

**Ekukhanyeni letter-writers: Notes towards a social history of letter writing in
KwaZulu / Natal – South Africa, 1890 – 1900.**

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Introduction

In this paper I examine a large corpus of private letters that were written by Christian converts between 1890 and 1900.¹ Most of the letters were written in Isizulu and some in Isixhosa and in English. This paper adopts an analytic framework which seeks to demonstrate how the letter – writers saw circumstances, possibilities and sought to fashion their lives. I move from the premise that these letters were a production, which reflected and was informed by the contingencies of the time.

This paper makes two overlapping arguments: firstly, I argue that through letter writing the writers managed to build a network of letter-writers and readers who shared similar thoughts and dreams. Having mastered the technology of letter writing, they sought to conquer space through ink,² and were able to establish connections that did not rely on physical face to face proximity. I suggest that this was a community or a network because the letter –writers had a profound sense of togetherness as a group. They also had a common language, and much of their interactions, conversations and debates took place through correspondence.³

¹ I am most grateful to Jeff Guy who introduced me to this archival data. At this stage I am still trying to get the extent of this culture of letter writing amongst the Ekukhanyeni Christians. Preliminary indications are that this community of letter-writers extended beyond the Anglican Church, writers belonged to different mission denominations.

² I owe this expression to David Cohen’s comments on my proposal and during numerous discussions we had last year.

³ My understanding of community is partly influenced by Benedict Anderson’s book: *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (London: Verso, 1996), Anderson writes, “in fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity / genuineness”, 6. In the paper I refer to these letter – writers collectively as a community or as a network interchangeably.

Secondly, for these writers, knowing how to read and write enabled them to unpack the language and the political grammar of the Natal Colonial State.⁴ And, through their masterly control of the conventions of letter writing, these letter – writers managed to comment, reflect upon and articulate their views on social, political, intellectual and economic situations in the colony.⁵ I begin by mapping out the terrain that had an enormous influence on the ideas of these letter-writers. This was the real world in which the writers of the letters lived, and the world that had a profound impact on their lives.

Ekukhanyeni as a Political Sphere

Ekukhanyeni Mission Station and Bishopstowe were situated six miles outside Pietermaritzburg, the colonial capital. The mission station faced in the direction of the Table Mountain and was southeast of the valley of a thousand hills in the Natal midlands.⁶ The Ekukhanyeni mission station was established by the Anglican Bishop William John Colenso in 1856 soon after his ordination as Bishop of Natal. Colenso

⁴ The *Amakholwa* or believers engagements with the Natal Colonial State involved numerous debates and petitions before the 1880 on the definition of “native”. David Welsh briefly discusses these events in his book entitled, *The Roots of Segregation: Native Policy in Colonial Natal, 1845 – 1910*. (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1971), 235 – 249. The Natal colonial government seems to have adopted an ambivalent attitude towards the emerging class of the *Amakholwa* at this time. This inconsistent and contradictory disposition was best demonstrated by the government’s legislation of 1864 (Exemption System) which sought to exempt *Amakholwa* from Customary Law. However, as commentators (in the *Natal Witness* and *Inkanyiso* newspapers) at the time saw it, this piece of legislation from 1864 to 1875 remained a dead letter. This law was one of the legislations that created heated debates on the civil rights of this class of *Amakholwa* before 1880. In this paper I consider how the letter-writers in their letters tried to come to terms with the discourses of domination. This included such language as English law, Christian State, king and chief.

⁵ As it will be clear later here I am trying to intervene in the historiography of Natal and Zululand, especially on African Christians and their interaction with the Natal Colonial government before the turn of the century. This period has been covered by two standard works by Shula Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion: The 1906 – 8 Disturbances in Natal*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), and Norman Etherington, *Preacher Peasants and Politics in Southeast Africa, 1835 – 1880: African Christian Communities in Natal, Pondoland and Zululand*. (London: Royal Historical Society, 1978).

⁶ Ekukhanyeni means a “place of light”. Bishopstowe was the Bishop’s house and lands, and later became the name associated with these letter-writers.

arrived in Natal in January 23rd, 1854, a decade after the establishment of the colony of Natal.⁷ He was born in England in 1814. Guy writes that “after an outstanding academic career at Cambridge he married in 1846 and accepted the living at Forncett St Mary, Norfolk”.⁸

He came at a time when Sir George Grey, the Governor in the Cape Colony was in Natal making plans to grant land to the missionaries to build mission stations. The Natal government granted missionaries land under the Deed of Grant of 1856. The grant gave the mission boards of different denominations powers to control their lands. The character of the mission stations reflected the interest of various mission bodies. Some missionaries emphasized the evangelical aspect while others encouraged individual land tenure, like the American Board Mission.

Between 1850 and 1900 Natal was one of the most heavily evangelized regions of the globe.⁹ Etherington in *Preachers, Peasants and Politics in Southern Africa*, suggests that:

No other quarter of nineteenth-century Africa was so thickly invested with Christian evangelists. The Secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions estimated in 1880 that the number of missionaries in Natal was proportionately greater than in any other community on the globe two or three times over.¹⁰

Most nineteenth century Christian denominations seemed to have tested their strength in Natal. As Etherington further stresses:

⁷ The defeat of Voortrekkers at Khongela in the early 1840 saw the end of the Republic of Natalia, and the occupation of Natal by the British in 1842. This British settlement had far reaching consequences for Natal and the independent Zulu kingdom to the north. Edgar H. Brookes and Colin de B. Webb, *A History of Natal*. (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal, 1965)

⁸ Jeff Guy, *The Destruction of the Zulu Kingdom: The Civil War in Zululand, 1879 – 1884*. (London: Longman, 1979), 89. Colenso had five children, Harriette, Francis, Frances, Robert and Agnes.

⁹ Norman Etherington, *Preacher Peasants and Politics in Southeast Africa, 1835 – 1880: African Christian Communities in Natal, Pondoland and Zululand*, 275.

Few if any nineteenth-century mission fields enjoyed greater popularity than southeast Africa. Anglicans, American Congregationalists, Scottish Presbyterians, German and Scandinavian Lutherans, English Methodists and French Roman Catholics, all tried their hands at evangelizing the Nguni people.¹¹

By the turn of the century in Natal alone there were 40, 000 communicants and 100, 000 adherents to Christianity.¹² Most of the converts lived in mission reserves.

Converts occupied about 175, 000 acres of Mission Reserves.

