

Crafting a Story about an African Interpreter on Colonial South Africa's Eastern Frontier: Roger Levine's Narrative of the Life of Jan Tzatzoe

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A Living Man from Africa: Jan Tzatzoe, Xhosa Chief and Missionary, and the Making of Nineteenth-Century South Africa. By Roger S. Levine. London and New Haven: Yale University Press. Jan. 2011. 328pp. ISBN 978-0300125-214.

A Living Man from Africa will be the first book to be published in a potentially exciting new Yale University Press series entitled 'New Directions in Narrative History'. The series editors are John Demos of Yale and Aaron Sachs of Cornell, both of whom have published prize-winning books that appeal to both popular and academic audiences. Levine employs the opening line from the Preface of Demos's The Unredeemed Captive – 'MOST OF ALL, I wanted to write a story' – as key inspiration for his own narrative choices. 'Most of all, I wanted to tell his [Jan Tzatzoe's] story,' Levine asserts. It is a self-reflexive focus on ways of story-telling as a way of returning history to its literary roots that is the foremost contribution of Levine's book. The book is also important as an unusually detailed and extended biography of the career of an African translator whom Levine casts as an intellectual. It thus fits within an exciting new scholarship that explores the complex processes of cross-cultural knowledge production across frontier zones in southern Africa and beyond.

Roger Levine cites as one of his sources of inspiration for his biography the text of a public lecture delivered by the social anthropologist Monica Wilson on 1 September 1972 in Grahamstown the year before her formal retirement after two decades of service as Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Cape Town. In spite of extensive experience of public speaking, the 74-year-old Wilson still found such performances 'an ordeal'.¹ She was, however, meticulously prepared. The writing of this lecture had been the work of many months. She had followed a tried and tested pattern in preparation. One can trace the evolution of the later published text of *The Interpreters* through the archival documents in the remarkably rich Godfrey and Monica Wilson Collection which has been housed in the Archives and Manuscripts Department of UCT Library since 1995. Wilson began by making rough handwritten notes on loose sheets.

¹ For evidence of her fear of public speaking in her mature years, see M.E. West, 'Monica Hunter Wilson: A Memoir', *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Africa*, 45(2), Aug. 1984, 208 and for an account of her 'awfully bad stage fright' during student days in Cambridge, see A. Bank, 'The Making of A Woman Anthropologist: Monica Hunter at Girton College, Cambridge, 1927-1930', *African Studies*, 68(1), April 2009, 44.

This was followed up with a detailed typed-up outline under sub-headings by numbered theme before her lecture took shape in the draft versions which were edited into the published product.² The typed outline bore a close resemblance to the final version, suggesting that most of the work of reflection and analysis had been done before she put finger to typewriter. Of the many tasks with which she had been engaged at the time, Wilson identified the writing of *The Interpreters* as one of the most difficult and time-consuming.³

Wilson's friend and colleague David Hammond-Tooke also used the concept of 'the interpreter' in his writings. He titled his historical overview of the history social anthropology in the age of the modern university *Imperfect Interpreters: South Africa's Anthropologists, 1920–1990*.⁴ The 'imperfect interpreters' of Hammond-Tooke's title are the professional anthropologists, though he does make brief mention of their forebears, the frontier missionaries and colonial administrators. Wilson defined the concept in a way that was both more inclusive and more deeply historical. Indeed this was the central theme of her lecture. Identifying herself as 'someone who has grown up among Xhosa people', she began her lecture by asking: 'How did the settlers and the Xhosa begin to communicate with one another?' For this daughter of a missionary father, David Hunter, who was schooled in Lovedale, the African Christian converts were the first in a long lineage of 'cultural brokers' (a term she borrowed in her lecture from Eric Wolf) that would include professional social anthropologists of the early and mid-twentieth century, but also, significantly enough, their research assistants. This was how she introduced successive generations of African Christian translators on the nineteenth-century Eastern Cape frontier where she had grown up.

