

The Crisis of African Languages in the Context of the Formation of Modernity in South Africa*

by

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One incontestable tragic fact of African cultural history across the twentieth century has been the progressive diminishment in the utilization of African languages as linguistic instruments of literary expression by African intellectuals, writers and artists. All critical texts and philosophical discourses on the nature of the African literary project, including those written and articulated by Africans (the ideological position of the Europeans is obvious) confirm, endorse and practically celebrate the hegemony of the European languages over the African languages. For all intents and purposes this cultural tragedy is practically confined to the African continent. A comparison and delimitation in relation to the situation in India indicates the enormity and glaring nature of the African tragedy. The choice of India is necessitated by the indisputable consensus that India is a *postcolonial society* like many African countries which were the former colonies of England and France, whatever specificities, particularities and possible deviations one could possibly adduce.

The prevailing Orientalist view that Indian literature written in the Indian Diaspora in the English language is superior to that written in the nine major indigenous Indian languages in India is strongly contested by two formidable Indian scholars: Aijaz Ahmad and Amit Chaudhuri. Though there are pertinent other reasons for choosing India for comparative contrast with Africa, one of the most critical is the one that makes possible to pose a fundamental issue regarding our continent: why was India, as well as a few other countries, been able to retain its religious beliefs and metaphysical systems despite the massive assault of English imperial domination, whereas Africa has not been able to do so as a consequence of English and French imperial systems? A related issue poses itself here: is the crisis of the African languages among the African literary elite connected to the destruction of indigenous religious beliefs and metaphysical systems among the masses of the African people? Even in those countries which have succumbed to Islamic domination, the crisis of indigenous languages is profound and persists to the present. A matter that need not concern us here but

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its seriousness compels one to mention it in passing: Is Islam an 'African' religion any more than Christianity is suppose to be! The late Mazisi Kunene (1930-2006), the great Zulu poet who passed away in 2006, the most eminent poetic voice to come from Africa in the twentieth century, was unyielding in his belief that all linguistic implements and all cultural expressive forms which were not 'indigenous' to Africa were 'Carapaces of Occupation'.

Given the continuing matter of the intractability of the crisis of African languages in the twenty-first century, the search for origins of this unending cultural trauma can perhaps best be historically understood by tracing, however schematically given its complexity, the historical form that enabled Europe to dominate Africa, or for that matter, the Universal 'Other', from the first moment of the encounter: *modernity*. It is with this historical and cultural formation invented by Europe itself that has made the this 'continent of Christianity' impose itself on 'universal history' through force and ideological persuasion from the time of the European Renaissance (fifteenth and sixteenth centuries) through the Enlightenment (eighteenth century) and Romanticism (nineteenth century) and modernism (twentieth century) to our moment of postmodernism (twenty-first century). As this calendrical structure should make obvious, the temporality of the whole world is determined by European history. The real question for world history not for us in this gathering: can the emergent China disrupt this temporality and in the process construct a new one?

Undoubtedly, the imposition of European modernity on African history by means of capitalism, colonialism and imperialism is at the center of the African historical imagination: the crisis of the African languages, and the seeming hegemony of African literature in the European languages over African literature in the African languages. The question of modernity imposes a fundamental question to us Africans today: could our predecessors in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries have *entered* European modernity through the African languages or was this only feasible through the European languages? My fundamental thesis is this: Africans could only have entered European modernity through the European languages not through the African languages. *The crisis of the African languages today is largely an expression of this historical conundrum*. The seemingly irrational attacks on African languages by the New Negro intellectual Alexander Crummell in the nineteenth century and the New African intellectual R. V. Selope Thema (1886-1955) in the twentieth century as 'heathenistic', 'barbaric' and 'backward' were an expression of this traumatic awareness of the impossibility of African languages being the *cultural facilitators* of entrance into modernity.

At this juncture we would like to shift from a 'continental' perspective of Africa to the 'bilateral' perspective between United States and South Africa and subsequently to the 'national' perspective of my country South Africa itself. The point here is to ascend to 'historical specificities' from 'general abstractions'.

