

Auto/ Biographical Narratives and the Lives of Jordan Ngubane

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1 Introduction¹

In South African historiography over the past two decades, autobiographies and personal narratives have been used to engage with theoretical issues of culture, identity and consciousness, to help recast 'revisionist' accounts of class formation and capitalist development². Life histories have been used to explore the complex web of class, racial, gender and ethnic identifications through which peoples' lives have been shaped, and to address questions of human agency. They have been especially important in approaching history 'from the bottom up', to rewrite South African history in terms of the experiences of ordinary people. This has included work on African politics, with which this article is primarily concerned. African nationalist politics in Lodge's work, for example, has been rooted in 'grass-roots' community experience. In *Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945* (1983), he traces the post-war rise of the nationalist movement essentially as a process of interaction between the strata of political leadership and local communities at 'grass-roots' level, each with localised day-to-day grievances and local histories of resistance. This transforms an understanding of nationalist politics provided by earlier, largely 'institutional' accounts³. However, in approaching African political history 'from below', Lodge

¹ I am indebted to Shula Marks and Paul la Hausse for their valuable comments on an earlier draft of this article. It arises from my current doctoral research for a biography of Ngubane.

² For further discussion of such developments in South African historiography, see Brown (1991). A growing literature is exploring the potential of personal narratives to recover the historically muted voices of women, working class people and Africans. See, for example, Personal Narratives Group (1989).

³ Both Walshe (1971) and Karis & Carter's (1972-1977) series focus primarily on organised politics sustained by the actions of African elites. Although these works refer to the extent to which such institutions were more broadly representative, the nature of their popular support (or lack of it) is not examined in detail.

downplays the importance of ideologies and the role of the strata of political leadership. Recent historiographic concerns tend to focus on 'grass-roots' to the exclusion of the intelligentsia. Intellectual or ideological differences remain only partially explained by reference to social differentiation between groups and factions, while the thinking of individuals is examined within these collective frameworks of political groups and factions.

Important questions remain about the complexities and nuances in the thought of the African intelligentsia. As Lodge demonstrates, it was their interaction with people at 'grass roots' level that sustained the liberation movement. Moreover, it was through the communal imaginings of such people that it also became a *nationalist* movement that sought to direct the struggles of diverse communities. Yet nationalist visions have been both contested and ambiguous⁴. Partly engaging with such issues, a growing body of work focuses on the complexities of social stratification and consciousness, and the structural ambiguities of the African intelligentsia (see especially Bradford 1987); and Marks 1986). Challenging any simple notion of a distinct 'African petty bourgeoisie', they explore an intersecting web of identifications based around race, class, gender, ethnicity and region. Significantly, many of these are biographical studies, tracing such complexities in the lives of individuals⁵. Yet while these works explore aspects of the identities and consciousness of the African intelligentsia, few focus specifically on intellectual history. A history in these terms would be important in itself, as well as contributing to more nuanced understandings of political history and the ambiguities of social formation. The collected writings and speeches of individuals, autobiography and intellectual biography offer important avenues for further research in this area, in order to trace in detail a number of simultaneously competing and intersecting intellectual strands, and the ways that these crystallise into 'usable' ideologies.

Jordan Ngubane's career is one such potential avenue. A prolific if controversial member of the African intelligentsia during much of the twentieth century, he produced both a large body of writing and a series of detailed autobiographies. A history of his life and thought highlights some of the complexities, not fully evidenced in existing literature, of African intellectual history, and can provide insights into African elite identity formation. The ways in which it

⁴ The literature which does focus on the constructive capacities of such communal imaginings —contrasting with the way Lodge downplays the role of ideologies— tends to focus specifically on Zulu nationalism. Here, the emphasis on the 'constructedness' of Zulu identity is largely a critical one. See, for example Marks (1989); Mare (1992); and Golan (1994).

⁵ See Willan (1984); Couzens (1985); and La Hausse (1992). Marks's work cited above also focuses on individual figures.

can do so, however, depend upon the ways in which his life is 'written', and the ways in which it is 'read'. His own writings, the recollections of former colleagues, and his scattered appearances in historical literature present either partial or conflicting views of his identity. While his lengthy autobiographies present the most fully elaborated versions of his life and thought, they are problematic accounts. Moreover, much recent debate about autobiography has emphasised the connections between self-representation and self-construction. In the process of writing his past, Ngubane sought to reconstruct his identity in the present. Thus his autobiographies reveal most about his consciousness at the time of writing. Yet, I will argue that they can also be interpreted to offer insights into the longer history of his life and thought. Such a reading, however, requires knowledge of Ngubane's life and evidence of his thought from sources other than his retrospective accounts—sources which are at times complementary, at times, contradictory.

2 Who was Jordan Ngubane?⁶

Jordan Kush Ngubane was born in 1917 in Ladysmith in Natal, the son of a semi-literate Zulu-speaking policeman, who had upwardly mobile aspirations for his children. Jordan was educated at local mission schools of varying denominations in Dundee and Ladysmith, and also learnt about 'traditional' Zulu custom and history from family members and peers. At school he was a bright pupil, and at the age of sixteen he entered Adams College, Natal's most prestigious school for Africans. In his final year at school, he took a correspondence course in journalism, and began contributing to *Ilanga lase Natal*, the English and Zulu weekly newspaper which voiced the concerns of Natal's educated African population. He matriculated with good results in 1937, and was offered a permanent job on *Ilanga*. Ngubane's early journalism consisted largely of social satire, but became increasingly infused, by the early 1940s, with biting social and political commentary. At the same time, he became a key member of a small but growing group of dissatisfied 'young intellectuals' in Durban. They were beginning to challenge the older generation of African political leadership which was deeply divided within Natal, and isolated from national politics, when Ngubane was transferred by the newspaper's owners, in 1943,

⁶ The following biographical sketch was compiled from a range of sources indicated below. My concerns are largely with the political and intellectual aspects of Ngubane's life. As with self-representation, the selection and presentation of data deemed relevant to another's life in a biography is influenced by the perspective of the author. Of more immediate concern in this article, however, is the way in which a biographical account is shaped also by the nature and extent of available source material, especially where these are apparently contradictory.

to work on *Bantu World* in Johannesburg. There, he was a founder-member of the militant, nationalist ANC Youth League, and he co-drafted its constitution and manifesto with A.P. Mda and Anton Lembede in early 1944. At this time he married Eleanor Madondo, a mission-educated, articulate and politically well-informed nurse. Together they had two children.

In 1944 Ngubane returned to Natal to take up the editorship of *Inkundla ya Bantu*, at that time a monthly journal serving mainly the northern Transkei and southern Natal. The group of African businessmen who owned the paper intended to expand it to a national weekly. This was eventually achieved under Ngubane's editorship, and *Inkundla* became 'the country's leading forum for the expression of African political opinion' (Karis & Carter 1977:115) of the day. Initially Ngubane used the paper to campaign for uniting Natal's deeply divided African political factions under the leadership of the veteran A.W.G. Champion. *Inkundla* remained independent of any particular political organisation, and Ngubane directed it towards political and cultural 'Nation Building', thus generally supporting the efforts of the Congress Youth League. By the late 1940s he also led the Natal branch of the Youth League, and campaigned against Champion, this time in favour of Chief Albert Lutuli. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Ngubane suffered prolonged periods of ill health. In 1951, this combined with financial difficulties and increasing government suppression, leading to *Inkundla's* collapse.

In the early 1950s, Ngubane drifted from the ANC, which he saw as increasingly compromised by the growing influence of mainly white and Asian communists. In 1953, he resumed his journalistic career, co-editing *Indian Opinion* with his friend, Manilal Gandhi, until Gandhi's death in 1956 when Ngubane took over the editing on his own. In 1955 he joined the recently formed Liberal Party of South Africa (LPSA), a multi-racial anti-apartheid group led mainly by whites. Ngubane rose to become its national Vice President—the Party's highest-ranking African member. At the same time he kept in close contact with some of the nationalists within the ANC who in 1959 broke away to form the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC). In 1958 he attended the All-Africa Peoples' Conference in Ghana as a representative of the LPSA, and this stimulated his broad but critical interest in pan-African affairs. The following year, he joined the PAC upon its inauguration, and helped the party leadership to communicate with independent African states through his diplomatic contacts. Following the banning of the ANC and PAC in 1960, a Consultative Conference of African leaders was called to co-ordinate the activities of the various anti-apartheid groups. Ngubane chaired the Continuation Committee formed at this conference, charged with organising follow-up 'All-In' conferences. However, partisan divisions could not be overcome, the PAC and LPSA members of the committee resigned, and these initiatives failed. Soon thereafter, Ngubane was charged, ironically, under the Suppression of Communism Act. He was convicted,

acquitted, and then banned in 1962, as a result of which he decided to flee the country.