When [Johannes] van der Kemp [of the London Missionary Society] preached to the Xhosa in 1801 he spoke in Dutch and had a variety of interpreters, mostly of mixed descent; when Joseph Williams settled as a missionary on the Kat River in 1816, his interpreter was Jan Tsatsu, who had been to school and learnt to speak Dutch at Bethelsdorp ... Some of the early converts, notably Tiyo Soga from Tyhume, learnt to speak perfect English, and many children of missionaries grew up completely bilingual in English and Xhosa ... [The] interpreters of the next generation came from Fingo families, men like the Jabavus and Makiwanes – but there were also Xhosa proper like John Knox Bokwe and other Sogas besides the original Tiyo, who were orators and writers in both English and Xhosa.⁵

It is the first-generation convert and interpreter Jan Tsatsu, more often referred to in colonial records as Jan Tzatzoe or Dyani Tshsatshu, that Roger

2 M. Wilson, *The Interpreters* (Grahamstown: 1820 Settlers National Monument Foundation, 1972), 26 pp.

3 I am grateful to Sean Morrow for these ideas about Monica Wilson's writing method and the effort she put into the writing of this lecture. Morrow suggests that her writing method applied even to private or official letters. (Personal conversation, December 2009)

4 D. Hammond-Tooke, *Imperfect Interpreters: South Africa's Anthropologists, 1920-1990* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1997; 2nd edition 2001).

5 M. Wilson, *The Interpreters*, 8-9.

Levine takes as the subject of his 360-page biography. He opens his book in 1836, the year the Select Committee on Aborigines of the British Parliament began its two year proceedings towards compiling a report on the treatment of indigenous peoples in British colonies, a moment which has been seen as the highpoint of the evangelical movement and the humanitarian liberal ideology of the 1820s and 1830s.⁶ Jan Tzatzoe had accompanied the missionaries John Philip, James Read Jr and James Read Sr to Britain. He was one of the star witnesses of the evangelical faction. Tzatzoe's testimony before the Select Committee was but one of dozens of public appearances in which he addressed audiences from London to Dublin to Kelso in Scotland.

Drawing on the cinematic effect of beginning his narrative in mid-stream and reconstructing earlier events as a kind of extended flashback, Levine describes how this member of the amaNtinde lineage of the Xhosa went striding to the dais in the Secession Church hall in Kelso. Tzatzoe was dressed in a British military coat with sparkling gold buttons. He spoke to his evangelical audience about the redemptive power of British Christianity and civilisation. Referring to the biblical man of Macedonia who appeared to Paul in a vision and asked him to 'come over and help us', Tzatzoe told his numerous audience: 'I stand before you not in a dream, but as a living man from Africa.'⁷ It is this phrase, uttered at the height of Tzatzoe's lecture tour of the British Isles between 1836 and 1838, that Levine chooses as his main title in order to foreground the public profile of Tzatzoe at a time when the image of Africans was central to the debates over abolition in Britain. In this sense his speech in Kelso was in a lineage that stretched back to the public readings of the former slave Olaudah Equiano during an earlier wave of abolitionist fervour.⁸

How do we account for Tzatzoe's rise to prominence from being the son of a minor chief on a far-flung colonial frontier to icon of the evangelical faction in 1836? How do we explain his later decline in status to the disaffected colonial subject described in the book's closing chapters dealing with the late 1850s, by which time he had all but disappeared from public view, a frustrated and excommunicated leader of a politically alienated people whose voice could be heard only in the occasional petition addressed to colonial officials. 'Memorialist & his people are compelled to reside on a barren hill and the land of his forefathers given to another,' he lamented in 1857.⁹

Levine's reconstruction of an African life in the early nineteenth century relies of necessity on years of trawling through archives in South Africa and in England. It is based on the closest of readings of missionary journals and

6 See A. Bank, 'Liberal and their Enemies: Racial Ideology at the Cape of Good Hope, 1820-1850' (Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge University, 1995) on humanitarian liberalism at the Cape and in Britain in the early to mid-nineteenth century, see R. Ross, 'Donald Moodie and the Origins of South African Historiography' in Ross, *Beyond the Pale: Essays on the History of Colonial South Africa* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 201-4 for analysis of the Select Committee and its ideological orientation.

7 Levine, *A Living Man*, 7.

8 On Sara Baartman and the abolitionist debates of the 1810s, see C. Crais & P. Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography* (Princeton and Johannesburg: Princeton University Press and Wits University Press, 2009); on Olaudah Equiano and the abolitionist movement of the 1780s and 1790s, including the debate over Equiano's invention of an African identity, see especially V. Carretta, *Equiano the African: Biography of A Self-Made Man* (Athens, Georgia and London: University of Georgia Press, 2005).

