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Leonard Diniso Ngcongco and the development of historical studies in Botswana

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In the three decades since independence historical studies in and on Botswana, as indeed in other parts of Africa, have made tremendous strides. In Botswana this development has been the result of the collective efforts of many different scholars, local as well as non local, working from within and outside Botswana. One of these has been Professor Leonard Diniso Ngcongco whose sixty-fifth birthday is the occasion for this *festschrift*.

Ngcongco's contribution to this phenomenal development has been in three main areas: research and writing, teaching and supervision of student research, mapping out areas of and directing research in his capacity as head of the Department of History and effective 'founding' director of the main research institute at the University of Botswana, the National Institute of Development Research and Documentation (NIR) as it is now called.¹

In 1967 when Leonard Ngcongco joined the then University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland based at Roma in Lesotho as Assistant Lecturer, historical research and writing on the newly independent state of Botswana were in their infancy.² Not much therefore was known about the general history of the country not to talk of the ethnic history of the various peoples inhabiting the country. The little that was known about the latter subject was the result of studies made by that indefatigable scholar of Tswana studies, Isaac Schapera. Valuable as Schapera's work is it has two basic shortcomings. Firstly, it is essentially anthropological in nature; this was in the spirit, the tradition and the practice of studies on Africa during the colonial period. Useful as anthropology is to history it is nevertheless not history as the two disciplines have different approaches to the study of societies in the past. In this connection Robert Smith's comment that "the social anthropologist is no more, and perhaps no less, a valuable colleague to the historian than, for example, the geographer, the linguist, the archaeologist and the art historian", is apposite.³ Secondly, Schapera's studies on Botswana concentrate on the major Tswana speaking groups—the BaKgatla, BaKwena, BaNgwato and BaNgwaketse—to the exclusion of the non-Tswana speaking inhabitants. Clearly then there was an urgent need to start serious historical studies on Botswana and its peoples at the time. The problem was compounded by the fact that the one university which could provide the opportunity and the personnel to address this need was based in Lesotho, had hardly any presence in Botswana and worse still had no Moptswana historian on its staff.

The first step towards addressing the need for historical research on Botswana may be said to have been taken with the appointment of Leonard Ngcongco and Thomas Tlou to the staff of the history department of UBLS at Roma in 1967 and 1971 respectively. Between them these two gentlemen have over the years contributed in no small measure to meeting this felt need by initiating, inspiring, directing and broadening the scope of historical studies in Botswana.

Originally a South African of Xhosa parentage, Leonard Ngcongco first went to Botswana in 1963. His presence in Botswana may be said to have been an accident of history, if one can talk about accidents in history. He grew up at De Aar in the Cape

Province, attended high school at Port Elizabeth and proceeded to the University College of Fort Hare from where he obtained a BA degree in 1955, a BA Honours degree in History in 1956 and a University Education Diploma in 1957.

With these qualifications he took a teaching job at Lovedale Institution in 1960 after a two year stint as Assistant Research Officer at the Institute of Social and Economic Research at Rhodes University. From Lovedale he moved to Moeding College at Otse in the then Bechuanaland Protectorate in 1963. His departure from Lovedale and South Africa took place under something of a cloud, in circumstances of suspicion and allegation by the Lovedale authorities of 'rabble rousing' his students through his lessons on the French Revolution and its aftermath in Europe.⁴ In this connection one has to remember that the 1950s and 1960s were a period of considerable socio-political ferment in South Africa. The Nationalist Party had come to power in 1948 and began to lay the foundations of its apartheid policy during this period. The education policy of the Nationalist government was characterised by, among other things, complete distortion of the history of the country and its peoples. In such a situation African teachers, especially those teaching history, were constantly under suspicion with regard to the content of their lessons; anything judged by the authorities to resemble African nationalist history, no matter how remotely, was labelled as poisonous stuff capable of sowings seeds of rebellion in the students, and promptly earned the suspected culprit the appropriate punishment, namely dismissal and a ban from teaching in a school in South Africa. Such was the fate of Ngcongco in 1963, and that explains his migration to the Bechuanaland Protectorate. His stay at Moeding College lasted four years, for in 1967 he accepted an invitation to join the staff of UBLS at Roma.

