



WRITTEN CULTURE IN A COLONIAL CONTEXT:  
AFRICA AND THE AMERICAS, 1500–1900

Edited by  
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pay-out for the African Wesleyans. Maloba had been the cunning diplomat: he had cut out a role for Vorster in which he could represent himself as a fair administrator without losing face in the eyes of the African Christians in his area, but also without having incurred the proposed compensation sum of fifty pounds upon himself; that would be paid out by the central government in Pretoria.

In this survey I have thus deliberately deviated from the approach of the contributors to *Africa's Hidden Histories*, who went in search of indications for the development of a uniquely African personhood in literate black people's private writings. With a number of glimpses into the circulation of official letters written by Africans in the 19th-century Transvaal, I have sought to emphasise how finely attuned even first-generation literates could become to the different, albeit not unlimited, performative possibilities in paper-driven procedures.

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## LITERACY AND LAND AT THE BAY OF NATAL: DOCUMENTS AND PRACTICES ACROSS SPACES AND SOCIAL ECONOMIES<sup>1</sup>

*Mastin Prinsloo*

*If we open the black box that is the finished and completed document, we expose the processes of its production: the other times and places, the other participants in the larger-scale systems of text production as a process.*

– J. Lemke<sup>2</sup>

#### Introduction

An influential meta-narrative about literacy in Africa is that it was introduced by Europeans, in the 17th, 18th and, particularly, 19th centuries to people who were living in a timeless, homeostatic present, locked in an unmediated engagement with their life-world. In this view, literacy, Christianity and European civilisation brought to these people the potentials of culture, history, development, reason, progress and modernisation, as well as the capacity for alienation. Literacy was seen by some as the critical gateway through which locals irrevocably crossed, or would cross, into a new conceptual and cultural world. This is the view held by literacy scholars such as Jack Goody<sup>3</sup> and Walter Ong.<sup>4</sup> It is also the story told by agents of the 'civilizing mission' of the 19th century, which included most of the Europeans in Africa at the time: in particular, missionaries, but also adventurers, linguists, natural scientists, educators, traders and, not least, colonial officials. For example,

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was published in *English in Africa*, 35(1) (2008), pp. 97–116.

<sup>2</sup> J. Lemke, 'Material sign processes and ecosocial organization' in P.B. Andersen, C. Emmeche and N.O. Finnemann-Nielsen (eds.) *Downward causation: self-organization in biology, psychology, and society* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2000), p. 203.

<sup>3</sup> J. Goody, *The domestication of the savage mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

the Swiss missionary, Henri-Alexandre Junod, working in Limpopo in the late 19th century, believed that 'immersing Africans in a written language structured by a disciplined grammar and a regular orthodoxy ... would raise (them) to think in the manner that had led to the development of Europe'.<sup>5</sup> Junod believed that literacy, rather than physical force, would ensure that written precedent (accompanied by order, rigour and self-control) would replace the flexibility, impermanence and instability associated with orality.

The story of literacy and indigenous people has, of course, also been told from the perspective of colonial and imperial conquest. From this vantage point, literacy is seen as the discursive adjunct to a coercive process, a gateway through which the subjugated local people were pushed into a new world where they were cognitively re-orientated and individuated. A conquered people, they were further distanced from their experiential life-world by the alienating resources of literacy: they were persuaded to accept the colonisers' own myths about civilisation and progress, namely, that these were products of European history as well as having universal application for other people. This is the account given by Leon de Kock in his study of the 'civilizing mission' of Christian missionaries in 19th-century South Africa.

Implicit in both the above perspectives, which could be seen as two versions of the same story, is an autonomous model of literacy, as Brian Street describes it.<sup>6</sup> Such a model sees literacy working as a social technology that has effect in context-independent and linear ways, producing uniform cognitive and social consequences. A third perspective has hardly yet been developed by historians of the African colonial experience.<sup>7</sup> It is the argument, developed in this paper, that alphabetic, print literacy and documentary practices, like colonialism and, indeed, Christianity, neither arrived nor were received as a unitary package. Instead, they came embedded in a variety of situated contexts, networks, artefacts, relationships, assumptions and practices. These practices and commitments were imported from European contexts where they had deep roots in established social networks and material relations. But once transported, they very soon encountered different contexts, histories and practices, and underwent changes that sometimes took by surprise

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in P. Harries, 'Missionaries, Marxists and magic: power and the politics of literacy in South East Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 27(3) (2001), p. 410.

<sup>6</sup> B. Street, *Literacy in theory and practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> The exception here is the work of Patrick Harries, who follows Street in seeing literacy as a situationally variable social practice that was 'taken hold of' in complex ways by converts at the Swiss mission station around Elim in the north of South Africa during the 19th century. See P. Harries, *Butterflies and barbarians: Swiss missionaries and systems of knowledge in South-East Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 2007); and Harries, 'Missionaries, Marxists and magic', pp. 405-27.

those who had brought them. Print literacy, like Christianity, was not simply transplanted in the African context to do its work, the way Ong, Goody and others suggested,<sup>8</sup> but was translated, interpreted, recontextualised and re-embedded in a range of ways by local people. Such recontextualisation processes were variable and uneven, depending on the social networks, power relations and mediating technologies that affected their dynamics.

