*Southern African Field Archaeology* 7:20-25. 1998.

# POPULATIONS, PREHISTORY, PENS AND POLITICS: SOME REFLECTIONS FROM NORTH OF THE ORANGE RIVER*

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*Accepted for publication April 1998

## ABSTRACT

During the last several years there has been a substantial effort to reclaim and rehabilitate 'indigenous identities' in South Africa. The past has been a significant resource in the shaping and authentication of some of these identities. As many of these identities claim to extend back to before the colonial era and the related establishment of a written record, archaeology has a potential role to play in this new identity construction process. The purpose of this paper is to examine the historical background to some of the identities being asserted in the Northern Cape as a case study in the assessment of the contribution that archaeology can make within this new scenario.

## INTRODUCTION

A challenging and important aspect of the 'new South Africa' is the way in which historically derived indigenous identities are being claimed and asserted. Among these identities are many which had hitherto been neglected if not actually denied. The need to construct an identity is a fundamental and very human characteristic. Individuals and groups need to make statements about their relationships to particular situations. In order to do this they appropriate certain resources and manipulate them to make explicit (or implicit) statements about who or what they are in those situations. The resources that are marshalled may be non-material (like beliefs or ideologies) or material (like certain styles of dress or the carrying of objects such as 'traditional weapons'). However, as Klinghardt (1997) has recently observed, some "forms of cultural identity [are] based on idealised images of the past that seem to owe more to trends in Western scholarship than to documentary evidence." The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of three related concepts used by Klinghardt - 'idealised images of the past', 'Western scholarship' and 'documentary evidence' - in contemporary identity construction and to offer some thoughts on their implications for archaeological research. Specific reference will be made to the Northern Cape so as to keep the discussion within manageable limits but, as will become clear, the issues addressed here are of far wider significance.

## "THE HISTORY" OF THE NORTHERN CAPE

All histories of the Northern Cape along the Orange River and beyond assume the prior existence of a variety of groups or identities. This is evident in all syntheses both before and since 1969 with its two seminal works, the "Oxford History" (Wilson & Thompson 1969) and Martin Legassick's (1969a) PhD thesis entitled - significantly - "The Griqua, the Sotho-Tswana and the Missionaries." An example of a recent manifestation of this assumption is Nigel Penn's chapter on the Orange 1770-1805 in "Einiqualand" (Smith 1995) where the first few pages refer to discrete groups of Khoi, San, Korana and "groups of Sotho-Tswana". The distinct impression is created that these various groups 'enter' the historical record as it reaches them as the colonial frontier pushes inexorably northwards. Indeed, Parsons (1995) is very explicit about this where he suggests that it should be possible "... to push back the frontiers of history - the continuous story of identifiable people - into the misty realms of prehistory".

In terms of this approach the 'early history' of the Northern Cape can briefly (and selectively) be outlined as follows (see Fig. 1.). By as early as 1661 in the Journal of Jan van Riebeeck there was reference to a group known as the Brijckje (Briqua) probably located around the present day Upington (Saunders 1966). More extensive information on these people was forthcoming when Hendrik Wikar and Robert Gordon explored the area in 1778-9. Later explorers, most notably the Truter and Somerville expedition to Dithakong in 1801 (Bradlow & Bradlow 1979), met with the Tlhaping who came to be regarded as being the same people as the Briqua (Maingard 1933). These and other groups were in turn part of a larger grouping known as the Bechuana, Tswana and other variations derived from a name "Moetjooaanas" marked on a map drawn by Robert Gordon in 1779 (Legassick 1969b). There were, of

course, many other groups in the area but these few can be used to illustrate the point to be made in this paper.

It will be argued here that these and other names are the creations of specific historical circumstances, that they do not extend back into 'prehistory' (contrary to Parsons' (1995) optimism) and that they are consequently of no 'primordial' significance whatsoever. But, having said that, it must be recognised that they can be, and indeed are, highly contested identities today. It is precisely here that the dilemma exists for the archaeologist; how do we address the past if it is actually devoid of groups alleged to have peopled it?

