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# **Orality, Memory and the Past**

## **Listening to the Voices of Black Clergy under Colonialism and Apartheid**

**Papers read at the International Conference held  
at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg  
on 30 June - 3 July 1999**

**Edited by Philippe Denis**



Cluster Publications

2000

# Contents

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ISBN 1-875053-21-2

First published in 2000  
Second Impression 2002

Published by Cluster Publications  
P.O. Box 2400  
Pietermaritzburg 3200  
South Africa

Typesetting by Lou Levine of *Stylish Impressions* - (033) 3869584

Printed by Natal Witness Commercial Printers, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

Introduction	1
SECTION I: TELLING THE STORY	9
Learning to Bless Our Memories <i>Bongani Finca</i>	11
A Mirage Called Forgiveness: A Critique of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission <i>Radikobo Ntsimane</i>	20
Interviewing the past, Wulf Sachs for instance <i>Grahame Hayes</i>	34
The Power of Narrative: Constituting Reality through Storytelling <i>Anthony Balcomb</i>	49
SECTION II: THE ORAL AND THE WRITTEN	63
Marcel Jousse on "Oral-style", "Memory" and the Counting-necklace" <i>Edgard Sienaert and Joan Conolly</i>	65
Recovering Oral Tradition Fixed in Text: the Case of Q3:7-22; 4:1-13 <i>Jonathan Draper</i>	85
Blindness and the Archive: an Exergue <i>Verne Harris</i>	112
Thinking Beyond "Modernist" History <i>John Wright</i>	124
SECTION III: LIFE STORIES OF BLACK MINISTERS	133
One Man's Experience of Colonialism: The Story of Chief Kama <i>Joan Millard</i>	135

Early African Clergy in the Anglican Diocese of Nyasaland: The Case of Augustine Ambali (1861-1931) <i>Henry Mbaya</i>	150
James Calata, the African National Congress and the Anglican Church <i>Mandy Goedhals</i>	162
Canaan Banana's Encounter with Colonialism and Apartheid in Rhodesia (1963-1980) <i>Paul H. Gundani</i>	176
Correcting the "Baptist" History on William Duma (1907-1977): An Oral History Contribution <i>Humphrey Moroka Mogashoa</i>	194
The Story of the Eersterust Fraternal <i>Christina Landman</i>	210
<b>SECTION IV: RECORDING BLACK AGENCY</b>	<b>227</b>
A Historical Quest for a Black Presence that "Walks" <i>Tinyiko Sam Mahuleke</i>	229
Struggles From Within: The Black Caucuses' Quest for Recognition <i>Thulani Mlotshwa</i>	251
From Mokone to the Black Methodist Consultation: Challenging Racism in the Methodist Church of South Africa <i>Mokhele Madise</i>	266
The Call to Action of the African Catholic Priests' Solidarity Movement <i>Dabula Mpako</i>	275
Index	281

## Introduction

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Oral History is not new in South Africa. During the last decade of apartheid numerous attempts were made to document and record the voices of the "ordinary people" as an alternative to a history written "from above". With the emergence of the United Democratic Front, a coalition of anti-apartheid organisations formed in response to the South African government's repressive policies, and the ensuing politicisation of South African society, the concept of "people" began to dominate social and political discourse. Radical historians endeavoured to write the "people's history" as a way to promote "people's power" and "people's education".<sup>1</sup> One way of reaching this goal was oral history. "In South Africa", wrote Luli Callinicos in an essay on *The 'People's Past'*, "[oral history] is a particularly necessary medium because of our dearth of documents written by ordinary people".<sup>2</sup>

The University of the Witwatersrand's History Workshop, which developed the most impressive oral collection in South Africa in the 1980s and hosted several important conferences in which oral history work was foregrounded,<sup>3</sup> widely shared these perspectives. With different emphases the work of the Zulu History Project at the University of Natal, Durban, and of the People's History Project at the University of Cape Town also constituted attempts to document a history "from below".

The representatives of what I would like to call the first generation of oral historians in South Africa saw oral history, as Benito Bezzoli, the editor of the proceedings of the third History Workshop, wrote in 1987, "as a means of asking, and perhaps answering, the kinds of questions likely to lead