9 Levine, *A Living Man*, 190.

reports, newspaper articles and official colonial documents, for the most part read against the grain. It is his location of this biography, his reflections on how we think about the subject, and his experiments with narrative structure and technique, that represent the most distinctive contributions. Firstly, he makes a persuasive and extended case for a complex analysis of one African interpreter's career in constructing colonial knowledge in dialogue with missionaries, which is in keeping with a vibrant new scholarship that explores the role of colonial intermediaries in the making of knowledge during the nineteenth and twentieth century, in southern Africa and beyond. Secondly, he develops new ideas about how we might think about self and agency in biographical writing, drawing again on current scholarship. Thirdly and most importantly, he works within a new genre of history writing that is experimental and self-reflexive about its use of narrative strategies and techniques, one that caters for popular as well as academic audiences and puts the telling of a story centre-stage. Each of these contributions will be discussed in turn below.

The interpreter Jan Tzatzoe was the son of Kote Tzatzoe, a chief of the amaNtinde, who were at once peripheral to, but respected by, the main Xhosa polities represented by Ngqika, Ndlambe and Hintsa. Living on the Xhosa periphery, the amaNtinde had early exposure to the LMS evangelicals Johannes van der Kemp and James Read. Tzatzoe spent most of his youth at the Bethelsdorp Mission Station in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. Here he learned the carpenter's trade, and after a revival swept through the mission, he was baptised and chosen to preach across the country. From thence until the mid-1820s, when he and the LMS evangelist John Brownlee founded the Buffalo River Mission on land Kote Tzatzoe provided in what is now the heart of King William's Town, Jan Tzatzoe travelled back and forth across the colonial frontier.

This, Levine suggests, was still a world of possibilities. Such possibilities were evident during the years he spent with the LMS missionary Joseph Williams and his wife Elizabeth, at the first Kat River mission station. Here Tzatzoe began his important work as an interpreter of biblical texts into Xhosa. He was a cultural intermediary, a man-between, but he also found himself in a highly precarious position as he was forced to accommodate the changing and competing interests of factions of colonial officials, settlers, missionaries, the amaNtinde, the Xhosa, quite apart from his personal interest in looking out for himself and his family. This chapter on his time with Williams foregrounds Tzatzoe's political and diplomatic work dedicated to ensuring the survival of the station in a conflict zone, the first of its kind in Xhosaland. In one charged incident, Levine describes how Tzatzoe turns from a confrontation with Ngqika to one with Colonel Fraser, and ultimately, with the colonial governor Lord Charles Somerset.

We might note at this point that Levine's text is characterised by a balance between the type of analysis noted above and an attention to narrative texture. One recurring technique is the use of metaphor to illuminate and enhance the analysis. Here, for example, is how he presents the initial stages of Ngqika's meeting with Joseph Williams and Jan Tzatzoe on a visit to Kat River in 1816.

The chief probes the institution as an anteater does an anthill with a quick thrust of the tongue here, a sustained, determined prod there. He seeks the sweet sustenance hidden within that might sustain his power. Yes, the reward contained inside might bite and pinch a couple of times on the way down, but it will invigorate once eaten. And if the hill refuses to cede its treasure in a polite and timely fashion, he has the brawny hindquarters, the muscled forelegs, the armored claws, to leave it strewn across the veld in disparate clods of dirt and dried grass. Better, though, to keep the hill whole and capable of renewing its internal bounty for repeat visits.¹⁰

Like many other missionaries (and other knowledge producers on colonial frontiers), Joseph Williams did not fully acknowledge the value of Jan Tzatzoe's work as translator and assistant. It was only when Tzatzoe and his companions from Bethelsdorp were readying to depart from the mission in open rebellion, that Williams openly conceded that Tzatzoe had been the 'only individual' with whom he could 'speak with any satisfaction', the 'only suitable interpreter'.¹¹

The second phase in Tzatzoe's career as a translator of biblical texts began in 1825 when he worked with John Brownlee on one of the first African language translations of books of the Bible. Tzatzoe and Brownlee completed translations of the gospels of Matthew and Mark between 1825 and 1827.¹²