What distinguished Ekukhanyeni from these other mission stations was the extent of its involvement in the politics of the Colony of Natal. This does not imply that the other mission bodies did not participate in politics; the difference is that their participation was indistinguishable from the official political discourse of the Colonial State. It took the American Board Mission two generations to rethink its position in the colony and to challenge the policies of the Natal government. A decade after the establishment of Ekukhanyeni, the mission station was already entangled in political and legal debates with the colonial government. Bishop Colenso's actions against the government were in part influenced by his close relationship with the men who worked with him at the mission station. These men were William Ngidi, Jonathan, Fuze and many others. The political involvement of the station began after the brutal destruction of the Hlubi chiefdom.¹³ The Station "protested against the manner in which Natal put down the alleged rebellion of Langalibalele and his Hlubi people in

¹⁰ Norman Etherington, *Preacher Peasants and Politics in Southeast Africa, 1835 – 1880: African Christian Communities in Natal, Pondoland and Zululand*. 5

¹¹ Norman Etherington, *Preacher Peasants and Politics in Southeast Africa, 1835 – 1880: African Christian Communities in Natal, Pondoland and Zululand*. 25

¹² Shula Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion: The 1906 – 8 Disturbances in Natal*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 52.

¹³ I understand the implications of this claim.

1873”.¹⁴ The Bishopstowe faction as they became known saw the incident as a miscarriage of justice, and sought to expose the brutality of the Shepstone system. From 1873 onwards, Colenso denounced “Shepstone and his regime as rotten to the very core”.¹⁵

The next clash between Bishopstowe and the colonial government took place during the events leading to the British invasion of the Zulu kingdom in 1879. The invasion resulted in the Battle of Isandlwana on 23rd January 1879 where the Zulu army defeated the British army. However, six months later on the 4th July 1879 the British came back after reinforcements and the Zulu army was defeated at the battle of Ulundi. The Zulu king, Cetshwayo was captured and exiled to Cape Town where he was imprisoned in the Castle. He was later sent to England to meet the Queen, and returned three years later, when the country was plunged into a civil war between Usuthu, a section loyal to the king and Hamu-Zibhebhu’s section that had defected to the British forces. The Zulu king, Cetshwayo died in February 1884. And Bishop Colenso died a year after. Ekukhanyeni was the only mission station openly against the invasion.

In 1888 Dinuzulu, the heir to the Zulu throne was charged for inciting the civil war. The Natal colonial government removed him from Zululand and was exiled to St. Helena with some of his supporters commonly known as Usuthu.¹⁶ What had been a united independent kingdom was divided into thirteen magisterial districts. The Natal colonial government deposed and installed chiefs that had been loyal to it

¹⁴ Jeff Guy, *The Destruction of the Zulu Kingdom: The Civil War in Zululand, 1879 – 1884*, 89.

¹⁵ Norman Etherington, *Preacher Peasants and Politics in Southeast Africa, 1835 – 1880: African Christian Communities in Natal, Pondoland and Zululand*. 42.

¹⁶ St. Helena is in the South Atlantic Ocean. See the two maps attached.

during the invasion. The view from Ekukhanyeni came through William Ngidi, who decried the repercussions of the invasion. He said:

I quite hope that now you know that the Zulus are set at loggerheads by the cunning of white men, who want to eat up their land. My heart is very full of grief, I cannot find words to express it, for this splendid old Zulu people.¹⁷

This was a political position from Ekukhanyeni, which was unlike other mission stations. The sustained political position that Ekukhanyeni took demonstrated the political life that the station enjoyed. It was a place for debate and political discussion.

However, the existing body of literature that covers these political developments has not fully explored how these ideas developed, or how a sphere of critical political debate in a colonial situation was nurtured. Moreover, what were the mechanisms by which they were exchanged? The letters provide an unusual view of the backstage communication amongst the Ekukhanyeni letter-writers, and most importantly what sustained their political opinion. The number of the letter-writers contributed to the rigor of these political engagements with the colonial government in late nineteenth century colonial Natal.

The authors of the letters that are a subject of this paper were part of the developments after the civil war. They sought to expose the Natal colonial government's injustices and inconsistencies in dealing with members of the Usuthu.¹⁸ In the process, I suggest that they specifically imagined a world of fair play and equal treatment. And, it was in part this experience that shaped their conversations in the letters.

¹⁷ William Ngidi, 1883, in Jeff Guy, *The Destruction of the Zulu Kingdom: The Civil War in Zululand, 1879 – 1884*, 69.

¹⁸ Usuthu was a section of the community within Zululand that remained loyal to the Zulu King, Cetshwayo.

Ekukhanyeni as a Literary Sphere

Ekukhanyeni was one of the most influential educational institutions in Natal before the turn of the century. The center was established in 1855. It was founded to provide education to “African boys, especially the sons of chiefs and headman”.¹⁹ At its commencement the school offered training in agriculture, carpentry, building construction and religious lessons. The first year the school opened, it enrolled nineteen boys. The next year the center registered thirty-three students. In 1859, there were forty-two students studying at the institution.²⁰ Ekukhanyeni Educational center reflected the situation of most of the schools in Natal before the turn of the century. The mission bodies founded and controlled most of the schools. By 1885 however, some of the mission schools came under the Natal government and received a share from a welfare grant of £5, 000 from the government.²¹

The role that the missionaries played in the educational affairs in the colony of Natal before the turn of the century, however, did vary, as did their practices. Etherington writes, “many chiefs invited missionaries to reside near them because they valued their secular services such as letter-writing and intercession with British authorities”.²² Other chiefs preferred the government – sponsored schools.²³ In 1885 there were about 64 schools, and by 1901 Natal had 196 schools with 11, 051 pupils.²⁴

¹⁹ Edgar H. Brookes and Colin de B. Webb, *A History of Natal*, 106.

²⁰ Edgar H. Brookes and Colin de B. Webb, *A History of Natal*, 106.

²¹ Shula Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion: The 1906 – 8 Disturbances in Natal*, 55.

²² Norman Etherington, *Preacher Peasants and Politics in Southeast Africa, 1835 – 1880: African Christian Communities in Natal, Pondoland and Zululand*. 282.

²³ Shula Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion: The 1906 – 8 Disturbances in Natal*, 55.

²⁴ Shula Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion: The 1906 – 8 Disturbances in Natal*, 55.

