Precolonial African Historiography as a Multidisciplinary Project: The Case of the Bahurutshe of the Marico[*]

JACOBUS ADRIAAN DU PISANI[1] AND KIM KWANG-SU[2]
[1]North-West University, [2]Hankuk University of Foreign Studies

Introduction

In 1822, the London Missionary Society missionary John Campbell published an account of his visit to South Africa two years earlier. His book included several chapters on his sojourn at Kaditshwene, the main settlement of the Bahurutshe[1] in the Marico region.[2] It was published before Setswana, the language spoken by the Bahurutshe, existed in written form and was the first written eye-witness account dealing with the Bahurutshe in precolonial times. Up to that point, Hurutshe history had been orally transmitted from generation to generation.

This article reviews the historiography of the Bahurutshe in the Marico in the precolonial period by analysing the contribution of different disciplines and different types of sources. Although researchers started collecting ethnological data about the Batswana from the late nineteenth century, the Bahurutshe remained outside the mainstream of South African history for the greater part of the twentieth century. Since around 1970, when the histories of precolonial African societies in South Africa became a specialised focus of research, the historiography of the Bahurutshe in the precolonial period has followed the general trend of precolonial African historiography, evolving into a multidisciplinary project. Historians recording the precolonial history of the Bahurutshe have relied mainly on oral tradition, supplemented by the findings of archaeological research at sites inhabited by the Bahurutshe during the Iron Age. Apart from ethnological and archaeological data, historians have also started to incorporate knowledge produced by other disciplines such as linguistics and environmental sciences into their narrative, thereby increasing knowledge about and understanding of the early history of the Bahurutshe.

The sources for the writing of the history of precolonial African societies differ from those of literate societies in other parts of the world. Therefore, western ideas

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[1] The prefix Ba- forms part of the noun denoting a people. Thus, Bahurutshe means the Hurutshe people. Hurutshe has no prefix when it is used as an adjective, e.g., a Hurutshe settlement.
[2] JOHN CAMPBELL, *Travels in South Africa Undertaken at the Request of the London Missionary Society: Being the Narrative of a Second Journey in the Interior of That Country* (London: Westley, 1822), 222–77 (chapters XX–XXIII).

about historical research and history-writing cannot be applied in an unaltered form. Following from this, our main argument is that the Hurutshe case study confirms that the writing of precolonial African history has to be based on multi- or interdisciplinary collaboration. We furthermore contend that, although the writing of precolonial Hurutshe history is a complex multidisciplinary project, it has significance and relevance for the present. Issues raised by this historiography can be linked to post-apartheid discourses in South Africa and the data collected and interpreted can contribute to a better understanding of controversial aspects of South African history.

The African context: the move towards interdisciplinarity in the study of the precolonial period

Until the end of the colonial period, most western historians believed that sub-Saharan Africa had neither a proper civilisation nor a significant history and that early African history was unknowable, because non-literate African societies had not left records that historians could use. They did not recognise non-written evidence as proper sources for historical research and preferred to leave the study of the African 'people without history'[3] to scholars from other disciplines, such as anthropology and archaeology. Therefore, historical studies on the indigenous black societies of Africa in the period before their contact with white immigrant groups remained undeveloped.[4]

For many years, African studies were dominated in the academic domain by American and European scholars. Most western-based historians, with their Eurocentric perspectives of Africa and their 'othering' of Africans, focussed on the colonial period. They paid scant attention to the precolonial past, which they regarded as a time of primitive tribalism in Africa. Colonial perceptions of Africa became so ingrained in the academic world that 'one never quite gets away from the colonial construction of African history.'[5]

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[3] See ERIC R. WOLF, *Europe and the People Without History*, 2nd rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

[4] L.D. NGCONGCO, 'Problems of Southern African Historiography,' in *The Historiography of Southern Africa*, proceedings of the experts meeting held at Gaborone, Botswana, from 7 to 11 March 1977, *The General History of Africa, Studies and Documents* 4 (Paris: UNESCO, 1980), 17; ESPERANZA BRIZUELA-GARCIA, 'Decolonising African History: Crises and Transitions in African Historiography, 1950-1990' (PhD thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2000), 20–1; FREDERICK COOPER, 'Africa's Pasts and Africa's Historians,' *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 34, no. 2 (2000): 298–336, see 300; FUNSO AFOLAYAN, 'Historiography and Methods of African History,' 2012, accessed 12 December 2018, http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199846733/obo-9780199846733-0011.xml; CATHERINE COQUERY-VIDROVITCH, 'African Historiography in Africa,' trans. JPD Systems, *Revue Tiers Monde* 216, no. 4 (2013): 111–27, see 112.

[5] COOPER, 'Africa's Pasts and Africa's Historians,' 308. See also Brizuela-Garcia, 'Decolonising African History,' 90, 272; DAVID SCHOENBRUN, 'African Pasts for African Futures in a Time of Radical Environmental Change,' in *History and Policy in Africa's Reconstruction*, ed. Robert Launay, keynote address, PAS working paper no. 17 (Evanston, IL: Program of African Studies Northwestern University, 2006), 5; PAUL TIYAMBE ZELEZA, 'The Disciplinary, Interdisciplinary and Global Dimensions of African Studies,' *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies - Multi-, Inter- and Transdisciplinarity* 1, no. 2 (2006): 195–220, see 197, 201.

When the process of African decolonisation was gaining momentum in the second half of the twentieth century, struggles were waged to 'decolonise' African historiography and introduce an 'African point of view' in the discourse about the African past. This led to a focus on precolonial history because of the need to prove that Africa had had a significant history previous to colonial intervention. African and Africanist historians were seeking to restore agency and initiative to precolonial Africans and respectability to the historicity of the African past. They started challenging Eurocentric notions that precolonial Africa was barbaric and static, and that civilisation and written sources constitute the only rational bases for historical scholarship.[6]

From the 1960s, realising that they needed to incorporate data produced by other disciplines to fill the gaps in historical knowledge, historians started engaging in multi- and interdisciplinary research to help them interpret the distant African past. At first most of them were not well equipped to embark on interdisciplinary research. However, multidisciplinary teamwork was facilitated by the structure of African studies as a regional project at American and European universities, where the pioneering academic work in the study of the continent was done. Within the emerging field of African area studies, disciplines exchanged information, techniques, methodologies and theories.[7]

Anthropology had been investigating Africa for several decades and had a large body of information on the classification of African peoples and traditional African practices and institutions available, which historians started incorporating in their studies of precolonial societies. Ethnography, in particular, provided indispensable data for the reconstruction of early African history.[8]

Academic historians started tapping into the abundant, but formerly unexplored, body of oral testimonies that had been transmitted in African societies from generation to generation. The pioneering work of the Belgian anthropologist, Jan Vansina, on the value of oral tradition for historiography[9] initiated an expanding literature on the

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[6] DAVID L. SCHOENBRUN, 'A Past Whose Time Has Come: Historical Context and History in Eastern Africa's Great Lakes,' *History and Theory* 32, no. 4, Beiheft 32: *History Making in Africa* (1993): 32–56, see 36, 39, 40, 48–49, 54, 56; BRIZUELA-GARCIA, 'Decolonising African History,' 99–100, 162, 270; ZELEZA, 'The Disciplinary, Interdisciplinary and Global Dimensions of African Studies,' 196, 199, 201, 203.

[7] BRIZUELA-GARCIA, 'Decolonising African History,' 163, 171; COOPER, 'Africa's Pasts and Africa's Historians,' 311; ZELEZA, 'The Disciplinary, Interdisciplinary and Global Dimensions of African Studies,' 198; CARLA DE YCAZA, 'Competing Methods for Teaching and Researching Africa: Interdisciplinarity and the Field of African Studies,' *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 38, no. 3 (2015): 63–76.

[8] BRIZUELA-GARCIA, 'Decolonising African History,' 171; KATHRYN M. DE LUNA, JEFFREY B. FLEISHER, and SUSAN KEECH MCINTOSH, 'Thinking Across the African Past: Interdisciplinarity and Early History,' *African Archaeological Review* 29 (2012): 75–94, see 81.

[9] Vansina's *De la tradition orale*, published in French in 1961, was translated into English and published with the title *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* (London: Aldine, 1965). A revised edition, *Oral Tradition as History* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985) was published 20 years later. It remains the standard text on the nature, collection, analysis and use of various categories of oral sources.

methodology of fieldwork for oral historiography and its application to specific case studies.[10] Although the evidential value of oral accounts has limitations, oral tradition has become recognised as a valid historical source when it is subjected to rigorous and critical appraisal. It can seldom be used as stand-alone proof of what happened in the past and its veracity is dependent upon verification of its compatibility with the evidence contained in other sources.[11]

Archaeology has been a leading and crucial contributor to the study of Africa's past.[12] Hard archaeological evidence proves that socially complex societies, cities and states existed in precolonial Africa.[13] The interpretation of the structures, spaces and artefacts at archaeological sites in the continent produces valuable knowledge for historians specialising in precolonial history. Dating of sites offers the basis for a chronology of African history. Evidence of change and continuity can be found in the archaeological record. By interpreting the representational qualities of the ordinary material things that precolonial Africans made and used, scholars gain insight into the non-material inner worlds of the users of those objects, the way in which they organised their domestic space, their economic and social organisation and development, and their relationship with the environment. Archaeological research enriches the historian's understanding of historical processes and complexities, and lends depth to the understanding of Africa's pasts.[14] In combination with other

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[10] See e.g., DANIEL F. MCCALL, *Africa in Time-Perspective: A Discussion of Historical Reconstruction from Unwritten Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969); ALAIN DELIVRÉ, *L'histoire des rois d'Imerina: Interprétation d'une tradition orale* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1974); JOSEPH C. MILLER, ed., *The African Past Speaks: Essays on Oral Tradition and History* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1980); DAVID HENIGE, *Oral Historiography* (London: Heinemann, 1982); ELIZABETH TONKIN, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History (*New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[11] Afolayan, 'Historiography and Methods of African History'; ROBERT S. BURRET, 'Review of Five Hundred Years Rediscovered,' *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 64, no. 189 (2009): 97–98, see 98; JAN C.A. BOEYENS, 'The Intersection of Archaeology, Oral Tradition and History in the South African Interior,' *New Contree* no. 64 (2012): 1–30, see 10; DAVID SCHOENBRUN, 'Early African Pasts: Sources, Interpretations, and Meanings,' 2018, 18–21, doi: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.147.