### I. The problem of the document

According to Jan Blommaert, the historiographic 'problem of the document' is at its most acute in the study of Africa because of the view of Africans as primarily members of oral cultures.<sup>9</sup> Drawing on the examples of linguistic anthropologists such as Johannes Fabian and Dell Hymes, Blommaert suggests that the techniques of historical criticism applied to documents may need to be complemented with ethnographic, linguistic and sociolinguistic research that is sensitive to the changes produced when documents move across spaces and economies of social and communicative practices. He suggests that we need a greater sensitivity to the document as formally and functionally relative to particular linguistic, cultural and political systems. I take up this concern by way of a study of historical documents and secondary analyses around two distinct historical events: firstly, the attempt of a 17th-century Dutch captain to purchase the Bay of Natal on behalf of the Dutch East India Company; and secondly, the attempts of Piet Retief, renowned Boer leader, to get a grant document for the same area of land from the Zulu leader, Dingane, which efforts culminated in his and his followers' deaths at the hands of the Zulu leader's soldiers.

My focus in this discussion is on early encounters with land grant documents on the part of people in Africa under circumstances where European influence had not yet become hegemonic. Such 'border' cross-cultural, pre-colonial and early colonial encounters are of interest because they offer opportunity to examine the provisional and contingent dimensions of practices and procedures which later take on the appearance of being universal or natural. These encounters and events are also fruitfully studied because they provide opportunities to examine and interpret how literacy is put to use in the interests of asserting and contesting relations of domination, inequality and resistance.

<sup>8</sup> Others here include E. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976).

<sup>9</sup> J. Blommaert, 'Writing as a problem: African grassroots writing, economies of literacy, and globalization', *Language in Society* 33 (2004), p. 643.

## II. Staking claims in Africa: An early 'purchase' of the Bay of Natal

For my purposes here, I treat as a series of literacy events the multiple-sourced account of the failed purchase in early colonial times of the 'Bay of Natal' (later the site of the harbour city of Durban).<sup>10</sup> On 4 December 1689, the galiot *De Noord* arrived at the Bay of Natal, with 'verbal and written instructions' given to the captain, Gerbrantzer, to rescue the shipwrecked crew of the *Stavenisse* and to purchase the bay from the local inhabitants. The details of this exercise are recounted in a dispatch sent by the Dutch governor of the Cape, Commander Simon van der Stel, to the Chamber of XVII (the *Heeren XVII*, or company directors) of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), which owned the ship:

*after embarking the crew of the 'Stavenisse,' and solemnly purchasing that bay with some surrounding land from the king and chief of those parts for some merchandise, consisting of copper arm and neck rings and other articles, upon behalf of the Honourable Company, whose marks were set up in various places ['der zelver wapen in verscheidene plaatsen opgerigt'] and proper attention having been paid to everything, they sailed on the 11th January following, and four days later put into the so-called bay De la Goa [...].<sup>11</sup>*

In this short passage, there are examples and mention of three distinct semiotic or enscription practices, of which, firstly, only the writing of documents might be thought of as literacy in the conventional sense. Secondly, the beacons set up around the bay were also coded signs, which were apparently intended to signal possession or presence, however differently those signs might be read by local residents, or by other visiting European ships. Thirdly, the copper arm and neck rings, regarded as cheap trinkets by the Europeans, were utilised by the Africans as signs that inscribed their bodies with statements of identity and social place in a local economy of signs that was not comprehended by the European sailors and traders, who only knew that these items had exchange value in this setting far in excess of their value in a European context.

My focus here is on the documents. The 'written instructions,' to which van der Stel referred, had been delivered to the captain of *De Noord*, and were notably specific in their detail. Apart from the instructions to clean the ship and proceed to the Bay of Natal without delay, they included the following:

*4. Watching a fit opportunity, you will enter into a negotiation with the chief or so-called Ingose, solemnly to purchase from him, for the Honourable Company, for beads, copper, ironmongery, and such other articles as they have a liking for, the bay natal and the adjoining land, and you will have a deed of conveyance, 'in communi et solemnij formâ,' written by Lourens van Swaanswyk, passed before commissioned members of the ship's council, and signed by the said chief Ingose and some of his nearest relatives, taking good care that the articles of merchandise for which the bay and adjoining land is purchased are not noticed in the deed, except in general terms, and that the amount of the same be estimated at nineteen or twenty thousand guildens.*

*5. Having effected this, you will run down the coast, and endeavour to make the bay De la Goa, lying in from 33° to 34° S. latitude, and to ascertain whether, as stated by the Portuguese, and laid down in your charts, there is a round sandbank at the entrance; you will carefully sound the bay, and have a chart of it drawn by the quartermaster, Cornelius Hemerans.*

*6. With regard to securing the missing men of the 'Stavenisse,' and the purchase of this bay, you will use same precautions which are above dictated in the fourth article; and you will above all attend carefully to your duty, and to the interests of the Company, taking note of everything which may in any way be profitable or is worthy of remark, and having such things carefully entered into your log-book by Lourens van Swaanswyk.<sup>12</sup>*

What is immediately apparent is the role of writing in the Dutch East India Company's precise instructions, which conclude with the general injunction to the ship's captain to write down anything that might later be turned to profit by the Company. The formal legal and Latin phrases and the subterfuge over the price to be paid indicate the Company officials' appreciation of legal literacies, how the law of contract applied in Holland, and how the hazardous activities of its ships were linked to a wider enterprise of competitive European accumulation practices in which advantage was to be secured through fine attention to detail.