The curriculum was the same in Natal and Zululand after 1880. Students were taught to read and write in English and Zulu. Students were also taught geography and a history. Boys were taught some industrial work and girls learned sewing, housework and cooking.²⁵ For instance, at the Ladysmith Anglican School in the same year, forty – two students attained an advanced level in English, German and Geography, six in English grammar, and two in music. At St. Mark’s school in Pietermaritzburg, black children were also instructed in Latin and Greek.²⁶ Besides the elementary schools the American Zulu Mission created an advance College and named it after one of its first missionaries, Newton Adams. Adams College was established at Amazintoti five miles south of Durban. Students could choose from a number of colleges including Inanda Seminary for girls, the Edendale Training Institute and Pietermaritzburg Training School and other schools outside the colony.

After the Natal colonial government was granted greater autonomy by Britain in 1893, it changed its policies on African education. This saw a change within government attitudes towards African education; part of this shift reflected the views of sugar farmers who wanted cheap labor for the farms. One of these changes saw the decline in standards in African education. Another part of this shift was well captured in newspaper commentaries that characterized educated Africans as “lazy good for nothing”.²⁷ Towards the turn of the century, the emphasis in government schools was on teaching African pupils how to read and write in English and Isizulu. Seeing this development well-to-do African parents criticized the government education system,

²⁵ Shula Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion: The 1906 – 8 Disturbances in Natal*, 55.

²⁶ Norman Etherington, Christianity and African society in nineteenth – century Natal, in Andrew Duminy and Bill Guest, *Natal and Zululand: From Earliest Times to 1910. A New History*. (Pietermaritzburg: Shuter and Shooter, 1989), 289.

²⁷ Shula Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion: The 1906 – 8 Disturbances in Natal*, 81.

and decided to send their children to racially integrated Cape schools.²⁸ Others sent their sons to the United States of America and England.²⁹ Most parents wanted their children to learn languages and trades so as to prepare their children well for future employment.

Between 1860 and 1880, Ekukhanyeni became an important alternative center of intellectual life in Natal. Through its Mission Press, the center established itself as one of the leading mission publishers in the colony and beyond. In four years, the Ekukhanyeni Press had published a “Zulu – English dictionary, a Zulu Grammar and a translation of St. Matthew’s Gospel”.³⁰ In less than ten years, the Mission Press had published a number of significant books in both Zulu and English. Major publications comprised a translated version of the “New Testament and the books of Genesis, Exodus and I and II Samuel in the Old, Zulu liturgy, a tract on the Decalogue and Zulu readers in Geography, Geology, History and Astronomy, as well as sundry Grammars and general Readers”.³¹ The translation of biblical texts alerted Colenso to the questions of truth about the bible. His co-translator, William Ngidi, sparked his questioning of the bible as a truth. While translating the story of the Flood, Ngidi asked,

Is all that true? Do you really believe that all this happened thus, - that all the beasts, and birds, and creeping things, upon the earth, large and small, from hot countries and cold, came thus in pairs, and entered into the ark with Noah? And did Noah gather food for them all for the beasts and birds of prey, as well as the rest?³²

²⁸ Norman Etherington, Christianity and African society in nineteenth – century Natal, in Andrew Duminy and Bill Guest, *Natal and Zululand: From Earliest Times to 1910. A New History*. 291.

²⁹ In the late 1860’s John Nembula was doing his medical studies at Chicago Medical College. And in the 1870’s he was working at a chemist’s shop at 308 Thirty-Ninth Street in Chicago, Illinois.

³⁰ Edgar H. Brookes and Colin de B. Webb, *A History of Natal*, 106.

³¹ Edgar H. Brookes and Colin de B. Webb, *A History of Natal*, 105.

³² Francis Colenso, *Colenso Letters from Natal*, edited by Wyn Rees. (Pietermaritzburg: Shuter and Shooter, 1958), 69.

Colenso asked himself “shall a man speak lies in the Name of the Lord. I dare not do so”.³³ The questions that Ngidi posed led Colenso to enter contemporary debates in the field of Biblical Criticism.³⁴ Soon after they completed translating the book of Genesis, Bishop Colenso published a book, which led to his excommunication from the Anglican Church. The book was entitled, *The Pentateuch and the book of Joshua Critically Examined*.³⁵ Published in 1862, it became one of the most controversial literary works in the biblical field.

The vibrant theological, political and intellectual life at the mission station impacted on its students. It was these debates that shaped the later generation of Christians connected with Ekukhanyeni and its wider social networks.

Ekukhanyeni Letter-writers

Letter writing was one of the major forms of communication amongst the Christian converts during the second half of the 19th century in Natal. For the Ekukhanyeni Christians letter writing was an integral part of their social life. And, it was this medium of communication that enabled the imagining of a community;

³³ Frances Colenso, *Colenso Letters from Natal*, edited by Wyn Rees, 69. The debate between Colenso and Ngidi became well known in South Africa and Britain. As Disraeli, British Minister at the time, commented in 1879 after the Anglo-Zulu war: “A Wonderful people the Zulus! They beat our generals, they convert our bishops, and they write finis to a French dynasty”. This comment has been quoted in most of the literature on this period. See Edgar H. Brookes and Colin de B. Webb, *A History of Natal*, 107 – 8.

³⁴ Edgar H. Brookes and Colin de B. Webb, *A History of Natal*, 107.

³⁵ John Colenso, *The Pentateuch and book of Joshua Critically Examined*. (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1870).

whose members' lives found their expression in the letters. The extent of this community is hard to determine at this stage. The network involved men and women living in the villages, towns and cities of Natal, Zululand, the Eastern Cape, Cape Town, Johannesburg, St. Helena, England and the United States of America. I will give more background in the seminar.

a) The Art of Letter-writing

One of the ways of getting into the world these writers imagined is to understand the importance they attached to writing and reading. These two practices constituted a significant part of their lives. To these letter - writers, writing was like constituting a community, a community free of the harsh realities of colonial life. The letter constituted a sphere for debate and a space for dreaming. Letter-writers valued those who knew how to write, and encouraged the novice.

One of Harriette Colenso's letters to Zulu chiefs shows the significance they attached to the technology of writing. Harriette Colenso was the eldest daughter of Bishop John Colenso. Born in Nottford, England, in 1847,³⁶ she came to Natal in 1855, when she was eight years old. In 1862, she returned to England with her father and studied at Winnington School in Cheshire until 1865.³⁷ After her studies in Britain, she came back to Natal where she resumed her Zulu lessons. By the early 1880's, she was a fluent Isizulu speaker and writer. Most of the letters she wrote after 1880s were written in Isizulu. She was a valued member of the letter – writers. They gave her an affectionate name *nkosazana and Dhlwedhlwe*. Harriette Colenso wrote:

³⁶ Shula Marks, "Harriette Colenso and The Zulus, 1874 – 1913", in *Journal of African History*, iv, 3 (1963), 403.