The historical representatives of European modernity who were its agency at the moment of its turbulent encounter with the 'Other' in South Africa as well as in much of Africa were the 'Colonial Administrators' and the 'Missionaries'. Although mutually in agreement on the historical project of the 'civilizing mission' through capitalism, imperialism and colonialism which was taken as a given in the interests European domination and superiority, they were not always in agreement about the process of its realization, precisely because the Colonial Administrators were principally engaged with the material interests to be had from exploiting, dominating and repressing the Other, while the Missionaries were concerned with transforming the spiritual world on the Native as a consequence of the imposition of and proselytizing on behalf of Christianity; the realm of the former was in the mines (the material world) and that of the latter in schools (the spiritual world). The history of the colonial project in Africa was characterized by a constant dialectical tension between these two agents of European modernity, now and then ruptured by intense hostility between them.

Despite this contradictory unity of interests, they were unified by their mutual interests in their belief of European superiority as well as determination to break the resistance they initially encountered from the Africans. Equally, among Africans there was no singular unity of response to the violent entrance of European modernity into African history; those aligned with traditional interests never compromised their perpetual hostility to European intrusion, while those who began attending missionary schools saw the 'wisdom' of compromising and accepting European modernity as the ruling order in world history. Two quick observations here: African religious beliefs and metaphysical systems remained situated in traditional societies; while the New African intellectuals who were the product of missionary schools moved on to struggle with the transformation of *European modernity* into *New African modernity*. This breach has never been healed across two hundred years despite the fact that some formidable African minds in our time such as Mazisi Kunene and Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa (1921-) have struggled with this issue. The crisis of the African languages emanates directly from the rupture in tradition effected by the violent entrance of European modernity into African history.

While the Colonial Administrators were preoccupied with infrastructural matters in transforming 'feudal' traditional societies into entities in which the capitalist relations of production predominated, the Missionaries changed the superstructural sphere of ideology through the epistemological instruments of Christianity, modern education and modern civilization in order to facilitate the change the historical consciousness of Old Africans into that of New Africans. It was truly extraordinary the way the Missionaries learned the linguistic structure of many African languages so that they could translate the Bible into a multiplicity of African languages. In so doing, not only did they enhance literacy and the reading of literary texts, they also began constructing the understanding of linguistic structure of African languages. Although they sought *largely* to confine the historical and intellectual imagination of the emergent New Africans solely around the horizon of the Bible, the controversial intervention of the New Negro intellectual Alexander Crummell argued that the New African intellectuals had to appropriate the *modern* English literary culture from Shakespeare and Milton to Wordsworth in order to truly attain the consciousness of being truly modern. While on the one hand Crummell was even more adamant than the Missionaries that African languages and African religious systems were 'barbaric' and 'backward', on the other hand he castigated the Missionaries as being incapable of proselytizing properly for Christianity because of the racism that was naturally engrained in their consciousness. With this charge against the Missionaries, Crummell was beginning to appeal to the principles of emergent proto-Pan Africanism that it was in the best interests of black people in the world for Africans to enter modernity.

The literary culture that the Missionaries preferred was that of *antiquity*, the Classics that they diligently taught the emergent New Africans. Despite the dispute among themselves, the religious education that the Xhosa Intellectuals of the 1880s, the first collective group of black South Africans to enter modernity, received from the Missionaries, and the ideology of literary culture they emulated from Alexander Crummell, albeit tinged with 'blackness', made this intellectual constellation really unusual in its constant search or quest for originality. Even at this incipient stage of the New African Movement, the crisis of the African languages was already apparent, in that the two poets within the Xhosa Intellectuals of the 1880s, William Wellington Gqoba (1840-1888) and Isaac W. Wauchope (1845-1917), seemed to have been in a state of hesitancy or 'confusion' in writing in *isiXhosa* or in English. The surviving poems of Gqoba are in English while his important document on Christianity was written in *isiXhosa*. While his poetic production oscillated between the two languages, the major essay of Wauchope, also on Christianity, was written in English. That the

crisis of the African languages ensued at the very moment of entrance into modernity by Africans, is perhaps an index of the gravity of the situation was to become throughout the splay of the twentieth century. Paradoxically, it was to be among the Missionaries (or their scholarly friends) that an insistent and persistent call emerged that Africans should write in the African languages, long before this proposition was misappropriated by the Apartheid regime in the 1940s and 1950s in order to entrench its racial domination and fascistic practices.

