Amateur historical writing in Botswana: Issues and examples[1]

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Abstract:

The discipline of history is more open than most to amateurs. This paper summarizes the contested definitions of what constitutes "professional" or "real" history, and then examines two amateur historians in Botswana, Albert G. T. K. Malikongwa and Gasebalwe Seretse. Both are *engagé* but both are honest and meticulous, and their work has considerable value. It is concluded, firstly, that amateurs play an important role in African history in particular, and secondly, that issues about different types of history become less significant when history is seen as a collective enterprise comparable to science.

Possibly more than any other academic discipline, history is open to the amateur practitioner. There is however not much agreement about where such practitioners' research and writing fits into the overall study. Recently there has been an increase in certain sorts of amateur history in Africa.

Discussion is confused by the verbal conflation of the *literal* amateur/professional distinction—the question of whether someone is formally trained and employed by a university—with a usage of "amateur/professional" carrying a judgment about the quality and type of work. This conflation can cause question-begging: I am reminded of a participant I once heard on a radio programme who complained "It's not fair to say that teenagers are adolescent—some of us are nice people." Since this problem of usage is of the essence in much discussion, the adoption of two distinct sets of terms would unfortunately also be misleading. However, recently there has been greater acceptance, in the humanities at least, of the category of "independent scholar", meaning a scholar who is not employed by a

1 Thanks to Peter Cunich of the University of Hong Kong and Paul Hammer of the University of Colorado at Boulder, former students of the late G.R. Elton, for their comments on my interpretation of Elton. Any mistakes or misunderstandings however are mine and should not be imputed to those named.

university but who typically accepts the same standards as the employed.[2] However, others outside universities include both frankly popular authors and those aspiring with less endorsement to intellectual standards. A further term of judgment is "antiquarianism" (often "mere antiquarianism") which has a variety of meanings usually implying collection of information without analysis.

My purpose here is to discuss ideas about the nature of "amateur" and "professional" history, looking at some important contributions to the subject, to consider two actual cases of amateur historical writing in Botswana in the light of these, and to make some suggestions about the relevance to African history in general.

The focus of African historians has tended to be on the rather different question of how to do authentically *African* history,[3] often noting the problems of the "outside" origins and continuing western domination of the discipline, and sometimes suggesting an "autonomous" African history might be a better way forward.[4] This raises very large issues which I will not directly deal with here; however, I suggest that a concept of history as a collective endeavour imagined more openly, of which I will say more later, may provide a partial alleviation.

Concepts of "real" history

Much recent writing on the nature of history has focused on the issues of whether, and how, true or meaningful representation of the past can be attained. Working historians generally maintain that the past is in some degree knowable, and that, despite the problems of language, representation of the past is contestable but not fictional (with debate on how pluralist such representation must be). Those less involved in the discipline, and oriented to Continental philosophy or literary theory, are more tempted by postmodern doubts. This paper assumes the mainstream historical position. Amateur historians tend not to adopt an explicit position on this but in general implicitly side with the mainstream historians. The main debates about amateur history have been between historians who agree that knowledge of the past is

2 See e.g. National Coalition of Independent Scholars website, "Join NCIS", http://www.ncis.org/join-ncis accessed 26 November 2012.

3 E.g. Esperanza Brizuela-García, "The History of Africanization and the Africanization of History", *History in Africa*, Vol. 33 (2006), pp. 85-100.

4 E. S. Atieno-Odhiambo, "From African Historiographies to an African Philosophy of History", *Afrika Zamani*, no. 7/8 (1999/2000) pp. 41–89.

possible but differ on how this is achieved.

This paper also assumes the common distinction between academic history and those forms of representation of the past which have different bases, such as social memory, or the sorts of history placed at the service of ulterior motives.[5] The amateur history discussed here is the amateur version of academic history. The relationship in Africa between academic history and social memory is a related topic which I hope to address in later work. Also, the debate over what is "real" history in the sense of historical writing should not be confused with debates about whether or not change in certain societies constitutes real "historical" change.[6]

History has often been seen as divided into superior and inferior types, the latter being relegated (if it is history at all) to an outer ring. This may be because it fails to reach some necessary standard, or because it is an obsolete type of history which preceded some revolutionary development in the discipline. Among the possible answers to the question of what constitutes full "history" are: the nature of research, the level of skill, the presence of analysis, and the significance of the questions.

R.G. Collingwood's distinction is of the revolutionary development type. He saw two main changes. Just as experiment had revolutionized science, history was learning a method of question-and-answer.[7] This connects to Collingwood's general theory of knowledge in terms of question-and-answer rather than propositions.[8] Secondly, whereas pre-scientific history used "testimony", scientific history used "evidence".[9] These may be compared to

5 Many postmodernists would of course deny that such a distinction is possible, but historians, while conscious of the potential overlap, disagree.

