



# Reading from the South

African print cultures and oceanic turns  
in Isabel Hofmeyr's work

Edited by

CHARNE LAVERY & SARAH NUTTALL

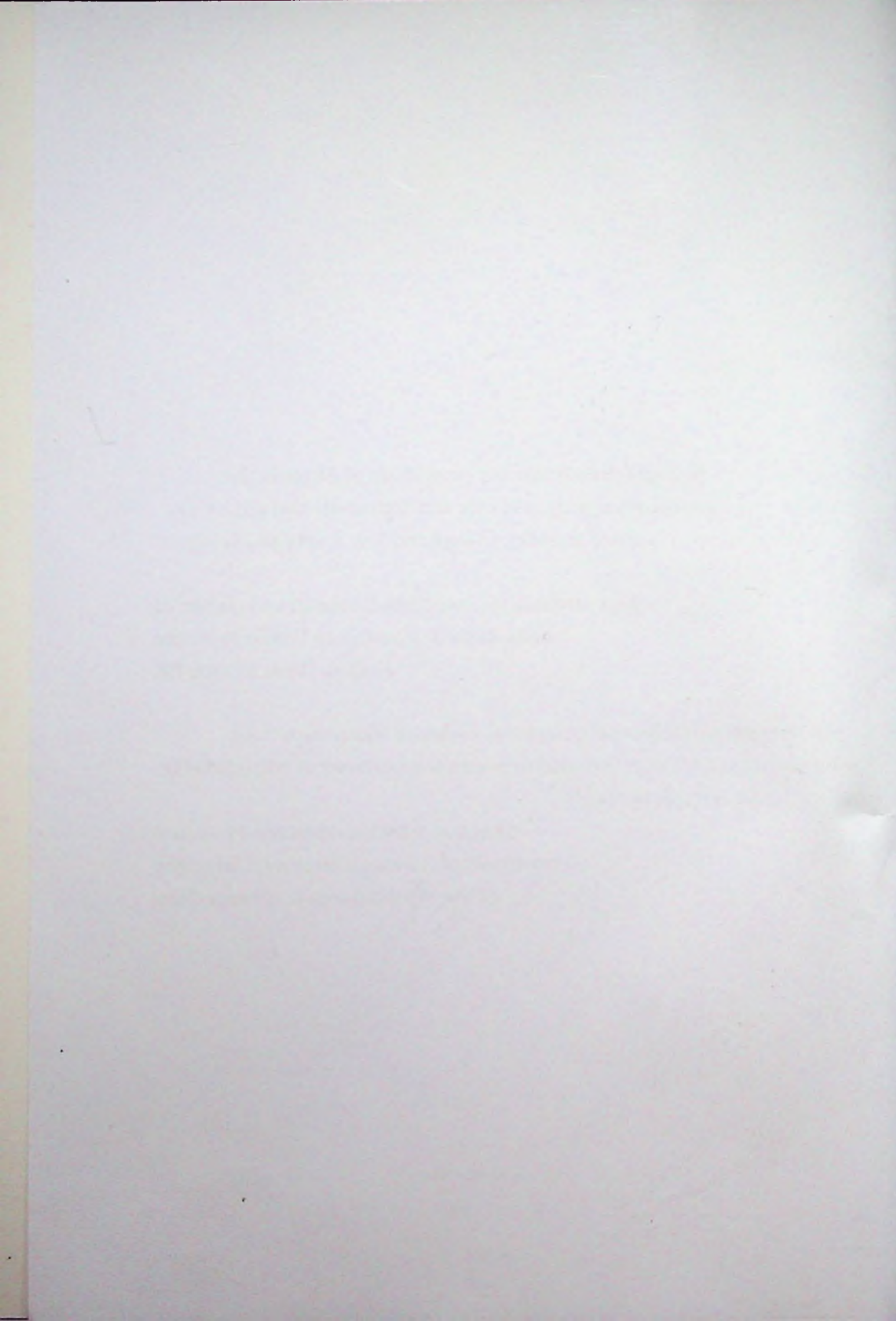


*Reading from the South* depicts the vast complexity of Africa in the Indian Ocean world, presenting evidence and arguments that render the continent an open space of mobility on land and sea. A very satisfying intellectual odyssey.

—RILA MUKHERJEE, maritime historian and author of  
*India in the Indian Ocean World: From the  
Earliest Times to 1800 CE*

An immersive intellectual portrait of a scholar whose capacious itineraries model what it means to widen the horizons of our scholarly practice. A rewarding read.

