

‘You can write and remember, but we are simply *izithunguthu*’

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Introduction

In the period May-June 1903, in the course of research that he was privately doing on the histories and cultural practices of Africans in the colony of Natal, magistrate James Stuart held intensive discussions on the past at his home in Durban with 89-year-old Thununu kaNonjiya. As they spoke, Stuart made notes of his interlocutor’s statements. On 10 June, in the margin of one of his notebooks, he scribbled a record of a comment apparently made to him by Thununu: ‘You can write and remember but *tina* [si] *izitungutu* *nje*’ – for our part we are simply *izitungutu*.¹

Stuart did not indicate what the word *izitungutu* meant, though his underlining of it suggests that he wanted to investigate the issue further. There is no entry for the word in A.T. Bryant’s major *Zulu-English Dictionary* of 1905,² nor in modern isiZulu dictionaries. The only place where we have been able to find it is in the fourth edition of Bishop John Colenso’s *Zulu-English Dictionary*, also published in 1905. (The main compiler seems to have been Colenso’s daughter Harriette: her father had died in 1883.) Here the singular form *isitungutu* is given as ‘One flustered or put out, made to forget by being scolded or cross-questioned, though well-informed’.³

These are the only written mentions of the word *isithunguthu* (to give it in modern orthography) that we have so far come across. The word was not known to isiZulu-speaking academics whom we consulted in 2014 and 2015, and today it appears to be unknown outside the small circle of scholars to whom it has been introduced since 2014. If it has ever had much of a public life, we have not yet seen the evidence for it.

What did Thununu actually mean in uttering the word in the way he did to Stuart? In using the word ‘*izithunguthu*’ (the plural of *isithunguthu*), to whom was he referring? Why did he describe himself to a colonial official as one of them? Did he have in mind a distinct category of people, or merely a loose plural number? What did Stuart’s writing down of oral accounts of the past imply to him? In effect, it seems to us, he was saying, ‘In the face of written history, we recounters of oral history are being reduced to the status of *izithunguthu*’. If this was indeed the meaning that he intended, he was making a powerful comment, from his position as an elder deeply involved in shaping oral accounts of the past, that pointed to a highly significant moment in the intellectual history of the KwaZulu-Natal region. As

scholars with an interest in this field, we see rich promise in investigating in some detail the context in which Thununu spoke the word, and why Stuart saw the statement in which it was embedded as worth putting into writing, even if in the form of a marginal note.

In this paper we briefly explore what little we can find on the biography of the word *isithunguthu*, and describe how it was rediscovered and taken up by academic historians. We go on to discuss his notes of his conversations with Thununu, as recorded in volume 6 of the published *James Stuart Archive*, in a way that combines historical contextualizing with a close textual reading. Our aim is to try to hear both Stuart's and Thununu's voices more clearly, and hence hear something of the wider resonances of the word.

Our approach to thinking about the meaning of *isithunguthu* has shifted slightly since we wrote the version of the paper that we presented to the CISA conference in Johannesburg in October 2016, as is reflected in our change of title. Our original title, '*Isithunguthu* – one who knows but is made to forget', highlighted the notion of 'forgetting' in Colenso's gloss. A commentator at the subsequent APC workshop made the point that it might be more productive to think about Thununu's statement as coming from a person who had been 'flustered or put out' rather than 'made to forget'. We have taken up this perspective, as it makes for a less categorical and more open-ended reading of Thununu's statement, which we have built more directly into our revised title. The paper is in part about the journey of a word, in part about the intellectual journeys of Thununu and Stuart at a specific point in their lives, and in part about our own journey in thinking about *izithunguthu*.

Putting '*isithunguthu*' into writing

We do not know what the roots of the meaning of *isithunguthu* are, nor how far back in time they go. What resonances did the word carry in the era before the coming of writing to the KwaZulu-Natal region in the second quarter of the nineteenth century? They could not have been about writing and remembering: were they about being knowledgeable but thrown off balance by questioning on the part of authorities in African societies? Or did the word have other meanings, now lost, and did it begin to resonate in this way only as colonial rule bore down more heavily on the African inhabitants of the colonies of Natal and, subsequently, Zululand in the later nineteenth century?