[12] The literature on African archaeology is extensive. See e.g., PETER T. ROBERTSHAW, ed., *A History of African Archaeology* (London: James Currey, 1990); T. SHAW et al., eds, *The Archaeology of Africa: Food, Metals, and Towns* (London: Routledge, 1993); DAVID W. PHILLIPSON, *African Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); LAWRENCE BARMAH and PETER MITCHELL, *The First Africans: African Archaeology from the Earliest Toolmakers to Most Recent Foragers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008). The methodological approaches and interpretative frameworks that have informed archaeological research in Africa are examined by SUSAN KEECH MCINTOSH, 'Archaeology and the Reconstruction of the African Past,' in *Writing African History*, ed. John Edward Philips (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2005), 51–85.

[13] ANN BROWER STAHL, ed., *African Archaeology: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005); GRAHAM CONNAH, *African Civilizations: An Archaeological Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[14] *The Historiography of Southern Africa*, 91; BRIZUELA-GARCIA, 'Decolonising African History,' 164; ANN B. STAHL and ADRIA LAVIOLETTE, 'Introduction: Current Trends in the Archaeology of African History,' *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 42, no. 3 (2009): 348, 350; DAVID SCHOENBRUN, 'Mixing, Moving, Making, Meaning: Possible Futures for the Distant Past,' *African Archaeological Review* 29 (2012), 295; DE LUNA, FLEISHER, and MCINTOSH, 'Thinking Across the African Past: Interdisciplinarity and Early History,' 83; SCHOENBRUN, 'Early African Pasts: Sources, Interpretations, and Meanings,' 17.

sources, such as oral tradition and historical linguistics, archaeology makes its most valuable contribution to historiography. Connah argues that archaeology contributes to a 'total' history of Africa, spanning several millennia, which helps to overcome the dichotomy between prehistory and history.[15]

A number of recently expanding fields of study, associated with archaeological research, provide information on the interaction of humans and their environments and the spread and development of agriculture in precolonial Africa. Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR), a form of remote sensing, helps with the identification and location of archaeological sites.[16] Bio-archaeology, zoo-archaeology and archaeobotany focus on the relations between plants, animals and humans. The study of plant and animal DNA has generated considerable insight into precolonial farming and herding practices. Geochemical and geo-archaeological studies of soils and sediments assist with the reconstruction of landscape dynamics over long time frames.[17]

Historians have acknowledged the value of linguistic studies for the study of the distant past, where other sources are lacking or inadequate. They introduced evidence about the history and connotations of words into their studies of precolonial Africa.[18] Christopher Ehret and his co-researchers did pioneering work in this field.[19] Historical linguists and archaeologists worked together in an archaeo-linguistic approach to reconstruct early African history. Applying linguistic techniques such as lexicostatistics, glottochronology and the words-and-things method, they studied language groups in different regions of Africa to collect information about the origin, diffusion and migration of African languages and peoples. Their contributions to proving the Bantu expansion hypothesis, the assumption that the original proto-Bantu-speaking population spread from a nucleus in West-Central Africa across much of sub-Saharan Africa, were vital.[20] One historian, Kate de Luna, classified languages in a part of Africa

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[15] GRAHAM CONNAH, *Three Thousand Years in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[16] KARIM SADR, 'Kweneng: A Newly Discovered Pre-colonial Capital Near Johannesburg,' *Journal of African Archaeology* 17, no. 1 (2019): 1-22, doi: 10.1163/21915784-20190001.

[17] PAUL LANE and ANNA SHOEMAKER, 'Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Precolonial Sub-Saharan African Farming and Herding Communities,' 2017, doi: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.70, see 1, 11–12, 27–8.

[18] DAVID DALBY, ed., *Language and History in Africa* (London: Cass, 1970); DEREK NURSE, 'The Contribution of Linguistics to the Study of History in Africa,' *Journal of African History* 38 (1997): 351–91.

[19] The case studies were published in CHRISTOPHER EHRET and MERRICK POSNANSKY, eds, *The Archaeological and Linguistic Reconstruction of African History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). For his more recent work, see e.g., CHRISTOPHER EHRET, 'Writing African History from Linguistic Evidence,' in *Writing African History*, ed. John Edward Philips (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2005), 86–111; EHRET, *History and the Testimony of Language* (Berkeley, LA: University of California Press, 2011); EHRET, 'Historical Linguistics,' in *The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology,* ed. Hilary Callan (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018).

[20] JAN VANSINA, 'New Linguistic Evidence and "The Bantu Expansion",' *Journal of African* History 36, no. 2 (1995), 173–95; BRIZUELA-GARCIA, 'Decolonising African History,' 166; DE LUNA, FLEISHER, and MCINTOSH, 'Thinking Across the African Past: Interdisciplinarity and Early History,' 76, 82; JONES M. JAJA, 'Interdisciplinary Methods for the Writing of African History: A Reappraisal,' *European Journal of Scientific Research* 5, no. 4 (2008), version available via Researchgate,

by reconstructing portions of their vocabulary.[21] In their research in different parts of Africa, Vansina, Klein-Ahrendt and Gonzales demonstrated how linguistic, ethnographic and archaeological evidence can be linked to enhance precolonial African historiography, while illuminating the changing practices of people's daily lives by which they created, organised and maintained their communities.[22] Schoenbrun argued that 'conceptual metaphor,' which offers cognitive processes as a common ground for empirical research in different disciplines, can be used as tool by means of which historians can combine linguistic and archaeological evidence to proceed beyond establishing the settlement sequences, chronologies and basic outlines of the economic practice of precolonial societies to explore their social relations, political culture and technological advances.[23]

Advances in palaeogenetic DNA research and improvements in genetic sampling have confirmed the potential of genetic analysis to illuminate historical processes in precolonial Africa by documenting human population genetic variability in the regions of the continent. It can supply detail about the movement of individual bodies through particular locales. Palaeogenetic research in Africa is still limited, but collaborative archaeology-palaeogenetic research programmes are encouraged.[24]

From the above it is clear that many historians, who study precolonial Africa and have a conceptual understanding of the value of multi- and interdisciplinary team work despite the challenges that inhibit collaboration across disciplinary boundaries, have adapted to new approaches and methodologies of historical research. They participate in interdisciplinary research to better explain the complexities and interconnectedness of human societies. Collaboration across an increasing number of disciplinary boundaries has become a reality in African precolonial studies. Historians involved in interdisciplinary projects not only borrow data produced by a variety of other disciplines, but also apply the techniques and methodologies of those disciplines

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https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263576261_JAJA_JM_2008_INTERDISCIPLINARY_METHODS_FOR_THE_WRITING_OF_AFRICAN_HISTORY_A_REAPPRAISAL, accessed 30 April 2022, see 5, 9, 10, 11, 13; KOEN BOSTOEN, 'Pots, Words and the Bantu Problem: On Lexical Reconstruction and Early African History,' *The Journal of African History* 48, no. 2 (2007): 173–99.

[21] KATHRYN M. DE LUNA, 'Scales and Units: Language Movement and Change in Precolonial Central Africa,' in *Tracing Language Movement in Africa*, eds Ericka Albaugh and Kathryn de Luna (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); KATHRYN M. DE LUNA and JEFFERY B. FLEISHER, *Speaking with Substance: Language and Materials in African History* (New York: Springer, 2018).

[22] JAN VANSINA, *Paths in the Rainforest: Towards a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); REINHARD KLEIN-AHRENDT, *Die traditionellen Eisenhandwerke der Savannen-Bantu: Eine sprachhistorische Rekonstruktion auf lexikalischer Grundlage* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004); RHONDA M. GONZALES, *Societies, Religion and History: Central East Tanzanians and the World They Created, c. 200 B.C.E. to 1800 C.E.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

[23] SCHOENBRUN, 'Mixing, Moving, Making, Meaning: Possible Futures for the Distant Past,' 297, 299, 314; SCHOENBRUN, 'Early African Pasts: Sources, Interpretations, and Meanings,' 7–8, 22, 25, 26. See also DAVID SCHOENBRUN, 'Words, Things, and Meaning: Linguistics as a Tool for Historical Reconstruction,' in *The Oxford Handbook of African Languages*, eds Rainer Vossen and Gerrit Dimmendaal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 961–72.