—GRACE A. MUSILA, Associate Professor,  
Department of African Literature, University  
of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg



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CHAPTER

# 3

## Fluidity and Its Methodological Openings: Mobility and Discourse on the Eve of Colonialism

Carolyn Hamilton

### INTRODUCTION

In *'We Spend Our Years as a Tale That is Told': Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Chieftdom*, which examines the relationship between orality and literacy, Isabel Hofmeyr (1993) drew attention to the impact on oral accounts of their publication in early South African school readers. She pointed to the way in which written texts separated speakers from their speeches, were static and unaccommodating of responses, and lacked the flexibility of oral storytelling. Using an aqueous metaphor that prefigured the circulations of the Indian Ocean and the hydrocolonialism of her later work (Hofmeyr 2022), she commented that publication conferred a rigid casing on forms that 'previously lived by fluidity' (Hofmeyr 1993, 54).

The fluidity that Hofmeyr pointed to in 1993 was, for most historians of the time, the core 'weakness' of oral accounts as historical sources. It was – and is still today for many researchers – a problem to be obviated by recording (usually by writing down) an oral text and 'fixing' it so that

it stays the same. However, Hofmeyr's formulation suggested a different possibility: that of grappling with the significance and dynamics of fluidity both at the time of the text's encasement in written form, and in its iterations in social and political life in earlier eras, when the local world was one of oral communication and circulation.

This possibility has been realised in a critique of the concept of oral traditions, and of the ways in which oral accounts thus conceptualised have been used by historians. The critique points to a new way of approaching both oral historical accounts and early written accounts based on previously oral-only repertoires and discursive practices. This approach entails paying attention to fluidity as a characteristic feature – rather than a deleterious effect of oral communication and the passage of time – that demands methodological, and historical, attention in its own right. The approach brings past responses, debates, assessments and revisions into view (Cohen 1989, 1994; Hamilton 1987, 2002, 2021; Hofmeyr 1993; Landau 2010). The key arguments here are that engagements of the past were part of processes of the navigation of change; that oral accounts, as much as written ones, bear the traces of that navigational work; and that such navigations continue to this day. The approach thus offers historians two opportunities: that of exploring the ways in which history was engaged with in past political discourses, and that of delving into the nature of creative political thought and deliberation both in the eras before colonialism and subsequently, when newly colonised groupings sought to establish themselves in the emerging colonial order.

The use of oral accounts to throw light on eras before colonialism presents particular methodological challenges because historians have to rely on narrated materials that were often recorded or written down (encased) later in time. Here the adaptation of Hofmeyr's approach to circulation, more fully developed in *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of 'The Pilgrim's Progress'* (2004), provides further assistance. For the use of oral accounts relating to the remote past, the work involves not only tracing circulatory pathways in and out of oral and written texts and across seemingly discrete geographies, but also tacking backwards and

forwards across the apparently absolute divide between what are teleologically described as the 'pre-colonial era' and the 'colonial era'. The process entails examining, first, how ideas from and about the past, and often the movement of people with those ideas, shaped recorded and written texts; and, second, how latter-day formulations shaped understandings of that past, in what we might think of as an iterative spiral through time.

For historians, this process offers a remarkable opportunity to move away from the practices of mining oral accounts for facts about earlier political developments and of using ethnographic data recorded in the early twentieth century to elucidate such developments. The focus on fluidity in the form of creative and deliberative responses to change thus signals a decisive break from long-congealed notions of societies prior to colonialism as being characterised by timeless, traditional practices framed as 'culture' rather than any number of alternatives – including political, intellectual or creative practices. In proposing that there are distinct traces of strong intellectual carry-overs and carry-backs across the seemingly absolute pre-colonial/colonial divide, this essay leverages the work of Hofmeyr to prompt scholars to consider engaging the history of earlier eras and earlier ways of discoursing in their own right, recognising the possibilities offered by methods that find a way back into that past through texts from later times.

This approach to discursive fluidity brings into view past practices of political fluidity, flexibility and mobility, accompanied by the circulation of news, ideas, information and goods that were both signals of and responses to changing conditions. These developments add up to an understanding of fluidity as a characteristic feature of past social and political praxis.