6 The theory that some societies do not have history, meaning that only certain types of change are the business of historians, was put forward by Hugh Trevor-Roper, "The Rise of Christian Europe", *The Listener*, 70, 1809 (28 Nov. 1963), p. 871, and by E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001) [1961], p. 121. Trevor-Roper's comments are better known because of his specific denial of African history. Few historians would now agree with such views.

7 R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History: Revised Edition, with lectures 1926-1928* [1946] (ed.) Jan van der Dussen (New Delhi: OUP, 2006), 269; see also now Collingwood, *The Principles of History* (Oxford: OUP, 2002), pp. 24–5. I will not attempt, of course, to expound the whole of Collingwood's philosophy of history. Collingwood used writing as a way of clarifying his thoughts. (*An Autobiography* (London: OUP, 1964) p. 116; *The Principles of History* (Oxford: OUP, 2002), xv n5.) Given this fact, and given that his main publications on the philosophy of history (*The Idea of History* and the recently rediscovered *The Principles of History*) were posthumous books taken from work left unfinished at his death, it is hardly surprising that his points do not always seem entirely consistent. It should also be noted that some of his material, like that of E. H. Carr's *What is History?*, was originally intended for lectures, and hence tends to dramatic effect and the need to stimulate. My understanding of Collingwood takes his brief and lucid *Autobiography* as the key.

8 Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, pp. 29–43.

9 Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, pp. 256–82.

Arthur Marwick's concepts[10] of "unwitting testimony" and "witting testimony" respectively: that is, "testimony" means the overt and explicit content of historical documents, while "evidence" means information deduced from these documents which was not intended as their original purpose.[11] Bloch made the same distinction as "intentional" and "unintentional communication".[12] History based on "testimony" was "scissors-and-paste" history,[13] as it could only consist of putting together these ready-made statements, which by their nature could not constitute scientific knowledge.[14] Despite Marwick's criticism of Collingwood, this view has in fact something in common with Marwick's view of the historian as *using* a variety of sources rather than simply repeating them.[15]

Collingwood wrote that

> The scissors-and-paste historian is interested in the 'content', as it is called, of statements: he is interested in what they state. The scientific historian is interested in the fact that they are made.[16]

In fact, however, modern historians use both witting and unwitting testimony, often in a complex interrelationship. Collingwood did admit that in language-based history the distinction between "evidence" and "testimony" could be unclear.[17].

At a more fundamental level, he maintained that "History has this in common with every other science: that the historian is not allowed to claim any single piece of knowledge, except where he can justify his claim by exhibiting... the grounds upon which it is based." In his view, this excluded memory.[18] The basic principle of exhibiting evidence is of course a fundamental one in history, but in African history there are problems with the details of Collingwood's view. The rejection of memory is untenable both in theory and in practice. Also, while oral tradition must indeed be analysed, the rejection of its manifest content as non-historical denies the oral "traditional historian" any status as a true participant in the collective enterprise of history.

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10 Although Marwick has sometimes been criticized for his knockabout style, he provides clarity on at least some issues.

11 Arthur Marwick, *The New Nature of History*, pp. 172–9.

12 Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam [1949] (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 50.

13 Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, p. 257.

14 Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, p. 257.

15 Marwick "Two approaches" pp. 20-21.

16 Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, p. 275.

17 Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, p. 133.

18 Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, p. 252.

In earlier writing, Collingwood rejected any sort of moral judgment in history.[19] However, he later came to the view that engagement was a positive force driving forward historical interpretation.[20] The latter is probably more congenial to African historians. Another aspect of Collingwood's concept of history is that of the *thought* of the historical actor as the essence of explanation.[21]

G.R. Elton distinguished the "professional" and "amateur" historian in terms of particular levels and types of skill. His "professional" historian achieves "instinctive understanding" of the period which he or she studies.[22] Without this, the historian is liable to "see the exceptional in the commonplace and find the unusual ordinary." Elton's distinctions are set out at some length[23] perhaps precisely because his "professionalism" derives less from any quantifiable method than from an *Einfühlung*[24] based on massive and wide research. Elton allows that amateur history can be "useful and stimulating" but it "cannot enlarge the understanding.... it cannot penetrate to fundamental explanation." Thus, apparently it may be of *use* to the historian, who will make his or her own analysis, but due to its defective understanding, its *own* analysis cannot be useful. The defect, in other words, is about failing to understand the period in a way that makes valid analysis possible. The amateur is a stranger in the past, "a visitor from Mars", whereas the professional has the understanding but not the limitations of a contemporary, "a visitor from the Inquisition".[25]

It should be noted that Elton was stressing the importance of the "professional" approach because he was writing for students and historians. Elton conceded almost in passing that what he termed amateur history could be "very good, not only entertaining but useful and stimulating".[26] Thus, though Elton was determined that his students should become "professionals", he did not dismiss all "amateur" work as valueless. (He took aim rather at

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19 Collingwood, "Lectures on the Philosophy of History" (1926), in Collingwood, *The Idea of History: Revised Edition, with lectures 1926-1928* [1946] (ed.) Jan van der Dussen (New Delhi: OUP, 2006), pp. 402–3, §§ 55–6. His argument seems to rest partly on the idea that the past has no reality, and partly on a pragmatic view that one's concern should be for the present.