Paradox being the matrix of modernity *par excellence*, while the New African intellectuals and writers had entered a state of crisis in their *creative process* as to whether to utilize the African languages at all, the majority of whom preferred the English language, the newspaper they edited from the last decade of the nineteenth century to the first quarter of the twentieth century were thriving in these indigenous languages, although invariably their first page and second page were written in English. The thriving of intellectual culture these newspapers facilitated through discourse on modernity in the vernacular languages deserve to be mentioned here: *Umteteli wa Bantu* (The Mouthpiece of the People), *Abantu-Batho* (The People), *Imvo Zabantsundu* (African Opinion), *Izwi Labantu* (The Voice of the People), *Inkundla ya Bantu* (Bantu Forum), *Ipepa lo Hlanga* (The Paper of the Nation), *Ikwezi Le Afrika* (Morning Star of Africa), *The Bantu World*, *Indian Opinion*, *A. P. O.*, *Ilanga lase Natal* (Natal Sun), *Tsalo ea Batho* (The People's Friend), *Morumioa* (The Messenger), *The Native Eye*, *South African Spectator*, *Fighting Talk*, *Guardian/New Age/Spark*, *Inkululeko/Umsebenzi* (Freedom/Work), *The Bantu World* and *Umteteli wa Bantu* (The Mouthpiece of the People). This is only a partial listing.

The creative writing that appeared in these New African newspapers at this particular moment of the history of the New African Movement was predominantly poetry in the African languages and its quality was astounding. The great Xhosa poet S. E. K. Mqhayi (1875-1945) published his earliest poetry in the 1890s and 1900s in *Izwi Labantu* and his middle period in *Imvo Zabantsundu*, closing his late period in the 1930s in the *Bantu World*. The best African woman poet in the twentieth century, comparable to any African poet in any language in Africa with the possible exception of Mazisi Kunene, Nontsizi Mqgqwetho (?-?) published her poetry written in *isiXhosa* throughout the decade of the 1920s in *Umteteli wa Bantu*. We live unmentioned here poets such as J. J. R. Jolobe (1902-1978) and Stanley Nxu (?-?), both of whom wrote in *isiXhosa*; and Benedict Wallet Vilakazi (1906-1947) all of his poems appeared in *isiZulu*. This enormous poetic productivity and intellectual depth in the African languages at this period

of South African cultural history has been characterized by some European scholars of African literature in the 1960s as having been a 'miraculous' event.

The disappearance of this 'miracle' as a collective process coincides with two major events that occurred in the particular year of 1932: the launching of the *Bantu World* newspaper and a major intellectual quarrel about the creative role of African languages in modernity between two members of the Zulu Intellectuals of the 1940s intellectual constellation. The fundamental importance of the *Bantu World*, whose founding editor was R. V. Selope Thema who stewarded the newspaper for two decades, was in transforming the *multilingualism* which had been characteristic of the old New African newspapers before its advent to the *monolingualism* of the new New African newspapers that imitated or followed the new trend it had established. Although most of these newspapers which began appearing in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century were not more than four pages, each page, other than the first page which was invariably in English, would be in the African languages be it in Setswana or Sesotho or *isiXhosa* or *isiZulu*. Each page had a distinct set of news items, be they political or cultural. The *Bantu World* itself followed this trend in the early years of its publication before it dramatically shifted to the monolingualism of the English language. Selope Thema, naturally gifted in linguistic matters, would sometimes write excellent articles or analyses for each of the segments of the newspaper, sometimes even in a particular copy. The shift of the *Bantu World* from multilingualism to monolingualism was hardly *economic* decision by the then World Depression of the 1930s than a calculated *ideological* decision stemming from his hatred of African traditional societies and his unabashed reverence for modernity. This reverence was not particularly for European modernity since he was a strong advocate for the transformation of European modernity into New African modernity. To fully understand this profound change he effected in the cultural history of South Africa one needs go back to the 1920s when he was one of the leading writers for the *Umteteli wa Bantu* newspaper together with his equally outstanding colleague Henry Selby Msimang (1886-1982).