This essay highlights the ubiquity of settled thinking to foreground the power – both disruptive and generative – of Hofmeyr's methodological engagement of fluidity, realised not only in her first book but elaborated across her accumulated body of work. It argues that fluidity in past political and historical discourses, as well as in past political practices, has long been obscured by three entrenched and interlocked forms of

settled thinking; colonial recording practices seeking a fixed record of the past; the linked colonial ascription of timeless cultural practices to newly colonised subjects; and the colonial view of historically established 'tribes' settled in bounded territories.

The essay does this by means of a discussion of recent work on the political formations of eastern southern Africa (present-day KwaZulu-Natal and neighbouring areas) in the century or so before colonialism, from roughly the early 1700s until around 1830 (Hamilton and Wright, forthcoming). What emerges from that work is an understanding of kinetic processes, of fluid and flexible polities forming and re-forming in new configurations and characterised by considerable political mobility, with people drawing on diverse networks of carefully curated connections. These processes were informed by active networks for the circulation of ideas and the movement of things, and were bolstered by equally dynamic discoursing about changing contexts. Fluidity is then seen both as a feature of oral accounts and of political formation-ing (the neologism is necessary to capture the idea of the fluid forming and re-forming of political entities) and as foundational to the methodological practice involved in using oral accounts as sources. That practice finds inspiration not only in Hofmeyr's *We Spend Our Years as a Tale That is Told* but also in her larger oeuvre. It entails the giving of attention to the movement of people, ideas and texts in overlooked networks of circulation, which is in many respects the hallmark of Hofmeyr's work.

### SETTLED THINKING

In the region with which this essay is concerned, the official recording in writing of what were regarded as 'tribal histories' commenced in the middle of the nineteenth century, when the newly installed British colonial authorities in Natal sought to rule through established chiefs and to confine Africans to specific pockets of 'tribal' lands (Guy 2013; Hamilton 1998; Hamilton and Leibhammer 2016; McClendon 2010). This type of recording, and linked practices of identifying and locating people,

became increasingly systematic over time (Lekgoathi, Kros and Wright 2022). A variety of people outside government who identified, or were identified, as native experts – among them missionaries, Bantu Studies scholars, folklorists and anthropologists – also recorded or documented oral material of various kinds. Until the 1960s, however, academic historians paid little attention to oral accounts, which for the most part they regarded as unreliable historical evidence.

Following Jan Vansina's interventions (beginning in 1961) in developing specific methodologies for the use of oral traditions, historians began to mine bodies of recorded oral material for historical evidence and even to record oral accounts. To this day, southern African historians use methodologies stemming from Vansina's work. Few of them pay close attention to the thick discursive matrices – the circumstances of the telling of tales – or the histories and forms of the materials from which they extract their factual nuggets. Limited also is the number of scholars who investigate the processes involved in recording and rendering the spoken word into what are often multiple versions of text, produced over time and in a variety of locales. Only some attempt to reconstruct anything of the history of the accounts, or of the world of historical debate in which they were involved before, and at the time of, becoming fixed in their recorded form. And fewer still pay attention to choices of phrasing, or words and concepts, used in the local African languages or versions thereof (Hamilton 2011, 2021; Hofmeyr 1993).

In the 1960s the decolonisation of much of Africa saw a sharp upswing of historical studies into the African past before colonialism. In contrast to earlier works, which, insofar as they considered that past, portrayed the rise of the Zulu kingdom as attributable to the genius of its founder, King Shaka, scholars began to consider the role of factors such as demographic pressure, environmental change and external trade (Gluckman 1960; Guy 1979; Omer-Cooper 1966; Thompson 1969). In the 1970s and 1980s Marxist scholars conceptualised the Zulu kingdom, and what they saw as a number of precursor polities, as states (Bonner 1983; Guy 1979; Hedges 1978; Slater 1976). A key institutional development identified



as enabling the processes of state formation was a new form of labour organisation – notably, *amabutho*, or ‘age-regiments’ – centralised under powerful rulers (Wright 1978). The upshot of two centuries of writing, from a variety of perspectives, about the history of the region before colonialism has been to conceive of these polities – whether described as chiefdoms, kingdoms, empires or states – as circumscribed entities settled in demarcated lands, with distinct historical identities under historically legitimated ruling houses characterised by forms of centralised power.

The corollary of the focus on the rise of big kingdoms was the conceptualisation of many of those who were not encompassed in these political formations as ‘refugees’. Much has been written about King Shaka having depopulated vast swathes of territory, and about how such ideas were used by European settlers as an argument for the land being empty and available for settlement, and for a convenient formulation of the local inhabitants of Natal as rootless refugees in need of shelter. For all its internal variations across time, the accumulated knowledge of the centralised kingdoms and its corollary of rootless refugees amounts to well-established habits of settled thinking.