He spent the next eight years in Swaziland where he became involved in the politics of decolonisation. Although for security reasons he had to keep a low profile, he was a founder-member and key ideologue in the multi-racial Swaziland Democratic Party, until its rout in the 1964 elections. In exile, Ngubane's career as a journalist came to an end and he concentrated instead on book writing. In this he was partially successful; several of the many manuscripts he produced in subsequent years were at least published if not widely read. In 1969, after several years of separation from his wife and family, Ngubane moved to America, initially to lecture on South African affairs at Howard University in Washington DC. By this time, in the face of internal political dissolution within South Africa, Ngubane thought that the ethnic 'homelands' being created by the apartheid regime could be used as important political platforms, and he threw his weight behind Chief Buthelezi, who had been his friend since the mid 1940s. In the States Ngubane acted as Buthelezi's 'informal ambassador', and lobbied the US State Department and African diplomats to take a more positive view of the 'homeland' leader. In the States he also began a lasting relationship with a white nun, Bernice Wardell, who renounced her faith soon after their acquaintance. Encouraged by her searching curiosity, Ngubane turned to theorising about the philosophy of *ubuntu* ('African humanism'), which increasingly infused the religious, cultural, political and historical aspects of his thought. In 1980, Buthelezi arranged for Ngubane's return to South Africa, hoping that he could provide an incisive strategic analysis for *Inkatha* and use his journalistic experience to improve *Inkatha's* public relations machinery. Ngubane joined the *Inkatha* Central Committee at Ulundi but failed to make a substantial impact in either of these intended roles. He remained preoccupied instead with more philosophical notions, until he died in 1985.

Jordan Ngubane's career thus followed an idiosyncratic trajectory. Without a lasting home in any political organisation, and by self-consciously carving out a career for himself as a critic, Ngubane remained something of a dissident, if at times influential, voice within African politics. His political roles were often 'behind-the-scenes', as he campaigned on behalf of others, and in the press sought to influence opinion. He was also an important intellectual figure, at all times in his career extending beyond narrowly political commentary, writing extensively on political philosophy, history, African literary culture and esoterics. Indeed, in his memoirs he recorded that had he not been drawn into the political fray as a young journalist, he would have pursued a career as a creative writer. In the event, he tried his hand periodically at fiction writing, with some success, and was also noted as a literary critic.

For these reasons, he is both a fascinating and an important figure in twentieth century South African history, but at the same time he remains a somewhat elusive figure. This is despite the public nature of his career, the numerous writings

he produced throughout his life, including detailed autobiographies, the lucid memories of former friends and colleagues, and the significant but limited academic attention that his contribution to South African history has received. In terms of scholarly studies, Ngubane has been the subject of a BA dissertation, a PhD thesis, and a chapter in a book about the African press⁷. However, all of these studies deal exclusively with the 1940s, and in particular with his work as editor of *Inkundla*. They contain little if any discussion of the remainder of his career, and also concentrate on the journal itself rather than on the thought of its editor. Unsurprisingly, Ngubane also appears frequently if fleetingly in studies of African politics, and to a lesser degree in literary studies. Depending on the period under discussion, he is usually referred to alternatively as 'one of the founders of the ANC Youth League', an 'African journalist', 'a prominent African liberal', or 'an *Inkatha* ideologue'⁸. While it is true that he was all of these things, when taken together such brief allusions do little to provide an account of the complexity of his thought, and do not attempt to explain his differing roles over time. Thumbnail biographical sketches of individuals that appear in accounts of African politics rely on referring to people's official roles in organisations, their professional status, ideological labels, and the use of such dichotomies as 'moderate-radical'. Such descriptions do little to reflect the complexities of individuals' motivations and intentions, nor do they begin to unpack the meanings of the descriptive labels themselves⁹.

In addition to the disjointed picture of Ngubane gleaned from his scattered appearances in academic literature, the perceptions of people that knew him as a friend or colleague also differ widely. They compete to pull Ngubane's place in history, and an understanding of his life, in different directions. Individuals who knew and worked with him at various stages in his political career each wish to claim him as one of 'their own'¹⁰. To those who knew him primarily as a fellow-member of

⁷ These are: Eales (1984); Ukpanah (1993); and Switzer & Ukpanah (1997).

⁸ For mentions of his role in the 1940s and early 1950s, see Walshe (1971), Karris & Carter, Vol 2 (1972-1977). His autobiographies are cited frequently in both as a source of information on the ANC Youth League. For passing references to Ngubane's role as an African liberal, see especially Vigne (1997) and Robertson (1971). Ngubane appears as an *Inkatha* ideologue most conspicuously in Golan (1995). His contributions as a literary critic are mentioned in Couzens (1984).

⁹ Jane Starfield (1988:19). It should be noted, however, that even thumbnail sketches are certainly better than no personal histories at all. Karis and Carter's Volume 4 (1977), *Political Profiles*, is invaluable in this respect.

¹⁰ The following remarks are based on interviews conducted with a number of Ngubane's former acquaintances. They are to some extent generalisations, but nevertheless serve to highlight the various claims made upon his life.

the Liberal Party, he is remembered as a like-minded humanitarian whose anti-racism was profound and outstanding. Thus Benjamin Pogrud, for example, describes him as 'a remarkable South African, with a great breadth of vision and a depth of non-racism which was highly unusual at that time in anyone, whether black or white'¹¹. Such memories are undeterred by the fact that in later life, Ngubane spurned the friendship of his former liberal colleagues. They tend to explain this by citing rumours that 'he ruined himself with drink' and suspicions that 'he became racist'¹². The 'real' Ngubane, in such memories, was the anti-racist moralist they had known; this was his greatest contribution to South Africa.

There are contrasting claims made on Ngubane's legacy by African nationalists of the PAC, which Ngubane joined upon its inauguration in 1959, much to the chagrin of many within the Liberal Party. According to PAC supporters, Ngubane was, at heart, one of them—'he was a nationalist to the end'¹³. In their view, when Ngubane 'hobnob[bed] with the liberals', this was a temporary, tactical 'blunder' rather than a genuine indication of his thinking at the time. The fact that his involvement in the PAC was largely informal does not discourage one member's claims about his loyalties, that 'he supported the PAC because he was friendly to the PAC people and he understood the ideas of the PAC'¹⁴.

According to his more recent colleagues in *Inkatha*, however, it was Ngubane's long-standing friendship with Buthelezi, dating back to the mid 1940s, which defined his loyalties. They claim Ngubane from the same perspective that views *Inkatha* as representative of the 'true spirit' of the ANC as it was up to 1949. According to one young *Inkatha* member who knew Ngubane from 1980, 'his vision, political vision, was similar to the IFP, or the old ANC as it was propounded by the founding fathers'¹⁵. As a founder of this 'true spirit' of the early Youth League, Ngubane's later support for *Inkatha* is indeed a potential, if ambiguous, source of credibility for such claims. Little wonder then that despite his muted reservations about the organisation, *Inkatha* lays claim to his heritage. Ngubane was buried in 'traditional' Zulu manner in Ulundi in a large ceremony from which his former friends were excluded. His papers remain in the hands of the KwaZulu Monuments' Council, which cautiously guards his memory by restricting or forbidding access to much of the material he bequeathed.

¹¹ Author's correspondence with B. Pogrud, 22 June 1998.

¹² Author's interviews with Randolph Vigne, London, 21 February 1997, and Ken and Jean Hill, Durban, 23 September 1997.

¹³ This and the following quotes are from author's interview with A.B. Ngcobo, Ulundi, 14 September 1997.

¹⁴ Author's interview with Joe Mkhwanazi, Durban, 25 September 1997.

¹⁵ Author's interview with Thami Duma, Ulundi, 16 September 1997.

To further complicate these competing memories, some of his former colleagues wish rather to see him as 'other', to distance him from themselves. In particular, his considerable contributions to the revitalisation of the ANC during the 1940s are generally overlooked by ANC-aligned intellectuals, who prefer to focus on Mandela, Sisulu, Tambo and others during that period¹⁶. Thus he is omitted from the gallery of ANC 'heroes' of the past, for in a heroic history his bitter criticisms of the 'communist dominated' ANC in the 1950s overshadow his important contributions of the 1940s. If his contributions are conceded at all, they are done so only reluctantly. Remembering Ngubane's role in the 1940s, I.C. Meer, for example, remarked on his 'very articulate, logical journalism ... even if much of it was rationalisation'¹⁷.

Thus Ngubane's roles were seen by at least some of his colleagues to be mutually incompatible. It is little wonder, then, that when he came to recording his memoirs, Ngubane stressed that the human mind was inherently 'many-sided', and that life's purpose was to develop this many-sided potential. But this 'many-sidedness' and the element of 'elusiveness' is not simply the result of a controversial political career. Ngubane was a complex and varied thinker. His intellectual output as a journalist, writer, political strategist, public speaker, critic and scholar straddled the fields of political commentary, social satire, literary and artistic criticism, fiction, history, political science, Egyptology, cosmology and moral philosophy. And as his career progressed, his moves from 'African nationalist' to 'liberal' to 'Zulu patriot' were accompanied by shifting tensions between a number of intellectual strands. Through these shifts, Ngubane sought to forge an identity for himself, an identity that was both complex and fluid. Moreover, he did so in the context of South Africa's systems of racial domination, which left little room in which African intellectuals could manoeuvre—especially for those, like Ngubane, who sought to make a living out of the free expression of their ideas. Ngubane's efforts to forge an identity for himself were thus played out within shifting boundaries of restricted political and intellectual spaces. It is within this process—the interaction between Ngubane's own intellectual labours and the changing, multi-layered worlds he inhabited—that one must seek to recover this 'elusive' figure.

Although Ngubane provided detailed accounts of his own life and times, they are problematic historical sources. On the one hand, the autobiographical act itself forms part of the way individuals construct their identity. In presenting particular versions of the past, his autobiographies reveal most about his view of him-

¹⁶ Lodge identifies several strands of ANC-aligned historiography. Apart from the 'Africanist' strand of the 1940s, of which Ngubane was himself an important part, all overlook the importance of such thinkers as Ngubane (Lodge 1991).