Literacy operates here as an important instrument of regulation and control that extends the interests of the Company into the day-by-day activities of its agents. The document that contains the instructions to the captain could be said to be an 'immutable mobile', to use Latour's term, in that it consists of durable and manageable materialised strings of symbols that distil and transport knowledge, classifications and procedures into the far reaches of the networks of practices that sustain such objects and their connected enterprises. But, contrary to Latour's analysis, the 'immutability' of such documents, with regard to their functions and effects, is not guaranteed when they operate at the very limits of the network of practices that give them effect. The standardised practices and classificatory procedures (such as those of the Dutch legal

<sup>10</sup> Literacy events and practices are the units of analysis in my study. While the former are those occasions when written language is a part of people's actions and interactions as well as their interpretive processes and strategies, the latter refer to the more general sociocultural framings, or social practices, that give significance to particular acts. The concept of literacy practices incorporates literacy events as empirical occasions where literacy is integral, and analyses them in terms of how such events are shaped by wider sociocultural practices.

<sup>11</sup> J. Bird, *The annals of Natal*, 2 vols (Cape Town: Maskew Miller, 1883, reprinted Cape Town:

system) do not automatically apply here. In contrast to the exactness of these instructions, indeed, the attempts at their execution were very much messier: Van der Stel's dispatch went on to inform the Chamber of XVII that *De Noord* was itself wrecked on the coast within a few hours after leaving the bay De la Goa. Prior to the sinking, the ship's captain, Gerbrantzer, had carried out his instructions 'to the letter', but stated that he had lost the 'deed of sale' recording the purchase of the Bay of Natal when the ship sank. He is reported to have made his way back by land to Cape Town, with eighteen of his men of whom only four survived the 2000-mile journey, 'the rest dying of hunger, thirst or heat, except for two or three who were killed by the Hottentots'.<sup>13</sup>

Gerbrantzer told John Maxwell years later that he had purchased the place ('Terra de Natal') on behalf of the Dutch East India Company for 20 000 florins.<sup>14</sup> This figure repeated the lie in his 'written instructions,' as Van der Stel described them, that he should record the sale as 'nineteen or twenty thousand gulden'.<sup>15</sup> Gerbrantzer is reported by Maxwell to have returned again to Natal in 1705, to find the 'late king's son then reigning', to whom Gerbrantzer spoke of the agreement with the new leader's father:

*'My father,' answered he, 'is dead; his skins (i.e., his clothes) are buried with him in the floor of his house, which is burned over him; and that place is fenced in over which none may now pass; and as to what he agreed to, it was for himself: I have nothing to say to it'. So Gerbrantzer urged it no further, having no orders concerning it from the company.*<sup>16</sup>

While the colonial historian Mackeurton's description of these encounters is drawn from the same sources and so does not differ substantially from the accounts of Bird and Chase, quoted above, his comments are nonetheless revealing. Regarding the purchase of the bay, he says the document 'expressed the consideration as twenty thousand guilders, but the actual value of the goods handed to the delighted chieftain, Inyangesa, was less than a thousand. In a few days stone beacons of the Dutch East India Company, bearing the V.O.C. monogram, ringed the harbour.' He then comments as follows: 'The deception practiced upon the simple Inyangesa [referring to the low price paid] would have meant nothing to him had he discovered it. He was incapable of grasping the conception of either the ownership of land or its alienation in perpetuity.'<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 60; J. Chase, *The Natal papers* (Grahamstown: Godlonton, 1843. Reprint, Cape Town: Struik, 1962), p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> Apparently, in the translation from Dutch to English, the currency simply got changed in name (*gulden* to *florins*) and not number.

<sup>16</sup> Bird, *The annals of Natal*, p. 60; Chase, *The Natal papers*, p. 12.

All these accounts of the events fail to mention that the Dutch captain could not have made sense of the direct speech of the chief—or, later, his son—let alone report it verbatim. Gerbrantzer would have relied on Khoi interpreters whom he had with him, and who spoke both Xhosa and Dutch, well or less well, in addition to their own language. Whatever the young chief might have said would have been interpreted and refracted through local (Xhosa) language and culture, Khoi sensibilities, Dutch language and cultural values, and reinterpreted in English by Maxwell and the others. This fact of extensive translation across language, values and cultural practices is a feature and a problem with much of the data on early colonial and colonial-era cross-cultural encounters around literacy. With these limitations on the reliability of the reported data in mind, I shall now discuss the meanings of these events.