It was really his subsequent literary work with the German LMS missionary Friedrich Gottlob Kayser that Levine attributes primary significance. Kayser joined the Buffalo River mission in 1827 and had a more open relationship Tzatzoe than did either of his predecessors. He was more generous in his later acknowledgement of the work of Tzatzoe as interpreter. Kayser attributed great significance to Tzatzoe's innovation in recasting the figure of Christ in the image, not of the Xhosa witchdoctor but of the Xhosa healer or physician. He reported to his superiors that 'John Tshatshu, known to you from previous reports, had used a healing story from the gospel to show the big difference there is between a witchdoctor and Christ, the greatest physician of all'. Kayser used this strategy in his translation work with Tzatzoe of 'all the miracles and parables of the gospel', interpreting them also in terms that related to the 'old practices' of the Xhosa and the figure of the healer in Xhosa tradition. In the months that followed, Kayser and Tzatzoe translated eight miracle stories of the Bible, compiled extensive lists of Xhosa verbs in their active and passive forms, developed 'prayers for

10 Levine, *A Living Man*, 56-57.

11 Levine, *A Living Man*, 64.

12 For details on the translation projects undertaken by Tzatzoe, Brownlee and Kayser, and the possibility of their having created the first African gospel, see R.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(2), 2010. For work on translation in African history, see especially W. Worger, 'Parsing God: Conversations about the Meaning of Words and Metaphors in Nineteenth-Century South Africa', *Journal of African History*, 42 (2001), 41; P. Landau, "'Religion" and Christian Conversion in African History: A New Model', *Journal of Religious History*, 23, 1999, 8-30; Derek Peterson, 'Translating the Word: Dialogism and Debate in Two Gikuyu Dictionaries', *Journal of Religious History*, 23, 1999, 31-50. On translation in a South African context, see I. Hofmeyr, *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of The Pilgrim's Progress* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004) and R. Gilmour, *Grammars of Colonialism: Representing Languages in Colonial South Africa* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

children', and began working on Xhosa translations of the New Testament gospel of John and the Acts of the Apostles.

These partnerships between Jan Tzatzoe, John Brownlee and Friedrich Gottlob Kayser, Levine argues, challenge the simplistic notion that a focus on African intermediaries allows historians to grant Africans a certain degree of 'agency' in the creation of the colonial world. Instead, the partnerships suggest that the translation projects (and the colonial encounter itself) can be seen as both indigenous and colonial. In his excellent case study of the importance of writing and successive contests over texts in the construction of Gikuyu political identities, Derek Peterson has called this effort an attempt to recover 'the multivocality' or 'the dialogical conditions' under which colonial texts were produced.¹³ The joint productions associated with Tzatzoe reach back into the early nineteenth century, giving us a baseline against which to judge the efforts analysed by Peterson and others throughout colonial Africa. Levine argues that Jan Tzatzoe, in his work with Gottlob Kayser in particular, was very much more than a mere facilitator, the translator of an LMS missionary's ideas into African languages and concepts. He was a knowledge producer in his own right. It is in this sense that Levine describes Jan Tzatzoe as an African 'intellectual' and proposes that we think of Tzatzoe as a figure at 'the vanguard of an African intellectual tradition born in the colonial encounter'.¹⁴

There are strong parallels here with recent literature on the role of research assistants in the sciences in twentieth-century Africa. Historians of social anthropology in southern and central Africa, for example, have highlighted the complexity of the social and intellectual relationships that produced anthropological knowledge. They have likewise foreground the unacknowledged or under-acknowledged work of Africans in this process. Some like Lyn Schumaker, whose work has pioneered the field, propose that we use the term 'intellectuals' to describe those customarily referred to as research assistants. It is worth quoting her reflections here as they apply with equal force to how we might think about the literary work of Jan Tzatzoe and those other nineteenth-century African Christian translators whom Wilson identified as forebears of the anthropologists and anthropological research assistants.

One of the problems involved in writing a history of anthropology that deals with a group of anthropologists, their research assistants and informants is to find concepts appropriate for analyzing a diverse group of people with often very different notions of what they are doing ... [L]ike 'indigenous anthropologist', the term 'cultural broker' suggests a central identification with a local culture, and this may not always be appropriate. Use of the term 'intellectuals' can get around these problems, because it allows for different degrees and types of attachment to the local on the part of both assistants and anthropologists. 'Intellectuals', in its broadest sense, refers to people

13 D.R. Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of the Imagination in Colonial Kenya* (Portsmouth, New Haven: Heinemann, 2004).