¹⁷ Notes from author's telephone conversation with I.C. Meer, Durban, 27 March 1997.

self and the identity he tried to assert at the time of writing. On the other hand, in presenting these views (however skewed) of his own past, they can simultaneously reveal something about that past. In order to separate what they reveal from what they conceal and distort, however, sensitivity to a host of interpretive issues is required by the reader. As the Personal Narratives Group, writing with reference to women's life stories, assert:

When talking about their lives, people lie sometimes, forget a lot, exaggerate, become confused, and get things wrong. Yet they *are* revealing truths. These truths don't reveal the past 'as it actually was', aspiring to a standard of objectivity We come to understand them only through interpretation, paying careful attention to the contexts that shape their creation and to the world views that inform them Only by attending to the conditions which create these narratives, the forms that guide them, and the relationships that produce them are we able to understand what is communicated in a personal narrative (Personal Narratives Group 1989).

Part three of this article explores these issues, tracing Ngubane's autobiographies as particular acts of self-representation, written in specific contexts, at particular moments and for specific purposes. It outlines the differing forms they took, relating these to the changing contexts in which Ngubane represented and re-presented himself. The final part explores some of the themes of the only available complete manuscript, which was completed in 1977. This is in many ways a controversial account. Both the interpretive language and theoretical framework of the narrative, and a number of 'factual' details contained in it, are contested not only from some of the directions outlined above, but also, in some cases, by Ngubane's own earlier writings.

3 The Politics of Self-Representation

Ngubane worked on his memoirs for a period spanning three decades, essentially producing two sets of accounts. None were published, and few complete manuscripts exist. Ngubane first began recording his life story during the mid 1950s, when he was in his late thirties. As far as available information indicates, an autobiographical manuscript first appeared in 1957, provocatively entitled 'Forty Years a Kaffir'¹⁸. By 1960, he had updated the work, and considered the more liberally inclined title, 'My Brother, the Human Being'¹⁹. During the early 1960s, he further updated the account,

¹⁸ It is this version that is cited several times, regarding the rise of the ANC Youth League, in Walshe (1971).

¹⁹ A synopsis and preface of this manuscript are held at the Alan Paton Centre, Vigne papers, PC86/4/1/8, file 15.

and extracts from an untitled manuscript produced in 1963 are widely available to researchers²⁰. Thereafter he appears to have discontinued the project for several years, while in exile in Swaziland. During the 1970s, in the United States, he returned to the task of producing his memoirs. In 1977, a greatly expanded version, consisting of 'about 216,000 words' appeared. It bore the title 'After the Collapse of Apartheid. An Inside View of Race Politics in South Africa'²¹. This is the latest and only complete available version, although a slightly expanded version entitled 'South Africa: The Promise and the Glory' appeared approximately a year later²².

The timing of Ngubane's earliest attempts at autobiography coincided with a period in which a number of black South African writers turned to autobiographical forms of representation. Ngubane was to some extent part of the vibrant literary culture of the 1950s, which centred around Sophiatown²³. From Natal he contributed several short stories to *Drum*²⁴, and was also one of the adjudicators for the journal's prestigious annual short story competition. He published a novel in Zulu in 1957, which proved popular until it was banned in 1963. In autobiographical and other works, writers in the 1950s shared a common concern to bear testimony against the increasingly repressive system of apartheid²⁵. By the 1960s, many were forced into exile, from where they often completed and published their personal accounts (Bahn

²⁰ Tom Karis and Gwendolyn Carter added around 150 pages of the 1963 manuscript to their extensive microfilm collection of South African political materials. These sections deal with the period from the 1940s to the early 1960s, omitting Ngubane's childhood, schooling and early journalistic career. This document is cited several times in volume two of *From Protest to Challenge* as a source of information on the ANC Youth League. These extracts are untitled and undated, although on p.238 Ngubane identified 'the time of writing' as 1963.

²¹ Copies of this version are held by a handful of university libraries including Yale, the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in London, and the University of the Witwatersrand.

²² This latest known version is generally unavailable for scrutiny, however, as it remains the property of the executors of Ngubane's will. One of them, a publisher in Durban, intends to edit and publish the work himself at some future date, although this has been his unfulfilled intention for several years. While the document certainly merits publication, it requires substantial editing.

²³ For an evaluation of the Sophiatown writers, see especially Chapman (1989).

²⁴ See, for example, 'The Answer he Wanted', December 1951, and 'Man of Africa', August 1956. Both are reproduced in Chapman (1989).

²⁵ For a further discussion of the many reasons why South African writing became increasingly infused with autobiographical content in this context, see Watts (1989:Chapter 3).

1984:23). Ngubane's efforts at autobiography share much of the context of these writers, but his works also differ in important respects from their broadly literary autobiographies. Their thinking was, according to Lodge, 'profoundly shaped by an industrial urban culture,' which produced 'an exciting and powerful literature of short stories, social reportage, and personal testimony.' Unlike Ngubane, however, they did not engage directly with ideological expositions or 'any nationalist-inspired exploration of the past' (Lodge 1991:127).

From the outset, Ngubane approached his life story explicitly as a political autobiography, tracing his role in African politics in South Africa, offering the reader an 'inside view'. Even within this 'sub-genre' of political memoir, however, his work incorporated a variety of forms. As George Egerton indicates, this 'sub-genre' has historically included varying combinations of:

contemporary descriptive recording of political events and impressions in diaries or journals, where one has been a participant in or observer of the events; retrospective narration of political engagements together with explanatory and interpretive reflections; autobiographical portrayal of one's life in politics, with childhood, education and personal development given full treatment; biographical depiction of political contemporaries from personal knowledge; revelation of the inner working of a political system based on personal acquaintance with 'the hidden springs of power'; and, in its most ambitious mode, portrayal not only of one's political life but also of the times in which this career occurred—in other words, contemporary history (Egerton 1994:xii-xiii).

Ngubane's memoirs contain elements of all of these forms. As he periodically updated the work, his intellectual preoccupations, sense of audience, and personal and political motivations shifted, and the form of his memoirs became increasingly polymorphous. In particular, his later set of accounts incorporated extensive historical, philosophical and cultural interpretation, breaching the conventional boundaries of the genre of autobiography.

The political nature of Ngubane's early efforts set them apart, not only in content but also in the motivations and intentions of the writer, from his literary counterparts. As Egerton comments, '[t]he intentional and, even more insidious, the unconscious element of personal interest operating in political memoir represents its most distinct and endemic defect' (Egerton 1994:344). The extent of such interests operating in his memoirs can be measured by comparing the accounts with Ngubane's other writings of the time, and by tracing the changing fortunes of his career as a writer and political commentator. Much recent debate about autobiography as a literary 'genre' has been about the relationship between

autobiography and fiction. Whereas even supposedly 'factual' autobiographical accounts are partly fictional, fiction can also be seen as partly autobiographical, revealing something about the author even when this is unintentional. These connections have been particularly close in South African writing since the 1950s. The works of Es'kia Mphahlele, for example, have deliberately inhabited, and thus blurred, the boundaries between these genres. Mphahlele's autobiographical fiction and his fictional autobiographies can in fact be read together as an almost seamless whole. In Ngubane's case, there is a similarly close relationship between his political memoirs and his other writing, most of which was ostensibly 'non-fictional' and 'non-autobiographical'. This is not because he deliberately inhabited the terrain between 'political autobiography' and 'political theory'. Rather, during the period he worked on his autobiographies, his other writing activity shifted from journalism to more theoretical work (see especially Ngubane (1963)). His autobiographies incorporated lengthy polemical passages that are almost identical to parts of the more scholarly works written at the same time. In turn, his theoretical works can be read as partly 'autobiographical' in that they document his political vision as it changed over time. It is an advantage afforded by extensive research for a biography—and the fact that Ngubane was a prolific writer—that a number of complementary sources are available to trace these shifts, and contextualise the ways in which Ngubane presented himself over time.

Ngubane's first set of accounts was an ambitious and controversial attempt at autobiography, history and political theory, as he sought to weave his own story into an historical and theoretical analysis of African nationalism in South Africa. The 1963 document detailed his own life from his childhood years, family life and schooling, to his entry into Natal politics as a journalist on *Ilanga*. It continued with details of his political career, seeking to explain the goals he set himself and the role he played as an African nationalist. He presented himself as a 'back-room' activist, as a founder of the ANC Youth League which, he wrote, intended to work as a 'pressure group' within the ANC, and as a journalist influencing public opinion in the press. By public campaigning for his preferred political figureheads, and through behind-the-scenes 'intrigue', he also wrote of himself as a 'king-maker' within the ANC. In the mid 1940s, he wrote, he was a key figure in reuniting the divided political factions in Natal under the leadership of AWG Champion. He claimed that although he disliked Champion's autocratic style and conservative outlook, he made this 'difficult choice' because Champion alone could overcome factional divisions. Less convincingly, he also claimed that he foresaw that as provincial leader, Champion would eventually discredit himself, and pave the way for a more suitable nationalist leader in Natal. Ngubane claimed that from the mid 1940s, he began to groom the initially reluctant Albert Lutuli for this future role, by simultaneously drawing him into the political fray and by shielding him from Champion's capacity to suppress potential rivals. By

the late 1940s, he continued, he had masterminded Champion's downfall, by gradually isolating him in political circles. Contentiously, he claimed that he was instrumental in ousting Champion's 'ally' on the national scene, the ANC President-General A.B. Xuma in 1949, in order to weaken Champion's position. When Champion was defeated in 1951, Ngubane further claimed that he convinced his reluctant colleagues in the Natal Youth League to sponsor Lutuli—seen by many as too moderate—for the Natal Presidency. Having succeeded in this, he continued to write that in December 1952, he was largely responsible for thrusting Lutuli into the position of President-General of the ANC.

