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Jan Tzatzoe or Dyani Tshatshu: personal, political, and historical consequences of naming in African history

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Jan Tzatzoe or Dyani Tshatshu: Personal, Political, and Historical Consequences of Naming in African History

By Roger S. Levine

"Oh, you mean, Tshatshu," the middle-aged man stated emphatically. He emphasized and then drew out each syllable in a deeply resonant manner that I had not heard before: Tsh-aaa Tsh-uuu.[102]

"Of course, I know who *he* was."

Our conversation had begun a few minutes earlier. In the winter of 2011 I had found my way to Grahamstown, in South Africa's Eastern Cape, for the National Arts Festival. I had been invited to present my recently published book, *A Living Man from Africa: Jan Tzatzoe, Xhosa Chief and Missionary, and the Making of Nineteenth-Century South Africa*. The book tells the story of Jan Tzatzoe, an African leader and intermediary who flourished in the European colonial world of the missionary Reverend Read, who helped raise him from boyhood, and the African world of his father, Kote Tzatzoe, chief of the amaNtinde lineage of the Xhosa state, to whose people he eventually returned.[103]

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[101] Roger S. Levine, "Jan Tzatzoe or Dyani Tshatshu: Personal, Political, and Historical Consequences of Naming in African History," in *African Christian Biography: Stories, Lives, and Challenges,* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2018).

[102]. My thanks to Jonathan J. Bonk and Dana L. Robert and the other organizers of the African Christian Biography Conference, to my fellow participants in the conference, and to Dana Robert for her comments on the revisions of this chapter.

[103]. Roger S. Levine, *A Living Man from Africa: Jan Tzatzoe, Xhosa Chief and Missionary, and the Making of Nineteenth-Century South Africa* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2010). For further information on Tzatzoe, in particular his evangelistic and diplomatic work, see Roger S. Levine, "Cultural Innovation and Translation in the Eastern Cape: Jan Tzatzoe, Xhosa Intellectual, and the Making of an African Gospel, 1817–1833," *African Historical Review* 42, no. 2 (2010): 84–101, and "An Interpreter Will Arise: Resurrecting Jan Tzatzoe's Diplomatic and Evangelical Contributions as a Cultural Intermediary on South Africa's Eastern Cape Frontier, 1816–1818," in *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks: African Employees and the Making of Colonial Africa*, ed. Benjamin N. Lawrance, Emily Lynn Osborn, and Richard L. Roberts (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 37–55.

Born into a Xhosa royal family around 1792 in South Africa, Tzatzoe interacted with both worlds as a missionary, diplomat, chief, and ambassador on the colonial, metropolitan, and imperial stages, including a highly publicized and controversial evangelical and political journey to Great Britain in 1836–37. He witnessed the advent and imposition of colonialism in South Africa. By the 1860s, despite his determined resistance, Tzatzoe was an oppressed subject of harsh British colonial rule. During this period of fervent cultural and political appropriation and contestation, he embodied African participation in several crucial issues of the colonial encounter: the hybrid nature of the selves, or identities, being fashioned in the interstitial and contingent space of the frontier; the coalescing of European and African religious thought and culture; the redefinition of African political authority; the construction of a colonial state apparatus and racial ideology; and humanitarian and African resistance to this construction.

To say that I was frazzled would be understating matters. It had been only a few days before that I had been told that I would not be presenting to the general festival audience, but instead to a Wordfest audience, a large group of local, isiXhosa-speakers, writers, and intellectuals. The morning had begun with high spirits, but by the time I made my way toward the auditorium for my talk that afternoon, intense storms or perhaps the inscrutable whims of ESKOM (South Africa's public electrical utility) had knocked out power on the Rhodes University campus. This turn of events threatened not just my PowerPoint slides, but the presentation itself due to lack of lighting in the lecture halls. I arrived to find my talk delayed, and the real highlight of the timeslot, Jonathan Shapiro, a.k.a. the cartoonist Zapiro, declaiming at the top of his voice, Pope-like, from a first story balcony down towards an audience that took up most of the ground floor atrium and flowed up the stairway itself.

I skirted the crowd and made my way up to the lecture hall to await the return of electricity or the "all clear" to forge ahead regardless. I could see that the auditorium was mostly full already and was collecting my thoughts, when my interlocutor found me. He held a copy of my book and was pointing at the cover, which features a stylized engraving from an 1836 painting of Jan Tzatzoe.

"Who is this person here?" he asked, adding, "We do not know this person." He pointed specifically at the title of the book. "This is not a Xhosa name! Why are you saying he is Xhosa?"