³⁷ Harriette Colenso, *Cases of Six Usutu (other than the exiles at St. Helena): Punished for having taken part in the Disturbances of 1888*. (London: Arthur Bonner, 1893) reprinted and published the Killie Campbell Africana Library with an Introduction by Brenda Nicholls, vii.

To the Zulu chiefs, Ndabuko and Tshingana
The letters which Dinuzulu writes give us great satisfaction, so as his desire for learning. Truly both his father and mine would be pleased with him, and in time to come he will be of help to the Zulu people. I am going to write to him soon.³⁸

The letter gives an insight into a sense of togetherness that this network of letter – writers had developed. Harriette Colenso’s use of “us” is telling, the letter was not just for her but it was for everyone at Ekukhanyeni, and they took delight at seeing Dinuzulu, Zulu king – who was imprisoned at St Helena learning the conventions of letter writing.

Some of the members of this network of letter - writers asked other skilled letter-writers to write for them. Rev Moses Sibisi’s letter to Ekukhanyeni demonstrates this practice. Moses Sibisi asked Fuze to write for him.³⁹ It was not that Sibisi could not write, there is number of letters that he wrote himself, but because this letter was sensitive, he had to get someone you was skilful in writing to write the letter. The letter was entitled, “*Indaba ka Ayliff Gcwensa* or The story of Ayliff Gcwensa”. Ayliff Gcwensa was a preacher but after expelling his wife from his house he was ordered by the Trustees of the Church of England in Natal, which Moses Sibisi was the member, to stop his services until he allowed his wife to return home. Because of the nature of Gcwensa’s case, Sibisi asked Fuze to write for him.⁴⁰ Sibisi concluded the letter;

³⁸ Both their fathers had died ten years previously. She wrote this letter in 1894 when she was in London. For more on this aspect see J.J. Guy’s section on the “Modernizing Prince” in the forthcoming monograph, *Imperial Subjects*.

³⁹ I do not have much information on Rev. Moses Sibisi. I talk about Fuze at length in this paper.

⁴⁰ According to the letter that Fuze and Sibisi wrote Gcwensa had a dispute with his wife. Gcwensa’s wife asked him not to come back home at night, however, Gcwensa never ceased to do that, as a result Gcwensa’s wife reported him to the Trustees. The Trustees stopped Gcwensa from preaching until he allowed his wife to return home. Ayliff Gcwensa told them (Trustees) to take his wife, since according to him, she did not belong to him anymore.

Namhlanje sesizwa esekhipha uKoza, owafakwa yithi kuleyondlu, sathi kayipathe, afundise lapho. Kuloba mina otume uFuze ukuba angilobele.

Rev. M. Sibisi⁴¹

Today we hear that he (Gcwensa) has removed Koza from the house, (Koza) whom we had put in charge of it, so that he can teach in it. I have asked Fuze to write for me.

Rev. M. Sibisi

The practice of asking skilled letter – writers to write letters also comes out in one of the letters that R. Twala wrote to Harriette Colenso. Twala talked about the common practice amongst the letter-writers to get people who knew the conventions of letter writing to write for the beginners. Twala wrote:

Siza ungincede uthumele leyo ncwadi eyabhalwa nguMarwick nokubonga; waze wena wathi ayifanele (ngani). Bengifuna neCopy yayo: nje abantu abangakwazi ukuloba bayabhalelwa: nje kufunwe amazwi amahle.

Please send the thank – you letter that Marwick wrote: you even said it was not appropriate (why). I want a copy of the letter: People, who do not know how to write, find people to write for them: the important thing is to look for good or beautiful words.⁴²

Having become part of the letter-writers and readers, and being able to write was not enough. The ultimate goal was to perfect one’s skills by mastering the conventions of letter writing. Twala stressed that “people who do not know how to write, find people to write for them”, but that was not sufficient. Twala continued; “the important thing is to look for good or beautiful words”. Twala’s letter suggests that writing gave these writers pleasure and fun. And looking for beautiful words was in itself a search for excellence and perfection.

⁴¹ Sibisi wrote this letter to Ekuhnyeni explaining the behavior of Ayliff Gcwensa to the Station. The letter does not mention the recipient of the letter.

⁴² I am still going to look for more information on Twala. And other letters that he wrote.

Through the different forms of letter writing these writers employed, one gets an insight into their social status. Chief amongst these styles of writing is a certain style of writing employed by the prison inmates. These writers had learned a particular style of writing, which allowed them to articulate their grievances. This was a style geared to lure someone's sympathies.

The papers that they used were standard, with letterheads showing the name of the prison in which the inmates lived. A glance at these letters also shows the constraints these standard papers imposed on the writers. They had very clear designated margins. This shows some sort of order and perhaps discipline these standard pads imposed on the inmates. For instance, the letter Mayatana Cele wrote to Harriette Colenso, shows the constraints on the writer. The formal pad had instruction that the writer should follow. These were the instructions:

Instructions to sender of reply. When replying the address must give full name and number exactly as above. Letters may be written in English, Dutch, German, French, Zulu, Sesetho or Sixosa. Letters in any other language may be delayed or even returned. Money must not be enclosed in Prisoners Letters, but sent to the Superintendent of the Prison. Letters to Prisoners must bear ordinary postage. Unpaid letters are liable to be returned.⁴³

This is in sharp contrast to the letters that went back and forth between the letter-writers outside the purview of the Colonial State. Some of these letter-writers used scrap papers to convey their message to their friends. Most of the letters are neither dated nor signed. This shows a degree of intimacy that existed between the individuals who wrote the letters. It also demonstrates the frequency with which they talked to each other through letters. The style of these writers did not follow any rigid way of writing. The salutations in most of the letters is in the body of the letter. And

⁴³ These instructions appear in the letters from Mayatana Cele to Miss Colenso. Mayatana Cele wrote this letter when he was imprisoned at Number 2, De Beers Convict Station, Kimberley.

sometimes there is no formal conclusion. The typical ending is “*Yimina omaziyo*”; that is, “I am - the one you know”.⁴⁴

The sense of freedom had an impact on the content of the letters, as to the amount of personal issues they talked about in the letters. It might as well be that the writers considered them public, they were intended for all readers residing at the mission station. These letters are indeed telling, in what they say about the community at the mission station. It was a community in which everything went.⁴⁵ A community of people who spent most of their time reading, writing and talking about each others personal concerns, especially household matters. This was also a community composed of migrants, who found in this community of letter-writers a proper place to leave messages to their families. One such migrant was A. Gilbert, he wrote a letter to his father through the mission station:

Dear Baba
Nginazisa ukuthi sengikhona lapha eTransvaal. Ngahlangana nabakithi uManyayiza, uFrance, uMzuza, uNgatizana. Nabanye-ke abaningi. Ngicela ukuba ungifakele amehlo kuMtwana Baba. Naku Nkosazana nakubalobokazi.