The 1963 account continues with discussion of his move to the Liberal Party in 1955, although its coverage of his role in the Party is less extensive than discussion of his involvement in the ANC, even though he was the Party's most prominent African member. He claimed that he joined because of his commitment to a universal morality, and was 'hounded out of Congress' by the left. He also wrote of his support for the 'humanist' wing of the PAC, led by Robert Sobukwe, as opposed to the 'extremist' group. Throughout the narrative, Ngubane outlined his political philosophy of African nationalism, which was infused with liberal-democratic principles, and also critiqued at length the ideologies of communism and Afrikaner nationalism. He appealed frequently to the history of the ANC, which he charted from its formation in 1912, to demonstrate how his outlook both bore the legacy of the ANC's founders, and also adapted itself appropriately to historical developments. Lengthy sections also seek to demonstrate how the Communist Party had historically been a prime cause of divisions within African politics. The work concluded with a warning that in the wake of the Sharpeville shootings of 1960, South Africa was rapidly heading for a 'bloodbath'. He then appealed to the international community to pressurise South Africans on all sides to peacefully 'negotiate a settlement to the race problem' through a series of compromises.

Ngubane's presentation of himself as a 'king-maker', and particularly his role in Lutuli's rise to prominence, have been contested both directly and indirectly. Eales, in particular, rejects Ngubane's claims as an 'elaborate alibi' to cover up for his 'embarrassing' support for the conservative Champion in the 1940s. Switzer and Ukpanah argue that Ngubane was an important campaigner in many of these leadership contests, but that his claims are exaggerated. General literature on the politics of the period details a wider range of factors leading to Xuma's ejection from office than those suggested by Ngubane. Most strikingly, Lutuli's own autobiography, in which he charts his transformation from an apolitical schoolteacher to President General of the ANC, neglects any mention of Ngubane²⁶. Contemporary

²⁶ *Let My People Go: An Autobiography* (1962), was written, like Ngubane's account, during a personal quarrel between the two men.

evidence, ANC records, and Ngubane's journalism of the time support Switzer and Ukpanah's brief evaluation. Ngubane was indeed an important campaigner in leadership contests in Natal in the 1940s and early 1950s, although his account exaggerates his personal impact by overlooking the more complex range of shifting alignments amongst the regional elite. His role in influencing leadership contests at the national level are less clear²⁷.

The distortions in Ngubane's memoirs were shaped by a number of personal and political motivations. By the time he began to record his life story in the 1950s, he had indeed made a considerable personal contribution to the transformation of the ANC which took place during the 1940s. He had gained intimate knowledge of the events and personalities surrounding the rise of the ANC Youth League. Aware of the historical importance of these developments, but also of the lack of adequate records, he thus set out to disclose his 'inside' knowledge. Indeed these manuscripts have since proved important sources of information for historians of the ANC Youth League in the 1940s. However, by the time he was writing in the 1950s and early 1960s, his political career had taken a radical departure. From the early 1950s, he split from the mainstream of the ANC leadership as it emerged during that decade. He attacked what he saw as communist influences in the ANC, more vociferously than many fellow-nationalists who shared similar reservations. He objected especially to the nature of the emerging Congress Alliance. By placing each of its member groups on an equal footing, he argued, the Alliance diluted the aims of the ANC, which alone represented the majority, and most harshly oppressed, group. Ngubane's narrative thus engaged with the ideological debates which took place within Congress in the 1950s, seeking to convince the reader of the dangers of communist influences in the ANC.

If Ngubane entered into polemical ideological debates in his autobiographies, he also entered into disputes of a more personal nature. By 1956, his attacks on communist influences in the ANC had degenerated into a series of published personal exchanges between Ngubane and Lutuli, then President-General of the ANC, and a former close friend²⁸. The two men had known each other since the late 1930s, and had developed a relationship that was clearly of great importance to Ngubane. The personal clash of 1956 left a sense of bitterness on Ngubane's part, and they did not resume cordial relations for some years after that. In his memoirs,

²⁷ His exact role in the leadership realignments of the period is yet to be fully appreciated and is thus traced from details in the biography from which this article draws.

²⁸ Ngubane published these in *Indian Opinion* in March to April of 1956. See also A. Lutuli, 'A Reply to Mr. Jordan K. Ngubane's Attacks on the African National Congress', CPSA papers, Ga93.

Ngubane elaborated at great length on the closeness of their relationship, and his role in Lutuli's elevation to prominence. He stated that Lutuli's election as President-General of the ANC in 1952 was the fulfilment of his own personal goal of providing the nationalist movement with a suitable figurehead. He presented Lutuli's rise to leadership as part of his own long-term strategy to direct the course of the nationalist movement from behind the scenes. Ngubane's exaggerated account, like Lutuli's failure to mention Ngubane's campaigning on his behalf, needs to be viewed within the context of the 'personal clash' taking place at the time of writing. Ngubane went to great lengths to establish the closeness of his and Lutuli's thinking as African nationalists during the 1940s and early 1950s. He inferred that subsequently Lutuli betrayed the nationalist cause by allowing himself to be manipulated by communists, who were pursuing their own agenda.

Although Ngubane's thinking shared much with nationalists within the ANC in the 1950s, his relationship with them was somewhat ambiguous. In 1955, he found a new political home in the Liberal Party of South Africa which had formed in 1953. He did so with considerable reservations, but also with compelling moral conviction. Amongst other things, he was painfully aware that 'to say a man is a Liberal, is, politically speaking in this country, not to pay him a compliment. The non-European regards the word Liberal as virtually synonymous with traitor or spy'²⁹. Certainly, this was the view of many nationalists in the ANC, and his move to the LPSA opened him up to personal criticism from those with whom he otherwise had much in common. At the time when Ngubane was writing his first set of memoirs, therefore, his reputation in African political circles required defence from several angles. He was in a minority in the contemporary ideological debates, he sought recognition of his role in Lutuli's rise to leadership, and he also felt the need to defend his move to the Liberal Party. But Ngubane did not write the account simply in order to vindicate himself in the eyes of an African leadership from which he was becoming increasingly distanced. In part a result of this distance, his account was in fact intended primarily for a white and international readership. Within the Liberal Party, Ngubane delivered numerous speeches at meetings. He found that both his credentials as an African political activist and his articulate speeches were met with keen interest by many whites, particularly university students, and also from interested foreigners. Indeed, Ngubane's role within the Liberal Party was to 'cross the colour line' and attract white interest, rather than to draw in African members³⁰. This opened up new opportunities for him to present African politics as he saw it. Indeed he circulated his autobiographies for comment amongst some liberal friends. It was largely through

²⁹ Ngubane, 'Memorandum on the African and the Liberal Party', LP papers, APC, c.1956.

³⁰ Author's interview with Peter Brown, Fort Nottingham, 28 September 1997.

their help and encouragement—some were authors or otherwise connected to the publishing industry—that he could hope to have the work published.

In 1962, Ngubane left South Africa and moved with his family to Swaziland. When he learned that he was due to receive a banning order, as he explained to his literary agent,

I promptly decided to flee the country. Every penny I had earned in my life had been from writing. I had never done any other work and to give up writing at 46 and start a new life I found a little too much. In any case [under the terms of the ban] I could not leave the Inanda district to get a job as a clerk in nearby Durban³¹.

Shortly after he arrived in Swaziland, Ngubane succeeded in having *An African Explains Apartheid* published. However, in Swaziland he found that his activities were also severely restricted, and the opportunities which seemed to be opening up for him as a writer and commentator in the 1950s dissipated in the 1960s. The course of his career took a new, and this time more uncertain direction. After initially updating his autobiography in 1963, he appears to have discontinued the project for several years. Although he conferred with fellow exiles on an individual level, he remained distanced from both the ANC and PAC in exile. In addition, he began to drift away from his Liberal Party friends, losing all personal contact with them apart from a handful of brief reunions in subsequent years. Ngubane was thus forced to cast about for new intellectual outlets, and address himself to new audiences. Rather than pursue his autobiography, as a number of other exiled writers did at the time, he began to write about broad contemporary issues of pan-African relations, the Cold War, and the implications of these on South Africa's liberation movement. During the mid 1960s, he attempted to find a sponsor to fund travels to newly independent African states, in order to write a series of critical examinations of 'Free Africa' which would appeal to international—both western and African—readerships³². He failed to find such a sponsor, but remained in Swaziland and pressed ahead with his study. This, like the autobiography, remains unpublished³³. By the end of the decade, having failed to publish any further works, Ngubane began to reconcile himself to winding down his political and writing careers, and to settling on his smallholding farm.

³¹ Letter from Ngubane to Howard Moorepark, 27 August 1963, Ngubane Papers, KwaZulu Cultural Museum.

³² Letters from Ngubane to Howard Moorepark, 27 August 1963 and 31 August 1964, Ngubane Papers, KwaZulu Cultural Museum.

³³ 'Africa's Crisis of Isolation', Ngubane papers, c.1965.