For numbers of Africans who experienced the questioning and breaking down of their knowledge of particular matters by magistrates and lawyers in the unfamiliar and often hostile environment of the colony's law courts, the meaning of *isitungutu* as given in the Colenso *Dictionary* of 1905 would have made much sense. It is significant that the word does not appear in the first edition of the *Dictionary*, published in 1861,⁴ when colonial rule in Natal did not yet lie heavily on most of the African population. We have not yet been able to lay our hands on copies of the second edition of 1878 and the third of 1884, but it is clear that at some stage before 1905 the word was widely enough in circulation among isiZulu-speaking people for it to have come to the notice of Harriette Colenso (and perhaps other persons who may have been involved in revising the *Dictionary*), and to have been included in the edition published that year. Colenso was herself a fluent speaker and writer of isiZulu,⁵

and, as Jeff Guy has shown in detail, had had long experience of discussions with Africans who had suffered at the hands of colonial authority in Zululand and Natal.⁶ She had also had prolonged experience of the workings of the colonial law courts through her involvement in the defence of Dinuzulu kaCetshwayo and others accused of treason after the Zululand rebellion of 1888.⁷

Factors such as these were surely important in the *Dictionary's* take-up of the word *isithunguthu*. For its contemporary meaning to become clearer, we need to know far more than we do about intellectual currents of the time in Natal and Zululand. We need to know particularly how ideas about the past and present were being made and circulated in those times among African people in the rapidly changing societies of the rural areas, such as the society that Thununu lived in. And we need to know much more about how the British colonizers who were tightening their hold over Natal (enlarged by the incorporation of Zululand in 1897) saw themselves and the Africans whom they ruled. Study of these topics, and of the sources of evidence available on them, has recently begun to generate probing research work,⁸ but is still some way from becoming a major field of investigation.

Thanks to James Stuart's practice of assiduously making notes of his conversations with his interlocutors, we have some idea of the circumstances in which the word '*izithunguthu*' was brought to written life in the interchange between him and Thununu. These notes form part of Stuart's collection of papers, which has been lodged in the Killie Campbell Africana Library in Durban since the late 1940s. From the 1970s, annotated renditions of his notes of his conversations with his interlocutors, with passages originally recorded in isiZulu translated into English, have been published by the University of Natal Press (from 2002 the University of KwaZulu-Natal Press) in the successive volumes of the *James Stuart Archive*.⁹ Collectively, these volumes now form the single most important published body of recorded oral materials on the history of African societies in the KwaZulu-Natal region before the early twentieth century.

In this paper, we base our discussion on the materials in the published volumes, though we would like to highlight a point made elsewhere by Carolyn Hamilton and by Wright that the reorganized, edited, and translated texts in the *James Stuart Archive* cannot be seen as identical to the original notes in the Stuart Collection.¹⁰ Nor, to draw on a perspective developed by Hamilton over years of research, can either the original notes or the edited renderings be seen in any simple way as records of what are commonly called 'oral traditions'.¹¹ Rather, they are notes of conversations about the past which were shaped by views of history held by both Stuart and his interlocutors, and by their particular agendas in their discussions. In a probing study, Hamilton has argued that the notes are in many respects faithful to what Stuart's interlocutors told him.¹²

From Stuart's notes of his conversations with Thununu, we learn that the latter was of the Gcabashe offshoot of the Qwabe clan.¹³ According to Stuart's reckoning, he was born in about 1814,¹⁴ in other words a little before the rise of the Zulu chief Shaka to political prominence in the KwaZulu-Natal region. He grew up among the Qwabe people in the south-east of the emerging Zulu kingdom. As a young man, he served as an *inceku*, or personal

attendant, in the household of Dingane, who succeeded Shaka as Zulu king after being party to his assassination in 1828. Much of what he told Stuart about his own life consisted of anecdotes about his experiences in this role. Sometime after the overthrow of Dingane in 1840 by his brother Mpande, supported by parties of Boer settlers from the Cape, Thununu left the Zulu kingdom to go and live in the region south of the Thukela river, which had been annexed by the British as the colony of Natal in 1843. Here he lived and worked for many years, and then at some stage moved back north of the Thukela river to the country of his Qwabe ancestors. During his long life, he seems to have acquired a reputation as a person with deep knowledge of the past. It was this that brought him to the attention of James Stuart, then a magistrate in Durban, who in 1903 invited Thununu to visit him to provide him with information on history and custom.