14 Levine, *A Living Man*, 5.

who take an active and conscious role in shaping and elucidating various kinds of knowledge, whether or not their audiences recognize them as professionals.¹⁵

Such choices are of course historically specific: the contributions of individuals in relation to a research project were diverse, highly contingent and might change significantly within a single career. In keeping with the description of Tzatzoe's different relationships with successive LMS missionaries from 1816 through to 1829, we might choose to label him as a translator in his work with Williams when he was both younger and had less scope to imprint his own interpretations on the biblical texts, but cast him as an intellectual in his creative dialogue with Gottlob Kayser.

The issue of motivation is clearly a key consideration. As Nancy Jacobs asks in relation to the history of ornithology in twentieth-century Africa, were such individuals working in the service of those who employed them, or in the service of the form of knowledge in a more abstract sense?¹⁶ In the case of Jan Tzatzoe, there are surely grounds for supporting Levine's argument that he worked in the service not just of the missionaries with whom he engaged but of his theological project in a wider and deeper sense. Reconstructing such motivation, it must be conceded, is a particularly tricky issue in relation to subjects whom we usually access through reports and the writings of others rather than in terms of their own constructions of themselves. This applies as readily to Tzatzoe as to the African research assistants who worked for the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in Central Africa over a century later.

Other scholars have used the concept of the 'intermediary'. Levine contributed to one of the best recent volumes in this emerging field: Lawrance, Osborn and Roberts's edited collection published in 2006 under the title *Intermediaries, Interpreters and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa*.¹⁷ Of course, intermediaries have featured in South African history since the time of Krotoa.¹⁸ Robert Ross has written about Hermanus Matroos in this vein, describing the period in which both he and Tzatzoe lived as one characterised by the closing down of the multiple 'occupations upon which black careers could be built'.¹⁹ Crucial to Levine's conceptualisation of the

15 L. Schumaker, *Africanizing Anthropology: Fieldwork, Networks, and the Making of Cultural Knowledge in Central Africa* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), 11, 14-15.

16 See N.J. Jacobs, 'Servants to Science: African Assistants in Twentieth Century Ornithology' (Seminar paper presented to the Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, 2005).

17 R.S. Levine, '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 B.N. Lawrance, E.L. Osborn and R.L. Roberts, eds., *Intermediaries, Interpreters and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 37-55.

18 For a rare exploration of a female 'cultural broker' in southern African historiography, see V.C. Malherbe, *Krotoa or Eva: a woman between* (Cape Town: Centre for African Studies, 1993).

19 R. Ross, 'Hermanus Matroos, aka Ngxukumeshe: a life on the border' in A. Bank and L. Bank, eds., 'Special Issue: Eastern Cape', *Kronos: Journal of Cape History*, vol. 30, Nov. 2004, 69. For a dynamic new literature on the prolific literary activities and output of Zulu converts from Bishop William Colenso's Ekukhanyeni ('Place of Light') mission station near Pietermaritzburg, see V. Khumalo, 'Ekukhanyeni Letter-Writers: A Historical Inquiry into Epistolary Network(s) and Political Imagination in Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa' in K. Barber, ed., *Africa's Hidden Histories*, 113-42; H. Mokoena, 'An Assembly of Readers: Magema Fuze and his *Ilanga lase Natal Readers*', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 35(3), Sept. 2009, 595-608; H. Mokoena, 'The Making of a *Kholwa* Intellectual: A Discursive Biography of Magema Magwaza Fuze' (D.Phil., Dept of Political Studies, University of Cape Town, 2005).

colonial intermediary is the notion of marginality. He argues that intermediaries thrive on the margins, which, of course, are most common in border regions or frontier zones. But the predicament of such individuals is that marginality confers a position of loneliness, and ultimately, as colonial cultural, political and intellectual power becomes established, intermediaries can be rendered obsolete.

Levine uses the concept of individuals being able to mobilise multiple or 'hybrid selves' in contingent historical situations as a way of getting past the idea of Africans as biographical subjects who might gain, be granted or lose 'agency' within a given historical context. In their recent biography of Sara Baartman, Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully challenge the standard biographical notion of 'agency' based as it is on the specific nineteenth-century Western European notion of the self-contained and self-motivating individual, a 'possessive individual, that person who has agency, autonomy, a vision of self'.²⁰ Levine also cites the challenge to the standard modes of biographical writing in South African revisionist scholarship posed by Ciraj Rassool in his study of I.B. Tabata. Rassool likewise questions the tradition of biographical and autobiographical writing in which the subject is presented in terms of a linear story, usually one of progress and achievement in the field of political biography with which he is most centrally concerned.