20 Collingwood, "Can historians be impartial?", Paper read to the Stubbs Historical Society, 27 January 1936, in *idem.*, *The Principles of History and Other Writings in Philosophy of History* (eds) W. H. Dray and W. J. van der Dussen (Oxford: OUP, 1999), pp. 209–218.

21 Exactly how this should be understood remains a matter of controversy.

22 G. R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (London: Sydney University Press, 1967) p. 17.

23 Elton, *The Practice of History*, pp. 16–20.

24 The process by which historians seek to understand a place and time in its own terms, "feeling oneself into" it (*sich einfühlen*). The term was coined by Herder.

25 Elton, *The Practice of History*, p. 17. For a parallel point in a literary context see C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), p. x.

26 Elton, *The Practice of History*, pp. 17–18.

postmodernists.)

Eric Hobsbawm addressed, more clearly than most, the question of what exactly is meant by defining work as proper history or otherwise. In a 1979 lecture he stated that "Anyone who investigates the past according to recognized criteria of scholarship is a historian, and that is about all the members of my profession will agree about." How could one exclude even "the most mindless chronicler of trivia? They may seem trivia now, but not tomorrow."[27]

Addressing the question of what constitutes proper history, Hobsbawm writes that the key to writing *history* "is not simply to discover the past but *to explain it*, and in doing so to provide a link with the present." In Hobsbawm's view the sheer interest of uncovering past lives, and the tendency to identify with the unknown common person, are not enough. E. P. Thompson's desire to recover such lives from "the enormous condescension of posterity" seems, in fact, something of a double-edged sword. "The best of such grassroots history makes wonderful reading, but that is all. What we want to know is *why*, as well as what."

Hobsbawm gives an example. It is discovered that in certain seventeenth-century English villages, and again in certain nineteenth-century English workhouses, unmarried mothers "were not treated as sinners or as 'unrespectable' if they had genuinely had reason to expect that the father of the child would marry them." Hobsbawm comments that while this is interesting, "what we want to know" is the reasons for such attitudes, how they fitted in with general community values, and "why they changed or didn't". [28]

A problem with Hobsbawm's distinction, however, is that it treats the work in isolation. If the findings about attitudes to unmarried mothers in the times and places mentioned were simply described, this would apparently be on the "merely antiquarian" side of the line; interesting but not real history. If the piece of work is being marked as a student essay then purely internal standards may be appropriate. But as historians we are also interested in the significance of the findings to knowledge in the field. Let us imagine[29] that scholars had previously supposed that attitudes to unmarried mothers in England in those centuries were uniformly harsh. The new findings, if well-supported, would be of considerable interest and significance, causing the scholars to revise their theories, and

27 Eric Hobsbawm, "Has History Made Progress?" [1979], in Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), p. 59.

28 Hobsbawm, "On History from Below" [1988], in Hobsbawm, *On History*, pp. 214–5.

29 Since we are interested in the significance of such research *in principle*, we shall ignore the actual state of scholarship on the question and conduct this as a thought experiment.

suggesting new avenues of research. Thus, the insistence on explanation within a single piece is problematic. It is useful here to compare the natural sciences: a report that some widely-held assumption has been tested, with negative results, would be a significant publication. The point is that the article described by Hobsbawm would be of value to historical studies *considered as a collective enterprise*. Many misunderstandings of historical study arise from the failure to consider it, like science, as ultimately a collective enterprise rather than the work of individual *auteurs*, a point stressed by Marwick among others.[30]

Finally, William Cronon suggests that the key is significance, describing "mere antiquarianism" as "excessive devotion to the facts and minutiae of the past without enough effort to put those facts in the service of larger questions." This is avoided by focussing on "significant" questions, but of course what is "significant" is disputed. (Hobsbawm, as we have seen, considered significance but concluded that it was not a feasible criterion.) Two things are notable about Cronon's definition. Firstly, he states that historians (or many of them) consider that "richly contextualized thick description of past events and phenomena is genuine analytical work even if it yields no obvious causal explanations." Historians are not only social scientists seeking explanation but humanities scholars: "Like many other scholars in the humanities, we are as eager to understand the meanings of past times and lives as we are to determine their causes, so interpretation is as important to us as explanation." Secondly, Cronon seems to imply that "mere antiquarianism" is a rhetorical expression, indicating a recurrent problem, rather than a binary opposition. Thus, Cronon has a broad and inclusive view of what constitutes the true "historian".[31]

The sort of descriptive history Cronon mentions also raises the question of the "revival of narrative". [32] Although there is sometimes a belief that narrative is in itself a low-level type of

30 Marwick, *New Nature of History*, e.g. pp. 82, 271; Mary Fulbrook, *Historical Theory* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 73. Fulbrook sees historical research as "puzzle-solving"(rather than "emplotment" of narrative) "carried out within a fairly delimited set of controversies about particular issues". This may assume the already ploughed fields of European history, while in Africa the role of pre-existing controversy may often be less.