"No, you see, he was a Xhosa," I answered. "His name was Dyani Tshatshu. Of the amaTshatshus."

"Oh, you mean Tsh-aaa Tsh-uuu," he replied.

In the remainder of this chapter, I wish to explore fully both the choices I made in writing and presenting my research findings that led to the moment described above and the personal, historical, and political consequences that flowed from those choices. While I by no means wish to suggest that my experience and choices are illustrative of the experience of other scholars and writers, I do offer this personal account with the hope that elements of it may resonate with others and inform their choices or at least allow them to anticipate better the consequences and unintended meanings their work may ignite. The issues raised by my experience do not provoke the kind of questions that have answers or for which an academic argument may be framed. But they do place me, and I hope others, into a space of reflection—a space in which emotions and unconscious motivations come to the fore. These issues are especially compelling in the context of this volume's focus on the biographical elements of African studies, African history, and African Christianity—the "possibilities and perils" of engaging with individual lives and individual life stories. More so perhaps than other work in African history that integrates individual lives into larger groups (which then can be analyzed with reference to class, gender, race, and such rubrics), biographies develop—and, yes, appropriate— in-depth lives and stories with specific, tangible, local contexts and meanings. Biographers do so to appeal to multiple audiences, both local and global, and they can find their work being received in unexpected settings.

Motivations

I found the historical figure who became central to my book in the pages of Noël Mostert's magisterial 1992 *Frontiers*, where he appears as Dyani Tshatshu.[104] Even to someone familiar with isiXhosa or with Nguni languages more broadly, Dyani is an unusual name and certainly not a familiar one. Once I began to examine the archival record for traces of Dyani Tshatshu, the situation became cloudier. The archival record speaks of a Jan Tsatsoe or Jan Tzatzoe and, toward the end of his life (starting around the 1850s), of a Jan Tshatshu. It remains unclear whether "Jan" was a transcription of the isiXhosa, Dyani, or what seems more plausible to me, that Dyani was a transcription back into isiXhosa of the Dutch/Afrikaans name, Jan. The first syllables of both names are pronounced similarly. The isiXhosa pronunciation that starting in the 1850s and through to

[104]. Noël Mostert, *Frontiers: The Epic of South Africa's Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People* (London: Pimlico, 1992).

the present day is transcribed as "Tshatshu" was recorded prior to the mid-nineteenth century as Tzatzoe or Tsatsoe. This background to the issue of naming should illustrate the basic choice I made in my text. I elected to use only one of the many transcriptions of my Tzatzoe/Tshatshu's name. Fundamentally, I chose to value the archival or nineteenth-century persona.[105]

I chose to utilize "Jan Tzatzoe" exclusively in my text for one specifically compelling reason, which I will mention shortly. I also did it for the sake of consistency. But at heart I knew I was choosing to do my best to resurrect an archival character to compete, in a sense, with British colonial leaders and governors of the Cape such as Sir Benjamin D'Urban or Sir Harry Smith, or with Christian exemplars such as the Reverend James Read or Dr. James Philip, whose lives have been developed in multiple biographical presentations. I had found enough in the archival record to suggest that I could build up a portrait of an African, an African Christian, and an African leader with sufficient depth and nuance—with as many pigments and viscosities of paint, as it were—to rival the portrayals or characterizations of Europeans from the period. My choice was confirmed by the fact that I had found practically nothing in the oral record. Finding a rich vein there might have pushed me more in the direction of utilizing "Dyani Tshatshu."

Looking back, I also realize that while Tzatzoe participated and performed on a global stage—living in-between and in movement—toward the end of his life and in his after life, Tshatshu lived affixed to place. But in choosing to illuminate and enliven the archival and global Jan Tzatzoe, had I unconsciously diminished Dyani Tshatshu? Was I rendering him at an even greater remove from the living tradition in which he remains embedded? Was I also unconsciously

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[105]. Even the choice of the words historians, scholars, and writers opt to use as they describe and analyze those about whom they write may carry unintended consequences. I used the descriptor "persona" just now after noticing how burdened my other choices—"character" or "subject"—might be. Persona is certainly a jarring choice and not one with which I am content. "Character" might perhaps be the most accurate term for describing my work, given that I presented Tzatzoe/Tshathsu in text and in relationship to other characters. But "character" elevates the role of the author and diminishes for some the potential historical accuracy of the portrayal. It nudges reflection closer to the line between historical fiction and history, especially historical biography, whose boundaries my work set out to test. "Subject," which is likely the most conventional choice, intimates a degree of mastery of sources and motivations that will make biographers, I imagine, feel deeply uncomfortable. And that is to speak only of the connotations of a "subject" as an intellectual exercise one might master.