In July 1971 Ngcongco transferred from Roma to Botswana as part of a team that went to start teaching on the small campus of UBLS in Gaborone. He was the only historian in the team; his task at the time, as indeed that of the other members of the Botswana campus team, was to start Part I work, i.e. years I and II. For the first year he was the only history lecturer but in the second year when there were now Years I and II students, he had the assistance of a part time lecturer in the person of Mrs Hazel Hudson.⁶ By the time Ngcongco left for doctoral studies in Canada in September 1972 he had already done the yeoman's job and laid a firm foundation for the study of history at university level in Botswana. This then is the first of his contributions to historical studies in Botswana.

Another of his contributions is in the area of research on the precolonial history of the peoples and societies of Botswana. This aspect of his work took two forms, namely research by his students whom he inspired, directed and supervised, and research which he undertook himself. By 1975 when Leonard Ngcongco returned to Botswana from doctoral studies in Canada the department that he had established now had students in Year IV. In addition a 'History of Botswana research project' had been introduced into the curriculum by his successor, Thomas Tlou, as part of the Year IV programme. Not long after his return Thomas Tlou was seconded to the Foreign Service of the Government of Botswana and it fell on Ngcongco, as head of the department, 1971-72, 1976-81, and 1985-96 to steer and sustain the history of Botswana research project, trying various innovations in its structure and organization and supervising, along with his staff, research by the students. The HBRP was designed to train students in the use of both archival and oral sources for writing history; emphasis was however placed on the collection of oral traditional and oral historical data. Ngcongco had himself collected and utilized oral traditions for his PhD thesis and therefore had acquired both knowledge and interest in this genre of historical data. It was not surprising therefore that he actively supported and encouraged this activity. The result is that over the years oral traditions have been collected from many of the societies and communities in various parts of the

country, both Tswana speaking and non-Tswana speaking, and essays written on a wide variety of topics and subject matter.⁷

The HBRP was the first of its kind in the University of Botswana and has thus been the inspiration and model for all other departmental research projects in the institution. More important from the point of view of the focus of this paper, it has contributed in no small measure to the historiography of Botswana. Professor Ngcongco's election to the chairmanship of the recently reorganised Oral Tradition Association of Botswana clearly reflects a recognition of his contribution to this genre of historical documentation in the country.

Beside the student research which Ngcongco has played a crucial role in sustaining, there is also his personal research focused mainly on the precolonial history of Botswana. His doctoral thesis was titled 'Aspects of the history of Bangwaketse to 1910'. Although this is a micro study of a Tswana society it does examine processes which are, in his own words, "observable on a wider scale among other societies of Bantu-speaking Africa".⁸ These processes are those of migration, state formation and nation-building. To demonstrate the validity of the above statement he subsequently undertook researches into the history of the Sotho-Tswana and other societies not only in Botswana but also in South Africa and put these in the wider context of the history of Southern Africa generally. It was the need for this contextualization then which led him into the wider field of Southern African history looking at the processes (of migration, state formation and nation building) which he had discussed in his studies on the Bangwaketse. His work on these processes brought him recognition in African historical circles as one of the leading indigenous black historians in the Southern African region. The evidence for this recognition is not only his published works but also his membership, from its inception in 1971, of the UNESCO International Scientific Committee responsible for drafting the multi-volume *General History of Africa*. His contributions to some of the volumes in this series include "Southern Africa: Its Peoples and Social Structures" which he wrote with Jan Vansina, "The Mfecane and the rise of new African states", and "Problems of Southern African Historiography".⁹

In order to spread the fruits of his researches to a wider student readership particularly in Southern Africa, Ngcongco has contributed chapters on a variety of topics and subjects to collected essays by Christopher Saunders, Ngwabi Bhebe and Peter Pule. In addition he has himself engaged in editorial work, editing *Southern Africa in the Late 19th and 20th centuries*, Book II of the Heinemann Junior Certificate History of Southern Africa series.¹⁰ His editorial work went beyond the Junior Certificate History Series. From 1981 to 1985 Ngcongco was the editor of the *Pula*, Botswana's journal of African Studies, and as Director of the NIR he edited, either all by himself or with others, several of the publications which issued out of that Institute.

Another vehicle for Ngcongco's contribution to historical studies in Botswana was in institution building. Two of these may be mentioned; the NIR and the Archaeology Unit, both in the University of Botswana. In 1976, Ngcongco became first acting and later the substantive director of the main research institute at the University of Botswana, the National Institute for Research in Development and African Studies (NIR) as it was then called.¹¹ The purpose of the institute was to promote, coordinate and conduct research 'that would contribute to processes which will ultimately benefit large and less privileged parts of the population as well as contribute to the self reliance of the country as a whole'.¹² The directorship was a strategic position which provided him with a unique opportunity to make further contribution to social, cultural and economic studies in and on Botswana.