For his part, Stuart had been born and brought up in Natal and educated in England. He grew up speaking isiZulu in addition to his native English, and from 1888 held posts in the administration of native affairs in Zululand and Natal. From the late 1890s he devoted much of his spare time to researching the history and customs of local African societies, and within a few years was aspiring to make himself the leading authority in this field. Though he shared many of the racial prejudices of the British settlers who dominated the politics of Natal, his prime motive was to establish as clear and detailed a picture as possible of the ‘Zulu traditional’ system of government in order to try to inform the making of native policy in Natal. As he saw it, white settler governments in the colony were heading in a dangerous direction by working to undermine the powers exercised by African chiefs over their adherents. Settlers more generally held ignorant and deeply prejudiced views of African ways of life.¹⁵

In the period from 1897 to 1900, while posted to a number of different centres in Zululand, Swaziland, and Natal, Stuart made notes, ranging in length from a single paragraph to several hundred notebook pages, of discussions with some fifty individuals. His encounters with some of them lasted no more than a few minutes; others extended over several weeks. His appointment as assistant magistrate in Durban in March 1901 enabled him to establish a more settled existence, and to conduct his researches in greater depth. From December 1901 to May 1903, he recorded conversations with twenty individuals. Over the three weeks from 28 May to 17 June 1903, he held discussions with Thununu that were some of the most prolonged and intensive he had yet engaged in. It was in the course of these that Thununu made the comment about *izithunguthu* that forms the subject of our investigation.

Rediscovering ‘*isithunguthu*’

The word *isithunguthu* does not appear in Doke and Vilakazi’s *Zulu-English Dictionary* of 1948, the most comprehensive dictionary of the isiZulu language to have been published up to that time.¹⁶ Nor does it appear in other major dictionaries published since.¹⁷ Without in-depth research into the history of the word and of the language, we cannot know why: all we can do here is note that sometime after it had appeared in Stuart’s notes and in Colenso’s *Dictionary*, the word *isithunguthu* seems to have fallen out of the sight of isiZulu-speaking intellectuals. In effect, it did not begin to resurface until 2013 when, in the process of editing

Stuart's notes of his conversations with Thununu for publication in volume 6 of the *James Stuart Archive*, Wright came across the marginal note quoted above. He found it an intriguing enough statement for him to make his own note of it, which he put away in a file marked 'Sense of History among Stuart's Informants'. The wider context for this was that by that time the making of historical knowledge in southern Africa before the advent of writing was starting to become the subject of academic attention.¹⁸ Wright had himself published on the subject, and intended to investigate it further.

In editing Thununu's statement, Wright was unable to establish a clear meaning for *isithunguthu*. Influenced by the tenor of conversations about the benefits of European 'civilization' between Stuart and certain of his *amakholwa* (Christian) interlocutors,¹⁹ he saw the word as possibly derived from the verb *ukuthungulula*, to open the eyes, discover, untie, undo. In the event this was the gloss that was published in volume 6 of the *James Stuart Archive* the following year.²⁰ The implication was that Thununu was having his eyes opened by what he was learning in his conversations with Stuart - which is something very different from the meaning of *isitungutu* given in the *Colenso Dictionary*.

The occasion for Wright's discovery of the entry in *Colenso* came soon after volume 6 of the *James Stuart Archive* had gone to press. In the second quarter of 2014, Carolyn Hamilton, NRF chair in the Archive and Public Culture Research Initiative at the University of Cape Town, and a leading figure in the study of southern Africa's past before the colonial period, was engaged in drawing up a call for papers for a conference that she planned to hold the following year on the making of the different forms of archive pertinent to this past. At the end of July she wrote to Wright, with whom she had worked on research papers over a long period, to express her view that the title of the conference should come out of the *James Stuart Archive*, and to ask for pointers. This gave Wright the incentive to go back to his files, from which he picked out the note on Thununu's comment that he had made the previous year. In once again puzzling over the meaning of '*izitungutu*', he turned to *Colenso's* previously neglected *Dictionary*, and discovered that Thununu had meant something quite different from what he had originally thought. As Wright put it in a letter to Hamilton on 1 August 2014:

Is Thununu not saying to Stuart, 'You can write and remember, but for our part we, who know our history well, are being made to forget as written history takes over?' This is a man who has been steeped in the past of the Qwabe and Shaka and Dingane for nearly 90 years. He knows this history; it is important enough to him for him to want to tell it at length to Stuart. It seems no accident that the note comes at the top of a page on which Stuart lists a number of questions on Qwabe history which he proceeds to ask Thununu – the cross-questioning of a well-informed oral historian, with his memories being transformed/captured (?) in front of him. Thununu is commenting not so much on Stuart's doing this, perhaps, as more generally on what written memory is doing to the history known by *izithunguthu* like himself

If this is the case, then Thununu is speaking directly to the issue that you raise in the proposal [for the conference] about the historical erasure of the oral archive. It seems

to me a statement that deserves to be brought in somehow, about an extraordinarily important historiographical moment.