Dear father
I would like to inform you that I am now here in Transvaal. I have met my homeboys Mnyayiza, France, Mzuza and Ngatizana and many others. Please father; look after my child, my daughter and my wives.⁴⁶

The style of writing that people used in their letter tells much about the person and the community. When they wrote to new members of this reading community, it appears that, the style changed. They wrote in big cursive writing. This was likely

⁴⁴ This is the ending of most the letters.

⁴⁵ This suggests that at this mission station there existed public performances or gatherings of people reading letters.

⁴⁶ Gilbert was in the Transvaal.

intended to allow the new reader to be able to read and become part of the network of readers. Nondela's letter to Fundi demonstrates this point quite clearly:

I am getting a big man now and someday perhaps will come and play with you again as we did once. I think Miss Colenso will read this to you and perhaps you can so I write it large.

Nondela wrote this letter while he was in England. In the letters he informed Fundi "about the fire which I had not long ago, all my things were burnt that was up in Scotland".⁴⁷ One can get a picture of Fundi. He was still in the process of learning how to read. So Nondela had to "write it large". In case he could not still read it, Miss Colenso was available to read it to him.⁴⁸

As I have stated above, most letters were often read in public. A writer had to insist that a particular letter was directed specifically for someone else. For if that was not specified, everybody could gain access to people's "private matters". In one case Harriette Colenso had to specify that one of the *leaves* in her letter to the chiefs at St. Helena was directed particularly to Mubi Mtuli kaNondenisa alias Bubi.⁴⁹ Harriette Colenso wrote:

Ehe, Mubi amazwana ezindaba niyakuwafumana encwadini leyo engibalobele namuhla abantwana. Lelikhasana liyakuqonda wena nje wedwa.

Ehe, Mubi you will get snippet of the news in the letter that I have sent to the princes today. However, this leaf will go direct to you, alone.⁵⁰

Mubi was one of the skilled letter-writers, as time went on he became a very close friend of Harriette Colenso, a relationship I am still yet to determine. Mubi Nondinisa

⁴⁷ Nondela's letter to Fundi.

⁴⁸ Nondela's letter is written in English.

⁴⁹ Leaf is a direct translation from Isizulu. It means "a page".

⁵⁰ When Harriette wrote this letter, Mubi was at St. Helena, and at the time Mubi received the letter he was making his preparation to return to Natal.

was a student at Ekukhanyeni in the late 1850's. He was teacher, interpreter and a prolific letter-writer. He worked as Secretary to the Zulu king, Dinuzulu in St. Helena. He played a very important role as an investigator and looking for witnesses during the trial of the Usuthu.⁵¹ He left a thirty – four-page diary that is yet to be published in its original form. He wrote this diary during his year-long stay in Zululand looking for witnesses after the civil war. It is the most detailed account of the repercussions of the invasion of Zululand and the civil war that followed thereafter. The author allowed the victims of the civil war mostly women to tell their eyewitness accounts of what happened. In a nutshell, the Nondenisa's diary demonstrates the power of narrative as a form of catharsis and also shows how the women who told their experiences or stories to Nondinisa attempted to “reinvent themselves through narrative”.⁵²

Through the letter that Harriette Colenso wrote to Nondenisa, one not only gets an insight into how letters were read but also how letter – writing enabled the carving of space for letter - writers to circulate news about political developments in England, Southern Africa and US. In the letter that Harriette Colenso wrote to Nondinisa, she talked about the political developments regarding the case of the Zulu chiefs in the Colonial Office in London and the Jameson Raid which had taken place at the Witwaterrand, and how it was received in London. The language she used to refer to the English raiders is very strong. She condemned their action.

b) A reading Community

⁵¹ Mubi Nondinisa spent a year in Zululand looking for people to testify against Zibhebhu and his faction. Zibhebhu went on the side of the British forces during the Battle of Ulundi and later instigated a civil war. But the Natal government charged Usuthu for inciting the civil war. It was this “injustice” that the letter – writers tried to deal with.

⁵² Njabulo Ndebele: “Memory, metaphor, and the triumph of narrative”, in Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee: *Negotiating the past: The making of memory in South Africa*. (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998), 27.

One of the things that united these readers was the sharing of information. If one of them had read something of interest in a book or newspaper, he or she shared it with others. And, through this they managed to create a network of readers who had a common language and some consensus on the issues they discussed. But the ideas that they shared were not givens; they constructed them as the community grew. This construction or production of ideas about themselves and the community that they imagined was shaped to a large degree by the kinds of books and newspapers that they read. Reading the letters one gets a profound sense of the importance of books and therefore of reading. The letter-writers demanded books, not just any books, but specific kinds of books that they needed. Mbili Sinoti's letter shows both the agency and the profound importance they attached to the books they read.⁵³ Mbili Sinoti wrote:

Please sir I beg you that you should be able to send me some of those books you have. A Visit to the Zulu King translation glossary and Grammatical Notes. Incwadi yomuhla uBishop WaseNatal ehambela KwaZulu and some of other books English – Zulu Gramma best one please. If you get them send me those I ask for them please. If you have not got that please send me two-shilling English – Zulu Dictionary that is all I close.
I remain your humble servant
Mbili Sinoti
C/o Public School.⁵⁴

The emphasis is on “A Visit to the Zulu King and Grammatical Notes”.⁵⁵ Colenso wrote the book after his first visit to the Zulu king, Mpande in 1859. As with most of

⁵³ I am yet to discover the recipient of this letter.

⁵⁴ “Incwadi yomuhla uBishop WaseNatal ehambela KwaZulu” = translation “The book about the Bishop of Natal's Visit to Zululand”.

⁵⁵ John Colenso, *Three Native Accounts of the Visit of the Bishop of Natal in September and October, 1859, to Mpande, King of the Zulus*. With explanatory notes and a literal translation, and a glossary of all the Zulu words employed in the same: designed for the Students of the Zulu Language. 3rd edition, Printed by Magema, Mubi and Co. Published by Vause, Slater, & C., Pietermaritzburg and Durban. 1901).