### III. Literacy events and practices

Taking a broad view, the events around the failed purchase of the Bay of Natal provide details of one example of the application of what could be called the appropriating discourses of colonialism in the early days of European world expansion. The ways of representing Africa stressed the wildness of the visited scene and its inhabitants, and involved a taming and claiming of what was regarded as a socially vacant space through naming it, measuring it, surveying it, putting monogrammed beacons on it. Explorers' and traders' ships were often stocked with goods and bargaining chips, 'gold, silver, pelts, fish, stones, swords, anything that could be bought and sold at a profit'.<sup>18</sup> As an alternative strategy to direct conquest, what often followed were acts of appropriation by way of 'land purchase'.

But what is noteworthy in the events described above, where Gerbrantzer and the Company failed in their first effort to acquire the Bay of Natal, was the Europeans' incapacity at that early moment to have their way as regards land acquisition, and for the logic of the son of the chief to hold sway over the Europeans, who were not yet in a position to assert their logic by force. Had the written document of land purchase not been lost at sea, it would still have had no leverage over local knowledge, because such leverage does not lie, miraculously, in the technology itself, the document as self-evident, but is entirely dependent on situated social practices. In Mackeurton's view, quoted earlier, it was the simple-mindedness of the local ruler and his son, their conceptual incapacities, which prevented them from realising, first, that the father had sold too cheaply, and, secondly, that the son was bound by contract

<sup>18</sup> B. Latour, *We have never been modern* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993),

to forfeit the land. An alternative explanation for these dynamics would simply be that the Europeans' network was just not long enough, yet, to displace local knowledge and practice. The Europeans' assumptions that their practices were universally applicable did not count when they did not have the means to insist that that was the case. It is likely, though, that the Company's primary concern in getting the signed 'land grant' document was to support their claim to the territory in their dealings with competing interests in Europe, so the indigenous disinterest in the 'contract' was not their first concern.

#### IV. The location and contingent origins of European land deeds

The widespread interest in acquiring land deeds for foreign territories is a very interesting example of how literacy practices normalise over time in particular contexts. In Latour's phrase, they are 'black-boxed',<sup>19</sup> or 'compacted', to use Freebody and Freiberg's term.<sup>20</sup> In colonial times, Europeans took with them when they travelled such assemblages of power and knowledge as the alienability of land and related social constructions of space and time. They also took them as given universals, as self-evident technical resources. Such practices relating to land ownership and transferability were 'black-boxed' because the history that had produced them had been erased from memory and the practice treated as standard or normal. The disputes, strategies, compromises and achievements that had earlier produced these practices were forgotten, and they had become a resource, tool and self-evident method of procedure. While putting a slightly different 'spin' on this phenomenon in his discussion of European expansion, Benedict Anderson makes the following, supportive claim: 'arriving from a civilization in which the legal inheritance and the legal transferability of geographic space had long been established, the Europeans frequently attempted to legitimize the spread of their power by quasi-legal methods'.<sup>21</sup>

Michael Clanchy's historical study, aptly titled *From Memory to Written Record*,<sup>22</sup> uncovers some of the forgotten disputes in relation to the practice of recording land ownership through written documents in the context of medieval England. Clanchy details the struggle that was waged by state and private property interests for the acceptance of written documents (of land

ownership) in lay, as opposed to religious, contexts, from the 11th through the 13th century. The struggle over land in medieval England was linked to the growth of a capitalised, commercialised market, and of rural production for market exchange, from 1066 through to 1307. One result of this struggle was the expansion of private property, both as an idea and on the ground, and therefore of contests over land and its ownership and usufruct rights. Established practice, where land ownership was confirmed by the testimony of 'twelve good men and true', was contested by educated property owners who could use reading and writing for their own and their families' advantage, and who won the battle to use written records for recording land ownership. These changes took place in a context where reading and writing were the preserve of a small cohort; there was no question at the time as to whether or not people who did not read or write remained capable of rational action, of acquiring and digesting information, and of making well-founded political and religious decisions. Street's discussion of Clanchy makes the point that the development of normalised and standardised social practice in relation to written records reflected the interests of some groups and individuals more than others.

The contingent development of particular practices, knowledge, institutions and subjectivities were peculiar, at first, to European history and politics and occurred in contexts of social struggle. Over time, those social struggles have receded from memory and the practices of recording property ownership in written, legal documents have become entrenched and taken for granted in Europe and elsewhere in the world. Contemporary practice is therefore the product of a number of disputes and resistances, whose history disappears in the face of the routinisation and standardisation of such practice. As one example, Clanchy's study shows that the practice of dating (that is, the writing in of the date) in property documents and business letters, so apparently self-evident and neutral, was an outcome of conflict and gradual change, with clerics first objecting to the secular use of an essentially non-secular time frame, to a practice that was seen as sacrilegious and construed as a threat to the power of the church.

In Latour's terms, closing the 'black box' on these disputes allows social actors to take the work of others as a resource and to move on. The strength of the socio-historically constructed network of people, materials and technologies lies in such social actors utilising these resources, and, in turn, having their dispositions shaped by the practices and material technologies they are using (and whose histories are unseen and forgotten). Reading and writing, like other resources embedded in particular practices, carry their histories into new networks of practice and have particular effects that involve

19 Latour, *We have never been modern*, p. 174.

20 P. Freebody & J. Freiberg, 'Globalised literacy education: intercultural trade in textual and cultural practice' in M. Prinsloo & M. Baynham (eds) *Literacies: global and local* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2008), p. 17.