For her part, Hamilton at once picked up the word *isithunguthu* as saying something about the nature of discussion among intellectuals in rural African societies of the time. Her response was to headline the word in the title of the proposed conference: ‘*Izithunguthu: Southern African Pasts before the Colonial Era, Their Archives and Their Ongoing Present/Presence*’. In the call for papers that she sent out under this title, she featured Thununu’s comment, together with the entry for *isitungutu* in the Colenso *Dictionary*, as epigrams. And so the word was launched into the wider academic world. The conference, held at the University of Cape Town in July 2015, was attended by some fifty people: how far the word has lodged in their historical consciousness, and how far it has since circulated beyond members of this group, are things we cannot know.²¹ By the same token, we cannot know how far the word was taken up by the audience of several dozen who heard Wright speak at the launch of volume 6 of the *James Stuart Archive* at the conference of the South African Historical Society held at the University of Stellenbosch two weeks before the APC conference. He made a point of highlighting the need for research into the world of the *izithunguthu*, a term which, he said, Hamilton and he hoped to see established as a central concept in the study of historical knowledge-making in South Africa.²²

The present authors’ participation in the CISA conference in October 2016 and the APC workshop the following month were further steps in bringing the notion of *isithunguthu* to the attention of a wider academic audience, and opening up discussion of its wider significance. In the process of doing this, we are also seeking to take forward notions developed by Hamilton on reading Stuart’s texts as notes of ‘conversations’. For her part, Kros was excited by the possibilities that the word *izithunguthu* seemed to open up when she first heard Wright speak about it at the launch of the sixth volume of the *James Stuart Archive*. She had been working on more contemporary narratives articulated by the widows of the striking miners killed at Marikana by the police in 2012. The women were determined to confront and overturn the dominant images disseminated by the mining industry and its allies of their dead husbands as savage barbarians because they understood how much harm a particular narrative could do to their search for justice and compensation. For Kros, there was a link with the idea that more than a hundred years previously an isiZulu-speaking man had commented to a British colonial official on the advantage that written narrative had over those who tried to retain their remembered history against its onslaught. Kros subsequently attended the APC conference, and as she pursued the work that she is doing with Wright on critical readings of archival sources on the past before the colonial era, was given more opportunities to think about the significance of *izithunguthu*.

Finding a focus

In thinking about the content of the paper, our first idea was to argue for the usefulness of the notion of *izithunguthu* as a label for protagonists of a particular, and now little known, set of discourses about the past in late-colonial Natal, that is, of oral discourses current among Africans living in the rural areas. We aimed to set our discussion against consideration of

two other sets of discourses about the past that were then being articulated in the colony and elsewhere in southern Africa. One was developing among the British settlers who were in the final stages of making themselves politically dominant in the subcontinent.²³ The other was developing among the small but growing group of *amakholwa*, or Christian Africans, who were seeking a place in colonial society on a par with that of Europeans.²⁴

In the event, we quickly moved on from this idea. We realized that, historically, the supposedly distinct discourses that we were in the process of identifying had drawn on one another in ways that the literature had hardly begun to examine.²⁵ Our ideas on how to focus the paper began firming up after Kros had done a first-pass reading of Stuart's lengthy notes of his conversations, extending over the years 1897 to 1922, with Socwatsha kaPhaphu. In contrast to the 'contextualizing' approach to Stuart's notes that Wright had developed over years of editorial work on them, Kros came with a perspective more attuned to their textuality, and to probing what a close textual reading could reveal about the nature of the conversations between Stuart and his interlocutors. It seemed logical that we should turn this kind of approach to an examination of the record of Stuart's conversations with Thununu, to see if it could help us establish more clearly where his comment on *izithunguthu* had come from.

