

Review Essay: At the Altar of Ethnography

Zulu Testimony and Colonial Influence in The James Stuart Archive: Volume Five and its Untold Legacies

The *James Stuart Archive* is now one-quarter-century-old. Edited by two historians, John Wright and the late Colin De B. Webb, the *Archive's* five volumes transform granular information into coherent, usable text. Webb and Wright painstakingly deciphered the notes of interviews conducted by Natal colonial official James Stuart with a range of informants, especially insightful Zulu elders. Transcribed by Stuart between the 1890s and 1920s, these discussions explored rituals, customs, politics, and lineage histories of southeast Africa.¹

The newest instalment, *Volume Five*, arrives at a time when increasing numbers of scholars instinctively consult the *Archive* for the most comprehensive ethnographies of KwaZulu-Natal. In the last decade they have used evidence from Stuart's informants to propel South African historiography into unmarked terrain.² A compelling example of the *Archive's* groundbreaking data can be found in the testimony of *Volume Four's* master interpreter of Zulu power, Ndukwana ka Mbengwana. His observations now appear in nearly every revisionist study of the known 'facts' of Zulu expansionism (*Mfecane*) and Shaka's despotism.³ Ever timely, the endnotes in *Volume Five* reflect these topical appraisals of historical methodology. Editor John Wright explains in the preface: 'By the time we picked up work on volume 5, we were starting to take note of currents of thought ... which suggested that oral histories should be seen as stories containing a more or less fixed "core" of facts rather than as fluid narratives whose content could vary widely' (p. x). Whatever the case, the *Archive* is a touchstone for polemical, epistemological, and 'meta' narratives of Natal and Zulu pasts.

Volume Five, like its four predecessors, will appeal to forward- and backward-looking audiences. For example, an intriguing view of 'racialism' emerges in the 1924 testimony of African National Congress pioneer Pixley Seme, whose black separatism reflects a potent strand of twentieth-century liberation thought. Other readers haunted by the galloping AIDS epidemic may discover a close analogue in Qalizwe ka Dhlozi's 1899 remarks on virulent, sexually transmitted diseases in colonial Natal. For those

interested in the events honored by monuments near the battle of Ncome (Blood) River and folk rebel Bhambatha's stronghold, eyewitness accounts in *Volume Five* describe the late 1830s conflict pitting king Dingana's regiments first against voortrekkers and then rival Ndebele fighters, and the 'Zulu' insurgency inflaming the 1906 poll tax disturbances in colonial Natal.

Perhaps one of the more revelatory passages in *Volume Five* suggests an alternative interpretation of Zulu warfare. Informant Ngidi ka Mcikaziswa, a Zulu soldier in his youth, recalled in 1905 seeing the 1838 murder of 'Piti' (Piet Retief), and participating in a subsequent battle against Mzilikazi's army. Considering the deployment of Zulu fighters during this turbulent period, Ngidi asserted:

all of us youths (izinsizwa) were hidden so that Mzilikazi's men should not see us. Only the mature men (amadoda) on the Zulu side appeared [while the] youths were not allowed to begin fighting. It was begun by the small amakanda, by the older, headringed men ... who would not run away, the older men. If boys were sent forward they would hesitate about pushing or facing the attack, and perhaps turn and flee (88).

Ngidi's testimony sheds light on an under-researched aspect of martial strategies in the kingdom. His cohorts were not inevitably in the first ranks of battle; in fact, the excerpt above kindles uncertainty as to whether young men fought at all. Ngidi's recollections should, at the very least, spur a reconsideration of Zulu men's military preparedness, particularly in relation to the many studies documenting when and how societies (preindustrial and industrial) mobilizing for war, and why certain soldiers – older, seasoned men versus less experienced youths – were destined for combat.⁴

Volume Five's extensive testimony on Bhambatha's uprising also provokes a central question about the politics of military mobilization in historic KwaZulu-Natal: Was this 1906 African revolt against a colonial poll tax the iconic event that ignited twentieth-century Zulu nationalism? For one reply, consider the evidence of Stuart's informant, Nsuze ka Mfelafuluti, who assessed both Bhambatha's reputation and the popular resistance allegedly fostered by a Zulu cultural revival. A poll tax protestor and armed rebel in 1906, Nsuze witnessed Bhambatha, then a fugitive after killing colonial policemen, seek haven in Nkandla forests and confront local skepticism. Nsuze remembered a prominent African man assail Bhambatha as an unreliable chief prone to hot-headed behaviour: 'Who is it who is bringing the madman here to our home?' (p.151). Despite this initial reaction, Bhambatha and his followers hid in Nkandla, rallied support, and waited for a retaliatory strike by the Natal government.

