

Frank Jolles (1931–2014)

RENAISSANCE man and beloved colleague Frank Jolles had the wit, wisdom and temerity to compare sending SMSs with making traditional Zulu beaded love letters. A self-invented, highly respected scholar of African material culture after he retired as professor of German literature and language, Jolles passed away from complications relating to a stroke.

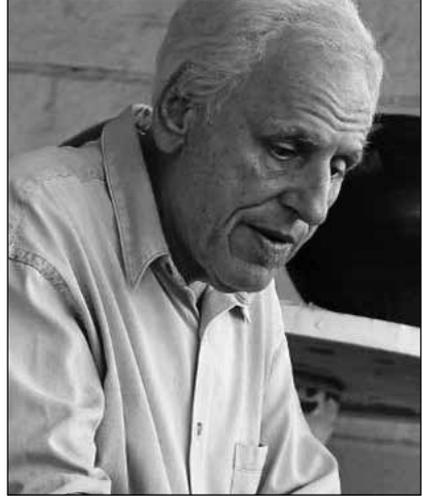
“His work is about culture in transition,” says his colleague at KwaZulu-Natal Museum, archaeologist Gavin Whitelaw. “For years, he collected woodwork – milk pails and meat platters – from the Msinga area.”

Professor Karel Nel of Wits University, a long-time friend of Jolles, describes sharing Jolles’ passion for Zulu culture as a joy. “His contribution to writing about and understanding Zulu culture was major. Being a linguist, he went out in the field and identified a number of regional styles, reflecting on the visual as one would do on a language.

“His strength was his meticulous ability to understand how things were related to one another, rather than snatching things out of context,” says Nel.

Jolles enjoyed abiding interests in many aspects of Zulu culture, including ear plugs and beadwork. “He was a lovely person. He was super-enthusiastic about the material. He loved learning about it from the people who made it and the people who used it,” says Whitelaw, who speaks of Jolles’s empathy for young and old. “He laughed a lot.”

Nel concurs: “With his dry sense of humour, he showed great respect for people and what they said. His conversations went on and on and on but were never boring.



Frank Jolles

“He was very erudite and very perceptive. He had a great capacity to engage deeply. He was extremely well informed about economics, politics.” Nel speaks of valuable time spent with Jolles in looking at objects: “He travelled with me to Micronesia and Papua New Guinea and the rapidity with which he grasped the syntax of a culture was astonishing.”

Whitelaw adds: “He made archaeological observations about Zulu pots that changed how we think about them. He was the first to recognise that between 1850 and 1900 there was a shift from beer-containing and beer-brewing gourds and baskets to clay pots.

“Frank was taken seriously by peers in the field, even though he was relatively new to it and boasted no qualifications. Often he was approached to identify an object’s provenance. He believed that removing a provenance was a kind of unethical dealer strategy to render an African object outside of time, rather than attributable to an individual.

“His approach was ‘sciency’, different from that of the average scholar.”

Nel adds: “He came to the field of African culture late. Because of his training as a linguist, he had the capacity to observe deeply and make deductions.”

Born on May 9 1931 in Berlin to a Jewish family, Jolles was six when his family fled Europe before World War II. He studied chemistry at Manchester University and linguistics at the Sorbonne in Paris. After completing a doctorate in German and English at Goettingen University, Germany, he was employed at the New University of Ulster, Northern Ireland, heading the German Department, where he remained for 20 years.

When his university amalgamated with a polytechnic, eliminating German literature, Jolles took early retirement in 1986. That’s when he landed his job heading up the department of German at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. He moved to South Africa with his son Philip, settling in the suburb of Hilton, near Pietermaritzburg.

Zulu objects re-ignited an interest in African artefacts that may have originated during time spent on secondment to the University of Nigeria in 1978. The experience encouraged him to accept an appointment to the Chair of German at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in 1987. It was a passion that first began for him as a 23-year-old student in 1954 at the University of Bonn,

when he attended seminars in classical archaeology.

From this vantage point he researched the Zulu hinterland – a world unknown to most of his colleagues. His retirement from the university in 1994 enabled him to continue working in this field as an honorary research associate. His recent publications centred on cross-cultural studies, including research on trade dolls and SMSs and material culture: carvings, ceramics and beadwork, particularly with reference to the information embedded within them.

His latest book, *Zulu Beer Vessels in the 20th Century*, is currently in production. Sadly Jolles did not live to see the book’s final proofs.

“He understood a lot about a lot,” says his son Stephen. “In studying literature, he was also an expert on philosophy of the periods he studied.”

“It doesn’t happen that the shoes of someone like this get filled,” added Whitelaw, referring also to the 2012 death of KwaZulu-Natal-based Africanist and ceramicist Juliet Armstrong.

Jolles leaves his children, Stephen, Philip and Anna, five grandchildren and a sister in Germany.

ROBYN SASSEN

*(With acknowledgments to the
Mail & Guardian)*