## THE ROLE OF LITERACY: A MODEL

The interpretation being suggested here draws on the work of Jack Goody (1977) and highlights the intervention of writing or literacy with the resultant establishment of what will here be termed the 'literary lattice'. To understand the significance of this intervention it is necessary to emphasise that identity is always negotiated. This means that identities are moulded in response to the situation in which the person or group finds themselves. In pre-literate societies this sort of negotiation is very fluid and tends to be bound to occasion or context. But as contexts change because of factors such as famine, invasion, disease and so on, then ideas and practices themselves will change resulting in other identity configurations. As Goody (1977:43) observes, "They seem more likely to do so here [in pre-literate societies] than in societies where ideas, religious or scientific, are written down in scholarly treatises or in Holy Writ". This is because when the written record intervenes it has the effect of 'freezing' situations and rendering them timeless. "Why?" asks Goody (1977:44), "Because when an utterance is put in writing it can be inspected in much greater detail, in its parts as well as in its whole, backwards as well as forwards, out of context as well as in its setting... Speech is no longer tied to an 'occasion'; it becomes timeless. Nor is it attached to a person; on paper, it becomes more abstract, more depersonalised". The effect of this 'freezing' is compounded because as a classificatory device the literary lattice requires 'filling up' so it tends to produce or induce elements of identity which did not necessarily exist before. For example, if it requires 'leaders', leaders have to be created even if they did not exist before. But even more than this, as Goody (1977:54) notes, the organisation of knowledge into lists (or columns) and formulas (or rows) - hence the term 'literary lattice' - produces a "fixed two-dimensional character [which] may well simplify the reality of oral communication beyond reasonable recognition, and hence decrease rather than increase understanding". Over and above all of this, and very important in the present discussion, is the fact that the literary lattice provides an extra resource which people can manipulate in expressing their identity. Again, as Goody (1977:53) observes, we "move from considering how the use of literate procedures inhibits the study of pre-literate modes of thought, to examining the ways in which these procedures have influenced the cognitive structures and processes that have developed subsequent to the advent of writing".

## "THE HISTORY" REVISITED

If this model is applied to the names mentioned above and shown on the map (Fig. 1) some interesting observations can be made regarding the intervention of the literary lattice and the subsequent "cognitive structures and processes".

The name Briqua (in various spelling forms - Saunders (1966) provides no less than 13) means 'the people of the goat'. This name appears to have been coined by the Khoekhoen for the people from whom they obtained goats (Saunders 1966). (It should be noted that the name 'Khoekhoen' is itself problematic but it can stand for present purposes). It may be suggested that this is unlikely to have been the name that the people used of themselves. It is, in all probably, an imposed identity related to specific exchange relations that existed at a specific period in time. Wilmsen (1989:98) goes so far as to assert that "Biriqua seems simply to have been a Khoikhoi equivalent of the Setswana Barwa categorization of peoples considered economically inferior". It is perhaps worth noting at this point that as early as 1801 Somerville observed of the 'Beriquas', "this name is considered to be a nickname given by the Coranna's who are their enemies, and is not recognised by them. They call themselves Boeshoeanna..." (quoted by Nienaber 1989:220). More will be noted about the Bechuana below.

The alleged later name - Tlhaping - is also a name apparently related to a set of specific temporary circumstances. Tlhaping means 'the people of the place of the fish' and is said to be derived from the fact that during a period of drought the people were forced to resort to eating fish (Maingard 1933). This was a food source not generally exploited in the region (Wilson & Thompson 1969:167) so the name is in some way 'derogatory'. The origin of the name of the neighbours of the Tlhaping, the Rolong, seems equally to have been bound to circumstances. Wilson and Thompson (1969:145) suggest that the name derives from a chief who was "called Morolong, *i.e.* blacksmith... This name...comes from an old word rola 'to forge'. His son Noto - that is, the hammer - also bore the name of the iron instrument which took the place of the primitive flint".