Nsuze recalled that as the standoff between white power and the rebels ended with colonial forces attacking the Nkandla region, Bhambatha faded from action and then 'deserted his men' (p.161). This may explain, in part, why the revolt in Nkandla sputtered. But Nsuze's testimony highlights a problem in the crucial psychological preparations for combat. He believed the rebellion's failure stemmed from the '[e]xtent to which [the] Zulu military system was not observed'. The 'rebel force was got together and prepared for hostilities in an irregular manner', he said, and 'doctoring, sprinkling, eating of intelesi [shielding medicine] etc. took place all in one day, whereas vomiting should have been the beginning' (p.178). Erratic ritual, Nsuze claimed, imperiled the rebels and made them distrust Bhambatha, whose leadership in ceremonies spiritually

armouring fighters offered no protection against bullets. At one point, when faced with defeat, Nsuzze's compatriots in the 'impi' turned on Bhambatha, denouncing him: 'You have been deceiving us' (p.179).

Nsuzze doubted that vestiges – cobbled memories, symbols, and rituals – of a once formidable Zulu kingdom could have inspired the unified anticolonial feeling required to turn 1906 into a victory rather than a loss. He explained that a significant number of chiefs in Natal and Zululand like 'Ndube etc.

refrained from going [into revolt] because not wishing to associate themselves with a madman's affair. I think it certain that even if Dinuzulu had come to the forest (rebelled) all N. [sic] would not have joined, for there were many Natives having the ear of the chiefs who persuaded them ... not to take up arms against Europeans because certain [sic] to be shot down and defeated. The object of rebellion was to protest against payment of poll tax. They accuse Europeans of exhausting (katazaing) them. They as a matter of fact no longer cared for Cetshwayo, many of them, on the ground that he killed off many of them, hence they elected to accept the white man's rule as more congenial, until the poll tax arose when, taken in conjunction with other matters, they felt they ought to openly protest (pp. 174–75).

To be sure, the evidence of Nsuzze and other *Archive* informants must be sifted for contradictions and exaggerations. Scholars, too, should be cognizant of Stuart's role as a literate mouthpiece of oral historians. Moreover, as a representative of the colonial army during the 1906 poll tax violence, his position was ambiguous: Was he an interloper, or worse, a defender of the government's repressive policies that responded to Nkandla rebels with summary executions?

Stuart's shadows of prejudice and self-interest may never be fully revealed. Yet informed speculations about his motives in transcribing interviews with Zulu informants may be grounded in a deeper understanding of his contradictory oeuvre, the English- and isiZulu-language books, pronouncements, and correspondence he wrote over sixty years. For example, Stuart's classic *A History of the Zulu Rebellion 1906* contains paraphrased segments of Nsuzze's Volume Five testimony. While Nsuzze's voice is absent from an introduction that portrays the 1906 uprising as a conflict 'between a race of savages on the one hand, and a number of Europeans or representatives of Western Civilization on the other', his allusions to 'Europeans katazaing [tiring] Africans' are echoed elsewhere. Stuart's epic 500-page narrative in *A History of the Zulu Rebellion* finishes with a plea for colonists to bolster the exhausted 'tribal system'. He appealed for 'sober reflection', lamenting that African

necessities, from their own peculiar points of view, are given expression to by no one. No one seems to have courage enough to champion their cause and to defend a system of life which, if evolution means anything whatever, must be of intrinsic value, from the mere fact that it exists after the countless generations. ... Natives, even the uncivilised masses, are, in the fullest sense of the words, British subjects, and, as such, entitled to at least the elementary rights [to live in] the great, natural system of Africa.

... If the tribal system is to succeed, it should be given a chance. That chance, it would appear, should be to revive and encourage such unobjectionable and salutary forms of control as were customary under the old system.