21 B. Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, revised edition (New York: Verso, 1991), p. 174.

22 M. Clanchy, *From memory to written record* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

the extension and modification of those networks of practice. If we study it without regard for its history, literacy remains a 'black box', an unanalysed instrumentality in those contexts.

### V. Literacy, land and power at the court of Dingane

The issues of land and of documents of transfer and ownership at the Bay of Natal reappear frequently, over a period of several hundred years. Elsewhere,<sup>23</sup> I show how the Bay of Natal is the intermittent focus of land documents, from the 17th to the 19th century,<sup>24</sup> in which cross-cultural misunderstandings are repeated due to the application of practices in settings different to those in which they originated. In the following section, I move on to examine both the dramatic events around the killing of Piet Retief and his followers, and the documents and literacy practices that play a key role in these events.

It is apparent that the Zulu leader Dingane, like Shaka before him, had an appreciation of the potentials of writing for communicating over space and time.<sup>25</sup> While he did not know exactly how written signs had their effect, Dingane clearly understood what written communication was about, and how to exploit it for his own ends. Indeed, as I describe below, he actively and strategically used writing to manage his relations with the settlers at the Bay of Natal, and with the Boer trekkers who entered his domains and sought land to occupy. His situated use of writing undoubtedly took the Europeans by surprise, with dramatic results.

It is notable just how much the dealings I examine were text-mediated events, despite assumptions that African people were living in a 'pre-textual' world which they could, according to the 'great divide' theorists, only cross after sustained education and immersion in Western knowledge forms. In particular, the events leading up to the killing of the Boer leader Piet Retief and his followers, while visiting Dingane's homestead, are set up in numerous ways through the complex use of writing on the part of Dingane, especially, and the Boers, with shifting roles being played by a missionary as literacy mediator and secretary to the Zulu king. The extent to which these relations were text-mediated is seldom noted in the historical record. Dorothy Smith points to a similar gap in contemporary sociology, which she criticises for

<sup>23</sup> M. Prinsloo, 'Shaka draws first: early literacy encounters at the Bay of Natal' (forthcoming).

<sup>24</sup> At one time in the 1820s, three European settlers, namely Lt. Farewell, Lt. King and Nathaniel Isaacs, according to Isaacs's account in his journal, independently and separately held grants, purportedly signed by Shaka, the Zulu king before Dingane, to the same land at the Bay of Natal. See N. Isaacs, *Travels and adventures in eastern Africa* (London: Edward Churton, 1836. Reprint, Cape Town: Struik, 1970).

<sup>25</sup> Prinsloo, 'Shaka draws first'.

taking little account of 'the phenomenon of textually mediated communication, action and social relations'.<sup>26</sup>

The journal of Francis Owen, a missionary at Dingane's court in 1837 and 1838, is the only European record of the important events around the death of Piet Retief. Owen's journal provides details of just how much Shaka's successor was engaged in writing practices, and also reveals some of the complex dynamics involved. Owen's descriptions of his unanticipated and unsought work as Dingane's literacy mediator or scribe provide details of how Dingane actively and enthusiastically used reading and writing in his dealings with various groups of Europeans. These descriptions also reveal the complex power relationships that were in operation in relation to these textual practices. Owen was almost entirely subject to Dingane's political authority while at his homestead. Dingane would let him preach to children but hardly ever to adults, and laughed openly at some of Owen's religious ideas. Nevertheless, Dingane gained in a number of ways from Owen's presence under his patronage, not least of which being his usefulness as a reader and a writer, and therefore made several efforts to keep Owen content and in place. He sent for Owen frequently, indeed, almost daily, to read or write letters.

Owen commented a number of times on Dingane's enthusiasm for writing. After dictating a letter, Dingane was, in Owen's description:<sup>27</sup>

*desirous of putting his own mark on the letter [so] I gave him the pen wherewith, as if affecting to write, he made a scribble down the paper, at which I could not keep my countenance, nor did he preserve his. [One assumes here that Owen means that they both laughed.] He is indeed wonderfully taken with this sure means of communication by writing and resorts to it at every opportunity. Whenever he sends a message to or by a white man it is always on paper. The other day having occasion to send a white man to Delagoa Bay, he made him write down the message that he might not forget it and sent to me for pen, ink and paper for that purpose.<sup>28</sup>*

Within days of settling in to his house on the edge of the king's homestead, Owen was persuaded by Dingane to write a letter in his own name, asking for gunpowder: 'I wrote a letter to Mr Maynard's agent at Port Natal to this effect, Sir, I beg to send you an elephant's tooth and shall be obliged by you sending me in return as much gunpowder as it is worth by bearer. I remain, etc.' The extent to which Dingane informed and controlled Owen's writing practice is made clear by the latter's disclosure that, upon having read to him

<sup>26</sup> D. Smith, *Writing the social: critique, theory and investigations* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p. 209.

<sup>27</sup> I rely here on Owen's record. Owen does not anywhere in his diary consider whether his limited fluency in Zulu and his restricted understanding of local political and cultural dynamics might shape or limit his account.