As already noted, the name Tswana is derived from the word "Moetjooaanas" inscribed on a map in 1779 by Robert Gordon (Legassick 1969b). From about 1830 the term 'Bechuana' came to be applied to all people in the interior of South Africa now generally called the 'Sotho-Tswana' (Legassick 1969b:96; Ambrose & Brutsch 1991: 161). Similarly, the name 'Sechuana' was used for the language of any of these people (Ambrose & Brutsch 1991:161). By 1887 the missionary John Mackenzie was able to remark: "These people [the Bechuana] do not use this word of themselves, or of one another; nevertheless

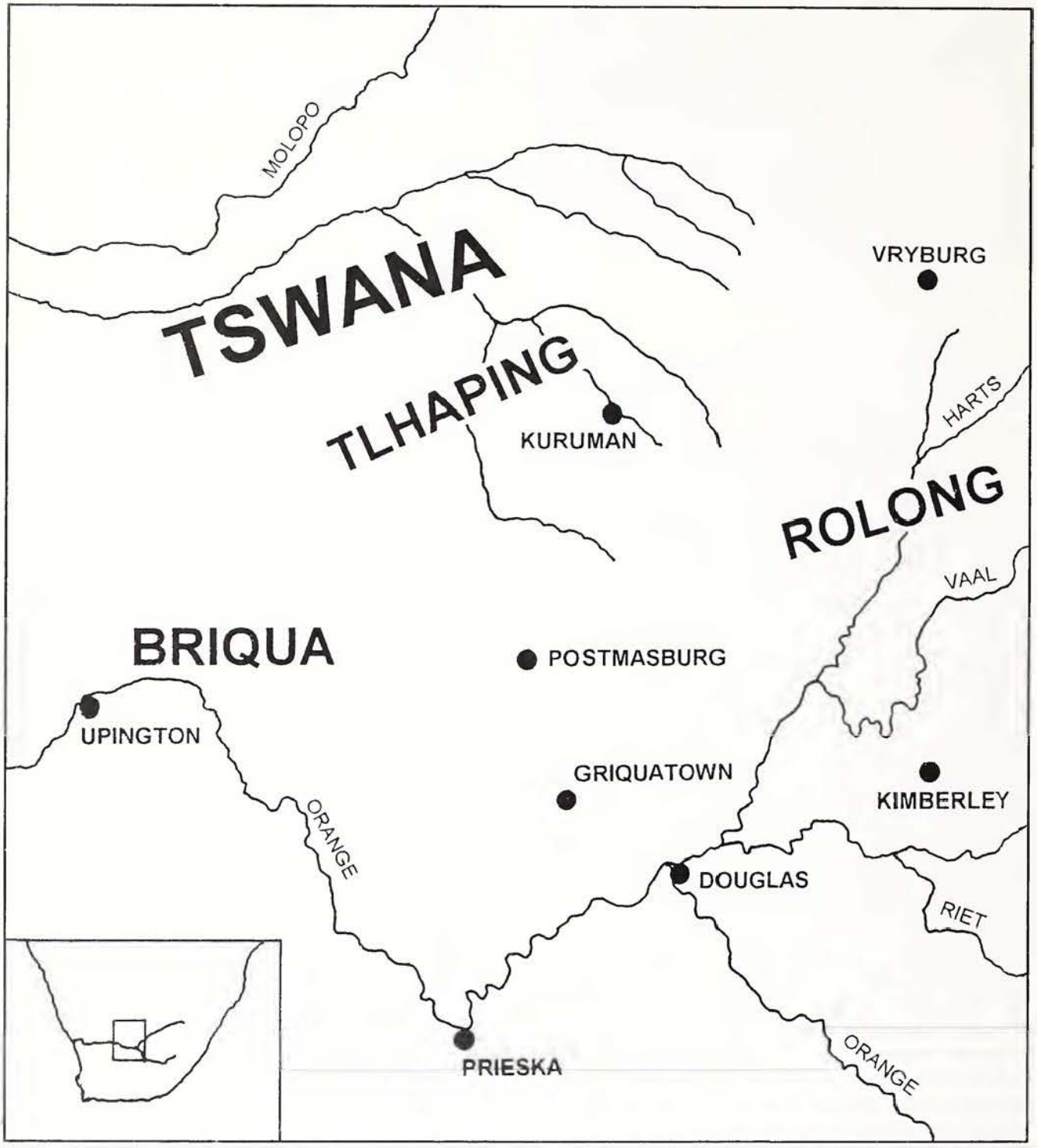


**Fig. 1. Map showing the approximate locations of the groups mentioned in the text.**

they accept of it as the white man's name for them, and now begin to use it of themselves" (quoted by Legassick 1969b:96), although, as noted above, Somerville records its use as early as 1801. Either way, it should be noted how the literary lattice is intervening - a recorded name is becoming a resource which is being appropriated and asserted by the people themselves in identity formation.