Colenso's books, William Ngidi, a partner whom he acknowledged, assisted him in most of his works. The book was published in both English and Isizulu. It contained a very detailed account of the visit to the king, and the authors the accounts, Magma Magwaza, Ndiyana and William Ngidi recorded all what they encountered on their way to the king. The striking difference between this book and other writings at the time is that it avoids the nineteenth century stereotypes which became characteristic of most missionary accounts. It never talks of savages and barbarians. In the end of the book the visit to the king remains a dignified endeavor, almost a pilgrimage.

It was not only Mbili Sinoti who was passionate about books. Mahlathini Gumede's letter echoes similar sentiments. Gumede spoke not only for himself, but also for "all young Zulus", as he called them, who read books. From Johannesburg, Gumede wrote to Miss Colenso:

Dear Madam, I am very glad to find this present opportunity to write to you and acknowledge you that those books you have sent me have reached me safely and I am grateful for these little books for they are of great importance to me and many of my friends like them very much indeed. So they are welcomed by all young Zulus.⁵⁶

Books "are of great importance", said Gumede, expressing his delight at receiving them.⁵⁷ The critical question is how were these books read or interpreted? What interpretations did readers prefer over others? It is difficult to answer these questions at this stage, but one can speculate that some of these books were debated through letters. And, letter-writers had some sort of consensus on good books to read and circulate. Gumede said the books "are welcomed by all young Zulus". The implication of this assertion is profound; the obvious point to begin with is what was

⁵⁶ Mahlathini Gumede wrote this letter while in Johannesburg.

⁵⁷ Mahlathini Gumede to Harriette Colenso.

Gumede's understanding of "all young Zulus"? What does this statement tell us about the readers who were included or excluded in this network of letter-writers? Did they have to be imagined or imagined themselves as Zulus?⁵⁸

Not only books but also newspapers were shared. The letter-writers notified each other about the interesting latest news. Twala asked Harriette Colenso to read "Ilanga" a Newspaper. Twala wrote:

Have you read "Abantu" Johannes (being native) Newspaper about you? Please see the 26th "Ilanga".⁵⁹

Making sure that they were abreast with the contemporary situation was one of the ways in which they maintained their connection. Letters were an efficient way of circulating news.

The social networks and influences that the Ekukhanyeni letter - writers established between 1890 and 1900 is hard to assess. But as campaigners against the unfair laws of the Natal colonial government they were well known not only within South Africa but also in England and in the USA. LT Mallet's letter to Harriette Colenso sheds light on the extent of their influence. Mallet asked Harriette Colenso to give lectures on the subjects of the Zulus. Mallet wrote:

You will probably not remember me at all; but I had the pleasure of meeting you at dinner at Mr Woolcott Browne's in Roschester Terrance, and also elsewhere to trouble you in order to ask whether you would be able and willingly to deliver to the N. Reus Women's Liberal Association lectures on the subjects of the Zulus, their rights and wrongs? I do not know when you are leaving England, but if you

⁵⁸ During this time Zulu identity was gaining more momentum amongst Africans in Natal and especially amongst white women, Harriette Colenso called herself a Zulu and Miss Susie Tyler, a daughter to Rev Josiah Tyler – an American missionary who went to live in Zululand in 1859, introduced herself to the students at Hampton Institute in Virginia – in the United States as a Zulu. She said, "I was born among the Zulus, and so I call myself a Zulu". See Southern Workman and Hampton School Record, vol. 23, January 1894, 213. How this Zulu identity gained acceptance among white women is hard to ascertain at this stage, but it is a theme I am trying to trace and develop for my next paper or chapter in my thesis. Especially how was it connected to this network of letter – writers.

⁵⁹ Langalibalele Dube founded *Ilanga* newspaper in c1900. It is still in existence today.

are staying over this winter, and would lecture on the first Thursday in the month for us, at any time after November we should be most grateful.⁶⁰

Shula Marks has written about Harriette Colenso's campaign in England.⁶¹ Harriette Colenso was a leading campaigner in London for the release of the Zulu chiefs who were imprisoned in St. Helena. However, what has not been stressed is the extent to which her activities were linked to a broader network of friends or letter-writers. And, what maintained their connection? The broader implications of this friendship and the knowledge they produced in their personal correspondences is profound, especially the ideas about their position in the colony and their voices.⁶² The letter that was written by Elka M. Cele offers some insights on the extent of this community:

I am sending you duplicates of the two receipts from Seme of which you asked. Mr Dube is here and sends his greetings and good wishes for your noble work for the Zulu people. He is proceeding to Natal tomorrow.⁶³

Cele's letter shows the extent of the network and the individuals involved in this community of letter-writers. Seme and Dube were well known political figures at the time. Pixley Seme studied at Columbia University (USA), Oxford and the Inner Temple and was one of the founders of the South African Native National Congress

⁶⁰ LT Mallet wrote this letter when Harriette was in England campaigning for the release of Dinuzulu and other chiefs.

⁶¹ Shula Marks, "Harriette Colenso and The Zulus, 1874 – 1913", in *Journal of African History*, iv, 3 (1963), 403 – 411. She is also a subject of Jeff Guy's forthcoming book, "

⁶² I am indebted to Prof. R. Hunt for thinking more about these individuals as knowledge brokers in a colonial situation.

⁶³ I am going to do more research on Cele. It appears that when he wrote this letter he was in Johannesburg.

(SANNC) later known as African National Congress (ANC) in 1912. By the turn of the century, he established his law practice in Johannesburg.⁶⁴

John Langalibalele Dube was the son of Rev. James Dube, a religious minister at Inanda part of the American Zulu Mission. John Dube studied at Adams College (later changed to Amanzimtoti Institute) and Orbelin University, USA. He became the first president of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) later known as African National Congress (ANC).⁶⁵ This network was also in part a political network where they shared political ideas about their futures and that of South Africa.

c) A Space for Political Conversations

The space these letter-writers created also served as a sphere for debate and for exchanging political ideas. Since most of the spaces for public opinion were not free, or were under the control of the colonial state, the imaginary world created by the letter offered them a space to dream aloud. Fuze's letter illustrates this point clearly. Magera Fuze alias Magera Magwaza was born in 1844, near Table Mountain east of Pietermaritzburg. He came to Ekukhanyeni in 1856, and he received his formal education at the Ekukhanyeni Center during its formative years. During the years he spent at the school, he perfected his reading and writing skills in English and Isizulu. In the late 1860s, he was working as a music composer for the Ekukhanyeni Press. In 1890, he taught and composed music at St Alban's College in Pietermaritzburg. By 1896 he was Secretary to the Zulu king, Dinuzulu and tutor to his

⁶⁴ Shula Marks, Shula Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion: The 1906 – 8 Disturbances in Natal*. 60. And Shula Marks, "Harriette Colenso and The Zulus, 1874 – 1913", in *Journal of African History*, iv, 3 (1963), 410.