In 1969, however, he seized on an opportunity to revive his political-intellectual career, once again, in a new direction. He secured a grant from the Ford Foundation and landed a temporary lecturing job at Howard University, which allowed him to move to the States. There he could once again embrace the role of political spokesman, this time on behalf of Buthelezi, who had simultaneously taken up leadership of the Zulu Territorial Authority. Ngubane lectured, toured, and lobbied the US State department and African diplomats in Washington DC, as an 'informal ambassador' of Buthelezi, and also as an independent scholar³⁴. He remained irreconcilably distanced from the ANC in exile, even though Buthelezi himself enjoyed a measure of co-operation with the ANC until the end of the 1970s. In the context of growing American interest in Africa, and particularly in South Africa, Ngubane found new opportunities as a writer. Throughout the 1970s, he produced a number of manuscripts, some of which were published³⁵. In updating his autobiography, Ngubane both updated his own life story, to include his life in exile, and added substantial philosophical and historical analysis. One might expect to find in 'After the Collapse of Apartheid', completed in 1977, a clear account of his decision to support Buthelezi in the 1970s, given that he had previously played influential roles in the ANC and LPSA. However, the way in which Ngubane updated these later memoirs provides an explanation only in abstract, often obscure, terms.

A comparison of the 1963 extracts and the 1977 version shows that Ngubane essentially added to rather than revised the earlier text, inserting into it a number of reflective comments and passages, and appending several new chapters on to the end. Thus the form of the 1977 autobiography is both polymorphous and inconsistent. The account up until 1963 consists of an earlier text overlaid with a number of insertions. The sections dealing with the period 1963 to 1977 were written in a different way. Although lengthy, they contain relatively little personal detail. Ngubane's years in Swaziland are dealt with very briefly, and most of the extensive account of the 1970s is dealt with in theoretical terms, reproducing arguments that

³⁴ Details of these activities are provided in 'After the Collapse of Apartheid', and are confirmed by the contents of the Ngubane Papers. This includes a number of reports and petitions he submitted to various bodies during the 1970s, including, for example, the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

³⁵ Published works include 'South Africa's Race Crisis: A Conflict of Minds', in Adam (1974); a novel *Ushaba: The Hurtle to Blood River* (1974); the esoteric *Conflict of Minds* (1979); and 'Shaka's Social, Political and Military Ideas', in Burness (1976). His major unpublished works in this period include his expanded autobiography; a comparative study of South African and American race relations (a project funded by the Ford Foundation); and a lengthy manuscript, 'Buntu: the Philosophy and its Practice', Ngubane Papers, 1977.

appear in his other writings of the time. That he did so reflects Ngubane's distance from the centre of South African politics during his exile years, and also the nature of his intellectual preoccupations at the time of writing, in which he sought to retrieve an ever more distant past.

His method of updating the autobiography results in a multi-layered representation of himself. On one level he allowed the analyses in his earlier text, which outlined his liberal brand of African nationalist philosophy, to remain. By the 1970s, however, his intellectual preoccupations had shifted considerably, as he articulated an elaborate philosophy of *ubuntu* (African humanism). He inserted into the earlier text a number of passages which reinterpreted his thinking throughout his career, in the light of his contemporary outlook. Thus while the earlier account of the 'intellectual struggles' that led him to a liberal nationalist position remain intact, he attempted to impose over these a strong sense of continuity in his motivations, identity and thought. In exile in America during the 1970s, intellectual currents surrounding the Black Power movement there as well as the emergence of the Black Consciousness movement and the re-emergence of Zulu nationalism in South Africa profoundly affected his thought. In his works of the 1970s, Ngubane developed an elaborate and essentialist philosophy, which drew on earlier strands in his thought, and incorporated some of these newer influences. His formulations of this philosophy, which he usually referred to as *ubuntu*, varied, but at its centre lay a set of assertions about the nature of 'the African mind'³⁶. This distinctively African 'quality of mind' was based, he argued, on a humanistic conception of man's relationship to the universe, and an 'evaluation of the person'³⁷ that above all else, respected people as individuals and valued the development of an individual's 'many-sided mind', regardless of race or creed. This moral outlook, and its associated cosmology, argued Ngubane, was expressed in the totality of (sub-Saharan) African traditions of thought, cultural practices, social institutions and political initiatives, which all emanated from a common source, ancient Sudanic or, as he termed it—'Sudic'—civilisation. In his work he referred extensively to examples from the Zulu past and present, but stressed that although this was the specific case he knew best, Zulu culture was but one variant of the broader unity of sub-Saharan African cultures. His theories thus represent a blend of Zulu ethno-

³⁶ Although *ubuntu* simultaneously became a rallying point for *Inkatha* ideologues and Zulu nationalists, Ngubane's writings on the subject reflect a greater historical and philosophical depth and sophistication, and a more sustained focus on the pan-African context, than do other writers or rhetoricians on the subject. Despite—or perhaps because—of this, his impact on *Inkatha* ideology was limited.

³⁷ This and other phrases that I have placed in parentheses appear frequently in all of Ngubane's writings from the 1970s onward.

nationalism and strands of Afrocentrism, then emerging in the States, which stressed the cultural-historical unity of all 'black' Africans.

Ngubane drew on then current debates in America in the field of Egyptology, which centred on questions of the racial origins of ancient Egyptian civilisation, the nature of Nubian civilisations, and their influences on ancient Greece and other European civilisations. The French-educated, Senegalese scholar, Cheikh Anta Diop, argued most powerfully the case both for positive contributions of ancient African civilisations to the Western world, and centred on Egypt as the historic root of a supposed contemporary cultural unity of 'black' Africans. These and associated ideas coalesced from the late 1960s into a coherent 'Afrocentric' school of thought in the USA³⁸, based around a number of University campuses which included Howard College, where Ngubane was initially based. He became increasingly interested in Egyptian cosmologies and religious practices, although he avoided entering into speculations about the 'racial' make-up of ancient Egypt³⁹, and preferred to claim that sub-Saharan African cultures derived from ancient 'Sudic' civilisation. He theorised that these cultures share a distinct moral tradition of African humanism or *ubuntu*, which he increasingly juxtaposed with what he termed 'Graeco-Romano-Hebraic' traditions: the various European-derived intellectual traditions including communism, fascism, Afrikaner nationalism, as well as capitalism and Christianity⁴⁰. With this novel formulation he attempted to posit an essential difference between the peoples of Africa and those of Europe, by drawing together the diverse Western traditions into a single family sharing the same underlying 'evaluation of the person'. What characterised 'Graeco-Romano-Hebraic' moralities, he argued, was the importance that each attached to 'the group'—whether based on economic class, race or religion. Thus in South Africa, he argued, white racism oppressed Africans as a group, while Africans continued to value people as individuals. These two opposing moral traditions, he wrote repeatedly, meant that underlying racial conflict in both

³⁸ For a critical analysis of such thought, see Howe (1998). Howe dates the emergence of a distinct Afrocentric school of thought to the formation of a 'Black Caucus' within the US African Studies Association in 1968, although he also traces similar strands of thought back to the mid-nineteenth century.

³⁹ Ngubane collected several hundred volumes on Egyptology, which are now housed at the KwaZulu Cultural Museum.

⁴⁰ In his writings on the subject, Ngubane conveniently avoids mention of a Western liberal ethical tradition. A broadly liberal combination of universalism, individualism and humanism differs in few essentials from his own conception of *ubuntu*. The 1977 autobiography glossed over his role in the Liberal Party of South Africa, which he seems by that time to have regarded as insignificant.

South Africa and the United States was a 'conflict of minds'⁴¹.

When Ngubane returned to the task of writing his memoirs in the 1970s, he did so with the ambition of narrating his life story within this broad historical-philosophical framework. Partly, it was an attempt to reconcile his new-found sense of identity at the time of writing, with his previous 'selves'. As such, the act of re-writing his life was itself part of the process of reformulating his identity. However, Ngubane was also re-interpreting his past (and presenting his philosophy) with specific audiences in mind. In casting his account within a broad 'civilisational' framework, it would be familiar to African-Americans engaged in seeking to root their contemporary identity in ancient Egyptian or Nubian civilisations. Ngubane sought to demonstrate similar linkages between ancient and present day African societies. In his 1977 autobiography, he used a combination of sophisticated argument and unsubstantiated inference, to piece together a lineage of political, religious and moral thought running through from ancient 'Sudic' civilisation, to pre-colonial Zulu society, to the twentieth century Natal African intelligentsia, of which he and, importantly, Buthelezi, were members. Despite some of these resonances with Afro-centric intellectual currents, however, Ngubane remained something of a lonely figure in American Africanist academia⁴². His awareness of his intended audience derived in large part from his personal relationships in what was for him largely an alien environment. At the time of writing his later memoirs, Ngubane had formed a personal relationship that inspired him not only to elaborate on his more philosophical constructions, but also to explain his own past within such a framework. In 1970 he met Bernice Wardell, a white nun and schoolteacher who at the time was undergoing a crisis of faith. As they developed an intimate relationship, she became increasingly fascinated with the theological implications of Ngubane's thought, and eventually 'converted', as he later put it, to *ubuntu* (in 'After the Collapse of Apartheid'). Her searching curiosity inspired Ngubane to elaborate further on the subject, and indeed her financial support, after alternative sources of funding dried up for him in 1973, allowed him to do so. In 1977, Ngubane gave her the original manuscript of his tract on *ubuntu*, on which he wrote:

You and I had spent years talking about Buntu, the Person, The Law, and The Environment. You finally asked if I could spare the time to write a book

⁴¹ Ngubane had since the late 1950s theorised about an essentially moralistic conflict between two 'irreconcilable outlooks' in a racially divided South Africa, but did not until the 1970s argue that these outlooks were rooted in the ancient histories of Western and African civilisations.

⁴² In his 1977 memoirs, Ngubane complained bitterly that his African-American colleagues failed to perceive the 'fundamentals' of racism as he did.

on my understanding of Buntu to enable people like you to understand more clearly the goals of my struggle and the meaning we were trying to give to freedom. You wanted answers to the questions you raised in Buntu. The present effort presents answers to some of your questions⁴³.