Thununu as an interlocutor

Thununu's name as a potential interlocutor had come up in the course of a conversation in Durban between Stuart and Ndlovu kaThimuni of the Zulu clan, who was a government-recognized chief in the Mapumulo district, on 9 May 1903.²⁶ At the time, Thununu seems to have been living near Eshowe in southeastern Zululand, in the old Qwabe country not far from where he had been brought up.²⁷ Stuart's approach to him was through Chief Magidi kaNgomane of the Lower Tugela division, who sent one of his sons to fetch him and accompany him to Durban.²⁸ The journey would have involved walking (fortunately in the cool season of an often sweltering climate) from his home to the nearest railway station, which was probably Gingindhlovu, some 20 kilometres from Eshowe, catching a train to Durban, and then making his way (by tram?) to Stuart's home in Musgrave Road on the Berea ridge overlooking the town. He seems previously to have lived and worked in Natal for many years and had five children living in Durban, so was probably no stranger to the town.²⁹

Stuart held conversations with Thununu from 28 May to 17 June 1903. Working in the early mornings and evenings, and at weekends, they engaged in one of the longest and most intensive working spells that Stuart had had with any of his interlocutors. He clearly hoped to elicit detailed information from Thununu on the life of Shaka and on historical relations between the Zulu and Qwabe, but on both counts he faced a good deal of frustration. It quickly emerged that Thununu far preferred to talk about his own experiences as an *inceku* (household attendant) at Dingane's capital, uMgungundlovu, in the 1830s. His motives for wanting to do so are not made clear, but they very probably went beyond the simply personal. From at least the 1860s, Dingane had featured as an archetypal 'bad native' in the political mythology of numbers of colonists in southern Africa because of his killing of Piet Retief and

a party of his followers in 1838.³⁰ The incident had also come to feature in various ways in the praises of Dingane and in historical discourses among Africans in the Zulu kingdom and Natal.³¹ In discussing his own life in Dingane's court with Stuart, Thununu may well have been wanting to make an intervention in a politically contentious issue. How far Stuart was aware of this is not on record, but, fortunately for later historians, he obliged Thununu by taking detailed notes on the subject.

To understand the directions that their conversations took, we need to examine in more detail both Thununu's background and the context in which he conversed with Stuart. Thununu had been born in the Qwabe chiefdom ruled by Phakathwayo in about 1814, that is, a year or two before Shaka came to power in the Zulu chiefdom. Though his father seems to have been one of Phakathwayo's close associates,³² Thununu knew, or at least indicated to Stuart that he knew, very little about the history of these and former times.³³ His father had died when Thununu was still a child,³⁴ which would no doubt have cut off one potential source of information about the past. Nor, by his own account, had he learnt much about the past from the wives of Phakathwayo.³⁵ He would no doubt also have been cut off from other potential sources by the disintegration of the Qwabe chiefdom in the reigns of Shaka and Dingane, and by his own flight to the colony of Natal, probably in the 1840s.

Also pertinent is the point, demonstrated in detail by Hamilton, that after the break-up of the Qwabe chiefdom, the traditions of origin of the Qwabe ceased to be of much interest or relevance, and largely fell into disuse.³⁶ In the 1830s and 1840s, a new Qwabe polity, made up of large numbers of refugees from Shaka, Dingane and Mpande, began reviving in the coastal hinterland south of the Thukela river, a region which, from 1843, formed part of the colony of Natal. But, as Michael Mahoney has shown, in the course of the nineteenth century it was the history of the Qwabe from the time of Phakathwayo's father Khondlo onward, rather than their traditions of origin, that came to be salient in Qwabe discourses about the past. Attention focussed particularly on the history of the succession disputes that had played out, and continued to play out, in Qwabe politics.³⁷

From 1890 to the Natal rebellion of 1906, tensions between rival factions of the Qwabe became particularly high. We need to see Stuart's conversations with his Qwabe interlocutors against this background. In October 1904, one of them, Mmemi kaNguluzane, who was of high status in one of the factions, and also highly informed on Qwabe history, expressly told Stuart that he feared being killed by political opponents if he became too closely involved in political issues.³⁸ It may well be that concerns of this sort were a factor in rendering Thununu relatively reticent on Qwabe history in the face of Stuart's probes on the subject. Another factor may have been that at this time he seems to have been living in the old Qwabe country in the Eshowe district,³⁹ where two influential Zulu chiefs, Mthonga kaMpande and Mkhungo kaMpande, ruled large chiefdoms.⁴⁰ Quite possibly Thununu was reluctant to talk about the Qwabe past, and the historical conflicts between Qwabe and Zulu, for fear of stirring up politically sensitive issues.