⁶⁵ See Marks, Shula, *Ambiguities of Dependence in South Africa: Class, Nationalism, and the State in Twentieth Century Natal*. (Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1986).

young sons who had been “found guilty of treason towards the government of the colony of Zululand” and were exiled to St Helena.⁶⁶ It was also during this time when he started writing his book entitled *Abantu Abamnyama Nalapho Bavela Khona (The Black People and Whence They Came)*. The book was published in 1922, and was later translated into English by Lugg and was edited by T.R. Cope in 1978.⁶⁷ Fuze had difficulty in publishing his book and was later to receive some help from his friends at the Ekukhanyeni. He died soon after his book was published. His contemporaries noted that Fuze lived his last years in a “humble tenement in a back street of Pietermaritzburg”.⁶⁸ Like his friends, Mubi Nondenisa, Mahlathini Gumede and Miss Giles, there is little trace of him in most of the vast historical literature on South Africa. He wrote this letter after Dinuzulu had been allowed back to Zululand in 1902. Fuze wrote to Dinuzulu, the Zulu king⁶⁹:

You should fight for that which is yours by right as all people do ... (but) now our only resource is to fight in a lawful way as do all wise nations under the sun. Indeed, I say this to you because I fear that if you are quiet and do nothing we shall find out that you are left alone and all the Zulu nation scattered from you by cunning and alienated from you so that you shall have no place of refuge and be in want of all things.⁷⁰

Through letter writing the writers were able to ink into existence a new world where they were able to rethink their political strategies. The Ekukhanyeni letter – writers

⁶⁶ John Wright, *The History of Isizulu*, essay appeared in the *Natal Witness*, December 17th, 1998. 2. (John Wright is a Professor of History at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg).

⁶⁷ Magma Fuze, *The Black People and Whence They Came. A Zulu View*. (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1979).

⁶⁸ John Wright, “The History of Isizulu”, essay appeared in the *Natal Witness*, December 17th, 1998. 2.

⁶⁹ I use the word “king” because the letter-writers preferred to use it than “chief”.

⁷⁰ A.G.O. 1/7/53 letter written by Magma in Shula Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion: The 1906 – 8 Disturbances in Natal*. 114.

also used the letter to warn their co-writers of certain political dangers. Harriette Colenso requested Fuze to write to Jabez, and alert him of an imminent danger.

Wetu Jabez,
Ngithunya unkosazana kuwe ukuba ngikwazise ukuthi ikona ingozi embi opakati kwayo wena, nakuba wena kodwa awazi lutho ngayo. Ngalokho iti inkosazana kimi angikulobebe loko, utshetshe ukhawuleze ufike kuyo, ngoba yona iyakulinda ukuba ikululeke ngokwamandla ayo.
Uyabona-ke, ngikutshelile, fika lapha masinyane, nawesekuyakuba kuwe lokho kokuzilibazisa, uyazi futhi ukuthi inkosazana iyakutanda, aitandi ukuba uwe pansi ngengozi enjalo, inxa yona seikuzwile okubi okuthile okuphethe wena kabi, njengoba nawe uyazi.
Ngingowakho Omaziyo
Magema Magwaza

Nkosazana has asked me to warn you about a danger that might befall you, you don't know about it. She asked me to inform you about it. She said, please hurry and come to see her. She wants to advice you about what she knows.
You see, I have told you. Come here quickly, if you delay that is up to you. You know that Nkosazana loves you. She does not like to see you fall into danger when she has heard about it, as you know.
I am yours – you know.
Magema Magwaza (Fuze)⁷¹

There are a large number of letters to John Dube, Harriette Colenso and other Ekukhanyeni based letter writers that asked about the political situation in the colony and some letter-writers offered ways of dealing with their predicament. One of the letter-writers even suggested that they should buy land in Zululand since they had no significant political control over it. Abraham D. Zulu wrote to Ekukhanyeni about his displeasure at how he lived in Melmoth. In the letter he proposed that they should buy land where they would live together.

Nami angisalithandi lelizwe nakho imali yami iyincosana kodwa ngingamthola u f 100 pawunde. Ngiyaphela lapho Zulu
Yimina Owakho
Abraham D. Zulu

⁷¹ Fuze wrote this letter on behalf of Harriette Colenso to Jabez, their friend.

I do not like this land, although I have little money, but I can get f100 pounds. I end there Zulu.
I am yours
Abraham D. Zulu
Melmoth

The proposed land was to be in the north of Zululand at KwaNobamba. But this, of course, was a suggestion it does not appear that the writers followed it through. This should be seen in the context of how they saw circumstances, possibilities, and made certain choices.

Unpacking the Language and the Political Grammar of the Colonial State.

The political language of the state was one of the sites that the letter-writers contested with the Colonial State. Magma's letter shows the depth of the political discussion these letter-writers had. The letter shows a very clear understanding of their rights as individual citizen vis visa the Colonial State. This comes out in the letters and their activities that sought to challenge the Colonial government.

Being able to write and read enabled him and other Christian friends to contest the control of the Colonial State. The conversations moved from the petitions in the street of Pietermaritzburg, and under the big pine trees in front of the Natal Native Administration offices, to one to one official correspondences with colonial administrators. This was a novel form of political engagement with the State. By unpacking the political grammar of the Colonial State, for instance, English laws and the Christian State, Fuze attempted to come to grips with the language that the Colonial State used and how it affected his everyday life. I say English Laws and Christian State

constituted a language because beneath them lay a series of powerful ideas designed to organize society.

The idea that runs through the letter is that of justice and Christianity. For Fuze a Christian State was just, and as a citizen he expected respect from the Colonial State which he did not get.⁷² What calls for more attention is the metaphorical language he employed in the letter.

The letter writing medium enabled the writers to carve a space for themselves as Christian upholders of justice. And in the process also carving a special niche for their identity, a Christian identity.⁷³ It was in this space that they imagined a world of fair treatment in contrast to the one in which they lived. However, even this space was surveyed, letters were opened. For Fuze this constituted an invasion of his private space. For Fuze the letter he received from his friend, Harriette Colenso, was a “heart”. As Fuze wrote:

... I thought this was forbidden by all English laws – to explore someone’s heart without proper reason I expect when one was found dead suddenly.⁷⁴

The metaphor of the heart is striking, not only because it clearly expresses Fuze’s attachment to letters, but also ideas about privacy, confidentiality and a strong sense of self.