It is perhaps necessary to state this unambiguously that R. V. Selope Thema was arguably one of the most brilliant minds in the trajectory of the New African Movement from about 1860 to 1960 in order to understand his critical positionality within South African political and cultural history in the twentieth century. He was a founding member of the African National Congress (ANC), whose centennial we are commemorating this year of 2012. Together with Pixley ka Isaka Seme ([1880-1951] the real founder of the ANC in that he is one who brought everyone to Bloemfontein on that historic day of January 8, 2012),

Solomon T. Plaatje ([1879-1932] first General-Secretary of the ANC, a major New African intellectual in his own right and founder of several important New African newspapers), John Langalibalele Dube ([1871-1946] first President-General of the ANC and founder of the *Ilanga lase Natal* newspaper in 1903), R. V. Selope Thema belonged to the segment of the *conservative modernizers* within the New African Movement whose predominant unifying ideology was antipathetic against both Marxism and Garveyism. Lest we forget: we should mention that Selope Thema was the first Treasury-Secretary of the ANC. Given all this, he was in effect a founding member of both of the African National Congress (the *political practice* of the New African Movement) and the New African Movement (the *intellectual and cultural expression* of the African National Congress). As though this critical political belongingness were not enough, Selope Thema had an astonishing influence on two outstanding New African newspaper editors of the following intellectual generation within the New African Movement who were also major writers in their own right: H. I. E. Dhlomo (co-editor with his elder brother of *Ilanga lase Natal* newspaper from 1943 until his death in 1956) and Jordan K. Ngubane ([1917-1985] editor of *Inkundla ya Bantu* from 1943 to the demise of the newspaper in 1950, and editor of *Indian Opinion* for one-year in the mid-1950s). Both Dhlomo and Ngubane were acolytes of Selope Thema on the *Bantu World* in 1930s; Dhlomo was a very young colleague of Thema in the days of *Umteteli wa Bantu* in the 1920s. A circle of Selope Thema's admirers extended to major white liberal scholars: the historian William Miller MacMillan (1885-1974), the philosopher R. D. Alfred Hoernlé (1880-1943), and the great philologist Clement Martyn Doke (1893-1980). Until he was displaced from the ANC by the radicalism of the ANC Youth Leaguers in the early of the 1950s, R. V. Selope Thema's ideological promulgations may not have had the effect of law edicts within certain circles of the New African Movement, but they did now and then effect profound cultural changes.

In the pages of *Umteteli wa Bantu* in the 1920s R. V. Selope Thema invented the concept of the *New African* which subsequent generations of New African intellectuals expanded on until the New African Movement was terminated by the Apartheid State during the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960. This notion was arrived at when Henry Selby Msimang and Selope Thema, especially from 1924 to 1928, extensively theorized the social responsibility of 'Bantu' intellectuals to the African masses. This conceptual invention was to lead to a sharp critique of the failure of the political leadership of the ANC in the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s. Looked at more closely, what R. V. Selope Thema had done was to appropriate the idea of the New Negro developed by the New Negro Movement in the early years of the twentieth century in United States in order to transform

and develop it in accordance with the imperatives of South African history. Logically this led Selope Thema to develop his second major theme of the 1920s: that the emergent New African intellectuals had to learn from the New Negroes as how to participate in the making of any kind of modernity.

It was in the context of developing these two formulations that he postulated his infamous political position that African traditional societies and all they represented had to be destroyed at all costs, not only because they epitomized 'heathenism', 'barbarism' and 'superstition', but fundamentally because they were a hindrance to the transplantation of European modernity in Africa, especially Christianity, but also because they were blockages of transmutation of European modernity into 'New African modernity'. Paradoxically, at nearly the same time as the formulation these controversial and contentious positions, three classic prose works in African languages appeared that argued for the validity of African traditional societies, however problematic they may be: *Ityala Lamawele* (1914) by S. E. K. Mqhayi written in *isiXhosa*; *Chaka* (1931) by Thomas Mofolo (1876-1948) written in Sesotho; and *Ingqumbo yeminyanya* (1940) by A. C. Jordan (1906-1968) written in *isiXhosa*. What perhaps blinded R. V. Selope Thema to these outstanding local achievements was perhaps his focused gaze on the happenings of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s.