claiming and conveying to readers and audiences a degree of control or ownership over his life and persona that was actually diametrically opposed to my conscious intentions?[106]

A Turn toward Biography

Lisa Lindsay illuminates these issues in a podcast, published in September 2015 by the *Africa Past and Present* series from Michigan State, on her soon-to-be-published book *Atlantic Bonds*.[107] She speaks compellingly of undertaking a biographical approach to African and Atlantic world history. She agrees with her interviewer, Peter Limb, that there appears to be a turn toward the biographical in African or trans-African studies. Why might this be? First, Lindsay argues that biography enables the reader—and for the purposes of this chapter, the author—to identify more closely and, importantly, in a more emotional fashion with the historical content and concerns at hand. Second, biography compels the reader—and author or historian—to follow a trail through the past, which almost certainly will lead in directions and unveil territory that are beyond one's initial ability to ascertain or predict. Hence, the advice is given to PhD students (ignored, I hope successfully, by me) to avoid biography at all costs for their dissertation projects. What if the life or lives in which one invests oneself lead in uninteresting or unhistoriographical directions? I confess that my initial interest in Jan Tzatzoe/Dyani Tshatshu did not necessarily lie in the Christian or religious aspects of his life, although I am grateful that he did lead me toward African Christianity.

Lindsay's comments are helpful in unpacking my naming decision and its consequences. As I mentioned above, my use of Jan Tzatzoe, rather than Dyani

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[106]. My thanks to Dana Robert for the lens of local and global. The classic text that calls these archival and appropriative issues into question is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan Education, 1988), 271–313. For a nuanced reading of this debate with specific regard to the South African archive and the writing of history in postapartheid South Africa, see Premesh Lalu, *The Deaths of Hintsa: Postapartheid South Africa and the Shape of Recurring Pasts* (Cape Town: HSRC, 2009). See also, Levine, "Introduction," in *A Living Man*, 1–6, and esp. 198n4.

[107]. Lisa A. Lindsay, "Episode 93: Atlantic Bonds and Biography: From South Carolina to Nigeria," Africa Past and Present, podcast, accessed September 2015, http://afripod.aodl.org/2015/09/. Lisa A. Lindsay, *Atlantic Bonds: A Nineteenth-Century Odyssey from America to Africa* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2017).

Tshatshu, provided me with a mostly unconscious identification or affiliation with an archival and global persona. Looking back, I must have felt that I could bring Jan Tzatzoe more fully to life than I might have been able to enliven Dyani Tshatshu. Tzatzoe was present in records with which I was familiar; he participated in conversations, controversies, and triumphs alongside other archival figures with whom I was familiar and to whom I could relate more closely than with the interactions of Tshatshu and other amaXhosa leaders. Crucially as well, Jan Tzatzoe inhabited an unbounded world, one in which his fate had not been proscribed yet, one that held immense possibilities. Jan Tzatzoe traveled to Cape Town and to England, met the King's grandchildren, compared the mountains of Scotland with those of Xhosaland, and attempted to forge peace between the British and the Xhosa in several wars. Dyani Tshatshu did these things too, but his world and the worlds of his descendants were shuttered. Tzatzoe's life was lived in the present; Tshatshu's possibilities lay in the past.

This identification or emotional connection became central to me as I completed my research and created various drafts of my manuscript. Tzatzoe's story had hooked me almost immediately, but not because of the relevance of his life to academic or historical debates. There was something else there that, frankly, I still cannot articulate or rationalize. The best I can do is to say that I foresaw the promise of a romantic story, a tragic one, to be sure, but one filled with the pathos of those who remain marginal or in-between, as I myself have been, moving between South Africa and the United States.

"This Book Should Be Banned"

Back in Grahamstown, when the lights came back on, I presented my book and its findings to the Wordfest audience. Then the proceedings were opened up for a question-and-answer session. The details remain foggy—and as a historian, I wish I had taken notes immediately—but what stayed with me was one audience member's insistence that "this book should be banned." While he was quickly calmed by other members of the audience who defended my right to write about Jan Tzatzoe/Dyani Tshathsu and who thanked me for presenting my findings and for having invested time in researching their ancestor, there was an emotional charge in the room. Would the confrontation have been avoided if I had made an initial decision to use the name Tshatshu or if I had been able to present my findings in isiXhosa? I am not sure, but the sense that a significant segment of the audience felt that I had inappropriately appropriated their history was palpable:

"What gives you the right to take this history?"