A discourse of knowledge-making

Why did Thununu agree to undertake what at his age must have been an arduous journey to visit Stuart? We will probably never have a full answer to this question, but a close reading of Stuart's notes of their conversations strongly suggests that he invested great importance in wanting his account of the past to be preserved in the written record. Hamilton argues that it is possible to find what she calls 'calculated attempts by the subjects of colonialism ... to enter their experiences and views into the formal archival record',⁴¹ and there is every reason to think that this is what Thununu was seeking to do, though without the evidence it is difficult to say precisely what incentives were driving him in what can only have been a major personal undertaking.

Hlonipha Mokoena has highlighted the *amakholwa's* awareness of the longevity of the written word,⁴² and it is highly likely that many non-*kholwa* elders like Thununu were just as cognisant of its power. Thununu would have known of the written word from the contact he had had with missionaries in the late 1830s during Dingane's reign,⁴³ and from many years of living in colonial Natal. He may possibly have had some prior knowledge of Stuart's interest in writing down what elders like himself could tell about the past, and the invitation to visit Stuart that came to him via Chief Magidi may not have been entirely unexpected.

But there is an ambivalence in Thununu's comment on *izithunguthu*. On the one hand it is an observation on the power of writing to preserve memory. On the other, it suggests that Thununu felt that this power put *izithunguthu* like himself at a considerable disadvantage. While wanting to see his words preserved, he may also have seen the capturing of 'his' history by Stuart, the colonial official, as threatening to deprive him of a platform for speaking of his own knowledge of the past, knowledge which, apart from anything else, served to maintain crucially important links through time between his ancestors, himself, and his children. In another context, Isabel Hofmeyr has written cogently about the sense of failure experienced by elders who felt that their social roles as communicators of cultural skills between generations was being undermined by the intrusion of the written word.⁴⁴ It may be that in his interactions with Stuart Thununu felt something of the same thing happening.

It is important to remember that we are able to hear Thununu's voice only through the notes that Stuart made, and that the transcription was by no means always verbatim. In keeping with his open-ended method of recording, however, Stuart was prepared to record Thununu's responses even when he seems to have judged them to be unproductive in terms of what he wanted to find out, or when they amounted to an admission of ignorance of the subject at hand. This practice, as well as the fact that Stuart documented some of his own musings on the apparent deficiencies in his interlocutor's knowledge, makes it possible to get quite a textured sense of their conversations, including the sticking points. Being able to identify the moments when Thununu was becoming irritated, or resisted Stuart's line of questioning, as well as the moments when Stuart himself was becoming frustrated, points up the particular nature of their conversations as a discourse of knowledge-making, one that we are only just beginning to unpack.

For his own part, Thununu seems to have a strong self-confidence in his own status as an authority on the past. In this his attitude contrasts sharply with that of another old man, one Jiyana, who was one of Chief Ndlovu kaThimuni's adherents. According to Stuart, he refused to talk about the past to Ndlovu's messenger because he had become so demoralised. As he put it, he who was once a man of position was now (for reasons we are not told) nothing but a dog.⁴⁵ To Stuart, Thununu presented himself as an informed commentator on events he stressed he had witnessed first-hand. Where he did not know the answer to questions put to him, he was prepared to say so. On several occasions when Stuart directly challenged him about his version of events, he refused to back down. In the face of scepticism or signs from Stuart that his answers to questions had not been very satisfactory, not to mention occasional contradictions from Ndukwana kaMbengwana and Jantshi kaNongila, others of Stuart's interlocutors who were present through some or all his conversations with Thununu, the latter persevered with his own versions.

Despite intending to work from detailed lists of questions that he prepared in advance of particular conversation sessions, Stuart gave Thununu several opportunities to speak at some length on the subjects he wanted to talk about. Thununu was obviously a good raconteur, a feature of their conversations which Stuart's perhaps surprisingly extensive notes seem to have captured rather well.⁴⁶ Given the nature of the evidence, we cannot read Thununu's intent with precision, but we can observe that he was not shy either about pursuing his own narrative interests, or asserting his status as an authority on particular events in history.