[24] DE LUNA, FLEISHER, and MCINTOSH, 'Thinking Across the African Past: Interdisciplinarity and Early History,' 83–6; SCHOENBRUN, 'Mixing, Moving, Making, Meaning: Possible Futures for the Distant Past,' 293.

to their historical research for a more comprehensive and reliable interpretation of the distant African past.[25]

Through the use of an array of sources and methodologies from several disciplines, each of them reflecting the past in different ways, remarkable progress has been made in the postcolonial era in the study of the history of precolonial African societies.[26] According to Schoenbrun, early African history now has a depth and breadth akin to the histories based on written sources in archives.[27] That John McNeill, in his presidential address to the AHA in 2020, regarded precolonial African history, based mainly on research without written documents, as a 'guide to our future as historians,' was a testimony to the advances made in this field.[28]

The rest of this article deals with the evolution of the historiography of the Bahurutshe in precolonial times to reach an assessment on how far knowledge about the distant past of this group has advanced within the broader context of precolonial African historiography. From this assessment, the identification of gaps and suggestions about future research can flow.

Geographical and historical context of the Bahurutshe

The Bahurutshe form part of the larger Sotho-Tswana group in South Africa, whose people inhabit the Highveld, a plateau in the South African interior. The map below indicates where they resided in precolonial times and which other groups lived in neighbouring areas.

The geography of the area in which the Bahurutshe settled played a decisive role in their history. Morton's statement that 'our appreciation of Tswana history prior to 1820 can be improved by taking into consideration the diverse types of landscape the many Tswana groups attached themselves to'[29] is applicable. Environmental aspects, such as the availability of water resources and the impact of droughts, were decisive in the history of precolonial African societies.[30]

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[25] JAJA, 'Interdisciplinary Methods,' 2, 3, 25; ZELEZA, 'The Disciplinary, Interdisciplinary and Global Dimensions of African Studies,' 198–9; COOPER, 'Africa's Pasts and Africa's Historians,' 311.

[26] TERENCE O. RANGER, 'Towards a Useable African Past,' in *African Studies Since 1945: A Tribute to Basil Davidson*, ed. Christopher Fyfe (London: Longman, 1976), 17–30; J. KI-ZERBO, ed., *UNESCO General History of Africa*, vol. 1, Methodology and African Prehistory (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981); CAROLINE NEALE, *Writing Independent History: African Historiography, 1960–1980* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1985); SCHOENBRUN, 'A Past Whose Time Has Come,' 35 and 'African Pasts for African Futures in a Time of Radical Environmental Change,' 15; JOSEPH O. VOGEL, ed., *Encyclopedia of Precolonial Africa: Archaeology, History, Languages, Cultures, and Environments* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira, 1997), 247–560; BRIZUELA-GARCIA, 'Decolonising African History,' 163.

[27] SCHOENBRUN, 'Early African Pasts: Sources, Interpretations, and Meanings,' 1.

[28] J.R. MCNEILL, 'Peak Document and the Future of History,' *The American Historical Review* 125, no. 1 (February 2020): 1–18.

[29] FRED MORTON, 'Settlements, Landscapes and Identities Among the Tswana of the Western Transvaal and Eastern Kalahari Before 1820,' *The South African Archaeological Bulletin* 68, no. 197 (2013): 15–26, see 15.

[30] JAN C.A. BOEYENS, 'The Late Iron Age Sequence in the Marico and Early Tswana History,' *The South African Archaeological Bulletin* 58, no. 178 (2003): 63–78, see 70, 74.
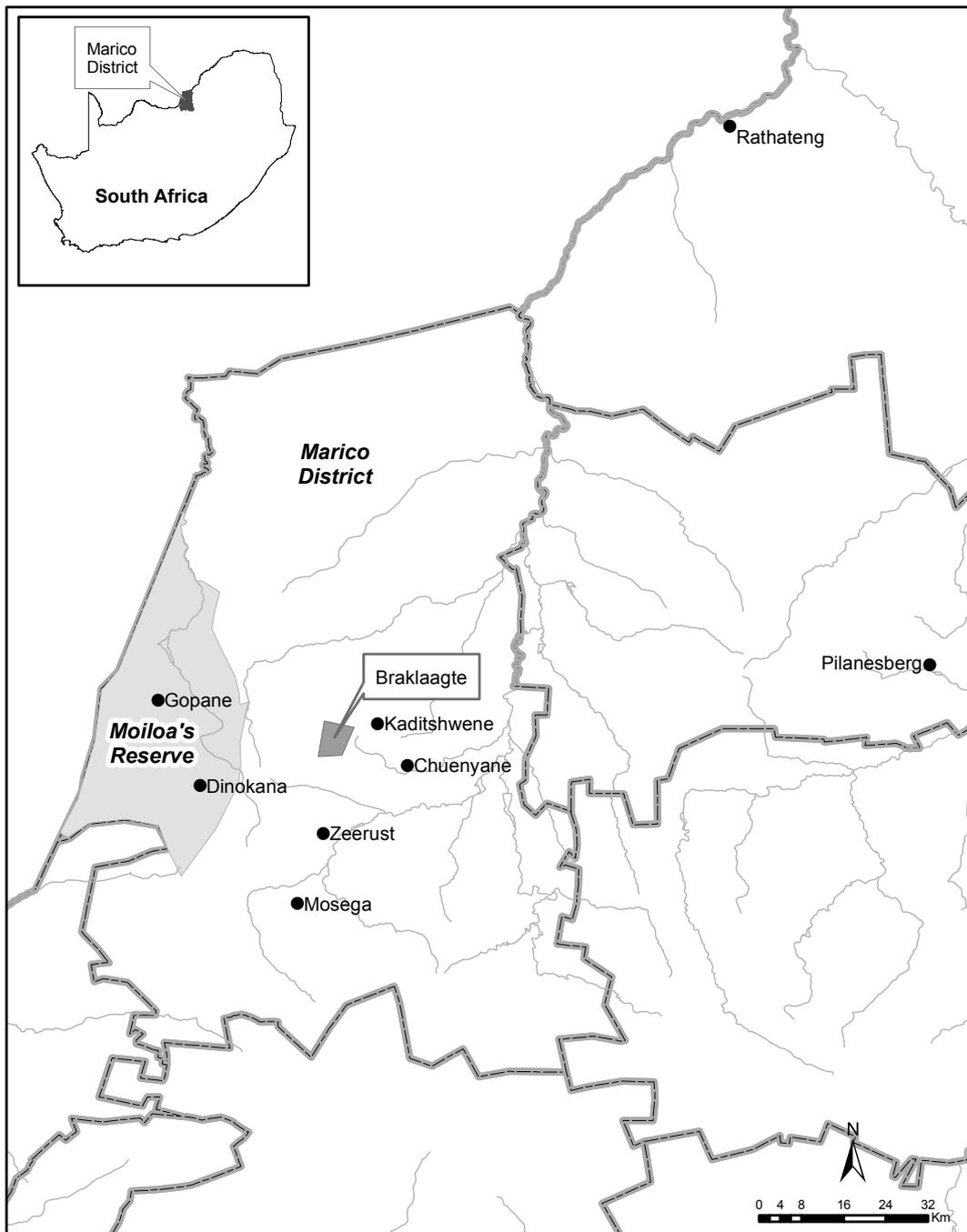
Figure 1. Lehurutshe, the section of the Marico region where the Bahurutshe have resided for more than 500 years, is indicated on the map. Surrounding merafe (peoples) in the precolonial period included the Bangwaketse to the west, the Bakgatla and Bakwena to the north, the Barolong to the south, and the Bafokeng to the east.

The timeline below includes some of the main events in the history of the Bahurutshe in the precolonial period.

Timeline of Hurutshe history 1200–1823 CE	
1200–1500	Mogale first chief mentioned in oral tradition c.1300
	Southward migration into southern Africa and settlement near present town of Rustenburg
	Westward migration
	The Bahurutshe, Bakwena and Bakgatla, three groups from the same line of succession, separated
Sixteenth century	The Bahurutshe emerged as an identifiable group
	Spread from the confluence of the Marico and Crocodile rivers (Rathateng)
	Adoption of *tshwene* (baboon) as totem
Seventeenth century	Settlement at Tshwenyane (Chuenyane) between present-day Zeerust and Groot-Marico
Eighteenth century	Main body of Bahurutshe moved to Kaditshwene (Karechuenya) under chief Mênwê
	Reign of chiefs Moiloa (Moilwa) I and Sebogodi I
	Kaditshwene expanded into a megasite
Beginning of Nineteenth century	Reign of Diutlwileng
	Visits of John Campbell (1812–3, 1820)
1823	'Mantatee' invasion and sacking of Kaditshwene

Oral tradition as a source of Hurutshe historiography

Because no written record of early Hurutshe history exists, the oral tradition, which goes back as far as the fourteenth century CE, has remained indispensable for the reconstruction of the distant past. Oral tradition contains an undisputed evidentiary base, but when it is passed down from generation to generation it loses detailed historical information. Therefore, for the period before 1600 the historical information contained in the oral tradition of the Bahurutshe is limited and unreliable. We do not

have accurate information about their origins, early migration or settlement.[31] Based on genealogical lists of chiefs, the southward migration of the Bahurutshe-Bakwena is calculated to have occurred between 1350 and 1450 CE.[32]