<sup>28</sup> F. Owen, *The diary of the Rev Francis Owen* (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1926), p. 59.

the letter in draft, Dingane required the following correction: 'Tell him the source of the tooth.' Owen then added the postscript: 'P.S. The tooth has been given me by Dingaan (sic).'<sup>29</sup>

When, instead of the gunpowder, a letter arrived from the Bay of Natal asking whether the original letter was a forgery, Owen informed Dingane, who persuaded him to sit down and write another letter confirming the original order for gunpowder. This letter was sent off immediately with the messenger who had brought the letter from the Bay, and the gunpowder duly arrived. Later, Owen, upon discovering that British authorities had imposed a ban on providing the Zulu king with gunpowder, was mortified that he had been used to circumvent it. In his diary, he protested at length his ignorance of this ban, and wrote that he had subsequently refused Dingane the use of his bullet mould, in an effort to make up for having been so used by the Zulu king.

Dingane's letters to the Port of Natal settlers similarly reflected the shifting power relations between them and the Zulu leader. Dingane had earlier demanded of the missionary leader, Captain Gardiner, that he return refugees from the Zulu who had sought protection at the Bay. Dependent on the goodwill of the king but undoubtedly knowing that the refugees would be killed if returned, Gardiner had sent them back nonetheless, thereby securing his tenure for a while. Owen wrote a letter demanding the return of yet another group of refugees, 'Isiguabani and three or four other men who were mentioned by name'<sup>30</sup>. Of interest, is Owen's horror as well as meek compliance with the request: 'This morning Dingaan sent for me to write a letter to Capt. Gardiner ... This letter was of a very serious and inauspicious nature ... I was grieved and shocked at the assertions which it contained, I felt it was best to write according to Dingaan's dictation.'<sup>31</sup> On this occasion the matter was resolved by a return letter two days later from Captain Gardiner, explaining that the fugitives had fled elsewhere.<sup>32</sup>

## VI. Blood and ink

Dingane's dealings with the Boer leader, Piet Retief, are particularly interesting as regards the use of writing. Both his manipulative use of texts, on the one hand, and the great store put on written documents by the Boers, on the other, are remarkable. After arriving at Port Natal with his followers

on 19 October 1837,<sup>33</sup> Retief immediately wrote to Dingane asking him to cede Port Natal and the territory around it, the same land that had already been granted at least four times in writing to various European groups and interests, dating from the document held by the captain of *De Noord* to those of Lieutenant Farewell, Captain King and Nathaniel Isaacs, and including a document signed by Dingane and held by Capt. Gardiner, who was then resident at the Bay of Natal.

Dingane's communications with the Boers were strategic from the start, and won the following somewhat confused but admiring comments from Owen:

*He [Dingane] then dictated a letter to the chief of the Boers who had written to him the other day. The purport of this letter does credit either to Dingaan's honesty or to his polity or to both. It was to say that these sheep which had been captured from Umzelekaz (in number 110) belonged to the Dutch, and that he was anxious to return them to their proper masters ... I was much pleased with this little instance of Dingaan's sense of justice. As he was desirous of putting his own mark on the letter I gave him the pen wherewith, as if affecting to write, he made a scribble down the paper.'*<sup>34</sup>

While Owen, at the time of writing this letter, did not know whether the king was being honest or strategic in his wish to return stolen sheep, the latter proved to be the case. The Boers arrived at Dingane's homestead soon thereafter. A complicated process of letter-writing and translating followed, with the Dutch-speaking Boers putting great store on getting a land allocation document, written in English, signed by Dingane:

*November 8th—Dingarn sent very early for me, and in great haste to meet the Dutch on business. Mr Retief had written a letter to himself as from the king who had dictated it. This letter being in Dutch was first interpreted to me, and then read over to the king for his approval. I was requested both by the king and Mr. Retief to write the letter in English.*

*The Gouverneur [Retief] then returned home with me, here I wrote in English to the following effect. 'An answer to your letter and the conversation which has now taken place [referring to Retief's letter of 26 October] ... To go on now with the request you made for the land. I am quite willing to grant it ...'*<sup>35</sup>

Realising that the land Dingane was now 'quite willing' to give to the Boers had already been given by him 'to the king of Great Britain by a formal grant, signed by him since Capt'n Gardiner's late arrival',<sup>36</sup> Owen was outraged.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>31</sup> Owen, *The diary of the Rev Francis Owen*, p. 85.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 71. These events were part of a rising tension between the Bay settlers and the

<sup>33</sup> See R. Davenport, *South Africa: a modern history*, 2nd ed. (Johannesburg: Macmillan, 1977), p. 58.

<sup>34</sup> Owen, *The diary of the Rev Francis Owen*, pp. 58–59.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 62–63.