These last observations notwithstanding, the origin of the name Bechuana or Tswana (again with many spelling forms) is unknown and it has even been suggested by G.S Nienaber that it might be Khoekhoen inspired because of the '-n-a' ending (Nienaber 1989:225) (Consider here Kora and Korana or, indeed, the word San itself). Today the blanket use of Bechuana for the people of the interior has been replaced by 'Sotho-Tswana'. But the origin of the name Sotho is apparently equally 'contextual'. The first recorded use of the word 'Sotho' appears to have been in a letter by John Mellvill written from Griquatown in 1824 (Legassick 1969b:95). Mystery surrounds the origin of the word but

it has been suggested that it means 'black' and derives from the Usutu River in Swaziland, but whether 'black' refers to the river, people or to clothing is unclear (Legassick 1969b:95). Lye and Murray (1980:25) justify the use of Sotho because it "has the virtue of deriving from their own language "but this is hardly compelling as a reflection of indigenous identity. It is clearly yet another historically created name.

Even at a more macro level the integrity of a 'Tswana unit' can be questioned. In 1950 Isaac Schapera (1950: 140) in describing the 'tribes' of the then Bechuanaland Protectorate was able to observe, "For our present purpose it is enough to note that each of the tribes dealt with here has its own territory and forms a separate political unit under the leadership and authority of a chief who is subordinate only to the British Administration". Clearly the structure of the Tswana political unit was a creation of the literary lattice imposed by colonial bureaucracy. Tswana 'tribes' in South Africa were to suffer a similar fate being 'unified' within the fragmentary 'homeland' of Bophuthatswana.

Moving from names to languages themselves, some pertinent observations on the impact of the literary lattice can be made. Setlhaping was the first dialect to be written down (Ambrose & Brutsch 1991:180). By 1819 James Read had produced a spelling book which was printed in Griquatown and by 1826 Robert Moffat, Samuel Broadbent and James Archbell had all translated teaching materials (Lye & Murray 1980:67). These works became the bench mark for linguistic studies in the interior. Moffat's vocabularies were carefully studied by the pioneer French missionaries in Lesotho. Thomas Arbousset and Eugene Casalis who arrived in 1833, for example, systematically eliminated words when they were found not to have the same meaning in Sesotho or not to occur in Sesotho (Ambrose & Brutsch 1991:180). It can thus be seen clearly how language differences were constructed and formalised via the written word. As already pointed out, these languages came to be referred to as 'Sotho-Tswana' yet the linguist Ernst Westphal (1963:239) was able to assert, "There is no dialect which describes itself as Tswana and the grouping of the Western dialects as Tswana is not acceptable to the author". Whatever the current status of Westphal's views (and they surely are being contested), it is clear that literary lattice based manipulations are still at work.

Perhaps the most telling confirmation of the impact of the literary lattice from the very beginning is to be found in the words of King Moshoeshoe when he remarked to Arbousset in 1840: "My language is very beautiful. We are only beginning to realise this since we have seen it written down. Thanks to the little books of the missionaries, it will not be altered: there it is written; oh!, your paper; that paper organises everything well" (Ambrose & Brutsch 1991:101). The potency and impact of the literary lattice can be seen in an even wider context when note is taken of Gough's (1994) observation that, "A rather odd quirk of past divide and rule policies is that African languages in South Africa are far more institutionalised than in most sub-Saharan countries". The obsession with the meticulous documentation of the minutiae of 'cultural difference' within the apartheid paradigm is too well known to require reiteration here.

It is thus evident on the basis of the consideration of these and other examples that the literary lattice 'captured' certain names which were current at the time of its penetration and 'froze'them. Despite this, however, as pointed out above, one gains the impression from some historians (and, indeed, groups themselves) that these names represent identity conscious groups which had some sort of historical integrity which could be tracked back into the prehistoric or pre-literate past just as the manipulation of these identities can be documented during the subsequent historical period and even through to today. It has been shown here that, on the contrary, these names do not extend back in time and it is therefore contended that archaeologists should not pretend that they can study the 'prehistory' of any such groups. They must be recognised for what they are - the products of a combination of literacy and very specific sets of circumstances.