31 Cronon, William. "Getting Ready To Do History: Nearly Everyone Studies The Past, So What Do Historians Do?", (2004); Carnegie Essays on the Doctorate, http://www.williamcronon.net/writing/Cronon_Carnegie_Essay_Getting_Ready_to_Do_History_2004.pdf, accessed 11 April 2013.

32 Lawrence Stone, "The revival of narrative: reflections on a new old history", *Past & Present*, No. 85 (Nov., 1979), pp. 3-24. The concept remains controversial, see e.g. Arthur Marwick "Two Approaches to Historical Study: The Metaphysical (Including 'Postmodernism') and the Historical", *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Jan., 1995), pp. 5-35, p. 19. The view of "story-telling" as basic to history (see A. J. P. Taylor, *A Personal History* (London, 1983) p. 124, quoted in Arthur Marwick, *The New Nature of History: Knowledge, Evidence, Language* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001) p. 15) has been re-emphasised by Cronon's presidential

history, distinct from analysis, it has been argued, especially more recently, that narrative can be in itself a form of explanation, sometimes one which works better than alternatives.[33]

Case studies

For specific examples of amateur historical writing, let us consider two historians who may be considered "amateur" in the literal sense: Albert G. T. K. Malikongwa and Gasebalwe Seretse. (I am here considering "amateurs" of written history, not oral "traditional historians.") One reason for looking at these two is that they both look at the career of Tshekedi Khama. More particularly, they are writers who are unashamedly aligned to a particular cause—what the French existentialists called *engagé*—on opposite sides of a particular debate: the relations of Tshekedi Khama with the BakaNswazwi. Both writers acknowledge that they have decided views on Tshekedi, but believe that a presentation of the data will prove their case, as if to say *res ipsa loquitur*, it speaks for itself. Malikongwa writes that "These revelations are not meant to vilify anybody who did not vilify himself by his own actions"[34] while Seretse declares of his book "Read it with a clear mind and you will find it informative.... Read it with a wrong mind and you will find it provocative."[35] Both have invested considerable time and resources in their projects, out of a belief in the importance of history, and deserve respect for this.[36] It should be noted that the archives relating to the conflict were still closed when Malikongwa began work, and that he had to go to court to gain access. In this, Malikongwa's determination and courage as a historian created opportunities for other scholars.

Mainstream Botswana historiography has seen Tshekedi's career as having both positive and negative sides. This complexity is particularly well captured in the collection *The Birth of Botswana*.[37] His achievements are clearest in external relations, where he fought

address to the American Historical Association (William Cronon, "Presidential Address: Storytelling", *American Historical Review*, vol. 118 no. 4 Feb. 2013 pp. 1–19).

33 George A. Reisch, "Chaos, History, and Narrative", *History and Theory*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Feb., 1991), pp. 1-20.

34 Malikongwa, *History of the Nswazwi People*, p. 35.

35 Seretse, *Tshekedi Khama*, p. vi.

36 The well-known historian Jeff Ramsay considers that "Even though I do not agree with some sections of [Seretse's] book I have to say it is a great product from a young Motswana." Tshireletso Motlogelwa, "Another look at Ngwato royal politics", *Mmegi*, 10 December 2004, online edition, http://www.mmegi.bw/2004/October/Tuesday12/5106956681837.html, accessed 12 November 2010.

37 See especially M. Crowder, "The Statesman", in F. Morton & J. Ramsay (eds), *The Birth of Botswana: A History of the Bechuanaland Protectorate from 1910 to 1966* (Gaborone: Longman, 1987), pp. 45–63; J. Ramsay, " Resistance from Subordinate Groups: BaBirwa, BaKgatla Mmanaana and BaKalanga Nswazwi",

to hold the line against the threat of South African incorporation and campaigned for South West Africa. His record is worst in terms of his authoritarian tendencies, including oppressive treatment of subject peoples and religious dissidents. His development policies have aspects of both his sides: far-sighted and even visionary projects, but increasingly driving his people too hard in building them.

Malikongwa and Seretse essentially focus on one or other side of this complex picture. This is less of a problem for Malikongwa since his topic is defined in terms of one issue: Tshekedi's conflict with the BakaNswazwi. Seretse's project is arguably the more ambitious, not only because he attempts a wider survey, but also because he deliberately raises issues on which mainstream historiography has not favoured his side.