The letter that Dingane dictated included an elaborate demand that the Boers prove themselves before getting land:

*I wish to explain that a great many cattle have been stolen from me from the outskirts of my country by people with clothing, horses and guns. These people told the Zoolus that they were Boers, and that one party was gone to Port Natal and that they (the Zoolus) would see now what would come upon them! It is my wish now that you should shew that you are not guilty of the charge which has been laid against you, as I now believe you to be. It is my request that you should retake my cattle and bring them to me, and if possible send me the thief, and that will take all suspicion away from me, and I will cause you to know that I am your friend. I will then grant your request.*

Displaying some independence from Dingane, Owen had a private conversation with Retief, warning the Boer chief of the Zulu king's profligacy with land documents:

*After writing the above I had a long conversation with Mr Retief on the inconsistency of Dingane's conduct, and the vain hopes which he was holding out to him. I told him of the grant of country to the English government, and asked him whether supposing the settlers at Port Natal objected to their occupying the country of Victoria, except on their becoming subject again to the British Government, they would occupy it on these terms? He plainly said No.<sup>37</sup>*

Retief was adamant, though, that the Boers would carry out Dingane's wish, saying that 'the expedition against the native chief ... was necessary ... for a vindication of their own character' (64). It is apparent that the Boers were interested in cooperating with Dingane at least as long as it took to get a land grant document signed by him. Dingane, on the other hand, was demanding that the Boers should act as tributaries to him and that Retief, as a tributary chief, should demonstrate his acceptance of that role through his willingness to undertake tasks for the Zulu king, including attacking his enemies (as the earlier group of settlers had done for his predecessor, Shaka),<sup>38</sup> and submitting to his authority when it was asserted. Their failure to understand or accept this probably proved fatal to Retief and his followers. The misunderstanding was produced, I suggest, by way of the written documents, with the Boers understanding the meaning of these written practices differently to the Zulu king.

Owen continues:

*We then went to the king to have his signature. Having read the letter to him I asked him in the presence of the Dutch, whether he had not already given the land which*

*the Boers [sic] had been requesting of him to the British Government! He paused for a few minutes, and then said, 'I will speak to Mr. Retief on that subject when he returns with the cattle.'<sup>39</sup>*

The Boers carried out Dingane's request, and recovered and returned the Zulu cattle from Sekonyela and his Tlokwa people. In the raid, they also captured guns and horses, which they decided to keep for themselves. Dingane was upset at this, and got Owen to write another letter, insisting, as the latter describes, that they:

*send him [Owen's emphasis] the guns and horses along with the cattle. When the cattle, guns and horses arrived he promised to assign the Dutch some land. The whole communication was indicative of the cruelty, artfulness, trickery and ambition of the Zoolu chief ... I knew not in what way to avoid writing the letter; it needed no remarks from me to convince Mr Retief of the character, duplicity and designs of the king of the Zoolus.<sup>40</sup>*

Dingane was clearly involved in a complex strategy, wishing to establish dominance in his relationship with the Boers and concerned about their guns, horsemanship and willingness to fight.<sup>41</sup> Among other things, he called in an immense herd of oxen 'for no other conceivable motive than to display his wealth to the Dutch. This herd consists of the white back oxen only but it was without number' (61). Dingane also assembled a large number of men from different parts of his kingdom to dance for the Boers. Both the colour-coded cattle and the dancing soldiers were undoubtedly signs of the magnificence of the Zulu king, though it is not evident that the Boers read them that way.

Retief's written answer to Dingane's letter demanding the guns and horses heightened the tension further. As Owen described it, Retief kept the horses and guns and replied in a letter, containing 'some excellent reflections and advice on the conduct of wicked kings', that the chief Umzelekazi had been ruined: 'because he had not kept God's word but had made war when he ought not. He [Retief] referred him [Dingane] to the Missionaries to tell him what God had said in his word respecting kings who did not favour or obey his word' (81). These veiled warnings were clearly not to Dingane's liking, and probably convinced him that the Boers were a threat that had to be dealt with. They had defeated the Ndebele and were now threatening him. Owen's diary summarises the events that followed, and also reveals the pivotal role played by letters and documents in this history:

<sup>39</sup> Owen, *The diary of the Rev Francis Owen*, p. 64.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>41</sup> The Boers had recently defeated the powerful Ndebele, led by Mzilikazi, so Dingane had good reason to be aware of their military capabilities (see Davenport, *South Africa: a modern*

<sup>37</sup> Owen, *The diary of the Rev Francis Owen*, p. 63.

<sup>38</sup> Isaacs recounts how the settlers were required to fight on the side of the Zulu army against

February 2, 1838.—Dingaan sent for me at sunset to write a letter to Mr Retief, who with a party of Boers is now on his way to the Zulu capital. The letter was characteristic of the chief. He said that his heart was now content, because he had got his cattle again. He requested that the chief of the Boers would send to all his people and order them to come up to the capital with him ... He promised to gather together all his army to sing and dance. He said, 'Tell them that they must bring their horses, and dance upon them, in the middle of the town, that it might be known which could dance best, the Zulus or the "Abalungu" (the general name given to white people)'. The Dutch will be too wise to expose themselves in this manner.<sup>42</sup>

The Boers did indeed come as invited, and left their guns to one side as requested. Owen's diary recounts the subsequent sequence of events:

February 6, 1838.—A dreadful day in the annals of the mission ... the usual messenger came, with hurry and anxiety depicted in his looks. He (Dingane) sent to tell me not to be frightened as he was going to kill the Boers .... 'There!' said someone, 'they are killing the Boers now!'