What are we to make of these statements, the first perfunctorily racist, the second plaintively critical of white rule? Are these opinions congruous with proto-segregationist ideology?⁵

Perhaps this question should be addressed in a project that unfolds in conjunction with the future *Volume Six*. In the preface of *Volume Five*, editor John Wright hints that such a parallel undertaking may be possible with growing interest in ‘a detailed appreciation of the contexts in which Stuart produced his work’ (x). This reviewer thinks that there may be no other scholar better equipped to tackle a biography of James Stuart and his network of knowledge-bearers than one of the founding editors of the *Archive*.

REFERENCES

1. C. De B. Webb and J. Wright, eds., *The James Stuart Archive, Volume One–Volume Five* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal, 1976, 1979, 1982, 1986, 2001). James Stuart grew up speaking isiZulu; his interest in the language became a lifelong devotion. Held in Durban’s Killie Campbell Library, Stuart’s private papers, comprising his interviews, correspondence, and book manuscripts, reveal that he often consulted knowledgeable Zulu elders, even on Christmas Eve in a Ladysmith hotel while his family waited for him. In repeated meetings with Zulu informants, Stuart meticulously transcribed their words in both isiZulu and English. A career in the Natal administration as a magistrate and, in 1909, as the assistant secretary for native affairs afforded Stuart an insider’s look at colonialism, including perspectives of deleterious white rule. Throughout the *Archive*, he acknowledges how Natal settlers impinged on many aspects of African life. For a contemporary historian’s critique of Stuart’s methods and attitudes, see: J. Cobbing, “A Tainted Well: The Objectives, Historical Fantasies, and Working Methods of James Stuart, with Counter-argument,” *Journal of Natal and Zulu History* 2 (1988): 115–54. For a sketch of Stuart’s linguistic and research skills and official career, see: Introduction and Chapter Four, C. Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty: Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical Invention* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).
2. Significantly, since the 1970s editor John Wright has shown the value of the *Archive* in his own investigations of precolonial Natal history, using African testimony that Stuart collected to support pathbreaking scholarship. See: J. Wright, “Pre-Shakan Age-Group Formation among the Northern Nguni,” *Natalia* 8 (1978): 23–29.
3. See: C. Hamilton, ed., *The Mfecane Aftermath: Reconstructive Debates in Southern African History* (Pietermaritzburg and Johannesburg: University of Natal Press and Witwatersrand University Press, 1995); D. Golan, *Inventing Shaka: Using History in the Construction of Zulu Nationalism* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1994); D. R. Edgecombe, et al. eds., *The Debate on Zulu Origins: A Selection of Papers on the Zulu Kingdom and Early Colonial Natal* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1992); D. Wylie, *Savage Delight: White Myths of Shaka* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2000). C. Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty* (1998).
4. The worldwide transition in warfare from set-piece battles between veteran corps to large-scale campaigns involving (mass) conscripted young men gained momentum only in the nineteenth century, with the advent of the ‘People’s Army’ during the French Revolution in 1789. The notion that young men instinctively sought combat to advance the goals of their nation is a recent development in military annals. Moreover, this image became embedded in the modern mind with the wide distribution of anti-war novels such as Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* and media coverage of anti-conscription protests in Vietnam-era America and late-apartheid South Africa. For historiographies of warfare and military strategies, see: C. Townsend, ed., *The Oxford History of Modern War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); L. Addington, *The Patterns of War Since the Eighteenth Century, 2nd Edition* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994); M. van Creveld, *Technology and War* (New York: The Free Press, 1989). For anti-conscription and anti-war youth protest, see: R. Jeffreys-Jones, *Peace Now! American Society and the Ending of the Vietnam War* (New Haven: Yale University Press,

1999). Some historians still believe that Zulu young men inevitably went to war because throughout the ages that is what young men were required to do. Why study this universal phenomenon when the answer is already known? they might ask. An analogous sentiment was voiced not long ago, similarly couched as an ahistorical question but posed, dismissively, to Marxists and materialist historians: Why study the poor? The poor have always been with us.

5. For 'between a race . . . on the other', see: J. Stuart, *A History of the Zulu Rebellion 1906* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1913), 1; 'wants and necessities . . . natural system of Africa', see: *ibid*, 527–28.

BENEDICT CARTON

Department of History, George Mason University, USA