The NIR was established with financial and personnel assistance from the Friedrich Ebert Foundation of West Germany in June 1975 with Thomas Tlou as Acting Director. At this initial stage "it consisted of a Documentation Unit only"¹³ and had not yet

established a research unit. In 1976 Ngcongco took over from Thomas Tlou as acting director and headed the institute until 1985. During this period he established its research unit and put its documentation activity on a firm footing. His responsibilities as Director included mapping out areas and directions of research on social, political, cultural, economic and policy 'aspects of development in the countries in the Southern African region in general and Botswana in particular';¹⁴ recruitment of research personnel including recruitment and training of young Batswana as future research scholars in the Institute, organization of seminars and workshops, and generally to provide the leadership and the congenial working atmosphere for the realization of the objectives of the Institute. In all these areas of activity Ngcongco was singularly successful as the variety of the issues researched, the quality of the research output, the increased holdings of the Documentation Unit, as well as the on target record of the recruitment and local staff training programme amply testify.

Besides NIR, Ngcongco was also responsible for implementing the plan to establish Archaeology as a unit in the Department of History. The idea of introducing archaeology as a discipline at UB was mooted some three years earlier by Michael Crowder when he became the Head of History while Ngcongco was still at NIR but it was not until 1986, after Crowder's departure that it finally materialised; that it did so at this time was because of generous funding by the Swedish Agency for Research Cooperation with Developing Countries (SAREC) as part of its cooperation agreement with UB.¹⁵ Since its establishment the Unit has been actively engaged in all aspects of archaeological research in Botswana. Staff of the Unit have been doing research on the historical archaeology of Tswana communities, settlement and agricultural systems in Eastern and Southern Botswana, metallurgy and the nature of interactions between farmers, herders and hunter-gatherers. Their findings are adding to our knowledge and understanding of the prehistory and early history of the societies in Botswana.

By 1992 the Archaeology Unit was well enough established to introduce single major undergraduate programme in the History Department; the first batch of students graduated in 1995. In addition to the degree programme the Unit is offering a one year certificate course in museum studies to develop the skills of the lower cadre of museum staff in the country and the Southern African region as a whole. It is clear therefore that the Archaeology Unit of the History Department, established by Ngcongco, is making a major contribution to historical and related studies in Botswana.

Not the least important of Ngcongco's contribution to historical studies in this country has been in the area of staff training in history. This type of contribution is perhaps indirect but it is nonetheless important. As head of Department of History for close to twenty years on the aggregate (1971-72, 1976-81, 1986-96) Ngcongco has had a big hand in identifying and encouraging the more promising of his Batswana students to go for further studies in history in order to become lecturers in the department. It goes without saying that all the local Batswana lecturers presently at post in the department as well as those still away on training have been beneficiaries of his encouragement. With the exception of one or two, all are researching on different aspects of Botswana's history in particular and the SADC region in general. Those not researching on this region are doing so on other regions of Africa and even the Americas.¹⁶ In this rather indirect way Ngcongco has helped to promote historical studies in this country.

The focus of this paper precludes a discussion of Ngcongco's other activities outside the realms of historical studies or of his role in the administration of the University of Botswana. In connection with the latter suffice it to merely mention that he has been not only head of the History Department for close to two decades, in aggregate, or Director of NIR, as we have seen, he has been also Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and for a brief period (of six months) in 1984 Deputy Vice Chancellor combining that position with his substantive position as Director of NIR. Also for a number of terms, at different

periods since 1971, he has been a member of the governing Council of the University and needless to say of its Senate. Each one of these administrative offices provided him with some opportunity, directly or indirectly, to make some (further) contribution to historical and other related studies in the University and the country as a whole.

This review, incomplete as it necessarily is¹⁷, does give an idea of the nature and extent of Ngcongco's service to the discipline of history in Botswana in particular and Southern Africa in general.

Sixty five is a respectable though not a very great age these days and it is to be hoped that retirement will not bring to a sudden end nearly thirty years of passion for history and of devoted service to historical studies in Botswana, in the Southern African region and by extension in Africa in general.