The quasi-legal environment

Thununu would already have had long experience of living in an environment in which elders like him offered competing historical narratives in public and private gatherings. In their conversations, Stuart fairly certainly confronted him with different versions of the past as given by previous interlocutors (for example, stories of Shaka's birth as related by Ndlovu kaaThimuni, Mhuyi kaThimuni, and Jantshi kaNongila). Stuart may also have fed into their discussions versions of the past which he derived from published sources, such as references to the Boers' visit to Dingane in 1837-8 made in Bird's *Annals of Natal* (p. 262). Thununu seems not only to have been aware of the challenges to his own account posed by competing histories, but also to have been sensitive to the question of the need to defend his own version of the past in a quasi-legal setting, framed by Stuart's proclivities as a magistrate habituated to procedures of cross-examination and weighing up evidence.⁴⁷ In the course of the interviews, Thununu was meticulous about presenting his qualifications as a credible witness. They resided mostly in his claims to have been present at central historical events, including the killing of the Boer leader Piet Retief and his party by Dingane in 1838, and the battle of Maqongqo at which Dingane was defeated by Mpande and his Boer allies in 1840, or in having had Dingane himself as a source of information (253). Thununu's relationship with Dingane dated from the time of the former's early childhood, when, as a young man, the latter had taken refuge at Thununu's family's home among the Qwabe because of tensions over the succession to the chiefship within the Zulu ruling house (253). Subsequently Thununu had become one of Dingane's *izinceku*, thus sharing an intimate space with the king, who according to Thununu, always treated him as a favoured servant.

It is possible to follow in Stuart's notes an argument that took place between Thununu and Jantshi, who happened to be visiting Stuart, about who was the more credible on the issue of whether or not Shaka had been born out of wedlock. It was an issue that Stuart considered an important one to settle (280), and he raised it as a point of discussion (293). Jantshi asserted that Shaka had been born among the Langeni, his mother's people, with the implication that he had been born out of wedlock. Thununu flatly contradicted this by insisting that Shaka had been born among the Zulu, his father's people, with the implication that he had not been born out of wedlock. Jantshi's claim rested on evidence that he said he had heard from his father Nongila, who had been closely associated with the Zulu royal house.

Thununu's claim seems to have rested on evidence that he said he had heard from Dingane, and also on his own great age and therefore, by implication, on his superior credibility as a witness on the past. Jantshi, who was in his mid-fifties, sought to undercut his position by pointing out that Nongila had been a contemporary of Senzangakhona, Shaka's father, and that in comparison Thununu was a mere 'boy'. In response, Thununu stated that he had been acquainted with Nongila, the implication being that Jantshi could not claim senior status for him. As one who 'knew', Thununu was determined not to back down, especially not in front of Stuart. Though the latter was only in his mid-thirties, unmarried to boot, and therefore a 'boy', he had the authority of the government behind him, and was a figure who wielded the power of writing.

Points of friction

Stuart began his conversations with Thununu on 28 May 1903. Over the next three days he sought to elicit information on the early history of the Zulu and Qwabe, but soon found that Thununu had little to say on the subject and much preferred to talk about his own experiences in Dingane's time (252-64). Stuart kept coming back to his own line of questioning, which suggests that he felt that Thununu was withholding information on the subject, but by the evening of 31 May he had been forced to conclude that 'Thununu knows nothing of the origin of the Zulu and Qwabe peoples, much less of such tribes as Mtetwa, Ndwandwe, aba se Langeni, and less still of the whole Native races' (264). He went on: 'Thununu cannot connect the Qwabe with the Zulu people. *He will not allow* (our emphasis) the Qwabes ever lived but in the neighbourhood of the Mhlatuze, Matigulu and Mlalazi, and yet he says both Qwabe and Zulu were the sons of Malandela and Zulu came from the north.... He *admits* (our emphasis) it is possible the Qwabe came from the north' (264-5).

Stuart's use of the words 'not allow' and 'admits' suggest that he applied cross-examination in an attempt to extract information, a procedure which was very probably beginning to cause Thununu the vexation that became apparent in his later remark about the *izithunguthu*. Despite his own dissatisfaction with the quality of Thununu's information, that same evening Stuart drew up a long list of 'queries' to put to him (265). Over the next few days he once again found that Thununu either could not or would not tell him much about early history, while being happy to speak about his knowledge of Dingane's reign. One can sense the mounting frustration behind the note that Stuart made on the afternoon of 6 June to the effect that, 'Thununu is very disappointing as to where the inhabitants of Zululand originally came

from' (283). Still he did not give up on Thununu, but once again made a note to ask him more questions.