## THE ROLE OF ARCHAEOLOGY

If such is the case, what is the role of archaeology? How do we address pre-literate identities which by definition fall outside of any Western (literary) scholarship or documentary evidence, to return to two of the concepts used by Klinghardt (1997) quoted at the outset.

Sahlins (1985:vii) has commented, "History is culturally ordered, differently so in different societies..." and herein lies a pointer. The literary lattice is but one way of ordering the past. It is one which is arguably most logical, and certainly most prevalent, in literate societies. Goody and Watt (1963:311) go so far as to suggest that, "The pastness of the past ... depends upon a historical sensibility which can hardly begin to operate without permanent written records ..." If this is so, it would seen futile to pretend that similar 'literary' style ordering is appropriate to pre-literate societies. Indeed, as Goody (1977:53) has pointed out, such a procedure inhibits the study of pre-literate modes of thought. Genealogies, to take but one example of a device valued in literary studies, cannot be used to 'push back history'. The function of genealogies in pre-literate societies was to legitimate the present order; they were and are not historical records in the conventional literary sense (Goody & Watt 1963:310; Van Warmelo 1974:57). Moreover, common people tended to order their lives according to genealogies - so much so, in fact, that it has been suggested that such people verged on 'history-lessness' (Sahlins 1985:51). But such a position is clearly unsatisfactory. Nobody is without some sort of 'history' in the sense that things happened to and around them during the course of time. It is the form of understanding and articulation of that 'history' that might differ because such articulation is culturally ordered. It is largely with this non-literary 'cultural ordering' that archaeologists have to deal and it is herein that their greatest challenges and opportunities lie.

A major motivation for recourse to statements about

identity appears to be access to resources. This is certainly true today and, it may be suggested, would probably have been true of the past. If this premise is accepted, two main areas of thrust seem to suggest themselves. In the first place, archaeologists should be concerned with 'modes of production'. How did people survive? How did they engage with their environments, both physically and symbolically? Within what sorts of frameworks did people find it necessary to assert themselves and create identity, however elusive and fluid that identity might appear today? But, as Clark (1989:96) has pointed out, "A reductionist approach to archaeology is inadequate, even repellent, once it is remembered that archaeology is about people ... If they acquire their humanity by belonging to societies constituted by culture, it follows that archaeology must involve far more than researches into the means by which they managed to survive". This brings in the second thrust - 'modes of communication'. How was identity formed, expressed and played out? Again. as Clark (1989:96) points out, "it is one of the distinctive features of human as distinct from non-human societies that they attach importance to shaping objects as a way of proclaiming identity rather than merely as a means of manipulating the environment"

The literary lattice is only one way of defining meaning and proclaiming identity and we as archaeologists must not allow the literary lattice to straight-jacket our perceptions of the past or of the present or, indeed, of the future. Writing is very much an afterthought in the human saga. Other resources were also manipulated to make statements about identity and we need to find and understand them - particularly among material objects which are, after all, the 'stuff' of archaeology. One of the challenges facing archaeologists, then, is to make people aware of, and sensitive to, this long term view of identity construction.

## CONCLUSION

As archaeologists strive to carve a niche for themselves in the late 1990s in South Africa, they need to be vigilant that they do not play into the politics of the day and produce what might ultimately be branded as "counterfeit history" (Clarke 1968:3) or "counterfeit sociology" (Longworth & Cherry 1986:15-16). Indeed, as David (1984) has observed, "Archaeology's primary role is not, after all, that of a purveyor of satisfying pasts and identities to ethnic, national and social groups ..." Perhaps ultimately we as archaeologists need to widen our vision and be even more far sighted for as Butzer (1982:320) has noted, "The past is essential to understand the present but even more important to evaluate the potential outcomes of modern trends. It is here that the contextual approach to the past forms a stimulating and provocative interface with the contemporary problems of regional development, resource management, sustained productivity, and ecological harmony ..." It is ... "more and more evident that former generations ... and ecological history can tell us as much about the viability of future strategies as can contemporary research". The future of the past might well lie not so much in looking back at resurrected past baggage but in looking forward to the potential for cooperation and mutual respect.

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