The Historiography of the KwaMachi People: A Frontier Community between Zulu and Mpondo in the Nineteenth Century

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In history, we have never known a thing that connects KwaMachi with either KwaZulu or Mzansi. KwaMachi was like an island in a way. The homeland system came, Mabiz became part of the amathunzi structures. Xolo was connecting it. Janjai Mabiz got chosen by KwaZulu parliament to represent amathunzi. Mabizhe's struggle went through xolo. (Dr. Mangosuthu Buthelezi, president of the African National Congress (ANC), a KwaZulu-Natal based political organisation.)

The above quotation not only illuminates the unique and intricate history of the Machi chieftain, which is the focus of this essay, but also highlights the fundamental argument of this study. This is a historiography essay that challenges arguments for deeper and fixed identities as the basis of most communities. The province of KwaZulu Natal is often associated with popular notions of ethnic history that see all Africans living in it as Zulu. This universal outlook not only fails to acknowledge the significance of the history of pre-Shaka communities, it also does not take into consideration borderland communities whose history has been shifting in time and who should be understood in terms of their unique history. Using KwaMachi as a case study, this essay asserts that border zones are not places where identities are sealed and where new ones are formed. They are locales where social spaces are reconfigured, mixed and hybridised in the formation of a borderland community. I argue on the basis of archival and oral research

1 I conducted the interviews referenced in this essay. My chief informants were KwaMachi community residents older than 60 from all levels of the community. The choice of informants was determined mainly by age. Many of them came from known families, were semi- or non-literate and without a high profile in the community. The photographs taken from an interview with J.T.S. (1889-1976) were taken at KwaMachi and now hang in the lounge. He had no leadership position at KwaMachi.

2 I define 'chieftain' in this context as political entity in a geographical area and the administration of an ethnic chief, or social authority. Mabizhe is the name of the founder of the chieftain and KwaMachity is the name of the chieftain on the southern border of KwaZulu-Natal.

3 This essay formed part of my PhD history research work completed 2006 and published as N. Cele, The Historiography of the KwaMachi People: A Frontier Community between Amazulu and Amakhulu in the Nineteenth Century, Journal of African History 27, 2006: 1-20.

Figure 1 (opposite). One of James Stuart's handwritten pages of notes on his conversation with Malaya khalasphaba. James Stuart Collection, Fk 42, p.67. Campbell, Collections of the University of KwaZulu-Natal