In writing his autobiography, Ngubane's perceptions of how his intended readership would respond to the narrative were informed by his personal relationship with Wardell, and her apparent receptiveness to his theories. The subtleties of this relationship form an important part of the context in which Ngubane represented himself⁴⁴. In addition to their mutual companionship, Ngubane was both Wardell's philosophical mentor and financial dependent, she was both his sponsor and muse. That Wardell was herself writing her own autobiography at the same time encouraged Ngubane to strengthen the connections between his 'previous lives' and his contemporary elaborate philosophical-historical constructions⁴⁵.

His sense of audience was also shaped by the partially favourable responses of diverse groups of people he addressed during lecture tours in America in the early 1970s. In the preface to 'After the Collapse...', he stressed the educative intentions of his work. He aimed to give westerners 'an inside view of the forces which shape thought and action and fix final goals in the majority group' in South Africa. Presenting himself as representative of 'the majority group' by invoking his credentials as an activist, he argued that *ubuntu* was the guiding force shaping Africans' thought and action, in contrast to the more practical appeals that ANC-aligned intellectuals simultaneously made to international audiences. Although the 1977 memoirs reproduced many of Buthelezi's strategies for negotiated change, the account did not simply conform to the political demands of international diplomatic campaigns by rival organisations. His more central preoccupation at the time was to contest versions of history from a range of commentators of South Africa, in a similar

⁴³ Hand-written note attached to 'Buntu: the Philosophy and its Practice', Ngubane Papers, 1977.

⁴⁴ For an extended consideration of personal power relationships in the production of autobiography, albeit in the case of a more unambiguously dependant diarist, see Swindells, 'Liberating the Subject? Autobiography and 'Women's History': A Reading of *The Diaries of Hannah Cullwick*', in Personal Narratives Group (1989).

⁴⁵ Ngubane mentioned Wardell's autobiography in the hand-written note cited above. Wardell's papers are held at the KwaZulu Cultural Museum, but access is subject to severe restrictions, and it is at present unknown whether any autobiographical manuscripts survive. The few writings of hers that are accessible, display a preoccupation with the primacy of moral and metaphysical world-views in directing individual and communal life.

vein to the self-appointed task of Afrocentric scholars in the States. In the preface to 'After the Collapse...' he wrote that he intended to record for posterity his experiences and inside knowledge because, 'after the collapse of White domination, African scholars will need to rewrite our history' (Ngubane 'After the Collapse ...', p.15). He cited the works of such historians as Jack and Ray Simons and Edward Roux as the kind of 'white perspectives' from which such a history would have to be wrested. Moreover, in the autobiography, he was himself attempting to rewrite that history, continuing a somewhat fragile tradition of Zulu nationalist historiography. Recognising his limited potential to rewrite history as an individual, he also devised a number of schemes to promote further research into an *ubuntu*-inspired history. In these efforts, he departed somewhat from *Inkatha's* more immediate concerns and failed to find sufficient support from within the organisation to bring these to fruition.

4 Reading Ngubane's Lives in 'After the Collapse of Apartheid'

Writing about early West African cultural nationalists, Farias and Barber (1990:3) point out that their efforts

involved the simultaneous affirmation of the worth of African culture(s) and the need for Africans to take on board Western modernity. From this conjunction flowed many variant conclusions, all of which shared, however, a characteristic ambiguity and often a submerged irony.

This 'characteristic ambiguity' was shared by two such West African figures, Edward Blyden who 'privileged the modernising impulse', and Agyeman Prempe whose vision was 'biased towards restoration of a vanished past'. Each of these two figures, continue Farias and Barber,

took to its limit one of the possibilities inherent within the arena of 'cultural nationalist' discourse in a way that diminished its counterpart, generating two views recognisably produced from the same discursive materials but with diametrically opposed results (Ngubane 'After the Collapse ...', p.4).

In the South African context, and decades later, Ngubane grappled with a remarkably similar set of tensions, in his role, like those of Blyden and Prempe, as a mediator between cultures⁴⁶. Within his own life, however, he progressed through more than

⁴⁶ This is of course a common condition affecting other South African figures. For such tensions in the earlier careers of Tiyo Soga, Sol Plaatje and John Dube see respectively, Williams (1978); Willan (1984); and Marks (1986).

one of the 'variant conclusions' suggested above. At different times and in various combinations, Ngubane embraced, rejected and reworked various aspects of both European and African cultures⁴⁷. His shifts from African nationalist to liberal intellectual to Zulu patriot were partly expressed by his changing sense of 'national' belonging. The boundaries of the 'imagined communities' with which he identified shifted from a pan-ethnic African nation, a non-racial South or southern Africa, the Zulu nation and 'black' Africa as a whole. Accompanying this was a shifting historical vision, as well as changing emphases on cultural assertion, and spiritual conviction.

As a student at Adams College Ngubane received, and indeed eagerly consumed, a mission-school education. He joined the American Congregational Church and for a time was a 'militant Protestant', as he put it (Ngubane 'After the Collapse ...', p.129). He mastered the use of the English language⁴⁸, and throughout his career wrote almost exclusively in that language. As a young journalist on *Ilanga*, he presented himself as a self-confident intellectual, positing education as the route towards African progress in the modern world. His view of the African past was ambiguous, scorning the 'backwardness' of tribalism, but also seeking to recognise the positive achievements of the past. He read the works of European philosophers avidly, and developed a fondness for European classical music. He absorbed liberal moral and political democratic principles. He referred to himself as a 'republican' and rejected 'tribal' authority and all forms of hereditary rule.

During the 1940s, he devoted himself to promoting, above all else, African interests as he saw them, and involved himself in the internal reorganisation of the ANC. Through both political organisation and cultural assertion, he embarked on African 'nation building', looking towards a future for Africans in South Africa as equals amongst the 'free nations' of the world. At the same time, he sought inspiration from the past, and viewed the expansionist efforts of Shaka, founder of the Zulu nation, as a precursor to modern 'nation building'. While he identified himself with the 'African nation' through a shared experience of racial

⁴⁷ Ngubane's cultural borrowings were in fact more eclectic than the (problematic) 'African-European' dichotomy suggests. Through contact with Indian communities in Natal he developed an admiration for the Gandhian philosophy of *satyagraha*. This was perhaps a familiar influence on a number of Africans at the time. More unusually, he became interested in Hinduism, and for a time adeptly practised an advanced form yoga, which, he claimed, successfully cured his chronic asthma. (Author's interview with Pat Poovalingham, Durban, 29 September 1997.)

⁴⁸ Ngubane's parents spoke only Zulu. His earliest contributions to *Ilanga* in 1936 and 1937 are in Zulu, but by the time he matriculated the following year he was confident enough to write in English.

discrimination, he continued to regard himself as amongst the most progressive section of African society. Within African society, he denied that class divisions had any but 'academic' significance, and viewed social cleavages along the lines of education and the embrace of modernity versus adherence to tradition. By the late 1940s, through his lifestyle as well as intellectual labours he identified himself firmly with the educated section of African society in Natal and South Africa. He wore Western style clothes⁴⁹ and established a nuclear family with two children, car, and house and garden on freehold land⁵⁰.

During the 1950s, as he increasingly mixed in non-racial circles, Ngubane championed the syncretic culture of modern Africans, which he lauded as nothing less than 'a new people in history'⁵¹. As a group, he argued, they had learned from the military defeats of the nineteenth century to borrow positive elements of both European and African cultures. On this basis, he stressed potential common ground between black and white in a future non-racial 'greater South Africa'. By the 1970s, however, Ngubane de-emphasised the syncretic nature of modern African culture. He looked towards the ever more distant African past in order to rely wholly on African cultural resources, and he increasingly juxtaposed European and African culture. He wholly rejected Christianity, and asserted his belief in the ancestors and a 'traditional' cosmology. Although he continued to write mainly in the English language, at home in South Africa he spoke Zulu and demanded the same of all others in his household⁵².

In revising his autobiography in 1977, Ngubane presented African and European-derived cultures as mutually incompatible. He sought also to emphasise

⁴⁹ Even for a member of the twentieth century African intelligentsia this is a point worth making, in light of some of the friction Ngubane's appearance caused him throughout his life. As a young schoolboy, his peers 'said I thought I was a White man because I wore polished shoes, a clean white shirt and pair of trousers, grey stockings and a grey cap every schoolday like White boys ... my peers did not like that'. (Ngubane, 'After the Collapse ...', p.38.) Later in life, as a lecturer in Washington DC, Ngubane 'was very, very miserable, because he was regarded as an Uncle Tom at Howard University. He wore a suit and tie—[in the context of Black Power America] these were all symbols.. (Author's interview with Cathy Brubeck, London, 20 April 1998.)

⁵⁰ I am indebted to Prof. Mazisi Kunene for pointing out the connection between Ngubane's decision to have only two children, and his largely 'western' life-style.

⁵¹ He increasingly pinpointed Seme's writings on the birth of 'a new and unique civilisation' in 1906 as the beginning of this historical movement. (See P. Seme, 'The Regeneration of Africa', *Royal African Society*, vol.5, 1905-1906.)

⁵² Author's interview with Naledi Ngubane, Pietermaritzburg, 21 September 1997.

continuity in his own motivations and role(s) throughout an apparently diverse career. Essentially, he sought to demonstrate that in the face of racial oppression in South Africa and then during exile, *ubuntu* had always been his guiding principle. Inherited from earlier generations, and particularly his father, he argued, this essentially humanist moral philosophy had guided his political decisions and shaped his ideological responses to racial oppression. The repetitive assertions and argumentations through which he elaborates this claim, and which thus overlay his life story, no doubt reveal most about the author, and the particular nature of the 'variant conclusion' he had reached, at the time of writing. However, while he imposed a strong sense of unity over his past 'selves', he also left intact discussions of his earlier intellectual 'struggles' from the 1963 manuscript, which are not always compatible with such a view.