The metaphor is powerful and it demonstrates the profound significance he attached to the conversations he had with his friends, especially Harriette Colenso.

⁷² By looking at these letters one gets an insight into ideas about personal respect that the Christian converts had. There has never been any attempt to consider this aspect in South African history before the turn of the century.

⁷³ I suspect that I might be making these letter-writers more Christian than they were (even close to Christian fanatics), some of them did not observe most of the Christian conventions. They were polygamists something that was against church policies at the time.

⁷⁴ Magma Fuze to His Excellency.

The violation or the invasion of his private space was tantamount to meaning that he was dead. He wrote “I feel very much hurtful and disgusted as I have been told another thing”. This language is very strong, to be directed to someone in power. This implies that he was convinced and conscious of his right to privacy.

Fuze’s letter is similar to Mubi Nondinisa’s letter that talked about justice. For Nondinisa justice was at the center of their engagement with the colonial state. One of the things that provided these letter-writers an opportunity to engage the Colonial State was the case of the Usuthu. See page five. When the letter-writers realized that the cases against chiefs could not receive a fair trial in the colony, they sought to take the cases to the metropole, England. According to Nondinisa they expected a settlement to come from London. Writing to Miss K. Giles in Pietermaritzburg,⁷⁵ Nondenisa expressed his opinion on the matter:

We are all well here, even the chiefs, who still asks us “when Miss Colenso be here?” and this is to fulfil justice done by the inkosazana (Miss Colenso). They and all of us expect for the settlement of their case in England, daily as many rumours of newspapers and Zulus in the Reserve (amambuka) speak everything they wish of them.⁷⁶ Also we long to see our people at home, as it is nearly a year since we parted them.⁷⁷

However, for them to be able to take the cases effectively to London, they had to unpack the language of the colonial state. In this case they had to change the label of prisoners the Colonial State attached to the Zulu chiefs. This involved forging a relationship between Zulu and English Royal houses. The death of the Duke of Clarence in the English Royal house was seized as an opportune time to forge a link

⁷⁵ At this stage I do not have enough information on Miss Giles, except that she was one of the letter writers based in Pietermaritzburg.

⁷⁶ Amambuka means traitors.

⁷⁷ Mubi Nondenisa wrote this letter when he was at Eshowe after his long stay in Zululand looking for witnesses.

between the Zulu King and the English Queen. The chiefs at St. Helena sent a letter of condolence through Harriette Colenso to the English Royal house expressing warm sympathies. The letter was accepted. The Queen of England responded in “the proper way”. The response to the two Zulu chiefs, Ndabuko and Tshingana was as follows:

Marlborough House

Sir Francis Knollys is desired to convey through Miss Colenso to the Zulu chiefs Cetshwayo’s brothers at St. Helena the sincere thanks of the Prince and Princes of Wales for the warm sympathy they have expressed on the occasion of their Royal Highnesses’ great bereavement. Sir Francis Knollys is further desired to thank for the photograph which accompanied Miss Colenso’s Letter and enclosure.

The Queen’s words of acceptance, Her Secretary says, have been sent to you in the proper way, by the hand of Secretary of State for the Colonies.

4th April 1892⁷⁸

While letters moved back and forth between London and St. Helena, Natal based - writers were sending their letters to the Mission Station, Ekukhanyeni, inquiring about the cases against the chiefs. Some of the letter-writers wanted to visit Dinuzulu and Usuthu in St. Helena. Thembelina Dlamini was amongst the letter-writers that asked to be allowed to visit “her king”. She wrote:

Please Mss H.E. Colenso I would be glad when you let me going to see my king.⁷⁹

The request perhaps does not deserve as much attention as her reference to Dinuzulu as “my king”. After the destruction of the Zulu kingdom, the status of the son of Cetshwayo, the last independent Zulu king, was lowered to a chief of a small village in Zululand. Thembelina’s choice of the word king to refer to Dinuzulu is telling. To what extent this reflected the view of this community of letter-writers is an open

⁷⁸ Colonial Office to the Zulu chiefs in St. Helena.

⁷⁹ The letter is written in Isizulu but this last sentence is in English.

question. Mahlathini Gumede expressed similar views. He ended a letter to Harriatte Colenso by asking for news about the son of the late king, Dinuzulu. Mahlathini wrote:

Dear Madam before I end my letter I pray you if possible to let me hear a word about the Martyr of our nation the son of our late King.

These two writers conscious choice of words is revealing of their understanding of the meaning attached to the two words, chief and king. In their search for “beautiful words”,⁸⁰ as Twala has stated. It seems they came to realize that Dinuzulu was not a “chief “ as the Colonial State called him but a “king”. And for Gumede he was a “Martyr of our nation”. Gumede put the “M” for martyr in capital letters. This shows a deep level of understanding of how language, especially the political language of the colonial State worked.

In doing this Fuze, Thembelina Dlamini, Mahlathini Gumede were trying to grapple with words and the language of the colonial State. Dealing with these terms like “chief” or “king” provides some avenues of getting to know how they understood the official discourse of the State, and sought to construct their own new discourse about themselves.

Conclusion

In this paper I have suggested that not only did letter writing transform the lives of the Ekukhanyeni Christians, but also the very technology of letter writing offered them a very powerful tool to deal with powers that controlled their lives. Looking at these letters also offer a refreshing way of dealing and understanding the colonial encounter. It allows one to shift the analytical framework from investigating

⁸⁰ See page 13 to 14.

how the Colonial State shaped the fortunes of these writers to how the writers of the letters saw circumstances and sought to refashion their lives. As Hunt has pointed out that “letters are an unparalleled source for the brokering of knowledge in a colonial situation”.⁸¹

This paper has demonstrated how these writers created a community or a network for themselves, and how they engaged the Colonial State. It has also shown how a certain constellation of ideas or texts was produced,⁸² ideas which in time gathered power and their own momentum in the early twentieth century South African political landscape. These ideas included a preoccupation with writing.

⁸¹ Hunt, Nancy Rose, Letter-Writing, Nursing men and bicycles in the Belgian Congo: Notes towards the Identity of a Colonial Category, in Robert W. Harms, Joseph C. Miller, David S. Newbury and Michele D. Wagner, *Paths to Toward the Past: African Historical Essays in Honor of Jan Vansina*. (Atlanta, GA: African Studies Association Press, 1994). 192.

⁸² See David William Cohen, *The Combing of History*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

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