Where Rassool chooses to interrogate the particular conditions within which biographies are produced, notably the political and public contexts of biographical constructions in South Africa since the 1980s,²¹ Levine is interested in experimenting with an alternative form of writing in order to convey this more diffusive and open-ended concept of self. He attempts rather than eschews a linear narrative, insisting that the story one tells will always remain provisional, tentative, experimental. Levine draws on Jo Burr Margadant's *The New Biography* which provides him with a model of 'hybrid selves' in which a life is seen to be 'always in the process of becoming', in which a historical character is constantly 'negotiat[ing] different historical contexts in all their vexed complexities'.²² The hybrid identity created by Tzatzoe's coexisting loyalties at first allows him a great deal of freedom and recognition, in his negotiations across the colonial frontier and across knowledge systems. He translates biblical parables into the cultural terminology that will make them understandable to the Xhosa, adopts the most compelling and useful customs of the British, and travels to Great Britain to lobby for the rights of Xhosa as equal citizens in the British Empire. His actions seem to be motivated by a concern for the welfare of the Xhosa, as well as for the spread of Christianity and British civilisation. The imperatives of cultural belief and political expediency likewise blend together in Xhosaland, so to speak, during these early years of British colonialism, British culture and Christianity

Yet on his return to South Africa, Tzatzoe sees his worldview fall apart, as his hybrid identity and overlapping loyalties become polarised in the

20 Crais & Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, 5.

21 C.S. Rassool, 'The Individual, Auto/Biography and History in South Africa' (D.Phil., Department of History, University of the Western Cape, 2004).

22 Levine, *A Living Man*, 5.

increasingly racially divided world of the 1840s and 1850s. For a new generation of missionaries and settlers, cultural pluralism and diversity were unacceptable.²³ John Brownlee, engaging in an act of historical revisionism, devalued Tzatzoe's role and claimed that it would be impossible for the Xhosa to become truly and completely assimilated. Tzatzoe, for his own part, felt the pressure not only of the missionaries to fulfil his pledge to spread British culture, but from the amaNtinde, who depended on his leadership and his ability to integrate himself into the colonial system. He was forced to compromise in his negotiations between the British and Xhosa, and between his religious beliefs and his political position within the lineage group. His identity as intermediary became increasingly strained and eventually impossible. The contingent opportunities for the British Empire, the Xhosa and his own identity began to close. Multiple loyalties became conflicting: he could no longer be loyal to his family and to his lineage without appearing disloyal to British culture in the eyes of the missionaries, and vice versa. This was all brought to a fever pitch with the successive wars between the British and the Xhosa in the years 1846 to 1853, in which Tzatzoe's part in aiding one side or the other is constantly in question and often impossible to determine. By the end of his life he was forced to plead, presenting himself as a subject of the Empire rather than as an intermediary with a hybrid identity.

The narrative achievement of *A Living Man from Africa* warrants more detailed commentary in these concluding pages. This is the first book being published in a new Yale University Press series titled 'New Directions in Narrative History'. The series editors are John Demos of Yale University and Aaron Sachs of Cornell University, both of whom have published prize-winning books that appeal to both popular and academic audiences. Indeed, Levine employs the opening line from the Preface of Demos's *The Unredeemed Captive* – 'MOST OF ALL, I wanted to write a story'²⁴ – as a source of inspiration for his own narrative choices. The Preface describes how he found the character of Jan Tzatzoe sprinkled among the pages of Noël Mostert's epic, *Frontiers*, as a 'young man who seemed to have accomplished and risked so much, only to encounter the full weight of a racist colonial order'. 'Most of all, I wanted to tell his story,' Levine asserts.²⁵ It is this focus on story-telling above all, as a way of returning history to its literary roots, that animates Levine's book. In so doing, he joins an emerging chorus of academic historians who have chosen to explore narrative and its many possibilities, to move beyond what has been termed 'micro-history' to an as yet undefined genre.