On becoming the founding editor of the *Bantu World* in the early 1930s, R. V. Selope Thema surrounded himself with young New African intellectuals like H. I. E. Dhlomo, Peter Segale (1901-1937), Peter Abrahams (1918-), R. R. R. Dhlomo (1901-1971), Jordan Ngubane, Henry Nxumalo (1918-1957), Todd Matshikiza (1922-1968), Guybon Bundlwana Sinxo (1902-1962), and others, whom he exhorted to appropriate the Harlem Renaissance cultural efflorescence in order to create something similar in South Africa. With this appropriation he hoped traditional societies would be put in their death throes. At this moment there was a dramatic political and cultural shift within the New African Movement from Politics, Philosophy and Religion towards Culture, Aesthetics and Art. Selope Thema published in the newspaper the new poetry of the eighteen year old Peter Abrahams directly inspired by the poetics of Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, central members of the Harlem Renaissance.

The spectacular occurrence of the Sophiatown Renaissance in South Africa twenty years later in the 1950s achieved by the *Drum* writers could partly be attributed to the exhortation of Selope Thema. The achievement of Peter Abrahams was such that twenty years later Ezekiel Mphahlele (1919-2008) in his classic autobiography *Down Second Avenue* (1959) recalls how exciting it was

when Abrahams in earlier years in St. Peter's School introduced him and other students to the writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Abrahams himself in his autobiography *Tell Freedom* (1953) recalls how momentous it was discovering in his teenage years in the 1930s on the shelves of the Bantu Men's Social Center library copies of *The New Negro* (1925) anthology edited by Alain Locke, W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and other books by New Negro intellectuals. Lastly, Peter Abrahams in his reportage *Return to Egoli* (1953) recalls how exciting and instructive it had been working with H. I. E. Dhlomo and Henry Nxumalo in the *Bantu World* under the tutelage of R. V. Selope Thema. These particular reflections of Peter Abrahams and Ezekiel Mphahlele are a *post factum* supportive evidence that by dramatically shifting the newspaper towards monolingualism Selope Thema sought to strangle traditional culture by limiting the cultural geography of the African languages in the urban cultural sphere of modernity. *Drum* magazine epitomized the success of this cultural policy. When the *Drum* writers (Ezekiel Mphahlele, Bloke Modisane (1924-1986), Lewis Nkosi (1936-2010) at the historic but infamous 1962 Kampala Conference of "African Writers of English Expression" denounced the Apartheid regime that it was strangling the African languages, they were only telling a portion of the truth of the sad narrative; what they did not reveal to the delegates from other African countries (i.e., Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo, John Pepper Clark, Bernard Fonlon, David Rubadiri, Ngugi wa Thiong'o [then known as James Ngugi]) who generally agreed with the supposition of the uselessness of African languages, was their own complicity in this unending African tragedy.

Given the close proximity of H. I. E. Dhlomo to R. V. Selope Thema in the precincts of *Umteteli wa Bantu* newspaper throughout the decade of 1920s, it is not surprising that he would write an article which on its appearance seemed inexplicable that he had never nor he would not write in the future in any of the African languages, in preference for the English language ("Mr. Vilakazi and Writers", *Ilanga lase Natal*, 1 January 1932). The ostensible reasons that Dhlomo gave was that he wanted to be recognized and given acclamation within a universal context, which presumably writing in the African languages (in his particular instance, in *isiZulu*) would not be able to provide; the other factor he mentioned was that he wanted a larger market for his literary commodities, thereby enabling him to become a professional writer, not being forced recurrently to depend wholly on his journalistic writings. He seems not have held his journalism in high regard in the manner that posterity was to do. One can state unambiguously that the journalism of Dhlomo is cultural criticism of the highest order. Twenty years later, he elaborated his position in a systematic manner regarding his reservations about writing in African languages:

An African writer who writes successfully in English kills many birds with one stone. He proves that an African can rise to world standards. He gets an international reputation. He speaks to a wider audience. He receives better financial returns. There are no political, religious and other restrictions. He is not encouraging tribalism. The argument is that he can show African genius just as well in writing in English. Then there is the emergence of a sophisticated, politically minded, urban reading public greedy for reading material in English. This is the result of the drift to towns, education, the breakdown of tribal ties and sentiment. These people are not interested in the deeper and finer points of Bantu languages being a great treasure or the Soul of the people. They are interested in their immediate needs and cravings for entertainment. While politicians and scholars argue, they voraciously devour all kinds of exciting sensational fiction in English. They read the European press and support African magazines published in English. They would not think of reading vernacular literature when there is so much variety and quantity of the other kind.

(“Reflections On A Literary Competition”, *Ilanga lase Natal*, 31 October 1953).

Although this rationale he provides was original for its time, what is more important is the fact that it was expanding on the rationale first formulated by the New Negro intellectual Alexander Crummell and endorsed by the Xhosa Intellectuals of the 1880s in the 1860s that modernity can only be entered, understood and graspable through the means of the European languages. This is a position also supported by R. V. Selope Thema who in the process formulated unacceptable ideological edicts against traditional societies.

Given that Dhlomo had a profounder understanding of modern European literary culture from the Renaissance to modernism than practically any black South African of his time, reflecting in the late 1930s when his primary mode of literary production was on the stage, he wrote a series of remarkable literary essays in which he compared his particular moment to that of the Greek tragedians, the Hebrew Bible and the Elizabethan period as to the tasks that had to be achieved in order for a nation or a people to be modern. In developing his literary theory, he seems to be arguing that the consciousness of being modern is attainable through language and its effects, invariably for him it was the English language, rather than by particularly political transformation of society at large. This may be the reason that he wrote such an abundance of poetry in English

rather than in *isiZulu*. He disastrously attempted to emulate his beloved Romantics in his poetic practice.

In contrast with some of his contemporaries and many New African intellectuals of later generations who no longer had the facility of African languages, Dhlomo's choice to write in the English language was an ideologically arrived at decision, rather a historically imposed limitation as was the instance with the others; his high linguistic amplitude is evidenced by his superb translation of Emmanuel Henry Anthony Made's (1904- ?) elegy written in 1947 in *isiZulu* in memory of his great friend but intellectual adversary Benedict Wallet Vilakazi which was translated into English by Dhlomo in 1948. Besides his skill as a translator, he wrote lucid literary appreciations and analyses of novels and of anthologies of essays written in *isiZulu*. One of the many paradoxes of Dhlomo is that although he demurred in using the Zulu language as an instrument for his literary work, be it creative or critical, he reflected on the Zulu language in several of his columns in *Ilanga lase Natal* in the 1940s. Perhaps inspired by his own translation, Dhlomo wrote these words in appreciation of Made, a writer and intellectual who wrote *all* of his work (poems, novels, plays but mainly essays) in *isiZulu*:

Mr. Made is one of the little band of Africans who, despite great odds, are doing their best to add to our cultural heritage and prestige. It is a path fraught with pain, disappointment and the great self-sacrifice for the African today. Yet it is such spirits that are building up and giving meaning to the name of the Race. Even in our money tainted and matter of fact society, we cannot but admit that the true greatness of a people depends upon its creative and inventive genius---the philosophers, poets, painters, writers, musicians, creative scientists.

("Emman A. H. Made: An Appreciation", *Ilanga lase Natal*, 6 November 1948).