...  
Two of the Boers [had] paid me a visit this morning, and breakfasted only an hour or two before they were called into eternity. When I asked them what they thought of Dingaan they said that he was good;—so unsuspecting were they of his intentions. He had promised to assign over to them the whole country between the Tugela and the Umzimvubu Rivers, and this day the paper of transfer was to have been signed.<sup>43</sup>

The historical record shows some puzzlement as to why Retief should have made himself and his followers so vulnerable to this kind of attack. As Davenport puts it, 'Retief failed to read Dingane's mind, rather presumptuously lectured him on the defeat of Mizilikazi as a sign of divine disapproval, yet walked into Dingane's carefully prepared trap on 6 February 1838 without taking the sort of precautions which other Voortrekker leaders clearly thought necessary'.<sup>44</sup> From a perspective on literacy as situated social practice, however, we can understand these dynamics. Retief, a Calvinist Christian, apparently saw the Bible as a source of divine wisdom, and had a general regard for the forcefulness of written documents. He had published his *Manifesto*, explaining why he and his followers were leaving the Cape Colony, in the *Graham's Town Journal* in February 1837. His main point there, as Davenport summarises it, was that 'the authorities had abandoned the proper way of handling white-black, master-servant relationships, and offended the law of God as well as human susceptibilities in doing so'.<sup>45</sup> Retief's reliance on the literalness and reliability of the written word, together with his assumptions of white superiority

(apparent in his views on master-servant relationships from his *Manifesto*), would have hindered him from realising that Dingane could make tactical use of documents. He apparently took comfort from the assurances in writing that Dingane sent him, and chose, for whatever reason, to ignore the doubtful value of land-grant documents under such conditions. Dingane, on the other hand, took advantage of the credibility that the written communications drafted by the pious missionary held for the Boers, while feeling no deep commitment to the veracity of the written word. He used these written communications in ways that were consistent with his own interests and political responsibilities. And, of course, the two leaders did not share the same view of land as ownable and alienable, in the specific European sense. Had Retief managed to secure such a land grant, it would only have had value in the eyes of the Europeans, and, no doubt, Retief's concern that the document be written in English reflected precisely his concern that the British be kept out of the Bay area.

In the aftermath of these events, Dingane's soldiers attacked other nearby Boer settlements, all but destroying the Voortrekker presence in Natal, until the arrival of Boer reinforcements—Andries Pretorius's commando of 500 men—brought about the military defeat of the Zulu at Blood River in December 1838. The first Boer state, the Republic of Natalia, was established and lasted for six years before being subsumed into the British Empire.<sup>46</sup> Owen was allowed to leave Dingane's homestead in February 1838, attempted, without success, to set up a ministry amongst the Dutch settlers and, after spending some time at the Bay of Natal, left on a boat for the Cape Colony in May that year. In his journal he summarised his thoughts on the failure of his mission:

*The pride and insolence of the Zoolu chiefs are the main hindrances to the promulgation of the truth. When that pride is abated, the way will be made more easy for the entrance of the Gospel. God is now humbling the pride of the nation generally, and of chiefs in particular, he has permitted them to fall by their own pride, self-conceit and wickedness into such an atrocity as will in all probability bring ruin upon themselves and the nation, from which it will never recover and thus the way will be prepared for the missionaries of the word. In the view of this we adore the inscrutable ways of Providence and perceive that the very fact which is driving us away from the country will ultimately contribute to the establishment of the truth.*<sup>47</sup>

### Concluding remarks

I would note that Owen's thoughts are apt, in that the spread of literacy and Christianity in southern Africa went together in tightly linked ways, in most

<sup>42</sup> Owen, *The diary of the Rev Francis Owen*, p. 104.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 107–8.

<sup>44</sup> Davenport, *South Africa: a modern history*, p. 59.

<sup>46</sup> See Davenport, *South Africa: a modern history*.

cases, and were closely dependent on the military conquest or political domination of local people for their expansion. But we can also clearly see from the above study why they never spread or operated in the linear and predictable ways that Owen and others would have hoped. Literacy never simply, on its own, in some kind of autonomous way, operated as a portal through which subjugated local people were cognitively re-orientated, where the master codes of local knowledge were removed and replaced by Western ones. These dynamics were much more variable, politicised and complex than the 'great divide' theorists of literacy would suggest. An approach to literacy that is sensitive to the networked, historically contingent and socially relative effects of knowledge and practices provides a better way of examining and understanding the historical record in relation to social artefacts such as written deeds of land ownership. Print literacy came to Africa embedded in a range of specific practices, relationships and artefacts rather than as a unitary package. Shaped by European experiences and interests, these practices were subject to interpretation, translation, recontextualisation and re-embedding in a range of localised ways by indigenous people as well as by relocated Europeans. In the two cases that I have examined, Europeans took assumptions on the private ownership and alienability of land with them when they travelled, and asserted the universality of their own practices, underwritten by texts. I have shown that the written documents of land purchase had no leverage over local knowledge until such time as the network of practices and arrangements that sustained this local knowledge had been supplanted, usually by force and conquest.

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