### TRACKING CHANGE AND MOVEMENT

Over a century of settled thinking focused on the nineteenth-century Zulu kingdom, whether portrayed positively or negatively, as the most developed example of these established centralised polities. At the same time, the effects of European interpretive frameworks were concentrated on it as the first extensively documented political formation in the region. However, as a result of timing, the Zulu kingdom was also the local political formation that first felt the impact of an expanding colonial presence and the (at first distant) encroaching colonial frontier that increasingly constrained options for movement within southern Africa. It was thus a new case, rather than an example that illuminates, by extrapolation, less well-documented earlier political formations in the same region.<sup>1</sup>

In our latest work, John Wright and I focus our attention on political formations that pre-date the Zulu kingdom (Hamilton and Wright, forthcoming). We use an approach that is attentive to, among other things, the histories of accounts and their discursive contexts; the variations and contradictions within them; and the persistent presence of opaque and contradictory matter. Central to our approach is taking careful notice of how ideas travel across space as well as over time, moving across the oral and the written, with ideas and practices from early times influencing ideas and practices in colonial times, and colonial ideas and practices shaping understandings of earlier times.

As Hofmeyr's work affirms again and again, travelling changes the shape of texts (Hofmeyr 2004). In a manner resonant with her approach, we establish fluidity, and the travelling of ideas, as a foundation of our methodological practice. This requires the kind of multi-sited methodological approach that marks much of Hofmeyr's work. Thus we make a point of consulting accounts, both recorded oral materials and written texts, from a wide variety of descendants and other commentators with diverse later histories.

Many of these descendants and commentators came to be located in places other than the areas where the historical political formations with which we are concerned were based. This has meant exploring understandings of the early history of the KwaZulu-Natal region expressed at various times, often by speakers and writers based outside of the region, not only in isiZulu but also in siSwati, isiXhosa and Sesotho (and variations thereon), and in English. One advantage offered by the diversity of speaking/writing positions with which we engage is that it assists us in tracing how ideas about the past travelled and changed. It positions us to grapple with the ways in which varied subsequent experiences and locations – what Hofmeyr (1993, 175) terms 'the intervening period' – shape historical discussion of the earlier political formations. This in turn illuminates how actively and divergently people moved over time, developing and dissolving relationships in changing contexts. While some of the movement was the result of colonial and apartheid policies, most of the movement which emerges in these historical accounts pre-dates formal

colonialism. Movements into, within and out of the region are abundantly attested to in the available historical materials, but previously attracted little attention because of the way in which the focus on aggregation, centralisation and settlement has been sustained over time.

Abundant attestation to movement is found in the main bodies of recorded materials for the region: notably, the James Stuart collection (assembled between c. 1890 and 1920), which contains the accounts of some two hundred commentators, interlocutors and expositors,<sup>2</sup> and the more synthesised compendium by Alfred T. Bryant (1929), a missionary turned Bantu Studies academic (Etherington 2016). The two corpuses are filled with details of politically contingent and ongoing regional shifts and movements over time of substantial groupings of people relocating to new areas and establishing new allegiances. They also record – in multiple ways – the discoursing on foundational movements in archaic and more recent times by the people with whom Stuart and Bryant consulted. Both Stuart and Bryant noted that these engagements typically involved discussions of opaque and ambiguous allusions. These allusions were open-ended and often engendered deliberative engagement from the interlocutors involved, as in this discussion about people identified as ‘ntungwa’ between Stuart and his assistants Socwatsha kaPhaphu and Maziyana kaMahlabeni, recorded in 1905:

*They rolled down by means of a grain basket (ba gingika nge silulu), i.e. were all put into a basket which was rolled down, and when they got down it was opened and they came out and scattered over the country . . . The abeNguni are not said to have come down by means of a grain basket, but Socwatsha thinks they must have done so, like the amaNtungwa, on the ground that the Qwabes and Zulu, who are really amaNtungwa, speak of themselves nowadays as abeNguni. (Webb and Wright 1979, 281)<sup>3</sup>*

Active interpretive engagement with movements in distant times also characterised the early historical writings of the intellectual Magma Fuze,

where it is part of a bricolage of inherited ideas about local movements and ideas about pan-African migrations gleaned from other literature (Fuze 1922; Mokoena 2011).