In another context, praising a novel *Indlela Yababi* [The Bad Path, 1946] written by his elder brother, R. R. R. Dhlomo, who wrote all of his historical novels on Zulu Kings in *isiZulu*, he made the following observation:

The flowering of Zulu imaginative literature---poetry, drama, essays and fiction---is a recent and remarkable phenomenon. As recent as the thirties, compilers of African bibliographies, reported that there was a singular death of Zulu creative writers, and in the fields of poetry and fiction, for example, showed some dozen Xhosa novels by some seven Xhosa authors

and some three verse publications by a Xhosa poet against a nil in both cases in Zulu. Since then there has been a great Renaissance in Zulu imaginative literature---so remarkable indeed that it would take a brave and reckless layman or a research scholar to say whether it is Zulu or Xhosa today that leads the field. Parenthetically, I may say that Dr. Vilakazi's thesis [in actual fact a doctoral dissertation, 1946] on this subject---*Oral and Written Literature in Nguni*---will throw light on these relative points, if and when it is published, as my informants say it will. ("Dhlomo's *Indlela Yababi*", *Ilanga lase Natal*, 25 May 1946).

These extensive quotations are meant to indicate that in contrast to his mentor R. V. Selope Thema, just one of the many outstanding mentors he had, Dhlomo did not possess an instinctive uncontrollable hatred of any intellectual process in any way associated with tradition, if nothing else, the presence of the historic and monumental figure like Shaka and the great Zulu poets Magolwana ka Mkhathini and Mshongweni in the nineteenth century Zulu history inhibited such extremism in his instance.

The reason for dwelling so insistently on H. I. E. Dhlomo, besides the fact that he was truly a major New African intellectual, perhaps the most extensively well read in the history of the New African Movement before the advent of the Sophiatown Renaissance intellectual constellation, his intellectual practice and literary production, whether absolutely intentional or not, *has had the disastrous effect of capsizing African literature in the African languages in preference for the then emergent African literature in the European languages in South Africa*. Before the advent of what could be characterized as the 'Moment of H. I. E. Dhlomo' the aforementioned outstanding New African poets and writers who wrote in the African languages held dominant sway within the intellectual landscape of the New African Movement. After Dhlomo and the Second World War, with the hegemony of Sophiatown Renaissance intellectual constellation whose mode of creative practice was only in the English language whose the cultural gaze and historical outlook was focused on Harlem and Hollywood rather than on their *own* literary landscape and cultural history, much was irretrievably lost. The strong response of Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, Zulu poet, novelist, scholar, lexicographer, who wrote his creative work in *isiZulu* and critical work in the English language, to his close friend H. I. E. Dhlomo's critique of his Master of Arts thesis he had submitted to the University of Witwatersrand (*The Conception and Development of Poetry in Zulu*, 1938), presciently anticipated the deleterious effects and consequences his fellow member of the Zulu Intellectuals of the 1940s

intellectual constellation was to have on South African intellectual and cultural history:

In the same section he speaks of the existence of Bantu tribal literature with a strong rhythm, repetition, simple and natural imagery, etc. These words sound nice to a reading man, but if we read them with discernment, what does Dhlomo really mean by that rhythm, repetition, simple and natural imagery in Bantu tribal literature? Is this not his mere echo of cursory reading? Who are these tribal writers of dramatic literature? What is the language medium they use? I hope he does not mean to force us to believe that a tribal man thinks in Xhosa, Sesuto, Zulu, etc., and writes his thought and rhythm in English and Afrikaans? Is that what he would call Bantu tribal literature? Absurdity! . . . I have an unshaken belief in the possibilities of Bantu languages and their literature, provided the Bantu writers *themselves* can learn to love their languages and use them as vehicles for thought, feeling and will. After all, the belief, resulting in literature, is a demonstration of people's "self" where they cry: "*Ego sum quod sum*" [I am what I am]. That is our pride in being black, and we cannot change creation.

(B. W. Vilakazi, "African Drama and Poetry", *South African Outlook*, 1 July, 1939)

Living in the era of the hegemony of the Sophiatown Renaissance in South African cultural history, even when its members had been compelled by Apartheid fascist repression to flee into exile between 1960 and 1990, it is not surprising that Mazisi Kunene had an unyielding hostility towards H. I. E. Dhlomo which he took with him to his grave in 2006. Kunene always referred to Vilakazi as his *modern* master, as much as Magolwana ka Mkathini and Mshongweni were his masters from *olden times*.

