

Session 10:
**Reflections on Writing and Teaching History in Africa in the
Twenty-First Century**

HOWARD PHILLIPS
University of Cape Town

Given the predominantly South Africanist composition of those participating in the colloquium, it was not unexpected that the discussion throughout was heavily canted towards the historiography of South Africa, and especially to producing it rather than teaching and communicating it. This proved to be no less the case in the final session, which sought to provide space to stand back and reflect on what

26. See J. Western, *Outcast Cape Town* (Cape Town, Pretoria and Johannesburg, 1981).

had been discussed during the preceding days. The observations which follow emerged jointly from the audience and a panel of four historians, Professors Toyin Falola (University of Texas), Shula Marks (London University), Nelly Hanna (American University of Cairo) and William Beinart (Oxford University).

The general insularity of South African historiography, especially from the rest of Africa, was remarked upon by many. Where comparisons and links were drawn, these tended to reflect familiarity with what one speaker called 'the cosy old colonial relationship with Britain'. The opening up of South Africa to the rest of Africa since 1994 should rather be seen as an opportunity to forge links deliberately and make historical comparisons across the African continent, allowing South African history to be put into a fresh, comparative, continental perspective. Prompted by this comparative train of thought, the suggestion was made that comparisons between South Africa and Brazil ought to be pursued as a high priority too, as these were the two countries in the world today with the greatest gap between rich and poor. Explaining how this had come about would be most telling of similarities and differences between the two societies and perhaps point to broader underlying forces at work in each.

That contemporary issues like this had so often triggered historical inquiry in South Africa in recent years did not surprise participants, given that the country was in the midst of its greatest transition ever, but several felt unease at what they called the inordinate 'burden of the present' on South African historiography, for it raised the danger of excessive presentism in what was researched, written and taught in universities. This had to be guarded against, lest it produced a foreshortened view of the past, lacking the long perspectives which ought to characterise a historical approach.

In terms of manufacturing and communicating history, concern was voiced about the predominance of English in all spheres of these activities in South Africa – the colloquium itself was a good example of this – for this unduly privileged those fluent in English, excluding or, at best, marginalising research, debates and even sources in other local languages. Moreover, such tunnel vision potentially diminished the end-product of research into the past by denying it the perspectives of sources not in English.

This raised the question of 'Who has the right to write history in South Africa?', an issue not openly discussed in the academy. Could only Afrikaners write the history of Afrikaners, and Zulus the history of Zulus? On this delicate topic it was suggested that such sectional history should rather be avoided by scholars who should focus instead on the history of interaction. One speaker, however, felt that the history of Afrikaners written by a Zulu historian would be most illuminating.

The format of the colloquium – sessions devoted to one historical sub-field after another – also gave rise to the opinion that such fragmentation in historical writing, research and teaching was very artificial, hinting as it did that the past could only be effectively studied through specialist lenses. The quest for 'total

history' seemed to have been abandoned without a fight, with a very real loss to historical understanding. Taking a leaf out of an earlier call for the need for comparative African perspectives in South African historiography, one participant reminded those present that African historiography of course boasted a notable exponent of total history, Ibn Khaldun. Perhaps reading his *Kitab al-'Ibar* and *Muqaddimah* would be a useful corrective to excessive fragmentation.

The only significant attention to the relationship and responsibility of historians of South Africa to the wider public arose around the issue of the appropriate role of public intellectuals. Should historians, it was asked, maintain as much critical distance from public history as possible, lest their integrity be compromised by non-academic demands, or should they enter into public history with gusto as advisers and collaborators? Given this choice of two extremes, some of those present opted for a third path, delightfully described by one as 'throwing a curve ball into the arena of public history every now and then'.

One aspect of historians' responsibilities to the wider community, of which participants in the colloquium were reminded, was their obligations to their subjects and informers. Not many asked 'What are the likely repercussions of my research for both my sources and my intended audience?' This was a question which had to be posed and answered, especially in post-apartheid South Africa with its legacy of open historical wounds.

Inevitably, the silences in the colloquium – what one speaker called the 'missing pages of history' – attracted mention in the closing session too, especially where they were deemed to have the potential to excite new audiences about history and to reveal the past in novel ways. In this regard family history was highlighted as an important vein left relatively unexplored by academic historians in South Africa to date, while the potential of the history of religion to illuminate private space in the past was not one that should be left solely to university departments of religious studies to explore. Away from silences about content, participants also had it drawn to their attention that the colloquium had been markedly unreflective about periodisation, terminology and methodology in South African historical writing. How, asked one champion of methodological self-reflexivity, would historians be able to reach wider audiences unless they critically debated how to produce narratively more interesting accounts?

With such pregnant questions hanging in the air undiscussed, the UCT History Department Centenary Colloquium adjourned until the department's bicentenary in 2103.