Quotidian movements are thickly attested to in the Stuart and Bryant corpuses, being present in the accounts of new wives moving to marital contexts; appointees being sent to inhabit distant areas; foreign experts gaining local pre-eminence; sons and brothers setting up their own establishments; and so on.

Movement likewise characterises the first novel in isiZulu, *Insila ka Tshaka*, John Dube's imaginative evocation of the times of Shaka, which opens with the perspective of a traveller approaching the king's Dukuza residence (Dube 1931). The novel is filled with the details of the hospitalities that facilitated travel along the road, court arrivals and departures, and the achievement of positions in various places by the main protagonist, Jeqe (first at Dukuza, then later to the north-east among the followers of Shaka's enemy, Soshangane, and still later to the north of the Zulu kingdom, eSwatini).

James Scott (2017) prompts us to think about how the historical disciplines, reinforced by assumptions accumulated over time, read settlement as a sign of political order, and sedentism, demographic aggregation and large entities as desirable signals of success. Concomitantly, these disciplines habitually treat mobility as a sign of political disorder and a signal of failure. Scott lays out a compelling argument for looking afresh at the available sources and their assumptions, and developing an understanding of mobility in settings such as KwaZulu-Natal in this period not as anomalous but rather as commonplace, strategic, politically logical and successful. Alive to the attestation in the sources to movement, Wright and I have come to reconsider long-standing habits of thinking about the history of the KwaZulu-Natal region as demonstrating processes of state formation. The reconsideration involved does not challenge the evidence of the emergence of powerful polities in the hundred years or so before colonialism. If anything, it adds to that. But it gives close attention also to political fluidity, flexibility and mobility,

arguing that those features were constitutive of the political fabric of the time.

In the period between around 1730 and around 1826, the region between the uPhongolo and uThukela rivers (an area of roughly only 160 square kilometres) saw the emergence and dissolution of a number of major formations, among them Ndwandwe, Hlubi, Mthethwa and Qwabe. The differences among these formations related to whether the aggregations concerned were primarily defensive or expansive, and whether the ruling powers were incomers or long-time inhabitants of a region. Suppliant incomers sought patronage and security in new places and offered adherence and labour in return. Incomers who benefited from the prior exploitation of resources elsewhere, a knowledge of other places and an ability to mobilise networks of distant connections were able to establish themselves in new places in assertive ways. Similar differences characterised vulnerable in situ people subject to conquest and powerful in situ people in command of strategic local affordances. The variety in the political formations of the time reflected the ways in which these combinations played out.

Focus of this kind on the dynamism of the regional political processes of the time, and on politically valued and much-used strategies of mobility, calls into question long-established ideas about what was politically exceptional. Well-known nineteenth-century migrant kingdoms such as Ndebele under Mzilikazi and Ngwane under Matiwane are cases in point. The challenge here is to consider whether, or to what extent, the later mobility of formations like Ndebele and Ngwane – much discussed in relation to the notion of *mfecane* and presented as a crisis response, whether in relation to unusually severe drought, colonial pressures, slave trading or even an exceptionally aggressive new regional power – was dramatically different from what was typical in the region. The process of reconsideration described above suggests that, in the face of intensifying pressures, these were heightened but not unusual responses.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, it offers a critique of the all-too-ready characterisation of movements of people as the scattering of displaced refugees, and makes it worth

noting that under certain circumstances people moved in order to seek the alleviation of onerous conditions and hardship, or refuge and protection from enemies. Some people were forced or pressured into moving, and some among them were forced into marginal existences. In addition, some people were captives taken to new places against their will. However, movement was as much a source of opportunity as it was a strategy of survival, and was often both.

In all instances relations between incomers and those in situ, and their layering into shared landscapes, required considered political conceptualisation expressed in the discourses of the time, often referencing the past in equally considered ways. Such conceptualisations involved what Hofmeyr (1993, 181) recognised as analysis embedded in narrative 'which encodes political ideas and historical thinking in particularly effective ways'. It entailed a form of iterative political work (more on this later).