While H. I. E. Dhlomo and Benedict Wallet Vilakazi were disputing whether Africans should write literature in English or in the African languages, the logic of South African cultural history in the aftermath of the Second World War was moving in the direction of creating the conditions of possibility that facilitated the emergence of the last intellectual constellation of the New African Movement: the Sophiatown Renaissance. Although it was the Russian Red Army that really defeated Nazi Germany in the Second World War, the appeal and enticement of American modernity gave the United States the appearance of having defeated the Nazi monster, which is historically incorrect as evidenced by

its economy not having been shattered. American modernity, at whose center were Swing jazz music, Hollywood film industry, popular musical culture, crime and detective novels, mesmerized the writers, intellectuals and popular singers of the Sophiatown Renaissance, as it did many others in other parts of the world in the immediate period following the Second World War carnage. What was particularly distinctive about South Africa and made it a unique phenomenon in the world, was the way the Sophiatown Renaissance massively and uncritically appropriated the Harlem Renaissance of the United States as its *supreme begetter*. This appropriation was at the cost of forgetting, even rejecting, large swaths of its own South African cultural history.

The consequence of this *confusion of realms* was profound: it was the Sophiatown Renaissance that decisively embraced African literature in the European languages (in effect, in English) at the cost of banishing African literature in the African languages. The evidence of this catastrophic decision is evident in the pages of *Drum* magazine throughout the decade of the 1950s: the serialization of the autobiographies of Billie Holiday and Louis Armstrong; the popularization of the lifestyles of Hollywood stars such Dorothy Dandridge, Lena Horne and others; the tabloidization of news à la American style; the glamorization of Hollywood gangster films; the valorization of crime fiction at the expense of classic South African literature and world literature. These were among the reasons that made Ezekiel Mphahlele resign as literary editor of the magazine. His departure to voluntary exile in Nigeria in 1957 was as much because of his hostility to the introduction of Bantu education by the Apartheid regime as well as about the 'wrong' cultural turn the magazine had taken.

This point or intent here is not overlook or minimize the major positive things that the magazine contributed to South African cultural history: Sophiatown Renaissance itself, the last constellation of the New African Movement, would probably not have come into being without the facilitating center of *Drum* magazine; a new style of writing English in South Africa would not have been possible without the magazine; it was *Drum* that made the short story form a major *forte* for the first time for many black South African writers; it launched investigative reporting in a major way; its intellectual portraits of New African intellectuals, political and religious leaders such as A. P. Mda (1917-1993), Father Trevor Huddleston (1913-1998), Albert Luthuli (1898-1967), Jacob Nhlapo (1904-1957), Peter Abrahams, Nelson Mandela (1918-), Benedict Wallet Vilakazi (by H. I. E. Dhlomo no less), D. D. T. Jabavu (1880-1959), among many others, was very impressive; the analysis of the genesis of South African jazz by Todd Matshikiza, the portrayal of the formation of popular culture in the country by Bloke

Modisane, both of which appeared in the columns of *Golden City Post* (the weekly sisterly newspaper of the monthly *Drum* magazine, both of which were owned Jim Bailey), made possible the understanding of the particularity of the modernity that was emerging or had emerged in South Africa. All of these things have been absolutely positive, as well as others that have not been mentioned here.

The central issue of contention here is that Sophiatown Renaissance decentralized African literature in the African languages in order to valorize itself into a hegemonic position in South African cultural history. Its success in mystifying and distorting our cultural history is such that a full generation after the historic victory of 1994 one would think that it was the most important intellectual constellation of the New African Movement whereas a mere glance in comparison to the Zulu Intellectuals of the 1940s, a constellation that preceded it, foretells a different narrative regarding intellectual acuity, philosophical wisdom and aesthetic splendor. It is not necessary to bring other earlier intellectual constellations to contradict the hegemonic narrative about itself that the Sophiatown Renaissance has imposed on South African cultural history.

In conclusion: it is absolutely imperative to dethrone the hegemonic position of the Sophiatown Renaissance in our cultural imagination in order to revitalize African literature in the African languages. This was the thesis of the finest poet South Africa has produced so far: Mazisi Kunene.

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