely to appear in the pantheon of nationalist heroes, but is not for that reason of lesser import.

What may turn out to be more challenging than grappling with a nationalist 'African voice' in future, is the issue of dealing with South Africa's history in the context of Africa. The question of South Africa's 'exceptionalism' on the continent has the potential to draw historians into a wider frame. It was Mahmood Mamdani who threw down the gauntlet to South African academics when he stated in 1996: *Part of my argument is that apartheid, usually considered the exceptional feature in the South African experience, is actually its one aspect that is uniquely African. As a form of state, apartheid is neither self-evidently objectionable nor self-evidently identifiable. Usually understood as institutionalised racial domination, apartheid was actually an attempt to soften racial antagonism by mediating and thereby refracting the impact of racial domination through a range of Native Authorities. Not surprisingly, the discourse of apartheid – in both General Smuts, who anticipated it, and the Broederbond, which engineered it – idealized the practice of indirect rule in British colonies to the north* (Mamdani 1996: 27).

Although such an exposition of apartheid as a form of rule might also have appealed to the architects of grand apartheid in the sixties, Mamdani's position is of course very different in that he tries to move away from South Africa's 'exceptionalism' and correlates aspects of South African history as reflecting developments elsewhere on the continent. While Mamdani's ideas fuelled considerable debate in the mid-nineties, particularly at the University of Cape Town, the issues have not been resurrected since then. There may be good reasons for this, but the question of the South African past in relation to the rest of Africa remains. This is in contrast to some analyses of African literatures where 'hidden discursive and historical links between African contexts' have been found (Kanneh 1998: 91). Admittedly in dealing with historical experiences such links may be harder to find, but conceptual exploration and comparative studies as well as a greater engagement with African historiographies may perhaps produce new insights.

Furthermore, for a critical historical culture to be maintained in a radical South African democracy, there is a case to be made for an emphasis on histories of relatively new constituencies. This will include for example gendered histories and re-assessments of ethnic minorities, historical analyses of emerging 'soft' industries such as leisure and tourism as well as ecological, gay and anti-institutional movements. To bring these constituencies into the main historical frame may yield few grand celebrations, but academic life may benefit from the

ensuing antagonisms, contradictions and complexities.**[xvii]**

Such exhortations, however, may be regarded as gratuitous and prescriptive as a new generation of historians will set their own agendas. But then again historical writing will always be a contested terrain. South African historiography has never suffered from blandness and it is unlikely to do so when a fresh cohort of academics with different backgrounds and agendas start flexing their academic muscles.

Conclusion

This chapter has tried to outline some emergent trends and dynamics in the South African historical profession. While the number of black historians currently involved in the tertiary profession is roughly in the region of 27 per cent, contingent upon some contextual factors the outlook is that this number will increase over the next five to ten years. Intellectual trends such as post-modernism and the flowering of heritage have caused historians to look anew at their basic assumptions and to interrogate and reflect upon the nature of pastness. In much the same mode the vexed question of the implications of what an 'African voice' may constitute, and in a wider sense the conceptual leap to move beyond South Africa's 'exceptionalism' on the continent can be seen as future challenges.

NOTES

i. This analysis is indebted to Bundy (2002). See also Marks (2000: 225).

ii. Details are to be found in The South African History Project Progress Report (2001-2003).

iii. Cape Town 12 August 2002: 'Apartheid's legacy of apathy may not be a bad thing'

iv. I have made these rough calculations myself from a database which is by its own admission less than exhaustive.

v. For example H-South@H-Net.msu.edu, 'What is history doing?' (June 2001).

vi. See for example Appleby, Hunt and Jacob (1994); Novick (1988); Maylam (2000: 134).

vii. Compare Scott (1989: 680-1). For charges of this nature in the South African context see Maloka (1996), and Leroke (1996: 13-17).

viii. For an extensive and critical review see Bahl (n.d.).

ix. I am indebted to S. Jeppie for this reference.

x. See for example Carruthers (1998).

xi. Some of these tensions are touched upon by Kros (2003: 326-36.)

xii. Compare Cobley (2001: 618).

xiii. Quoted in Comoroff (2003: 21).

xiv. See for example Rassool (2000); Rassol and Witz (1993); Witz, Rassool and Minkley (2001); Witz (1998-1999). The history department at the University of Western Cape has also embarked on a large scale project on South Africa's public pasts. In addition, issues of heritage have also relatively early in the nineties found institutional niches at the University of Cape Town and the University of the Witwatersrand. See Hamilton (1993).

xv. See for example Magubane (2002: 31, 36); Odendaal (2002: 30, 33).

xvi. Quoted in Meier and Rudwick (1986: 297).

xvii. Compare Cross (1999: 220).

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