The plethora of evidence about political movement is complemented by the abundant evidence related to the movement of goods. Many of the political developments described above involved strategically moving into position to control trade and transit routes, and mountain and river crossings. Ivory, brass, beads, finery, herbal remedies, potent substances, cattle, provisions and raided grain, among other things, were all in motion. So were porters, guides, envoys, spies, adventurers, ritual specialists and others with valued skills, relatives on their way to and from family visits, regiments on missions to relocate people, and even *buyisa*'d<sup>5</sup> ancestors. All this movement and mobility was underwritten by a variety of ritual and social practices designed to protect and support people who were moving, a case in point being the placing of stones on ubiquitous *izivivane* (travellers' cairns) with their associated invocations of ancestors' protection. Moreover, as is to be expected, the movement of goods and people was accompanied by the transmission of technologies, knowledge, expertise, new ideas, information and news. Movement and the circulation of goods and ideas were thus all at once agents and results of processes of change, and signals of dynamic political developments.

What emerges from a wide-ranging discussion of movement over time is the ability of people to take advantage of the affordances of carefully cultivated and constantly curated networks of cross-cutting connections, whether they were moving of their own volition or being forced to move, or were involved in moving things. These connections took multiple forms. One of them (the constraints of the essay form limit discussion to one type of connectivity) was the strategic management of carefully distributed exogamous marriage connections and of exchanges of information and political intelligence-gathering facilitated by the movement of women – notably, women who thus connected their natal and marriage homes. Women did not simply move away into new married contexts but maintained natal connections and actively visited, and were visited by, relatives. Similarly, women who were sent from their homes to live and work among the king's *izigodlo*<sup>6</sup> effectively connected their natal homes to the court, the workings of which they were closely and continuously exposed to. As *izigodlo* women who married men designated by the king, they also connected the court to their married contexts. Moreover, by sharing information among themselves, married *izigodlo* women facilitated the lateral movement of information across these married contexts.

The significance of the movement of women was, however, not confined to matters of information, communication and the multi-directional relay of political intelligence. Married women continually managed the political heft of their natal contexts in their married ones. They relied on their natal contexts to underpin their status in their married contexts, and in securing the successful accessions of sons or contesting the successions of others. They also used the affordances of their married contexts to direct benefits back to their natal contexts, and vice versa. Marriage strategies thus gave the families of both sons and daughters opportunities to secure multiple connections that were capable of supporting flexible immediate and future strategies.

The movement of women and the nature of their structurally relational political positioning was therefore centrally constitutive of the political

fabric. At the same time, existing marriage connections were not the only factor facilitating flexible political activity. The *history* of marriages was also significant, as was the history of other kinds of connections.

## PAST DISCOURSES AND DISCOURSING ACROSS TIME

The capacity to activate earlier connections and past and present networks – and to mobilise alternative possibilities at different points in time in response to new conditions – depended on ongoing communication and the work of historical memory, and sometimes on the refurbishment of such memory. The seeking of support, refuge or new opportunities was often bolstered by the mobilisation of historical arguments about past marriages, other connections, historical reciprocity, kinship or even past grievances. In short, the nature of political life meant that the production of history was a vital aspect of political discourse.

Discourse and discoursing are centrally concerned with words, communication and debate, often entailing extended expression of thought on a subject. It involves ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations that inhere in such knowledge. Until a 2010 intervention by Paul Landau, Hofmeyr (1993) was a lone voice in pressing for engagement with intellectual discourses in southern Africa before colonialism, and in suggesting ways of doing this.

Recent research leveraging off Hofmeyr's insights now points to a long history of discourses and practices designed to manage and maximise the options that could be taken up in the face of changes; and capable of facilitating the mobility, flexibility and fluidity that were constitutive of the political fabric in eras immediately before, but also into, the reign of Shaka. The kinds of changes involved were diverse. They might range from the effects of drought and difficulties in cultivating marginal fields, through opportunities such as the introduction of new kinds of crops that supported larger populations and shifts in trade (from locally unvalued items to locally vital items), to the



emergence of aggressively expanding neighbours. Taking up options required having multiple potential allies and access to a wide range of resources, including mountain and cave refuges, military support, loan cattle, alternative land to settle, multiple forms of capital, and specialist knowledge and expertise desired in other places. The matter of having viable options was no accident. It was the result of careful strategising. It involved maintaining relationships rooted in historical obligations and preserving memory of them. All of this required assiduous curation and ongoing work.<sup>7</sup>

As soon as we allow ourselves to entertain the idea that in former times people expended intellectual energy in thinking critically about political life and about the past, fluid features of their accounts that were long ignored or generalised as problems of broken relay, faulty memory or even invention emerge as signals of past debates and deliberative interventions, as political discourse in action and as involving iterative discursive activity. Indeed, the local term today translated as 'history' is *umlando*. The verb *ukulanda*, typically translated as 'narrate' or 'tell a story', carries within it notions of fetching, tracing or pursuing, placing the emphasis on the activity involved. This local term resonates conceptually with the title of Hofmeyr's 1993 study, and with fluidity in the multiple senses discussed in this essay.