The 1977 manuscript is thus polymorphous, multi-layered and inconsistent. On the one hand it is richly detailed and offers unique information on several aspects of his life, particularly his early years and life in exile, as well as important 'inside information' on Natal politics in the 1940s. On the other hand, it is a problematic source on his intellectual shifts, through which he arrived at his contemporary sense of identity. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which his insistence on continuity hints at the precise nature of some of the central tensions which produced, at different times and in different circumstances, each of the 'variant conclusions' that he reached. These changing circumstances in which Ngubane forged an identity for himself were often highly restricted. As a dissident voice amongst an African elite itself confronting increasingly restricted political spaces, Ngubane had to carve out a career for himself in a variety of roles. At various stages he addressed himself to markedly different audiences, and the modes of public expression that were available to him were limited⁵³. That his political allegiance varied, reinforces the appearance of a constantly reinvented self. Ngubane did not use the often obscure language of *ubuntu* until the 1970s⁵⁴, and this indicates both his outlook at the time, and his detachment from practical politics. However, his insistence on continuity in the 1977 memoirs can also suggest longer-term intellectual preoccupations, which in the language of *ubuntu* were being expressed in a way that he did not, or could not have done earlier.

⁵³ These shifts, while hinted at in part two of this paper, are traced in greater detail throughout the biography.

⁵⁴ In this new 'language', Ngubane repetitively used numerous phrases associated with his philosophy of *ubuntu* without always explaining what he meant by them. Where used in this article, I have placed such phrases in parentheses. While I have indicated the central thrust of Ngubane's philosophy of *ubuntu* in part three above, the topic deserves further research.

'After the collapse' provides a lengthy and fascinating account of Ngubane's childhood and family background, although it is a problematic account. No alternative sources relating to his childhood are available with which to compare these recollections⁵⁵. Nevertheless, it is clear that he used the earlier text, into which he inserted passages about *ubuntu*. By the time he did this, his memories of childhood had of course been subjected to a series of reinterpretations, and thus he unavoidably failed to recapture his childhood view of the world. Nevertheless, the 65 pages that he devoted to his childhood and family life provide a valuable account of the 'historical, cultural and racial influences which shaped thought in my home and acted as the moulds in which my outlook was cast as I grew up'⁵⁶. Staking a claim to a distinct childhood inheritance was no easy task for Ngubane, as the range of these influences was eclectic, including recognisably 'modern' and 'traditional' elements, but also the multiple dislocations brought about by rapid social change in Natal during the inter-war period⁵⁷. Ngubane experienced this most profoundly within his own family life, and recounted at length his recollections of the 'divergent minds' (Ngubane 'After the Collapse ...', p.58) of his various family members. His grandmother, for example, was an 'uncompromising Zulu' who imparted to him direct memories of a precolonial Zulu state. In contrast, his mother acquiesced in the Christian faith, disregarding the ways of her 'heathen' forebears.

His father, Jan Ngubane, is portrayed as a complex and ambiguous figure, and also his most important formative influence. As a policeman Jan Ngubane remained economically dependent on the state, and suffered humiliation in the tasks he was required to perform. Yet he remained determined in his aspirations for a better life for his children, and worked hard to provide them with the best available education. Ngubane wrote that beneath his father's outward deference to white authority, lay an attitude of defiance, although in the circumstances he had to avoid confrontation and instead pursue long-term goals. Jan severely punished the young Jordan when he responded rashly to incidents of racism. Although it is unclear how Ngubane regarded his father's severity at the time, in later life he perceived that his father deliberately groomed him to engage in struggle for greater freedom, and to do

⁵⁵ Carter and Karis omitted these sections of the 1963 manuscript from the microfilm collection. Ngubane's surviving sibling, Juliet, was highly reluctant to talk about her brother or family background, as she disagreed with his 'dangerous' political activity. (Author's interview with Juliet Mkhwanazi, 12 September 1997.)

⁵⁶ Ngubane, 'After the Collapse ...', p.82. For a discussion of several other writers' treatment of their childhood during the same period, see Shear (1989).

⁵⁷ For Africans' experiences of social change during this period, see especially Bradford (1987); La Hausse (1990); Marks (1986); and other works by these authors.

so by relying on clear reasoning rather than emotion⁵⁸. He claimed that his father, who lacked formal education, sent him to mission schools to give him access to the workings of 'the white mind', so that he could 'combat' white society on that level. This perspective fits too comfortably with the thesis that Ngubane elaborated in *Conflict of Minds* in 1979, and it is unlikely that Jan Ngubane would have regarded mission education in quite this way. It is more likely that he viewed it primarily as an opportunity for self-improvement. Although there is a lack of alternative sources on the exact nature of Jan Ngubane's political consciousness, the autobiography provides a number of important clues about his thinking, such as his reading habits, his uneasy relationships with the rural policemen he commanded, his responses to the beer-hall boycotts of the late 1920s, and his admiration of particular leading African figures. Such clues can be combined with the historical literature on Natal in the inter-war period, to provide an outline of the tensions in Jan's own thinking, and the example he provided his son⁵⁹.

Given the diversity of his childhood influences, Ngubane recounted his early 'struggles' to reconcile his own experiences of racism, his father's frustrations, and the varying, often stifled, attitudes of defiance amongst his family members, as well as the evident tensions within the local African communities in the towns in which he lived. At the same time, he drew these diverse influences into a single theme. Each family member, he wrote, had responded in different ways to the historical situation of 'defeat'. This theme runs through the narrative as a whole, and Ngubane presents it as a central dynamic in his life. As a child, he wrote, '[t]he atmosphere in my family made it impossible for me to come to terms with defeat' (Ngubane 'After the Collapse ...', p.17). He thus evokes his experience of childhood as an explanation of his subsequent role as a political activist. The successes and failures of his career are framed within this militaristic metaphor, and he likened his 'back-room' role as a propagandist, campaigner and ideologue to that of a 'foot-soldier in the armies of African Nationalism'. He extended the theme of defeat and rising from defeat to provide the central dynamic of Zulu history, while he modified this metaphor to present twentieth century African nationalism as an 'evolving revolt'⁶⁰. In this way

⁵⁸ Ngubane's analyses of African political factions in the press frequently drew on such distinctions between emotional/ rational or heroic/ realistic responses.

⁵⁹ See footnote 46 above. Revealingly, Jan Ngubane collected the works of Petros Lamula, whose career as an interpreter of cultures has been recovered in *La Hausse* (1992).

⁶⁰ Ngubane's use of militaristic imagery, derived in large part from his view of Zulu history, is highly ambiguous, and bears comparison with Buthelezi's use of such symbols. On the one hand, by the 1970s, Ngubane opposed the tactics of armed resistance adopted by the ANC and PAC, and sought to demonstrate that South

Ngubane situated his own life story within these histories, summing up his life as follows:

I had never seen myself as anything but a foot-soldier in the armies of African Nationalism. My duty to myself was to do everything I could to restore to my people everything that had been taken away or stolen from them. My weapons for doing this were the Sudic or Buntu evaluation of the person, my many-sided mind and my environment. I fought to the best of my ability and used my weapons and opportunities as best I could. I hurt very many people in the process and pleased many more. A soldier offered his life to his people to guarantee victory for them... For him, victory was the thing to live for. He could apologise only if he contributed to defeat. But in an evolving revolt like ours, there could be no defeat because we had risen from a situation of defeat and chosen to move forward with a determination and relentlessness which no power could stop. We would stumble and fall in the process, but our destiny was forever to rise and march. I fell down many a time; but I also rose from each fall. By the middle of 1977... signs were not lacking that we had brought apartheid to its last days. I had given our struggle everything I had. I apologised for nothing and regretted nothing (Ngubane 'After the Collapse', p.695).

Throughout the narrative, Ngubane asserted that the philosophy of *ubuntu* motivated him to 'rise from each fall'. In his earlier career, however, he did not use such language in any of his writings. To what extent does this perspective provide new insights into his life, or does it contradict earlier writings and therefore indicate only his thinking at the time of writing?

In 1933, at the age of sixteen, Ngubane entered Adams College, and thereafter began a career as a journalist. As a student, several of his essays were published in the school journal, and in his final year he also began to contribute news reports to *Ilanga*. Thus from his late teens there are alternative sources to his multi-layered autobiography with which to reconstruct his life and thought. As a journalist

Africa's 'race crisis' was essentially a 'conflict of minds'. By using imagery of war, he sought to communicate to a largely American audience that this abstractly-defined conflict was nevertheless a matter of life-and-death. On the other hand, he also raised the spectacle of a 'race war' or, as he also put it, 'a return to Blood River'. This betrayed his own very real fears, especially during the Soweto revolts, of an uncontrollable spread of violence. At the same time he sought to heighten such fears amongst his readership in order to encourage them to accept his (and Buthelezi's) proposals for negotiating a solution.

and writer from the late 1930s to the late 1950s, he left extensive records of his responses to events as they unfolded, and numerous outlines of his political and intellectual outlook. These earlier writings can be used to compare his later representations of his past, with what he expressed at the time. Such comparisons can partly overcome the problem of 'factual accuracy' in autobiography, although not in any simple way, as his newspaper articles and other writings also need to be contextualised. In the autobiography, Ngubane identifies several key historical moments that each had a profound impact on his thought. Discussions of these, left over from the 1963 text, emphasise the changes that these events wrought, while passages inserted during the 1970s simultaneously claim continuity in his outlook, claiming that his response to each situation was inspired by *ubuntu*.