The mainstream historical view on the Nswazwi affair is roughly as follows. Relations between the Kalanga of Nswazwi and their Bangwato overlords had been generally good before Tshekedi. Problems arose initially over the BakaNswazwi's failure to obey immediately a work order which came during ploughing,[38] although economic stresses affecting the Kalanga, squeezed between the Tati Concession and Ngwato cattleposts, were an underlying factor.[39] After this both sides escalated the quarrel; the BakaNswazwi by for example persistently appealing directly to the administration (a breach of procedure which Tshekedi took seriously[40]) and Tshekedi by what British officials regarded as needling provocations.

Albert Malikongwa published a variety of works in both English and Ikalanga, especially poetry and drama. His 1996 booklet *History of the Nswazwi People (Struggle Against Tshekedi) 1932 to 1945*[41] makes its theme clear in the title. Malikongwa presents Tshekedi's actions as unreasonable and dictatorial, and as an example of his generally oppressive relationship to the Bangwato's subject peoples, while Nswazwi was a man of a "progressive mind" only seeking justice.[42] The Nswazwi people were "freedom fighters"[43] resisting Tshekedi at a time when the Bangwato were generally unchallenged by their subjects.[44] The Bangwato's relationship with their subjects is compared to that of "the Boers

ibid., pp. 64–81.

38 Thomas Tlou and Alec Campbell, *History of Botswana* (2nd ed., Gaborone: Macmillan, 1997), p. 260.

39 Diane Wylie, *A Little God: The Twilight of Patriarchy in a Southern African Chiefdom* (Hanover NH & London: University Press of New England, 1990), pp. 164–66.

40 Tshekedi, it must be said, was himself adept at breaking the protocols of communication in the same way when it suited him.

41 Albert G. T. K. Malikongwa, *History of the Nswazwi People (Struggle Against Tshekedi) 1932 to 1945* (1st ed., Gaborone: n.p., 1996). Booklet, iv + 84 pp.

42 Malikongwa, *History of the Nswazwi People*, p. 18.

43 Malikongwa, *History of the Nswazwi People*, p. 65.

44 Malikongwa, *History of the Nswazwi People*, p. 31.

of South Africa".[45]

The author's attitude to the colonial government is more complex. Overall, it is implied that the officials did to some extent recognize the oppressive nature of Tshekedi's actions, but were unwilling to do anything about them. Their policy was to back up Tshekedi, in harsh terms. Malikongwa's verdict on Tshekedi is that he "was an intelligent man but lacked [the] wisdom that should have gone with his office."[46] The booklet ends with a quotation from Charles Rey's diary denouncing Tshekedi as a "swollen headed devil".[47]

While the booklet does not follow academic conventions of source reference, it is based on archive research, with large extracts of material from the colonial files (mostly official inquiries) being reproduced. The source references are usually not complete (though they would probably not be too difficult to find in the BNA) and in some places the reproduction seems to lapse into reported speech. The author's analysis is interspersed between the extracts, generally commenting directly on them.

A second edition was published in 2002.[48] The most important revision is the addition of a four-page bibliography of archive sources, giving full details of all the colonial administration files used. While many source quotations are still unreferenced, this brings the work much closer to "professional" citation standards.

In 2001 Malikongwa published a sequel, *The Assault on Captain Robert M. D. Langley by the Bakalanga baka Nswazwi wa Pomba Ngombe 10-Feb-1945 Nswazwi Village*,[49] dealing specifically with one episode in the long conflict. In this episode, a white policeman arrived at the Nswazwi village, bearing a message from Tshekedi, and, seeing some religious service or ritual in progress, decided to wait. A Ngwato loyalist, Mfakose Mutswete, went out to meet him, leading to a fight which escalated into a serious attack on the white officer.

As in his earlier work, Malikongwa provides extensive extracts from colonial documents, mainly official inquiries, adding his own comments and analysis. He blames Mfakose Mutswete for the fight, on the grounds that by going to greet Langley before his

45 Malikongwa, *History of the Nswazwi People*, p. 35.
46 Malikongwa, *History of the Nswazwi People*, p. 78.
47 Malikongwa, *History of the Nswazwi People*, p. 84. See Charles F. Rey (eds N. Parsons & M. Crowder), *Monarch of All I Survey: Bechuanaland Diaries 1929-37* (Gaborone: Botswana Society, 1988), p. 16, 20 Feb.1930.
48 Albert G. T. K. Malikongwa, *History of the Nswazwi People: the Struggle Against Tshekedi) 1932–1945* (2nd ed., Francistown: Mukani Action Campaign, 2002). Commemorative edition published in connection with the return from Zimbabwe and reburial of the body of Nswazwi, who had died in exile.
49 Albert G. T. K. Malikongwa, *The Assault on Captain Robert M. D. Langley by the Bakalanga baka Nswazwi wa Pomba Ngombe 10-Feb-1945 Nswazwi Village* (Gaborone: n.p., 2001). Booklet, v + 55pp.

chief he committed a serious breach of protocol likely to cause disorder.[50] However, Malikongwa is careful to describe in detail the seriousness of the assault on Mfakose.[51]