Colonialism (and later apartheid) framed the immediately pre-colonial era of the region as a time of bounded 'tribes' with singular identities, located in particular areas and led by genealogically validated chiefs. It imposed this static conception on Africans even as the closing colonial frontier was reducing opportunities for mobile political responses. Over time, colonial procedures and processes, and – some time later – academic practices, came to authorise particular aspects of the past and to establish them as a fixed record, first in the form of colonial documents and then of recorded oral tradition, what Hofmeyr (1993, 175) termed 'literate impositions'. As a fixed record supporting singular tribal identities, allegiances and locations, the record itself curtailed the capacity of people to offer and withdraw support for chiefs, to foreground chosen aspects

of identity or to move physically. In short, a set record and authorised history worked alongside laws, fences and boundaries to limit the political option of moving. However, the evidence suggests that even when faced with these colonial conditions and restrictions, Africans were adept at curating inherited historical knowledge in ways that served them in their new circumstances. At least at first – and perhaps for longer than we realise – the full repertoire on which they drew, with its capacity to store knowledge well beyond what was most immediately, colonially, relevant, continued to be assiduously curated and cultivated as an archive of political possibility. This is yet manifest in the forms of thick local historical knowledge about the distant past circulating in family networks, often in local languages, which are concerned with historical matters other than the rise of major kingdoms.

This resilient historical custodial praxis – involving the careful development and maintenance of diverse networks, options of connection, and histories of reciprocity and of negotiated successions – was honed over hundreds of years of iterative political activity. It did not attempt to store the past in the form of a definitive record, nor did it involve expediently attesting to whatever was newly most convenient. Rather it entailed – and continues to entail – a complex understanding of the past as full of resources for re-engagement in the face of change.

Hofmeyr (2004, 28) conceptualises *The Pilgrim's Progress* as becoming, through its circulations, a portmanteau text, 'an archive in which various intellectual positions could be billeted . . . provid[ing] a shared landscape and asset of reference points around and in which debates could be rehearsed'. A focus on fluidity allows us to bring into view similar processes of billeting and intellectual activity in a very different, much earlier setting, with remarkable effect.

#### NOTES

- 1 See Kopytoff (1987, 78) for a general claim about nineteenth-century polities being 'mature forms' that were then frozen as a result of colonialism.
- 2 Material in the collection, held at the Killie Campbell Africana Library in Durban, has been published as *The James Stuart Archive of Recorded Oral Evidence Relating to*

- the History of the Zulu and Neighbouring Peoples* in six volumes (published consecutively in 1976, 1979, 1982, 1986, 2001 and 2014).
- 3 The words in italics in the quotation signal that the original notes upon which they are based were in isiZulu, not English.
  - 4 This is one of the matters at issue in what has become known as the 'mfecane debate'. See Cobbing (1988) and the collected essays in Hamilton (1995). See also Kopytoff (1987, 7) on the political culture of African societies as having a mobile 'frontier cast'.
  - 5 The term *ukubuyisa* refers to the ceremonialised return home of the spirit of a person who died in distant parts.
  - 6 This term is not readily translatable into English. The most recent volume of the *James Stuart Archive* glosses the term, as used here, as referring to 'women of the king's establishment; girls presented to the king as tribute or selected from the households of his subjects; and as his "daughters", disposable by him in marriage' (Webb and Wright 2014, xxi).
  - 7 The discussion here chimes with new anthropological work on the social generation and experience of what is often termed 'potentiality' in times of significant change, notably the potentialities involved in movement – of people, ideas and goods. Such potentiality is understood to be a pervasive aspect of a prevailing sociality and ethical orientation, and as a process in action, captured in the idea of 'potentialising'. See, for example, Paolo Gaibazzi (2022). See also Giorgio Agamben (1999) on potentiality in relation to time, history and change.

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The wide range of analytical and reflective pieces in this collection affords us the pleasure of discovering that we have not received Hofmeyr's work as individuals, but as part of a large and dedicated international community. It is a wondrous gift.

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