Notes and References

1. See note 11 below.
2. Botswana achieved independence from British colonial rule on 30 September 1966.
3. Robert Smith, 'Jacob Ajayi, historian', in Toyin Falola (ed) *African Historiography, Essays in Honour of Jacob Ade Ajayi*, Longman, 1993, p.2. It may be noted that some historical information could be found in the writings of (non-historians mostly) European missionaries and colonial administrative officials such as V.F. Ellenberger, G.B. Moseley, G.E. Nettelton and Anthony Sillery, but these were scattered about in scores of different books, essays and colonial government files and were therefore not easily accessible to the ordinary reader. Moreover, by their nature these constituted the sources for, rather than, the history of the people.
4. Interview with Leonard D. Ngcongco, Gaborone, 19/06/96. See below for full transcript of the interview.
5. Until July 1971 all degree teaching was done at the Roma campus. The future of the University was the subject of two missions headed by Sir Norman Alexander in 1968/69 and 1969/70. The commencement in July 1971 of teaching for Part I degree courses at the University centres (campuses) in Botswana and Swaziland was part of the recommendations of the second Alexander Mission whose report was submitted to the University in September 1970. See UBLS Annual Report for the year ending April 1970, pp.1 & 2; see also UBLS Calendar for 1975/1976, p.45.
6. Mrs Hazel Hudson was the wife of Mr Derek Hudson who was at the time an employee of the Bank of Botswana.
7. See (1) Kevin Shillington, *Essays on the History of Botswana: a Bibliography of History Research Essays Presented in Part Fulfilment of the BA Degree of the University of Botswana, 1976-1984*. Gaborone, 1984. (2) Kofi Darkwah, "Essays on the history of Botswana: a bibliography of history and archaeology research essays presented in part fulfilment of the BA degree of the University of Botswana, 1985-1996", Mimeograph, Gaborone, 1996. See also David Kiyaga-Mulindwa (ed) "Tswapong Historical Research Project" 3 vols, Mimeograph, Gaborone, 1980.
8. L.D. Ngcongco, "Aspects of the history of the Bangwaketse to 1910". Unpublished PhD thesis, Dalhousie University, April 1977, p.i.
9. These contributions can be found in (1) D.T. Niane (ed), *General History of Africa*, IV, London, Heinemann and Berkeley, University of California Press for UNESCO, 1980, 578-595; (2) J.F. Ade Ajayi (ed), *General History of Africa*, VI, London & Berkeley, Heinemann, University of California Press, 1989, 90-123; (3) *The Historiography of Southern Africa: The General History of Africa*, Studies and Documents 4, London, UNESCO, and Heinemann, 1980, 17-24.
10. Other volumes in this series are *Southern African Societies Before the Scramble* (ed) N. Bhebe; *The Modern World* (ed) P.M. Pule.
11. See T. Tlou, "The Documentation Unit—what it is and what it does", NIR Documentation Unit, Botswana, Working Paper No. 1, June 1975; University of Botswana and Swaziland/ University College of Botswana Calendar for 1977/78, p. 62. N.O.H. Setidisho, "University

Education in Botswana, its contribution to national development, problems and prospects", Gaborone, Sept. 1979, pp.116 & 118; UBS/UCB Calendar for 1978/79, p.94. University of Botswana Annual Report 1983, p.154; UB Calendar for 1983/84, p.70; and subsequent UB Annual Reports and Calendars.

12. UB Annual Report, 1983, p.154.
13. N.O.H. Setidisho, *op.cit.*, p.118; UBS/ UCB Annual Report, 1977/78, p.40.
14. UBS/UCB Annual Report, 1977-78, p.40.
15. UB Annual Report, 1986/87, p.50.
16. Mr. W.G. Morapedi is currently researching on comparative agricultural history, Latin America and Botswana; Ms. M.M. Bolaane on Eastern Africa; Mr. G.B. Barei on Northern Africa. Dr. B. Mokopakgosi did his PhD on German colonial policy in Namibia, G.A. Sekgoma did his MA & PhD on Sierra Leone, and Dr. R.K.K. Molefi, who is no longer with the department, did his PhD on colonial agricultural policy in Tanzania.
17. For example, nothing has been said about his contribution as External Examiner, at different periods, at the National University of Lesotho, University of Zimbabwe, and University of Swaziland. Nor have we touched on his role in the formation in 1982 of the History Teachers' Association of Botswana, his role in the regional conferences of ESAURP and the history departments in Lesotho, Malawi, Botswana, Zambia and Zimbabwe, his membership for many years of the Executive Council of International African Institute, of the African Association of Scientific Editors, of the African Association of Human Rights in Development, and of the Boards of the Botswana National Archives, the Botswana National Library, the Botswana National Museum and Art Gallery, or his membership of the Botswana Society. This last named society offered many avenues and opportunities for furthering the course of historical and other related studies in Botswana.