The colonial officials are criticized. In particular the author notes an apparent irregularity in which an official, recused from an early stage of the inquiry, later sat as an assessor in a High Court appeal against the result.[52]

In this booklet Malikongwa gives wider overall conclusions than before. Nswazwi's actions, he writes, were not understood at the time, but can now be seen as part of the process of the liberation of Botswana.[53] On Tshekedi he concedes that he "did great things for Botswana" but cannot be reckoned as a great man in view of his negative actions and his resistance to "the tides of change".[54]

Gasebalwe Seretse's 2004 book *Tshekedi Khama: the Master Whose Dogs Barked At*[55] is more extensive, attempting a defence of Tshekedi in several controversies, including the Nswazwi affair and Seretse Khama's marriage. It is not a general biography, and tends not to deal with the areas where Tshekedi's reputation is more secure. Interestingly, in his preface Seretse proposes a Collingwoodian intention to show "the thoughts of Tshekedi when he did certain acts",[56] but in practice this is not his main focus.

Like Malikongwa, Seretse makes use of unreferenced extracts from archive material, but also seems to draw on oral testimony or tradition. Informants are named in the bibliography, but are not cited in the text, and the use of this material is much less transparent than the archive material.

Academic writers have noted the contested history of Ngwato-Kalanga relations. Diane Wylie writes that "Each side in the Mswazi dispute indulged in freewheeling and self-serving reconstruction to justify its own claim to independence and suzerainty."[57] Richard Werbner, more bluntly, refers to inequality being justified by "falsifications".[58]

Despite this, Seretse and Malikongwa agree, to a perhaps surprising extent, on the basic data of the Nswazwi case. They differ on the interpretation. Whereas Malikongwa accuses the Bangwato of seeing themselves as superior to Kalanga, Seretse argues that

50 Malikongwa, *The Assault on Captain Robert M. D. Langley*, p. 2.
51 Malikongwa, *The Assault on Captain Robert M. D. Langley*, p. 7.
52 Malikongwa, *The Assault on Captain Robert M. D. Langley*, p. 25.
53 Malikongwa, *The Assault on Captain Robert M. D. Langley*, p. 37.
54 Malikongwa, *The Assault on Captain Robert M. D. Langley*, p. 46.
55 Gasebalwe Seretse, *Tshekedi Khama: the Master Whose Dogs Barked At (A Critical Look at Ngwato Politics)* (Gaborone: n.p., 2004). The title refers to a Setswana proverb.
56 Seretse, *Tshekedi Khama*, p. vi.
57 Wylie, *A Little God*, p. 162. "Mswazi" is the form of Nswazwi used in the colonial files.
58 Richard Werbner, *Reasonable Radicals and Citizenship in Botswana: The Public Anthropology of Kalanga Elites* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 69.

Tshekedi was not prejudiced, citing his friendship with a Kalanga man. The two writers agree that the conflict increased after Nswazwi's attempt to assert independence from Tshekedi. Malikongwa argues that the BakaNswazwi would accept reasonable overlordship, and sees separatism as a response to oppressive rule; Seretse, however, sees separatism as the cause of the trouble.[59] On the Langley case, Seretse agrees on the role of Mfakosi Mutswe[60] but justifies his actions in going to meet the officer, and suggests in fact that "[s]ome people believe that the religious activity was a deliberate pretext to ignore Langley."[61]

Werbner identifies a process of "minoritization" which involves a process of "learning". "Certain incidents serve as revelatory or epiphenal moments... at least in retrospect."[62] The imprisonment of Nswazwi, a respected chief among the Kalanga, was such a revelatory moment.[63] This accords well with Malikongwa's own analysis of the episode's significance in Kalanga history and historiography.

> When Nswazwi stood up to fight against the rule of Tshekedi, many people did not understand what he stood for, but it is only now that the great burden he carried has now brought him fame and recognition....[64]

Thus, Nswazwi's actions have a historic meaning which is only seen in retrospect.

An important contribution of Malikongwa's two booklets is in clarifying the complaints of the BakaNswazwi. Contemporary observers, even relatively sympathetic ones such as the Ballingers,[65] found their complaints confusing, a disorganized set of miscellaneous issues which failed to make a clear impression. (This is, of course, a general problem of the weak and subordinated: they necessarily try to make their case within the system and discourse which legitimates the status quo, and not surprisingly seem to be merely "difficult".) Wylie argues that the stated complaints were results of the conflict, which really reflected deeper "material roots", but even so it is worthwhile understanding how the BakaNswazwi saw the issues. [66]

Seretse recognizes the existence of the narrative of Kalanga inequality, but argues that the Nswazwi affair was a specific local problem, not a *Kalanga* issue, and that the cause of