Firstly, he wrote that his experience of mission education caused considerable 'intellectual struggle'⁶¹. He recorded how he was attracted by the teachings of his school-master, Edgar Brookes, and absorbed Christianity and a universal, individualistic morality. At school he developed a fondness for classical music and began to read European philosophy and history—and was particularly interested in the French Revolution. He struggled to reconcile these new influences with his family background and sense of belonging. In hindsight, he was bitter about his experience at Adams. He wrote that the 'cultural arrogance' of missionaries towards Africans meant that they aimed

to convince us that we had emerged from a non-world in which we had no history and no culture and had achieved nothing in all the centuries we had roamed the African countryside The education I received did not deepen my understanding of the Zulu or African experience; it made me a non-person who did not belong to the White world and did not belong to the African world (Ngubane, 'After the Collapse', p.115-116).

At the time, however, he expressed enthusiasm about the influence of Adams College and its role in creating an educated intelligentsia⁶². However, this apparent contradiction needs to be contextualised. Ngubane praised the school in its own journal, and no doubt the young Ngubane was aware of the scrutiny of his teachers. Moreover, he did so in 1935, the year of the American Zulu Mission's centenary, in

⁶¹ For a more detailed account of Ngubane's schooling, see G. Rosenberg, 'Mission Education and the Zulu Intelligentsia: Jordan Ngubane at Adams College, 1933-1937', paper presented to the African History Seminar, School of Oriental and African Studies, 6 May 1998.

⁶² Ngubane, 'The Role of Adams College in the Life of the Bantu', *Iso Lomuzi* 4:2, 1935.

which Adams College hosted a number of elaborate and self-congratulatory celebrations. The eighteen-year-old Ngubane could hardly have expressed dissent at the time⁶³. That he expressed bitterness in later life about 'deculturation'⁶⁴ and the denial of African history at Adams draws attention to other aspects of Ngubane's activities as a student. In 1936 he wrote an essay defending the much maligned Zulu king, Shaka⁶⁵. He also responded keenly to the formation in 1936 of the Zulu Society, which aimed to re-evaluate the Zulu past, preserve suitable customs, and record oral traditions⁶⁶. These suggest that as a student he did indeed struggle to reconcile notions of progress, as evidenced in the first essay, with the need to recover the Zulu past. Although he only later wrote in terms of *ubuntu*, the underlying tension was evident in his student writings. Where his memoirs do differ from earlier evidence is in the assertion that his experience at Adams made him a 'non-person'. His early journalism in the years after matriculating indicates that he emerged with much self-confidence, and he enthusiastically asserted the need for a modern education to foster African progress.

Secondly, the sheer destructiveness of World War Two, he wrote in the memoirs, led him to reappraise his attitude towards Europe:

Something fundamental seemed to have cracked or gone wrong somewhere in the inner structures of White civilisation. That was the beginning of my quarrel with the Graeco-Romano-Hebraic evaluation of the person (Ngubane 'After the Collapse ...', p.132).

By the end of the War, he continued, 'my faith in Christ had been shattered' (Ngubane 'After the Collapse ...', p.135). During this time, he wrote, he replaced his largely Western vision of progress with an ideology of African nationalism inspired instead by the '*ubuntu* evaluation of the person'. His writings of the time were not

⁶³ The many student protests at mission schools in South Africa around the time of the war did not affect Adams until after Ngubane had left.

⁶⁴ Ngubane began to employ such concepts during his comparative research between South African and American race discrimination in the early 1970s. As did widespread debates about the 'Africanisation' of school curricula in America at the time, his study focused to a large extent on the relationship between formal education and African cultural 'self-definition'.

⁶⁵ Ngubane, 'Chaka: the Warrior Administrator', *Iso Lomuzi* 5:1, 1936.

⁶⁶ It also sought to campaign for greater official recognition of the Zulu Regent, Mshiyeni. A number of its leading figures were teachers at Adams College and it enjoyed the patronage of Brookes. For an analysis of Zulu Society, see Marks, 'Patriotism, Patriarchy and Purity ...'.

expressed in these terms, although he did stress the need for African self-reliance and the construction of a distinctively African culture. Moreover, although he edited a newspaper which was African-owned, his modes of expression were nevertheless constrained. He struggled as an African journalist not only to advance particular political causes, but also to maintain an independent African press under increasing threat of depoliticisation and commercialisation from white, monopolistic ownership⁶⁷. What he could express was also limited by the political language available at the time, and by the demands of 'nation building'. The pressing needs for political organisation and mobilisation, as well as differences in opinion, meant that the ideological vision of the ANC Youth League in the 1940s was partially and unevenly developed⁶⁸. It also meant that few nationalist intellectuals in the 1940s elaborated a detailed historical vision. Because pre-1912 African history was necessarily one of disunity, it could not easily be retrieved and presented for the nationalist politics of the present. Ngubane attempted to do so to some extent, but his historicising efforts in the 1940s were muted by these considerations. Most of the numerous biographical sketches of African figures produced in the 1940s were of ANC leaders or cultural figures of the twentieth century. The demands of 'nation building' meant that he only occasionally rehabilitated pre-colonial African figures. In doing so, Ngubane asserted that the nationalists of the 1940s traced their lineage back beyond the formation of the ANC in 1912 to precolonial rulers, and particularly Shaka, whom he reinvented as 'the real father of African nationalism' (Ngubane 1949).

Thirdly, in 1949, he witnessed the anti-Indian riots in Durban. This experience shook his sensibilities, and, he wrote, left him 'torn between my commitment to the person regardless of race or colour' (Ngubane 'After the Collapse ...', p.298b) and the ANC Youth League's doctrine of African nationalism. He explained that having confronted the brutally violent potential of heightened race-consciousness, he drifted towards the non-racialism of the Liberal Party. While he explained his move to the Liberal Party as a result of the shocking potential of the Durban riots, he proceeded to skip over much of his high-profile involvement in the Party. This silence reveals a sense of regret over this period of his life. Rather, his brief mentions of the Liberal Party are anecdotes that serve to demonstrate that most

⁶⁷ For an historical outline of the African press, see the introduction in Switzer (1997).

⁶⁸ Thus the philosophical appeals of the League's first President, Anton Lembede, were often dismissed by his colleagues as abstractions. The development of Lembede's own vision was halted by his premature death in 1947. See Edgar & ka Msumza (eds) (1996). While the 1949 Programme of Action represents the culmination of the League's efforts in the 1940s, it is largely a practical programme.

white liberals, he found, were ultimately unable to genuinely 'confront the challenge of belonging to Africa.' Many of his former Liberal Party colleagues remember a genuine friendship 'across the colour line'. His later rejection alerts a reader of his writings in the 1950s, which often propagandised on behalf of the Liberal Party, to a sense of self-doubt. Given that his role in the Party opened up otherwise unavailable opportunities for him as a writer, and his attempts to 'radicalise' the Party's policies, the doubts he expressed before joining may well have lingered throughout the 1950s, but were expressed only later in his autobiographies.

From the 1950s onwards, in his autobiography, Ngubane details no further 'intellectual struggles', and his account of the latter part of his life is linear. Changing circumstances led him only to apply a fixed philosophy, the result of the intellectual 'journey' of his youth. Ngubane's other writings provide evidence that deeper tensions in fact persisted longer, and that he 'arrived' at his 1970s conception of *ubuntu* only after a longer history of shifting ideas. His writings of the 1950s in particular outline his commitment to democracy, individual liberty and a non-racial vision. His autobiography remains silent on his involvement in the Liberal Party, even though there is considerable continuity between his 'liberal' outlook and philosophy of *ubuntu*, with their respective stresses on individualism and humanism. Perhaps it is by remaining silent on this part of his life that he was able to simultaneously assert his *ubuntu* philosophy, and deny an intellectual debt to what he termed 'Graeco-Romano-Hebraic' civilisation.

While his life story was thus written from the perspective of the present, he simultaneously retained earlier discussion of intellectual tensions, and through his insistence on continuity, also presents a challenge of interpretation. This demands close attention to the contexts in which his earlier writings were produced, and the availability of different forms of expression. And if one seeks to trace the interaction between human agency and social structure in his life, it suggests the extent to which these contexts were highly restricted and shaped his shifts from African nationalist to liberal intellectual to Zulu nationalist. Moreover, Jordan Ngubane was born seven years after the formation of the Union of South Africa. He died just nine years before South Africa's first non-racial, democratic election. Thus although he lived all his life in South Africa under formal white rule, as a child his consciousness was informed by his relatives' memories of past independence. In his last years he anticipated the reality of the 'collapse of apartheid'. Taking a long view of African history, as Ngubane increasingly did, the period of formal white rule in South Africa was a short one. His autobiography presents an argument that the impact of white supremacy was less important—or at least less unambiguous—in shaping African identities than the view often presented in South African historiography. If read in this way, Ngubane's autobiography partly succeeds, although it overstates an African essentialism. In addition, his attempts to interweave his life story into the broad histories of Zulu and

African nationalisms as well as relate these to the history of sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, were highly ambitious. Not only did he extend the scope of his autobiography beyond more conventional boundaries of the genre, but his historical formulations, blending Afrocentric and Zulu ethnonationalist discourses in novel ways, remain obscure.

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