In the nineteenth century, missionaries and colonial government officials started capturing ethnographic data of African societies in southern Africa, but the early historical and anthropological works by Theal, Cory and Stow contained only the most basic information on the Bahurutshe.[33] From the early twentieth century, the government and social anthropology departments at universities played the leading role in recording the oral tradition of African societies in South Africa. A British-based social anthropologist, Isaac Schapera, did extensive fieldwork among the Batswana, produced numerous publications and emerged as the foremost expert on Tswana society and culture. Although his fieldwork on the Bahurutshe was focused on the section of this group in Bechuanaland (present-day Botswana), not in South Africa, his work contains much generic information that contributes to a better understanding of historical events in the region where the Bahurutshe have lived for centuries.[34]

One genre of oral tradition featured in Schapera's work is the praise poem (*lebôkô*) paying homage to the *kgôsi* (chiefs).[35] Praise poems for several chiefs of the Bahurutshe have been recorded. They have limitations as historical sources, because they are meant to eulogise traditional leaders and are, therefore, subjective. They provide a one-sided representation of past reality and lack historical accuracy.[36] Nevertheless, the text of praise poems, containing the names of individual people, groups and places, are acknowledged as potentially valuable storehouses of historic facts. They provide clues to fill in gaps in the historical record and enable researchers to 'animate the precolonial material record with remembered places, peoples and personalities.'[37] In the praise poem for Diutwileng, who was *kgôsi* of the Bahurutshe at Kaditshwene at the start of the nineteenth century, a series of names of people and places provide information that can be used by historians to establish the dates and locations of as well as the participants in battles involving the Bahurutshe.[38]

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[31] JAN BOEYENS and SIMON HALL, 'Tlokwa Oral Traditions and the Interface Between History and Archaeology at Marothodi,' *South African Historical Journal* 61, no. 3 (2009): 457–81, see 462–63; B. MORTON, 'Narrativity and Tswana Oral Tradition,' *Botswana Notes and Records* no. 43 (2011): 52–63, see 61.

[32] BOEYENS, 'The Late Iron Age Sequence in the Marico and Early Tswana History,' 67.

[33] George McCall Theal's *History of South Africa* and George Cory's *The Rise of South Africa* consisted of many volumes and George W. Stow's *The Native Races of South Africa* was first published in 1905.

[34] For an assessment of Schapera's legacy and a bibliography of his works, see SUZETTE HEALD, 'The Legacy of Isaac Schapera,' *Anthropology Today* 19, no. 6 (2003): 18–19; HEALD, 'Isaac Schapera: A Bibliography,' *Pula: Botswana Journal of African Studies* 12, nos 1 and 2 (1998): 100–15.

[35] ISAAC SCHAPERA, *Praise-Poems of Tswana Chiefs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965).

[36] VANSINA, *Oral Tradition as History, 187–90*; J. OPLAND, 'Praise Poems as Historical Sources,' in *Beyond the Cape Frontier: Studies in the History of the Transkei and Ciskei*, eds C. Saunders and R. Derricourt (London: Longman, 1974), 1–37; N.P. MAAKE, 'Trends in the Formalist Criticism of "Western" Poetry and "African" Oral Poetry: A Comparative Analysis of Selected Case Studies' (PhD thesis, University of South Africa, Pretoria, 1994), 162, 204.

[37] BOEYENS, 'The Intersection of Archaeology, Oral Tradition and History,' 15.

[38] See PAUL LENERT BREUTZ, *The Tribes of Marico Fistrict* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1953), 28–9.

The most significant contribution of praise poems to Hurutshe historiography is that they have supplied information, not available anywhere else, to trace the line of succession of Hurutshe chiefs in ancient times with a measure of accuracy.[39] They also provide an insider's interpretation of the Hurutshe society of old and clues to an understanding of the 'feel' of the time when they were created.[40] Therefore, the study of Hurutshe praise poems and the linking of their content with the archaeological and anthropological record remains a facet of Hurutshe historiography.

Ethnologists employed by the South African government made major contributions to the recording of the oral tradition of African communities in the country. G.P. Lestrade and N.J. van Warmelo, working for the Ethnological Section of the Native Affairs Department (NAD), focussed their research on creating a 'scientific' basis for racial segregation policies.[41]

Paul Lenert Breutz, who served as government ethnologist from 1948 to 1977 under National Party rule, made a major contribution to Tswana historiography. During fieldwork trips, Breutz systematically collected a huge amount of ethnological data through oral interviews in Tswana communities scattered over a wide geographical area. He supplemented the raw data he collected with information from archival records, published travellers' accounts and secondary literature. He produced many publications, including a series of eight volumes on the different Tswana 'tribes' in South Africa. Breutz's work has been criticised as being flawed as a result of his pro-apartheid views and his use of outdated theories. However, his collected data is acknowledged as one of the richest, most reliable and indispensable sources of information dealing with the Batswana. Despite the inconsistencies and contradictions in Breutz's data, his publications have served generations of historians, archaeologists and anthropologists as the most important source in reconstructing the Tswana's precolonial past.[42]

Breutz paid at least one hundred visits to the Bahurutshe and interviewed the chiefs and councillors of the different Hurutshe groups, with whom he built a close

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[39] Breutz compiled lineage charts for the Tswana subgroups. For a 'skeleton genealogy' of the chiefs of the Bahurutshe ba ga Moiloa, see BREUTZ, *The Tribes of Marico District*, 142–43.

[40] MORTON, 'Narrativity and Tswana Oral Tradition,' 61; R.M. DORSON, ed., *Folklore and Traditional History* (The Hague: Mouton, 1973), 52–53; VANSINA, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, 149; SCHAPERA, *Praise-Poems of Tswana Chiefs*, 10.

[41] See G.P. LESTRADE, *Miscellaneous notes on laws and customs of the Bahuruthse, fieldnotes and preliminary summary of information obtained at Gopane and Motsoedi with regard to laws and customs of the Bahurutshe, Moiloa Reserve*, Marico District, manuscripts 276 and 277 (London: Royal Anthropological Institute, 1926); N.J. VAN WARMELO, *A Preliminary Survey of the Bantu Tribes of South Africa* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1935); VAN WARMELO, 'Grouping and Ethnic History,' in *The Bantu-Speaking Tribes of South Africa*, ed. I. Schapera (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1946), 43–66.

[42] JAN BOEYENS and FRED MORTON, 'The Tswana's Antiquarian: The Life and Work of State Ethnologist Paul-Lenert Breitz (1912–1999),' *Southern African Humanities*, no. 32 (2019): 109–34. See also MORTON, 'Settlements, Landscapes and Identities among the Tswana of the Western Transvaal and Eastern Kalahari before 1820,' 17; FRED MORTON, 'To Die For: Inherited Leadership (*bogosi*) among the Tswana before 1885,' *Journal of Southern African Studies* 43, no. 4 (2017): 699–714, see 709; Jan C.A. Boeyens, 'In Search of Kaditswene,' *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 55, no. 171 (2000): 3–17, see 5.

rapport as knowledgeable informants.[43] His research on the Bahurutshe was incorporated in one of the volumes in the tribes series titled *The Tribes of Marico District*. Under his standard set of subheadings, in this publication Breutz supplies detailed information about various aspects of different sections of the Bahurutshe. It includes valuable information for historians on – amongst others – migrations, the history and genealogy of chiefs, age regiments, political organisation, population size, social structure, beliefs and religion, agriculture, material culture and economics.[44] In many instances including the only account of personalities and events of the distant Hurutshe past, Breutz's work will continue to serve as a starting point for historians and archaeologists working on the Bahurutshe.[45]

The oral tradition recorded by Breutz and others plays a fundamental role in ascribing a historical identity to the many Late Iron Age stone-walled sites attributed to Tswana groups. Archaeologists can link the references in oral tradition to political lineages to specific sites. Oral tradition was, for example, used to accurately locate Kaditshwene, the Hurutshe Iron Age megasite.[46]

An important issue in the historiography of the Bahurutshe in the precolonial period is their status in the larger Tswana context. Andrew Smith noted in his diary in 1835 that the Bahurutshe was regarded as the senior group among the Tswana *merafe*, because according to oral tradition they had first come out of the Matsieng waterhole, the place of origin of the Batswana.[47] For the greater part of the twentieth century, mainly as a result of the findings of government ethnologists, the Bahurutshe continued to be regarded as the senior group of the Batswana in South Africa. G.P. Lestrade, the first ethnologist employed by the NAD, regarded them so.[48] F.J. Language described the Bahurutshe as the core from which the other main Tswana groups originated.[49] Breutz, relying on oral evidence, agreed that the Bahurutshe, who are the descendants of the eldest son of Malope, formed the senior 'tribe' of the Batswana that dominated the western Highveld up to the eighteenth century. This seniority was acknowledged by allowing the chief of the Bahurutshe to perform the ceremony of the first fruits. Nobody in the region was allowed to eat the first fruits of the season before the Hurutshe chief had rubbed his body with *lerotse* leaves. The Hurutshe chief also announced the harvesting season and the commencement of the period of initiation. It was also he who performed the ritual of selecting the best young

[43] BOEYENS and MORTON, 'The Tswana's Antiquarian: The Life and Work of State Ethnologist Paul-Lenert Breitz (1912–1999),' 119–20.

[44] BREUTZ, *The Tribes of Marico District*, 139–94.