59 Seretse, *Tshekedi Khama*, pp. 13, 16–17. Mainstream historiography has tended to see an initial act by Tshekedi leading to a vicious circle of separatism and overreaction.
60 Seretse sometimes uses local forms of names.
61 Seretse, *Tshekedi Khama*, p. 14.
62 Werbner, *Reasonable Radicals*, p. 41.
63 Werbner, *Reasonable Radicals*, p. 66.
64 Malikongwa, *The Assault on Captain Robert M. D. Langley*, p. 37.
65 Margaret Hodgson Ballinger, diary entry 30 June 1931, Ballinger Papers, University of Cape Town, cited in Wylie, *A Little God*, p. 244n.86.
66 Wylie, *A Little God*, p. 164.

equality is not served by what he sees as the defaming of Tshekedi. “Equality can be attain [sic] without badmouthing somebody.”[67] At this point Seretse and Malikongwa are offering differing understandings of the same data; one developing a narrative of minority consciousness, the other arguing against its validity or usefulness. It is notable, however, the extent to which they agree: a testimony to the integrity of these apparently *engagé* writers.

Seretse gives more attention to the controversy over Seretse Khama’s marriage. Mainstream historiography of the issue notes a development in Ngwato opinion. Two *kgotla* meetings were held in 1948 and one in 1949, all being of several days. Initially opinion was against the marriage, but doubts began when it was realized that Seretse Khama was committed to his marriage, and that the alternative to accepting his wife was not a different marriage but the indefinite continuation of Tshekedi’s rule. In early 1949 anti-Tshekedi forces coalesced, and at the June 1949 *kgotla* Seretse Khama demonstrated that he had overwhelming support.

Gasebalwe Seretse’s interpretation, based on interviews and (apparently) knowledge of oral tradition, is that the conflict is best seen as episode in traditional Ngwato elite politics. The “outs”, especially the “sons of Sekgoma”, were according to this theory using the marriage as a means of destroying Tshekedi. Seretse writes that only those “who were not directly involved” imagined that the marriage was really the issue.[68]

Seretse denounces the opponents of Tshekedi in the strongest terms, calling them a “brood of vipers” ready to “spew the venom that was to determine the destiny of Tshekedi”.[69] He analyses the motives of a large number of important figures, in almost all cases finding discreditable motives, often a desire for personal revenge on Tshekedi.[70] He does not discuss the first two kgotla meetings, which favoured Tshekedi, but begins with the crucial period of secretive manoeuvrings in 1949.

We can now review the two writers in terms of the concepts of historical writing proposed by the various historians cited above.

Both writers can make a claim to Elton’s intuitive understanding, though in both cases it comes from their own situation as much as from abstract study. Whether they have achieved the appropriate critical relationship is less clear. Both are definitely oriented towards Hobsbawm’s requirement for explanation, though not necessarily in the form of

67 Seretse, *Tshekedi Khama*, p. 17.
68 Seretse, *Tshekedi Khama*, p. 35.
69 Seretse, *Tshekedi Khama*, p. 35.
70 A few people are concluded to have acted out of personal friendship for Seretse Khama, and Seretse even finds one case of a decision made on principle.

causation. Seretse in particular seeks to provide a detailed explanation of Tshekedi's downfall. In addition, it seems indisputable that both deal with significant issues.

Inasmuch as the methodological orientation of the two can be analysed, it would seem in both cases to tend to the hermeneutical. Although Seretse does not fully deliver on the promise to analyse Tshekedi's motives,[71] his analysis of the actors in both the Nswazwi and the marriage cases is Collingwoodian, reconstructing what he sees as ideas and intentions.[72] Similarly Malikongwa seeks to show not so much the causes of the confrontation as its meaning as part of a process of liberation.

In both cases there are weaknesses in terms of the imperative to show how knowledge is obtained. However both would seem to be able to do so, had they used citation, so this fault is more technical than fundamental.

These determinations, however, do not tell us a great deal about the quality and usefulness of the two writers' work that we had not already observed. Seretse's book is not academically referenced, but given the nature of some of his sources, oral tradition of a sort which is generally inaccessible, this may be inevitable. Wylie comments in regard to the downfall of Tshekedi:

> Popular allegiance had shifted massively between November 1948 and June 1949. The secrecy that necessarily surrounds the building of factions has obscured the strategic details of the realignments—who was allied to whom and for what reasons.[73]

In that case, the book, although "amateur" in this sense, may be making a contribution that could not be made "professionally".

Amateur historians are more likely than professionals to write on topics of direct personal interest. Partly this is due to a process of self-selection: only a small proportion of the general public writes history, and the motive of writing about what is important to them is more common than an abstract taste for research. As noted, both Malikongwa and Seretse are *engagé* writers, and Malikongwa can be considered a cultural nationalist. Does this constitute a problem? Hobsbawm felt that no nationalist could be a scholar of nationalism, since nationalism "requires too much belief in what is patently not so."[74] This rests not on a demand for the historian to be personally apolitical—Hobsbawm always remained in some sense a

71 Seretse, *Tshekedi Khama*, p. vi.

72 E.g. the brutal methods used by tax collectors are interpreted by their understanding of the situation as "war": Seretse, *Tshekedi Khama*, p. 16.