On 10 June Stuart had yet another series of questions ready for his interlocutor about early Qwabe history. It is here, on the same page as he listed these questions, that Stuart records Thununu as having remarked, 'You can write and remember but *'tina [si] izitungutu nje'* (for editors' rendering see *JSA* 289). In the context, one cannot help but read it as an expression of irritation and fatigue that came in the wake of concentrated interrogation and perhaps a perceived neglect of the events and characters Thununu believed were significant to the history he was telling. When we were reviewing the page in the published *James Stuart Archive* on which the *izithunguthu* remark is rendered, we noticed the proximity of diagrams that Stuart drew and labelled, including one of an *ikhanda* (royal homestead) on the same page (289), and another (on a page dated 14 June) representing Dingane's main homestead, Mgungundlovu (294). In the latter, Stuart made a note against one of the architectural features that reads: 'Tununu lived here' (295). If Thununu had any sense of how his lived experience had been reduced to a one-dimensional diagram, this might also have fed into his feelings of exasperation.

Even if Thununu was irritated at certain points by Stuart's procedures, he did not shy away from their discussions. His attitude to conversing about the past contrasts strongly with that of another of Stuart's interlocutors on Qwabe history, Mbovu kaMshumayeli, who, in September 1904, said to Stuart, 'Why do you stir up these old graves? When the tribe is still standing and flourishing it is something, but now we are broken and scattered.... [T]o talk over things dead and gone appears painful and unnecessary'.⁴⁸ We will never be quite sure of what agendas Thununu had in talking to Stuart, but, through paying attention to the apparent points of friction between them, we can get an idea of how Thununu's resistance to Stuart's probings on certain issues was instrumental in shaping the latter's texts. We can imagine Thununu looking at the young magistrate as he ploughed through his questions and thinking, 'We may be *izithunguthu*, but you are a boy to us'.

In spite of their occasional frustrations with each other, Stuart and Thununu saw fit to persevere in their conversations for three weeks. Stuart found enough of value in what Thununu had to tell him for him to record much of it in detail. For his own part, Thununu clearly wanted his words to enter the written record, and as far as possible on his own terms. What his feelings ultimately were about his conversations with Stuart we do not know.

In this paper we have described something of the surfacings made by the word *isithunguthu* at two widely separated points in its journey through time – the first years of the twentieth century, and the second decade of the twenty-first. As spoken by Thununu, it seems to have signified a knowledgeable person whose knowledge was being undermined in processes of cross-examination by authority figures. More specifically, he was making a strong – and poignant – statement about what was happening to oral discourses about the past in African societies in Natal as colonial forms of knowledge-making and knowledge-archiving became firmly established. Now that the word has been rediscovered, more than a century later, by

scholars concerned to open up the field of intellectual history in the era before colonialism, we can ask: How will it continue its journey, and in what direction?

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- ⁷ Guy, *The View across the River*, chs. 18-22.
- ⁸ C. Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty: The Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical Invention*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Cape Town: David Philip, 1998; H. Mokoena, *Magama Fuze: The Making of a Kholwa Intellectual*, Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2011; C. Hamilton and N. Leibhammer, eds., *Tribing and Untribing the Archive: Identity and the Material Record in Southern KwaZulu-Natal in the Late Independent and Colonial Periods*, 2 vols., Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2016.
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- ¹¹ C. Hamilton, ‘Archives, ancestors and the contingencies of time’, in A. Lüdtké and T. Nanz, eds., *Laute, Bilde, Texte: Register des Archivs*, Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2015, pp. 103-18.

¹² Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty*, pp. 142-52.

¹³ These notes, with editors' annotations, are to be found in *JSA* vol. 6, pp. 252-315.

¹⁴ *JSA* vol. 6, pp. 280, 309 n.140.

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²⁰ *JSA* vol. 6, p. 312, n. 180.

²¹ See Hamilton's report on the conference published online in the APC Gazette in October 2015.

²² The text of Wright's address was published online in the APC Gazette in October 2015.

²³ E.g. R. Russell, *Natal: the Land and Its Story*, Pietermaritzburg: P. Davis, 1891.

²⁴ P. la Hausse de Lalouvière, *Restless Identities: Signatures of Nationalism, Zulu Ethnicity and History in the Lives of Petros Lamula (c.1881-1948) and Lymon Maling (1889-c.1936)*, Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2000; H. Mokoena, *Magema Fuze: the Making of a Kholwa Intellectual*, Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2011; H. Hughes, *First President: A Life of John L. Dube, Founding President of the ANC*, Johannesburg: Jacana, 2011.

²⁵ Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty*, is a major exception.

²⁶ *JSA* vol. 4, p. 218.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

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- ³² Ibid., pp. 252, 282.
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- ⁴⁶ On Stuart's recording of narrative see Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty*, p. 153.
- ⁴⁷ See Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty*, pp. 142-3, 152.
- ⁴⁸ *JSA* vol. 3, p. 38.