[45] BOEYENS and MORTON, 'The Tswana's Antiquarian: The Life and Work of State Ethnologist Paul-Lenert Breitz (1912–1999),' 120; MORTON, 'Settlements, Landscapes and Identities among the Tswana of the Western Transvaal and Eastern Kalahari before 1820,' 68–9.

[46] BOEYENS and HALL, 'Tlokwa Oral Traditions and the Interface between History and Archaeology at Marothodi,' 457–8.

[47] P.C. KIRBY, ed., *The Diary of Dr Andrew Smith, 1834–1836* (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1940), 221–22.

[48] LESTRADE, *Miscellaneous notes on laws and customs of the Bahuruthse.*

[49] F.J. LANGUAGE, *Inleiding: stamregering by die Thlaping* (Introduction: Tribal Rule among the Thlaping) (Pro Ecclesia: Stellenbosch, 1943), see 9.

bulls before the weaker bulls could be castrated.[50] According to Mpotokwane's interpretation of oral tradition, the Bahurutshe and Bakwena were the offspring of Malope's children, Mohurutshe and Kwena. He states that the Bahurutshe are said to be the senior stock of all Tswana ethnic groups.[51]

Claims about the seniority of the Bahurutshe have been challenged. In an Afrikaans textbook on the 'Bantu' of South Africa, J.P. van S. Bruwer, professor of cultural anthropology (*volkekunde*) at Stellenbosch University, identified the Bakwena as the senior Tswana 'tribe.'[52] Ngcongco rejected the idea that the Bahurutshe was the parent group of the Batswana and asserted that both the Bahurutshe and the Bakwena split from the original Kwena-Hurutshe cluster between c. 1475 and 1505 CE.[53] In his in-depth study of Hurutshe history, Andrew Manson takes a similar neutral position by pointing out that all Tswana lineages descended from the same founding ancestors (Masilo, Mokgatla and Morolong) and that the united *Phofu[54]* cluster divided into the Bahurutshe and Bakwena in the time of chief Malope I. Only in certain periods were the Bahurutshe the dominant group in the Marico region.[55] Legassick viewed the Bakwena, and Mbenga the Barolong, as the senior Tswana groups.[56] Regardless of the status of the Bahurutshe among the Tswana groups in the region, they were notable actors in the history of the Marico.

Although anthropological data, in the same way as archaeological data, constitute a major source for writing the history of the Bahurutshe in precolonial times, Manson sounds the warning that ethnologies tend to be bogged down in the time when the fieldwork is performed and also mostly have a top-down perspective, focussing on the traditional leaders and excluding ordinary people, women and the youth.[57]

The contribution of archaeology to precolonial Hurutshe historiography

Archaeological evidence is an indispensable source of information about the history of the Bahurutshe in the time before first-hand written records. More than a thousand stone-walled Iron Age settlements have been recorded in the Marico basin.[58] Archaeologists have used data from studies of some of these sites to identify patterns of migration, settlement and interaction between groups. Manson points out that

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[50] BREUTZ, *The Tribes of Marico District*, 16.

[51] JAMES MPOTOKWANE, 'A Short History of the Bahurutshe of King Motebele, Senior Son of King Mohurutshe,' *Botswana Notes & Records* 6, no. 1 (1974): 37–45, see 37, 44.

[52] J.P. VAN S. BRUWER, *Die Bantoe van Suid-Afrika* (The Bantu of South Africa) (Johannesburg: Afrikaanse Pers-Boekhandel, 1956), 22.

[53] NGCONGCO, 'Origins of the Tswana,' 28, 33, 34.

[54] *Phofu* is the Tswana name for the eland, the antelope that in early times was the totem of both the Bahurutshe and the Bakwena.

[55] MANSON, 'The Hurutshe in the Marico District of the Transvaal, 1848–1914,' ii, 37–40.

[56] BERNARD MBENGA, 'Bafokeng and Bahurutshe,' *H-Africa discussion group*, University of Pennsylvania, African Studies Center, 2000.

[57] ANDREW MANSON, 'The Hurutshe in the Marico District of the Transvaal, 1848–1914' (PhD thesis, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, 1990), 22–23.

[58] REVIL J. MASON, 'Transvaal and Natal Iron Age Settlements Revealed by Aerial Photography and Excavation,' *African Studies*, 27, no. 4 (1968): 167–80; J.D. SEDDON, 'An Aerial Survey of Settlement and Living Patterns in the Transvaal Iron Age: Preliminary Report,' *African Studies* 27, no. 4 (1968): 189–94.

although archaeologists have been prone to reaching flawed assumptions, they have produced indispensable data for the historical research of the Bahurutshe.[59]

The first major archaeological study at a Hurutshe site in South Africa was completed by Jan Boeyens for his doctoral thesis on Kaditshwene.[60] He combined a comprehensive archaeological study of the site with supporting data from other sources, especially the text of John Campbell's account of his visit to Kaditshwene in 1820 and the paintings he made during his stay there. The thesis deals with the migration and settlement of the Bahurutshe between c. 1200 and 1848 CE. Their main group moved to Kaditshwene (or Karechuenya), which in the late eighteenth century became a megasite, with a population of between ten and twenty-five thousand, probably the largest town in southern Africa at that time. Boeyens found that the Bahurutshe had only one main settlement at the time at Kaditshwene and not a dual capital as suggested by Mason and Breutz. He included data on the material culture, agriculture, hunting, iron-smelting and trade of the Bahurutshe, which shed light on their economic activities and lifestyle. Kaditshwene's archaeological remains confirm that the Bahurutshe had big herds of cattle and worked iron on a large scale.[61]

Archaeological research has been at the centre of the discourse on the applicability of the Central Cattle Pattern (CCP) to the history of the Batswana. This ethnological model of spatial organisation, focussing on the centrality of cattle in the culture of the southern Bantu, was derived from Adam Kuper's explanation of the typical layout of homesteads[62] and confirmed by the archaeological research of Tom Huffman and others.[63] In Tswana communities, the spatial arrangement of the settlement, with the cattle kraal in the centre, indicated economic, political and social relationships. Cattle were significant as a source of wealth and power, were the key

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[59] MANSON, 'The Hurutshe in the Marico District of the Transvaal, 1848–1914,' 18–22.

[60] Kaditshwene, the name of a hill and the stone-walled settlement built on it, is probably derived from the phrase 'ga se ka ditshwene,' translated as 'what an incredible number of baboons.' See JAN C.A. BOEYENS, 'A Tale of Two Tswana Towns: In Quest of Tswenyane and the Twin Capital of the Hurutshe in the Marico,' *Southern African Humanities*, 28 (2016): 1–37, see 4.

[61] JAN C.A. BOEYENS, 'Die latere Ystertydperk in Suidoos- en Sentraal-Marico' (The Later Iron Age in Southeastern and Central Marico) (PhD thesis, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, 1998), ix, 50, 88–91, 200, 229, 239. See also BOEYENS, 'A Tale of Two Tswana Towns: In Quest of Tswenyane and the Twin Capital of the Hurutshe in the Marico,' 1–37; JAN C.A. BOEYENS and I. PLUG, '"A Chief is Like an Ash-Heap on Which Is Gathered All the Refuse": The Faunal Remains from the Central Court Midden at Kaditshwene,' *Annals of the Ditsong National Museum of Natural History* 1 (2011): 1–22; NEIL PARSONS, 'Prelude to Difaqane in the Interior of Southern Africa c. 1600–c. 1822,' in *The Mfecane Aftermath*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1995), 330–31; Etherington, *The Great Treks*, 99; REVIL J. MASON, *Origins of Black People of Johannesburg and the Southern Western Central Transvaal AD 350–1880* (Johannesburg: Archaeological Research Unit, University of the Witwatersrand, 1986), 840.

[62] A. KUPER, 'Symbolic Dimensions of the Southern Bantu Homestead,' *Africa*, 50, no. 1 (1980): 8–23.

[63] T.N. HUFFMAN, 'Archaeology and Ethnohistory of the African Iron Age,' *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 11 (1982): 133–50; T.N. HUFFMAN, 'Iron Age Settlement Patterns and the Origins of Class Distinction in Southern Africa,' *Advances in World Archaeology*, 5 (1986): 291–338; HUFFMAN, 'Architecture and Settlement Patterns,' in *Encyclopedia of Precolonial Africa: Archaeology, History, Languages, Cultures, and Environments*, ed. J.O. Vogel (London: AltaMira Press, 1997), 149–55; HUFFMAN, 'The Central Cattle Pattern and Interpreting the Past,' *Southern African Humanities*, 13 (2001): 19–35.

form of surplus storage in precapitalist Tswana societies and formed the basis of a feudal system of allegiance.[64] The CCP became the dominant model to interpret Late Iron Age southern Bantu communities, but its applicability to earlier times has been challenged.[65] Boeyens' study of Kaditshwene confirmed the existence of the CCP among the Bahurutshe in the Late Iron Age, but studies of older sites will be required to establish how far into the past it can be traced.