73 Wylie, *A Little God*, p. 185.

74 E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1870: Programme, Myth, Reality* (2nd ed., Cambridge: CUP, 1994), p. 12. He did however soften this with several caveats and exceptions. As has been noted, Collingwood came to believe that engagement was necessary, and rejected the ideal of the "eunuch historian". (Collingwood, "Can historians be impartial?")

Marxist—but on a specific judgment about nationalism. While he has a point, my view is that the essential minimum is rather honesty.

Although these two have been examined in detail, amateur history varies widely.[75] In Botswana one amateur work has achieved classic status: Bessie Head's *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*,[76] which includes a large amount of oral source material, generally edited to form continuous short texts. Some works set out privately held information, as with Kenneth Stanley Birch's booklet on Bessie Head's white ancestors.[77] The Khama III Memorial Museum in Serowe, an excellent small museum with well-kept archives, has published an occasional periodical including both popular history by academic writers and source material, both manuscript and oral interviews.[78] Some works deal with major topics, especially where there is no mainstream book: D.D. Phiri's *From Nguni to Ngoni: A History of the Ngoni Exodus from Zululand and Swaziland to Malawi, Tanzania and Zambia*[79] is a detailed study, written in a lively style. It is based on very extensive work—the author stopped at one point to learn Zulu when he found it necessary—by a former diplomat with a degree in economics. It is however unreferenced, with no bibliography.

This article has noted some weaknesses in examples of amateur history, notably the absence of reference which makes data untraceable. Analysis also shows weaknesses. The best response, in my view, is not to dismiss such work, but to see the problems as suggesting where professional academic history might assist the amateur branch to develop. Professional standards need not be compromised by goals of connection rather than exclusion.

In 2000 the University of Botswana hosted a conference "Challenging Minorities, Difference and Tribal Citizenship in Botswana", organized by Isaac Mazonde and Richard Werbner. Although there were prepared papers,[80] attendance and discussion was open, and eminent scholars combined with non-academics, some of whom seemed to have just walked in. As a participant I vividly recall how energizing this experience was. Admittedly, this was on a topic of unusual public interest, with the proceedings attracting press attention, but

75 Biography and autobiography are also popular.

76 Bessie Head, *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1981).

77 Kenneth Stanley Birch, *The Birch Family: An Introduction to the White Antecedents of the late Bessie Amelia Head* (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand Library, 1997). Africana Series no. 4. This is unusual, for an "amateur" work, in having such a notable publisher.

78 *Lekgapho: Khama III Memorial Museum Review* (subtitle varies), see e.g. 1990, which includes an account written in 1930 about a 1878 trek, & 1995, which includes interesting interviews by Gasenone Kediseng.

79 D.D. Phiri, *From Nguni to Ngoni: A History of the Ngoni Exodus from Zululand and Swaziland to Malawi, Tanzania and Zambia* (Limbe: Popular Publications, 1982).

80 Leading to the subsequent publication *Minorities in the Millennium: Perspectives from Botswana* (ed.) Isaac N. Mazonde (Gaborone: Lightbooks, 2002).

perhaps this event gives a hint of the possibilities for how academic history in Africa can take a role of leadership rather than self-isolation.

Conclusions: an inclusive endeavour

Firstly, it should be noted that in Africa, it is important that historical knowledge is not lost or obscured. When the harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few, the energies of amateurs should be welcome. Secondly, a distinction needs to be made between the assessment of a piece as historical writing *in itself* and as a contribution to the discipline. This arises, for example, with the undergraduate research essays written by University of Botswana history students. Considered as an academic exercise, the research essay will be assessed and marked according to how well the student has carried out scholarly research, rather than according to the interest of the material. The essays are deposited in the University Library, and sometimes consulted by researchers. The researchers will be looking for a particular subject, and may be more interested in the data than in the interpretation put upon it, though in this case, because of the very high quality of many of these essays, foreign scholars often have engaged with the interpretation.[81] Obviously the researcher would like best to find an essay that was both on the right subject and written with the best scholarship; but an unanalytical essay, presenting data which is relevant, probably otherwise unavailable, possibly otherwise permanently lost, is still most welcome.

Thirdly, it is clear that there has been a progressive widening over time of the subjects of historical enquiry, the "return of Herodotus". This makes it increasingly untenable to dismiss history as trivial: one scholar's trivia is another's microhistory.

History, like science, is a collective project. Individual historians may be "great" as communicators or as developers of ideas, but the community of historians will ultimately judge their contributions to African or other history along with all the less famous ones, including the amateur historians.

81 Notably Ashley Jackson, *Botswana 1939-1945: An African Country at War* (Oxford: OUP, 1999); but the point is that such essays have value even when this is not the case.

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