In a previous article published in *Kronos*, Levine identifies his work as part of the 'new narrative history' although he avoids that direct affiliation in this text. His earlier article explicitly locates his book within an emerging genre where the

23 See A. Bank, 'Liberal and their Enemies: Racial Ideology at the Cape of Good Hope, 1820-1850' (Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge University, 1995) on the 'white consensus' that emerged during the 1840s and 1850s. For a fuller exploration of this racial order which includes the Orange Free State as well as the Western and Eastern Cape, and racial practice along with racial ideology, see T. Keegan, *Colonial South Africa and the Origins of the Racial Order* (Cape Town and Ohio: David Philip and Ohio University Press, 1996).

24 J. Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive* (1995).

25 Levine, *A Living Man*, x.

historian is a self-conscious story-teller and inventor, willing to experiment with narrative techniques which

include the use of the present tense; italicizing quoted text instead of placing it between quotation marks so that it is more easily integrated into the narrative; the use of a creative historical imagination in crafting scenes (with these passages always indicated as speculative); the incorporation of cinematic or fictional techniques (close ups, fade-aways, unorthodox chronological structure); extensive quoting of contemporary sources, and narration that attempts to mirror these voices; use of metaphorical language; creative use of verbs and adjectives ...

[T]hese tools [are used] to tell a compelling and meaningful story and to create empathy with historical figures. Its goals are to involve the reader in the action, to create narrative tension, to achieve dynamic characterization, crucially, to ask whether analysis can be transmitted through description or narrative, and finally, to ask questions of historical truth, voice, narration, and method.²⁶

Levine draws literary and historical inspiration from diverse sources and his sweeping introduction provides an impressive reading list. These influences include Simon Schama on Revolutionary-era and mid-nineteenth-century America, Julia Blackburn on Australia, Jonathan Spence on China, John Demos on colonial New England, Robert Harms on the Atlantic World of the slave trade era, and Robert Rosenstone on Meiji Japan. Most of these works deal with cross-cultural encounters and the creation of colonial worlds. It is this sense of contingency and opportunity that Levine hopes to capture by what might take some readers of the text aback: a narrative that proceeds in the present tense. This is how he explains his intentions in the Introduction:

The stories told about Africans often feature a downward trajectory – solidified by the use of the past tense – in which Africans are increasingly constrained by their environment, be it physical, cultural, religious, or political. *A Living Man from Africa* unfolds in the present tense so that the reader can gain a sense of life that is under constant construction and become aware of the multiple possibilities of each historical moment of Tzatzoe's life.²⁷

I think that this book more than demonstrates the creative potential and marketability of this experiment in genre. It is relatively free of academic jargon, unburdened with excessive pontification or qualifications that might interrupt narrative flow, and allows for a refreshing degree of immediacy in its engagement with personalities and places in the past. He has revisited the sites

26 R.S. Levine, "'Savage-born but new created': Jan Tzatzoe, Xhosa chief and Missionary in Britain, 1836-1838', *Kronos*, 33, Nov. 2007, 112.

27 Levine, *A Living Man*, 5.

of significance in relation to the life of his biographical subject, Jan Tzatzoe, and incorporates a sense of this texture in his descriptions of place. This study will in its turn serve as inspiration for future biographical work on Africans.

Of the many incidents and anecdotes that make Tzatzoe's life so rich and evocative, one readily comes to mind. During his tour of Britain in 1836–1838, Tzatzoe marvelled at the castles he saw crumbling into ruins. He asked his hosts for the cause and was told that the English now fought with the pen and the ink. He vowed to return home with this message. In December 1840, speaking from amongst his fellow Xhosa chiefs, Tzatzoe responded to a new Governor of the Cape, Sir George Napier, who had called a meeting in response to the breaking down of the Treaty system, or Commando system. 'The war of words is the best war,' Tzatzoe insisted, 'unlike the war of weapons.'²⁸ In the present-day context of South Africa, it is comforting to remember just how far we have come. It might have taken over one hundred and fifty years for Jan Tzatzoe's preternaturally prescient statement to take root and flower within the country, but we can, now, for the most part say that the war of words has trumped the war of weapons. *A Living Man from Africa* reminds us to celebrate this fact, even if it insists – as Tzatzoe himself did in asking for the British public to send missionaries to educate the Xhosa – that the war of words can only be fought on equal terms when a quality education is provided to all. Levine can be assured that Tzatzoe has been brought to life in the pages of his book, and that he continues as a living man, a living example that the past remains relevant to the present.

28 Levine, *A Living Man*, 171.