Archaeologists use data from other disciplines to help them interpret archaeological sites and their artefacts, thus creating a model for writing a deep-level history for non-literate societies.[66] In his doctoral study of Kaditshwene and subsequent articles, Boeyens used material from ethnology, linguistics (particularly the etymology of place names) and art (John Campbell's paintings and copies of Hurutshe mural art) to help him interpret the archaeological data.[67]

As a major source for the study of African precolonial societies, archaeology sheds light on people and places not mentioned in the written record. Archaeological discoveries verify and explain aspects of oral tradition, although a precise correlation between the data contained in oral tradition and archaeological study is seldom achieved. By strengthening the *longue durée* perspective, archaeology is able to investigate long-term change. However, archaeology has limitations. Its evidence is often fragmentary and inconclusive. Artefacts contain important information about the material culture of precolonial people, but extrapolation based on this information is hardly adequate to explain immaterial aspects such as the thought processes of people.[68]

The earliest written accounts of the Bahurutshe and their territory

In the early nineteenth century, when the north-western frontier zone in and adjacent to the Marico had started opening up and the precolonial period in that region was coming to an end, European travellers, hunters and missionaries started visiting the Marico. Some of them wrote accounts of their visits to and sojourn in the area, thus producing the first written accounts of the Hurutshe people and the land where they lived. For the late precolonial and early colonial periods there is only a limited number of these accounts.

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[64] PARSONS, 'Prelude to Difaqane in the Interior of Southern Africa c. 1600–c. 1822,' 324.

[65] SHAW BADENHORST, 'The Central Cattle Pattern during the Iron Age of Southern Africa: A Critique of Its Spatial Features,' *The South African Archaeological Bulletin* 64, no. 190 (2009): 148–55.

[66] See e.g., DAVID LEE SCHOENBRUN, *A Green Place, a Good Place: Agrarian Change, Gender, and Social Identity in the Great Lake Region to the 15th Century* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998); HENRY DREWAL, 'Signs of Time, Shapes of Thought: The Contribution of Art History and Visual Culture to Historical Methods in Africa,' in *Writing African History,* ed. John Edward Philips (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2005), 329–47.

[67] BOEYENS, 'In Search of Kaditswene,' 3–17; BOEYENS, 'The Late Iron Age Sequence in the Marico and Early Tswana History,' 63–78; JAN C.A. BOEYENS and DESMOND T. COLE, 'Kaditshwene: What's in a Name?,' *Nomina Africana* 9, no. 1 (1995): 1–40.

[68] BOEYENS, 'The Intersection of Archaeology, Oral Tradition and History,' 7–8; BOEYENS and HALL, 'Tlokwa Oral Traditions and the Interface between History and Archaeology at Marothodi,' 460, 463.

The first written documents in which information relevant to the Bahurutshe appeared were the reports by the Truter-Somerville expedition of 1801 and by Lichtenstein after his 1811–12 visit to the region.[69] Campbell's account of his sojourn in Kaditshwene in 1820, referred to in the introduction of this article, is by far the most detailed eye-witness description of life in a Hurutshe community in the period before the destruction of Kaditshwene and the dispersal of the Bahurutshe before and during the *difaqane*. It provides valuable information on life at Kaditshwene and the leaders of the Bahurutshe, *kgôsi* Diutlwileng, who reigned till 1823 when he was killed during the sacking of Kaditshwene, and the young Moiloa, later *kgôsi* Moiloa II, who reigned from the 1840s to the 1870s at Dinokana.[70]

Missionaries made a major contribution to the recording of information about the Batswana in the nineteenth century. During the 1820s, the *difaqane* wars in the interior, after invasions from the east across the Drakensberg mountains, almost totally disintegrated the Bahurutshe. Their capital, Kaditshwene, was attacked and destroyed by the invaders. They were forced to move southward and lost all their cattle.[71] When Mzilikazi's Ndebele shifted their main settlements to the Marico valley in the 1830s, the majority of the Bahurutshe moved further south.[72] The removal from their land brought along political, social and economic disruption for the scattered Hurutshe communities.[73] The journals and letters of Robert and Mary Moffett, who worked at the LMS mission station at Kuruman, provide valuable information about the turmoil in the Hurutshe territory in the 1820s and 1830s. This material was edited and published by Isaac Schapera in 1951.[74]

Apart from transcribed oral tradition and archaeological studies, as far as the period up to the early nineteenth century is concerned, historians have to rely on these early written accounts by travellers, hunters and missionaries, who recorded aspects of the history and culture of the Batswana.[75]

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[69] MANSON, 'The Hurutshe in the Marico District of the Transvaal, 1848–1914,' 25.

[70] CAMPBELL, *Travels in South Africa Undertaken at the Request of the London Missionary Society: Being the Narrative of a Second Journey in the Interior of That Country*, 222–77. Stephen Kay, a Methodist missionary, visited Kaditshwene in 1821, but made only brief mention of the Bahurutshe. See STEPHEN KAY, *Travels and Researches in Caffraria, Describing the Character, Customs and Moral Condition of the Tribes Inhabiting That Portion of Southern Africa* (New York: Harper Bros, 1834).

[71] BOEYENS, 'Die latere Ystertydperk in Suidoos- en Sentraal-Marico,' 50–51; BREUTZ, *The Tribes of Marico District*, 141.

[72] R. KENT RASMUSSEN, *Migrant Kingdom: Mzilikazi's Ndebele in South Africa* (London: Rex Collings, 1978), 97, 100, 102.

[73] GEORGE W. STOW, *The Native Races of South Africa* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1910), 558; HENDRIK VAN DER WATEREN, 'Die materiële kultuur, vervaardiging en bedryfslewe van die Bahurutshe van Motswedi' (The Material Culture, Production and Industrial Life of the Bahurutshe of Motswedi) (PhD thesis, Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, Potchefstroom, 1974), 144–51.

[74] ISAAC SCHAPERA, ed., *Apprenticeship at Kuruman Being the Journals and Letters of Robert and Mary Moffatt 1820–1828* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1951).

[75] B. MORTON, *Pre-colonial Botswana: An Annotated Bibliography and Guide to the Sources* (Gaborone: Botswana Society, 1994), 33–4.

Historians' role in the interpretation of source material dealing with Hurutshe society in the precolonial period

It is no easy task to interpret, explain and understand the precolonial past. Because the evidence is thin, it is hard for the historian to establish the sequence and connection of events, to understand how people thought, to explain human actions and to interpret the political, social and cultural frameworks by which human beings ordered their lives.

To bridge the divide between the precolonial and colonial periods, historians' task is to integrate the different types of source material in a multidisciplinary project to construct a coherent narrative of the African past. Because of the paucity of the written record in the case of the Bahurutshe, historians have to rely heavily on ethnological, archaeological and linguistic data. To achieve an understanding of the nature and dynamics of precolonial Hurutshe communities, the data sets of the different disciplines need to be combined, taking account of both disjunctures and convergences between them and using the principle of convergent verification to affirm findings. Interpretation is most reliable where the evidence contained in the data sets converges. Consonance and dissonance between the various evidential sources require careful scrutiny of the mentions and silences in the different records.[76]

The first extensive text by a historian on Hurutshe history in the precolonial period was J.J. Snyman's master's dissertation completed in the 1940s. Apart from the existing secondary literature and ethnographic data available at the time, he also made use of the oral evidence supplied by Afrikaans farmers of the Marico region contained in their memoirs. These memoirs were not first-hand accounts, but oral tradition passed on from generation to generation. Writing from an Afrikaner nationalist perspective, Snyman focused on conflict in which the Bahurutshe were involved, including intergroup conflict, for example, conflict with the Barolong, and intragroup conflict stemming from succession and leadership struggles, which often resulted in fission as factions split from groups and moved away to settle at other localities. Snyman's study was in line with Afrikaner nationalist thinking at the beginning of the apartheid era about the ethnic divisions within the African population in South Africa.[77] Two decades later, P.J. Oosthuizen completed his master's dissertation on the history of Marico, which followed the same Afrikaner nationalist historiographical line as Snyman by emphasising the conflicts and tendency of fission among the 'Bantu tribes' in the region. He argued that the Bahurutshe had been living too thinly scattered

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[76] BOEYENS, 'The Intersection of Archaeology, Oral Tradition and History,' 14–15; BOEYENS and HALL, 'Tlokwa Oral Traditions and the Interface between History and Archaeology at Marothodi,' 479.
[77] J.J. SNYMAN, 'Die naturellestamme in Marico vanaf die 18de eeu tot die verdrywing van die Matabelestam in November 1837' (The Native Tribes in Marico from the 18th Century to the Ousting of the Matabele in November 1837) (MA dissertation, Department of History, University of South Africa, Pretoria, 1949).

to maintain their unity. A series of secessions had led to the formation of an ever-increasing number of subgroups.[78]

In his early publications on the Sotho-Tswana, based on his research for his doctoral thesis, Martin Legassick formulated his critique of the frontier tradition in South African historiography, which was also applicable to the Bahurutshe owing to their finding themselves in a frontier zone for the greater part of the nineteenth century. Legassick investigated the instability, dynamism and temporary nature of the frontier zone and argued that it was a fluid space where there was no single source of legitimate authority and where acculturation took place. Legassick's work initiated renewed debate about the importance of the precolonial frontier situation in South Africa for the establishment of ideas of race, the development of racial prejudice and, implicitly, the creation of segregationist and apartheid systems.[79]

To counter the Afrikaner nationalist view of pervasive fission in Tswana societies, which bolstered government policies of segregation based on ethnic differences, liberal and radical historians argued that alternate phases of fission and fusion could be identified in early Tswana history. In specific conditions, certain factors promoted the fission of groups into smaller communities and in other conditions a different set of factors promoted the fusion of groups into larger units. Through these processes, chieftaincies and headmanships, related to one another, came into existence and proliferated.[80] Manson contends that a pattern of alternating processes of centralisation and fragmentation characterises Hurutshe history over the last five centuries. From the mid-seventeenth century and towards the end of the eighteenth century, the Hurutshe population was concentrated under powerful chiefs at major centres, notably Kaditshwene, where the powerholders increased their control over resources and the number of their adherents. Increased cohesion promoted state-formation. However, around the turn of the eighteenth century, from 1790 to 1820, surrounding Tswana states challenged the Hurutshe dominance and, plagued by succession disputes, the Bahurutshe started losing power.[81]

There has been a tendency in the different disciplines contributing to the historiography of the Bahurutshe in the precolonial period to focus mainly on

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[78] P.J. OOSTHUIZEN, 'Die geskiedenis van Marico tot 1900' (The History of Marico up to 1900) (MA dissertation, Potchefstroomse Universiteit vir Christelike Hoër Onderwys, Potchefstroom, 1971).