"Why are you calling him Jan Tzatzoe?"

"Why have we never heard of him before?"

"This is an insult to the Xhosa nation!"[108]

I do not wish to misrepresent my experience. I felt much support in the room as well, and a good deal of mediation was occurring between the two sides of the audience. But the experience brought out reactions and emotions that may well be present but not confronted head-on in other biographical and scholarly contexts. Then again, the depth of feeling might be exceptional to the Eastern Cape with its extraordinarily violent and disruptive colonial history, as well as to amaXhosa intellectual and literary engagement.[109]

In my responses to the questions, I remember emphasizing two points. First, if I had done my job well, I hoped that I had demonstrated just how interesting and notable a life Jan Tzatzoe/Dyani Tshatshu had led. I hoped that I had shown how many and varied are the archival sources available for others to attempt their own studies of his life as well as the lives of his contemporaries and of this fascinating time and place in the history of the Eastern Cape and South Africa. For, I stated, it is through multiple narratives and other characterizations that we can engage best with these issues. Second, I stated that I felt more comfortable employing "Jan Tzatzoe" exclusively because I had found many examples of his name signed in that fashion (one of which I had on a PowerPoint slide). Indeed, these signatures are the only pieces of evidence I found that I think are definitively in Tzatzoe/Tshatshu's hand. It is now clear, certainly, that Tzatzoe/Tshatshu would have expected his name to have been pronounced by modern English speakers with a "tsh" sound, rather than a "zah" sound, despite the transcription.

The signature gave me a solid, rational, conscious hook on which to hang my choice of the archival persona. Looking back, I see that it confirmed many of the unconscious motivations behind my narrative and authorial choices. It cast Tzatzoe/Tshatshu as an intellectual, as a man engaging with the education and literacy being presented by the European missionaries with whom he

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[108]. Wilhelmina Maboja, "A Xhosa Idiom Brought to Life," *Wordstock*, July 6, 2011, 4. One audience member described the book as an "'insult to the Xhosa nation,' not having been written by a Xhosa."

[109]. I am reminded of an apocryphal story from the University of the Western Cape history department in which Jeff Peires was shouted down by an audience of largely isiXhosa-speaking students when he described archival evidence that proved that Sir George Grey had not directly orchestrated the great Cattle Killing as a plot.

associated. I was able to construe him as a man trying to create a new persona for himself in the evolving global colonial world of the early nineteenth century. Likely I was overselling this world to myself. The restrictive, oppressive world of the mid-nineteenth century—one that sees Tzatzoe/Tshatshu petition for his lost lands as a colonial subject and do so in the official record as "Jan Tshatshu"—was a world I was less interested in exploring.

The process of privileging that I undertook—and of which I became more aware largely because of the Wordfest audience—speaks deeply and directly to the issue of audience in biography. In a sense, I was forced into a choice (given the multiple transcriptions in the archival and contemporary record) that other biographers and scholars make more implicitly. To my initial interlocutor and some in the audience, the choice was obvious. I had written for other academics, for "white" or "colonial" readers, and for my own material gain (this observation occurred only in discussing these events subsequently with others).[110] This crucial dilemma is one that I am not sure has any answers. Could I have created a text that took as its first responsibility the audience in that room at Rhodes University? And then, assuredly, built outwards toward the other audiences, both popular and scholarly, that one anticipates as a scholar? What would that look like? Would it involve an isiXhosa text? An oral component? Or simply a reordering in the author's own mind of the project's intent and goals?

Reconsiderations

Again, I return to emotions and unconscious motivations. I would argue that an incredible arrogance is required on the part of any historian, but especially a biographer, who tells a historical story. One must have a compelling belief in one's own historical tool kit, in the breadth and depth of the sources one has acquired (has every avenue been exhausted?), and conversely, in the seeming irrelevance of the evidence one has failed to turn up (could a document out there someplace invalidate the biographer's fundamental contention or argument?). But most important is belief in one's historical imagination. What gives one the right and capacity to think oneself back into the past—into the lives, thoughts, and feelings of people who are now (for most biographers) dead? And to perhaps

[110]. I am appreciative of the fact that *A Living Man* has been read and employed by writers such as Mcebisi Ndletyana (see note 10 below) and Xolela Mangcu, *Biko: A Life* (London: Tauris, 2014). These issues have returned recently in the form of academic and popular protestors' calling for a "decolonization" of the South African curriculum.

state the obvious: what gives a "white," secular, South African-American of Jewish descent the right or capacity to think himself into, to merge himself with, a man like Jan Tzatzoe/Dyani Tshatshu? The compelling fiction in one's mind that maintains this arrogance and sustains this ability hour after hour, day after day, year after year during these projects is a powerful mental construct. While fundamentally necessary and appropriate to the task, it is also largely hidden to ourselves until it is bared in a truly shocking fashion.

