

*Tribing and untribing the archive: Volumes 1 & 2*

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*Tribing and Untribing the Archive* is a culmination of collaborative initiatives led by two prestige academics who are the editors of this publication. Carolyn Hamilton is a leader of Archive and Public Culture Research Initiative (APC) at the University of Cape Town and Nessa Leibhammer a custodian of the Traditional Collection of Southern African Art. Their book is an exceptional resource for historians, researchers, History teachers and History students. It is also relevant for other disciplines such as anthropology.

The partnership between the two editors significantly adds weight to the relevance of this project. As highlighted in the book's *preface*, the aim of APC is to "examine the public understanding of the past and the nature of the materials and conceptual tools available in the present with which to engage that past" (p.6). Against this background, the two editors who are respected researchers in their field allure the reader to an enticing piece of work that informs the contemporary debates around the role of historiography, particularly pre-colonial historiography, in understanding the present.

The focus area of this project is mainly between the Thukela and Mzuvubu Rivers in KwaZulu Natal. It is acknowledged that there is still more work to be done, with suggestions for the necessity of similar work in other provinces such as the Eastern Cape focusing on the Xhosa nation. Considering that the Archive of KwaZulu-Natal constitutes of years of written work from the perspective of the outsiders (mainly European colonizers) there is much that has been diluted, with limited consideration of the individuality in its representation. In a nutshell, this book encapsulates the experimental analysis of archival material (such as art) in an attempt to sift through the available the material until it is possible to uproot the stereotypical Eurocentric perspective of the Zulu nation, while empowering the knowledge of the past to allow individuals to see themselves as unique in experience and practices through the envisaged history before colonisation.

The book is composed of two volumes, with each volume having two sections that have different essays. The first volume has an opening essay written by both Hamilton and Liebhammer and it contextualizes the enquiry and eloquently defines the terms of the title *Tribing and untribing the archives*. A “tribe” is conceptualized as a verb and this understanding is then unpacked to define the discourse of understanding how tribes developed historically. Tribing on the other hand, places the role of Archive in the centre when considering the meaning, which involves the process of history in making material worthy to be archived.

Macotywa who was a speaker in the 2012 International Archives Conference highlights the need to start the collection of the archival material abroad and at home so as to participate in the conversation about identity and social cohesion. His assertion is not the only point which this book seems to attend, but also this radical project uses the Africanist historians’ lenses in relating and questioning the available and omitted archival material of the ever-changing South African tribes and traditions prior the European colonisation period. The art and practices of that time provide a different kind of knowledge in a discourse of the African moving towards the self and understanding his/her reality today using the reflection of the self through the archival material and arts defined and interpreted without the European.

The structuring of the book meshes well with the purpose and the methods used in the projects enquiry. Through each volume the reader can delve into pieces of work that have been contributed to by different authors who have different backgrounds and are specialists in their respective disciplines. What can also be appreciated as a strength of this work is the manner in which the project was conducted in that each essay was shared to a panel and discussed before being published. This helped in unpacking and digging layer by layer the years of ethnographic collections which have not assumed a space in the Archives of the present day.

The orderliness of the book conforms to the academic way of writing, particularly research. In the book there is clear evidence of this project being an empirical project that used both primary and secondary sources in the form of ethnographic collection and other published work. Moreover, the footnotes are informative as they provide the gaps to further research which would propel the reader who specialises in either Archives, Anthropology, or History to entertain the suggested gaps in their respected research field.

While this work is eloquently written, the language used is inaccessible to those outside of the field. It is difficult to find flaws in this work as some essays are abstracted from much bigger scale project under APC, however, it worth noting that it would have been beneficial for sections where key terms would be defined for the reader to use as they manoeuvre themselves through this work.

What outweighs this shortcoming is the visuals that form a mini-art gallery in this piece of work. They provide deeper insight and evidence of the written content which are in their own right an introductory sensory to the reader. One could further argue that they are an exemplary task of doing object enquiry and the task of interpreting such work into contemporary understandings and now knowledge.