[79] M.C. LEGASSICK, 'The Griqua, the Sotho-Tswana, and the Missionaries, 1780–1840: The Politics of a Frontier Zone' (PhD thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1969). The thesis was published as a book by Basler Afrika Bibliographien in 2010. See also MARTIN LEGASSICK, 'The Sotho-Tswana Peoples before 1800,' in *African Societies in Southern Africa*, ed. Leonard Thompson (London: Heinemann, 1969), 15–35; MARTIN LEGASSICK, 'The Frontier Tradition in South African Historiography,' in *Economy and Society in Pre-industrial South Africa*, eds S. Marks and A. Atmore (London: Longman, 1980), 44–79; JARED MCDONALD, 'Review of The Politics of a South African Frontier by Martin Legassick,' *Historia* 56, no. 1 (2011): 159–61.

[80] LEGASSICK, 'The Griqua, the Sotho-Tswana, and the Missionaries, 1780–1840: The Politics of a Frontier Zone,' 87, 98–99, 124.

[81] MANSON, 'The Hurutshe in the Marico District of the Transvaal, 1848–1914,' 21, 36–37, 40–42, 50–53. See also PARSONS, 'Prelude to Difaqane in the Interior of Southern Africa c. 1600–c. 1822,' 323–24, 335–36, 344, 345, 346, 348.

intergroup conflict. Historians and archaeologists agree that continual conflict was a feature of early Tswana history because of the jostling for land, cattle, trading positions and ultimately power between armed chieftaincies.[82] These conflicts resulted in movements of people and realignments of power, but disease, droughts and warfare restricted the ability of any single kingdom to sustain a dominant role for any length of time. The argument that from the seventeenth century onwards the increase in human population heightened the competition for resources and caused an intensification of conflict among Tswana groups in the western Highveld is persuasive. The fact that the remains of most of the Iron Age settlements are located on hilltops has been interpreted as an indication that the people who built them sought defensible sites against attacks by neighbouring groups.

Unfortunately, the focus on conflict may lead to a one-sided perspective, which creates the impression that interaction between Tswana groups was predominantly conflictual rather than collaborative. To bring balance, historians of the Bahurutshe should strengthen research on the thread of centralisation and collaboration in Hurutshe history in periods of strong leadership.

The significance of the precolonial history of the Bahurutshe

Building on the groundwork laid by ethnologists and archaeologists, historians started interpreting aspects of early Hurutshe history to produce a cohesive narrative. Because the level of 'reliving' that is required for good history-writing is hard to attain for non-literate societies in precolonial times, it has been and will continue to be an arduous task. Is it a worthwhile exercise to go to so much trouble to compile scraps of information from different sources to construct the early history of the Bahurutshe? Does the history of precolonial African societies still have significance in the twenty-first century, hundreds of years later?

While writing about the Bahurutshe from different historiographical perspectives, historians brought to the fore some typical and topical issues informing the national discourse in both the apartheid and post-apartheid eras. Two matters that have received attention are ethnicity and land ownership.

Ethnicity, the sense of belonging to a group that is rooted in a notion of shared cultural peoplehood, is one of the most controversial issues.[83] The existence of

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[82] See e.g., ANDREW MANSON, 'Conflict in the Western Highveld/Southern Kalahari c. 1750–1820' and SIMON HALL, 'Archaeological Indicators for Stress in the Western Transvaal Region between the Seventeenth and Nineteenth Centuries,' in *The Mfecane Aftermath*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1995), 351–61 and 307–21. See also the cited works by Parsons, Etherington and Boeyens.

[83] The complex phenomenon of ethnicity has been investigated from different perspectives. See e.g., WSEVOLOD W. ISAJIW, 'Definition and Dimensions of Ethnicity: A Theoretical Framework,' paper, Joint Canada-United States Conference on the Measurement of Ethnicity, Ottawa, 1992, https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/68/2/Def_DimofEthnicity.pdf, accessed 27 May 2022; ELLIOTT D. GREEN, 'Redefining Ethnicity,' paper, 47th Annual International Studies Association Convention, San Diego, CA, 2006, available at https://personal.lse.ac.uk/GREENED/ISA.pdf,

different ethnic groups in South Africa is a historical fact that has evolved over many centuries.[84] However, the classification by Breutz, a white ethnologist working for the apartheid government, of the components of the Tswana population in terms of different 'tribes' and ethnic subgroups has been challenged. By identifying 'tribes' culturally, Breutz gave the 'tribe' a real, but specious, identity. Although the value of his data was beyond dispute, his ideological outlook was under suspicion. Breutz's ethnic classification was used by the apartheid government, which manipulated ethnic differences in order to divide and rule the black majority in South Africa and perpetuate white minority domination. It was rejected as unacceptable by liberal and radical scholars who regarded ethnicity as 'false consciousness' and its use by the government as retrogressive and divisive 'tribalism.' Critics argued that there was little point in trying to identify people by clear-cut ethnic characteristics, because ethnic identities did not remain 'pure' throughout the centuries.[85]

Colonial concepts of ethnicity need to be broadened when writing Africa's early history. According to anticolonial insights, the concepts of 'tribe' and ethnic distinctions are inventions of the colonial mind. 'Tribe,' with its connotation of primitive and static African communities, was used by colonialists in an imprecise way to refer to groups, identified variously by shared language, ancestry or allegiance to the same ruler, whereas the combination of these different characteristics was seldom contained within one clearly defined African group. Ethnicity as a social construct has often been used to promote political agendas. Both colonial and postcolonial rulers used ethnic categories as a tool of domination.[86]

In a pathbreaking study, Ronald Atkinson responded to the question of whether ethnicity was a creation of the colonial period or whether it was a reality in precolonial times. He found that, although the British colonisers of Uganda manipulated the notion of an Acholi 'tribe,' the process of the formation of Acholi ethnic identity had started in the seventeenth century, a long time before the colonial period. He emphasised that the socio-political groupings of the present cannot simply be read back into the past, because ethnicity is not an unchanging, single-dimensional phenomenon, but the changing product of an unfinished process of identity formation. The development of ethnicity should be regarded as a link between the precolonial and colonial past.[87]

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accessed 27 May 2022; HANNA ZAGEFKA, 'The Concept of Ethnicity in Social Psychological Research: Definitional Issues,' *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 33 (2009): 228–41, doi: 10.1016/j.ijintrel.2008.08.001.

[84] See e.g., ISAAC SCHAPERA, *The Ethnic Composition of Tswana Tribes* (London: Routledge, 1952).

[85] *The Historiography of Southern Africa*, 90.

[86] SCHOENBRUN, 'A Past Whose Time Has Come,' 47; SCHOENBRUN, 'Early African Pasts,' 28; ATJENO ODHIAMBO, 'Review of Ronald R. Atkinson, *The Roots of Ethnicity: The Origins of the Acholi of Uganda before 1800*,' *American Historical Review* (April 1996): 535–36, see 536.

[87] RONALD R. ATKINSON, *The Roots of Ethnicity: The Origins of the Acholi of Uganda before 1800* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994). See also ATKINSON, 'The Evolution of Ethnicity among the Acholi of Uganda: The Precolonial Phase,' *Ethnohistory* 36, no. 1 (Winter, 1989): 19–43, see 19–20.

The semantics of ethnicity has been 'retooled.'[88] Today many scholars agree that the idea of clearly identifiable ethnic groups is not applicable to precolonial African groups, because their identities were fluid, permeable, overlapping and complex.[89] Landau regards the concept of entrenched ethnic identities as not a natural cultural residue from the distant past, but a Eurocentric invention that developed in the colonial period. In his view, the 'Bechuana people' were not an ethnicity, a tribe, or even a single racial type.[90]

Ethnicity remains a controversial issue in the diverse society of South Africa. The significance of Hurutshe precolonial history for current South African debates around ethnicity lies in the fact that it reveals the roots of ethnic formation in the country. The way in which the Phofu cluster, the larger Bahurutshe-Bakwena formation, split into ever-increasing subgroups was typical of the origins of different ethnic groups in the country.

More research (perhaps modelled on the example of Atkinson) is required to test the conflicting viewpoints in the discourse on Breutz's work and obtain a clearer understanding of how ethnicity among the Batswana was manifested in precolonial times. In the case of the Bahurutshe, research on aspects such as totemism[91] may bring greater clarity on whether this group functioned as a relatively homogeneous ethnic group from the sixteenth century CE onwards.