I cannot fully appreciate how it must feel to have someone whom one considers to be an outsider present one with a history of one's own people, drawn from a set of sources that one potentially cannot access due to decades of overt educational and material discrimination. But I am left with a feeling of sadness. Who owns this history? How must it feel not to have access to these forms of knowledge? How can we address these concerns? In the end, Jan Tzatzoe/Dyani Tshatshu belongs to at least two communities, and the tension occasioned by the varying claims of ownership is not resolvable. One hopes, however, that it might function in a productive fashion moving forward.

Would I redo my choice given the chance and change every occurrence of "Tzatzoe" to "Tshatshu" in the text of *A Living Man*? In the initial aftermath of the presentation in Grahamstown, I decided that I very much would. But when Yale University Press unexpectedly approached me a couple of years later with a plan to produce a paperback edition of the text, I passed on the opportunity to ask whether such a change was within their editorial capabilities. I hesitated at the impracticality of the request (would it not create an entirely different book or, at best, a true second edition rather than a paperback version?). Even shifting just the subtitle from "Jan Tzatzoe" to "Jan Tshatshu" or to the unwieldly but more accurate "Jan Tzatzoe/Dyani Tshatshu" would have led to this issue. But I also realized that I needed to stick with the defensible choices I had made and the explanations I provided in the text. Perhaps if I ever publish a true second edition I can append a version of this chapter to my original text, but for now I must address these concerns in other formats.

Conclusion

Two notes and a comment by way of conclusion. I had not heard much from South Africa when, in early 2013, Mcebisi Ndletyana published a piece in the *Sunday Independent* that used my account of Jan Tzatzoe (not amending the name) to reflect on Jacob Zuma's pronouncements about "clever blacks" and "black mimicry of whites" and to argue for a renewed sense of cultural hybridity

and non-racialism.[111] The latest act in my little story came as quite a surprise in the form of an email that reached me while I was sketching out this chapter in July 2015. While it did not diminish the impasses and dilemmas I hope I have illuminated as worthy of attention, it did provide a welcome balance to the story and to my own emotional response to it.

From: Nosipho Salman
To: rlevine@sewanee.edu
A LIVING MAN FROM AFRICA JAN TZATSOE
Good Day Prof

My name is Nosipho Salman, the grand-granddaughter of Chief Jan Tshatshu. I appreciate the great work you have done. Its new generation that is concerned on what was happening to our great–great Chief of Amantinde., our family was not enlightened by that time. I do what I can to make South Africa, especially the Eastern Cape to recognised this poor man as a hero. I forwarded a request to Department of Arts and Culture and Traditional Affairs to re-vitalised and re-built his grave, the re-naming of his town (King William's Town) to be Jan Tzatsoe.

The history you gave us in your book is the one that our parents left with us, but it was not in writing it was difficult to make references. I need your support in this project, currently I'm collecting all the relevant data for submission to the heads of the departments.

I humble request your assistants on the period Chief Jan Tzatsoe stayed in England (for a period of 2 years), and bought a land for his family.

Thanking you in advance.

Kind Regards[112]

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[111]. Mcebisi Ndletyana, "Mistrust Behind Cultural Hostility," *Sunday Independent*, January 27, 2013.

[112]. Nosipho Salman to Roger S. Levine, e-mail, July 20, 2015. I wish to thank Ms. Salman for permission to quote her email.

To have Jan Tzatzoe/Dyani Tshatshu feature so prominently in the public or political realm was an unexpected validation. It was gratifying to hear that the work had resonated in the public realm in this way and that it might contribute to the ongoing debate around the renaming of prominent geographical and infrastructural elements of South Africa. The shift from King William's Town to eTshatshu, or something similar, would be monumental indeed and would represent a profound and appropriate reappropriation of nineteenth-century colonial history. Best of all, in Nosipho Salman's email I see the colonial Jan Tzatzoe and the living Chief Tshatshu present alongside the figure of Jan Tzatsoe. The three join together (a trinity of sorts) to form a greater whole and, perhaps, to begin to heal the wounds of the past.