Another controversial issue in South African historiography to which oral tradition and archaeology have made contributions is the question about the time of arrival of different groups in different parts of the country and their claims of being 'indigenous people.' When the definition of 'indigenous people' as people who have always lived in a particular place rather than having arrived from another place is applied to South Africa, the question raised is whether any group can claim to be indigenous. Commenting on the claims by the San and Khoi that they should be recognised as South Africa's 'first people,' Crowe notes that DNA evidence reveals that all groups currently living in South Africa should be regarded as 'settlers' and 'colonisers.' The ancestors of the San arrived here about 140,000 years ago, those of

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[88] SCHOENBRUN, 'A Past Whose Time Has Come,' 48.

[89] GABRIELLE LYNCH, 'Ethnicity in Africa,' *Oxford Research Encyclopedias, African History*, 2018, doi: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.32.

[90] PAUL S. LANDAU, *Popular Politics in the History of South Africa, 1400–1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 41, 64, 121. See also the description of ethnic distinctions as a 'consciously crafted ideological creation' in LEROY VAIL, 'Introduction: Ethnicity in Southern African History,' in *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, ed. Vail (University of California Press E-Books Collection, 1989), par. 7, http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft158004rs/.

[91] For more information on the switch from the *phofu* (eland) to the *tshwene* (baboon) as the totem of the Bahurutshe, see BREUTZ, *The Tribes of Marico District*, 19; PAUL LENERT BREUTZ, *A History of the Batswana and Origin of Bophuthatswana: A Handbook of a Survey of the Tribes of the Batswana, s'Ndebele, Qwaqwa and Botswana* (Margate: Breutz, 1987), 226; PARSONS, 'Prelude to Difaqane in the Interior of Southern Africa c. 1600–c. 1822,' 323–50, see 330, 332.

the Khoi about 2,000 years ago, those of the Bantu-speaking black Africans fewer than 1,700 years ago and those of the Europeans fewer than four centuries ago.[92]

Colonial and Afrikaner nationalist historians tried to justify the historical fact that in the colonial period people of European descent took possession of the largest part of South Africa. They did it by means of the 'empty land myth,' alleging that whites and blacks arrived at the southern tip of the continent at roughly the same time and that the white pioneers moved into a largely uninhabited interior.[93] Shula Marks successfully refuted the empty land myth by using archaeological evidence to prove that the ancestors of the Bantu-speakers arrived in southern Africa long before the first European settlers.[94] The African nationalist point of view is that the African ancestors can claim indigeneity by virtue of their very early arrival in southern Africa.[95] However, research established that the Bantu-speakers did not arrive so early: in the case of the Bahurutshe in Marico somewhere between 1200 and 1600 CE. Therefore, neither the colonial and Afrikaner nationalist versions nor the African nationalist version of the arrival of the different groups is based on hard empirical evidence.

The claims of early arrival in southern Africa and of indigeneity represent a significant input into current debates on the land issue, one of the most controversial aspects of policy in the country.[96] This input is certainly applicable to the land claims of the Bahurutshe, who arrived in the Marico region centuries before the white farmers who, from the nineteenth century, gradually supplanted them.

We argue that Hurutshe history has major significance in the bigger picture of the South African past. It fits into the broader pattern of the country's history and has relevance for the understanding of current debates around controversial issues such as ethnicity and land claims.

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[92] TIM CROWE, 'How the Origin of the Khoisan Tells Us that "Race" Has No Place in Human Ancestry,' *The Conversation*, 2016, https://theconversation.com/how-the-origin-of-the-khoisan-tells-us-that-race-has-no-place-in-human-ancestry-53594, accessed 27 May 2022.

[93] See e.g., G.M. THEAL, *History of South Africa before 1795*, 3rd ed., vol. III (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1922), 128–30; F.A. van Jaarsveld, *From Van Riebeeck to Vorster, 1652–1974: An Introduction to the History of the Republic of South Africa* (Pretoria: Academica, 1975), 54; South African History Online, 'The Empty Land Myth,' 2015, https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/empty-land-myth, accessed 27 May 2022.

[94] SHULA MARKS, 'South Africa – "The Myth of the Empty Land",' *History Today* 30, no. 1 (1980), https://www.historytoday.com/shula-marks/south-africa-myth-empty-land, accessed 27 May 2022. See also CLIFTON C. CRAIS, 'The Vacant Land: The Mythology of British Expansion in the Eastern Cape, South Africa,' *Journal of Social History*, 25, no. 2 (1991): 255–75.

[95] LEONARD NGCONGCO, 'Origins of the Tswana,' *Pula: Botswana Journal of African Studies* 1, no. 2 (1979): 21–46, see 26, 28, 39.

[96] For details about these debates, consult F. HENDRICKS, L. NTSEBEZA, and K. HELLIKER, eds, *The Promise of Land: Undoing a Century of Dispossession in South Africa* (Auckland Park: Jacana, 2013); P. HEBINCK and B. COUSINS, eds, *In the Shadow of Policy: Everyday Practices in South African Land and Agrarian Reform* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2013); LUNGISILE NTSEBEZA and RUTH HALL, eds, *The Land Question in South Africa* (Pretoria: HSRC Press, 2017); WILLIAM BEINART, PETER DELIUS, and MICHELLE HAY, *Rights to Land* (Auckland Park: Jacana, 2017).

Conclusion

In the colonial frame of mind, the history of precolonial African societies was regarded as unknowable and insignificant. This resulted in the misrepresentation of these societies as fixed, passive, isolated, unenterprising and unenlightened. We now know that the history of precolonial African societies, spanning a much longer period than the history of European settlement in southern Africa, was eventful and characterised by interaction, flux, mixing and adaptability.

In this article, the three sources from which historians obtain their material for the research of the Bahurutshe in the precolonial era have been discussed: oral tradition, archaeological studies of Iron Age sites, and the oldest written accounts by European visitors to the Marico. I have shown that because the Batswana were non-literate societies before the nineteenth century, the study of their early history has to be a multidisciplinary project requiring the inputs of anthropologists, archaeologists and linguists. Boeyens states that the different sources 'must be studied conjunctively and comparatively to gain a more complete understanding of the past.'[97]

Compared to the advances in the breadth and depth of the historiography of precolonial societies in West, Central and East Africa, the knowledge about the distant past in southern Africa has lagged behind, partly owing to the fact that decolonisation happened later in the southern part of the continent. Already in the 1970s, participants in the project to compile UNESCO's *General History of Africa* observed this backlog and called for a multidisciplinary approach to the study of the history of the subcontinent.[98]

In order to redress this situation, scholars from different disciplines launched the Five Hundred Year Initiative many years later in 2006. Its objective is to overcome the lack of interdisciplinary vision and cooperation that resulted in the circumscribed use of documentary, oral and material records which limited integration and historical depth in the study of the precolonial period in southern Africa. It aims to promote interdisciplinary research involving archaeologists, oral historians, social anthropologists, linguists and others in order to reconnect erstwhile disparate sources into a coherent intellectual agenda. A comprehensive digital database of precolonial material related to the southern African region is being created. Participants of this initiative strive to reinterrogate the last five hundred years and generate a more comprehensive understanding of modern southern Africa.[99]

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[97] BOEYENS, 'The Intersection of Archaeology, Oral Tradition and History,' 2.
[98] *The Historiography of Southern Africa*, 19, 89.
[99] P.L. BONNER et al., 'Introduction' and JOANNA BEHRENS and NATALIE SWANEPOEL, 'Historical Archaeologies of Southern Africa: Precedents and Prospects,' in *Five Hundred Years Rediscovered: Southern African Precedents and Prospects*, eds Natalie Swanepoel, Amanda Esterhuysen, and Philip Bonner (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2008), 1–20 and 23–40 respectively, see 23. More information about the FHYA is available at Archive and Public Culture, http://www.apc.uct.ac.za/apc/research/projects/five-hundred-year-archive, accessed 27 May 2022.

What progress has thus far been made by means of multi- and interdisciplinary projects in the production of historical knowledge about the Bahurutshe in the precolonial period? When the latest developments in precolonial African historiography, as described earlier in this article, are considered, it is clear that as far as the Bahurutshe are concerned, the desired level of synthesis of disciplines has not yet been achieved. It is true that by combining multidisciplinary inputs, factual knowledge about the Bahurutshe in precolonial times has been expanded to form the basis of an emerging coherent history. However, there is much scope for future interdisciplinary research.

Historians studying the Bahurutshe should build upon the methodological innovations applied to other parts of the continent, where interdisciplinary collaboration over a period of several decades has resulted in a remarkable increase in knowledge about peoples living in the distant past. More research in the field of the environmental history of the Marico is required, because information about environmental conditions in the region in different periods, the impacts of these conditions on the human population and their responses to adapt to them can potentially be very important for a better understanding of Hurutshe history. Inputs from light detection and ranging (LiDAR), bio-archaeology, zoo-archaeology, archaeobotany, geo-archaeological studies of soils and sediments and palaeogenetics are still lacking at well-documented archaeological sites, such as Kaditshwene, but have the potential to considerably expand scientific data. Hopefully, the Five Hundred Year Initiative can play a role in facilitating this kind of interdisciplinary team research.

The further development of the precolonial historiography of the Bahurutshe (and other South African communities) through interdisciplinary research has the potential to realise McNeill's expectation that precolonial African history may prove to be a 'guide to our future as historians.' It may have significance beyond the country's borders for historians using similar sources in their research on the distant past of people in other parts of the world.