## SOUTH AFRICAN LANGUAGE LITERATURES

by

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The writing of African literature(s) in the African languages, rather than in the imperial and hegemonic English, was a historical project undertaken by the New African Movement in the process of constructing modernity in South Africa. Although Xhosa intellectuals of the 1880s such as Elijah Makiwane (1850-1928), Walter B. Rubusana (1858-1936), Pambani Jeremiah Mzimba (1850-1911), John Tengo Jabavu (1859-1921), William Wellington Gqoba (1840-1888), Isaac Wauchope (1845-1917) were part of the Movement's historical horizon, it was in approximately 1904 in the essay "The Regeneration of Africa" that Pixley ka Isaka Seme clearly delineated and articulated the conceptual vision of the project. In the essay Seme writes the following: "The giant is awakening! . . . Ladies and gentlemen, the day of great exploring expeditions in Africa is over! . . . Yes, the regeneration of Africa belongs to this new and powerful period! By this term, regeneration, I wish to be understood to mean the entrance into a new life, embracing the diverse phases of a higher, complex existence. The basic factor, which assures their regeneration, resides in the awakened race-consciousness." With the unfurling of this banner of modernity over the African continent four years after the beginning of a new century, Seme (1880-1951) effected its political realization by being the principal founder of the African National Congress (ANC) in 1912. Two other New African intellectuals in this critical year of 1904 similarly also hoisted above the continent their particular articulations of modernity in their equally avant-garde essays: Solomon T. Plaatje's "Negro Question" and John Langalibalele Dube's "Are Negroes Better Off in Africa? Conditions and Opportunities of Negroes in America and Africa Compared". Plaajte (1879-1932) was the first Secretary-General of the ANC, and Dube (1871-1946) was the first President-General of the ANC. In actual fact, the necessity of modernity had already been given cognizance in the 1860s by Tiyo Soga (1829-1871), the first modern African intellectual in South Africa.

At the center of the New African Movement was the metamorphoses and phenomenology of the historical consciousness of the New African. That the ideology of New Africanism necessitated the creation and making of the New African Movement which in turn gave expression to the philosophy of 'New' African Nationalism is indicated by two journalistic pieces written by two important members of the New African intelligentsia. In "Leaders Of African National Congress Must Reconcile Differences", Pixley ka Isaka Seme notes: "The African National Congress is a new movement which is being implanted in the heart and blood of the Abantu people. All nations have national congresses of

their own which help mould together the spirit and the good will of those nations. . . . We want to be able clearly to express our free will as a nation like all other peoples of the world today." Two years later, in "European Students And Race Problems", appearing in a different New African newspaper of which he was editor, R. V. Selope Thema (1886-1955) observed: "There is a movement among Africans not only for the betterment of their economic conditions but for political freedom as well. If this movement is barred from its natural road of advance and deprived of its liberty of thought, expression and action, it will become a menace to the security of the white race, and a brake in the wheels of the country's progress." Although political and intellectual adversaries at the time of the writing of these statements, both Pixley ka Isaka Seme and R. V. Selope Thema were in unison in theorizing that a New African Movement had come into being forging a dialetical unity of agency and structure, thought and life, theory and practice in the making of New African modernity.

It was within the historical parameters defined by the New African Movement during the historical period of modernity that written African literature in the African languages in South Africa realized its efflorescence. The brilliant journalism of R. V. Selope Thema had an incalculable inspiration on some of the third or fourth generation of the major exponents of this literature: the Xhosa novelist, poet and translator Guybon Bundlwana Sinxo (1902-1962); the Zulu historical novelist R. R. R. Dhlomo (1901-1971); the Zulu novelist, intellectual provocateur, political maverick Jordan K. Ngubane (1917-1985); the Southern Sotho short story writer Peter D. Segale (1901-1937), who died relatively young. Thema published the extremely rare Zulu journalism of H. I. E. Dhlomo (1903-1956), who viewed the language of Shakespeare as the 'authentic' language of modernity. These acolytes of Thema who apprenticed under his editorship on The Bantu World newspaper went on to exemplary journalistic careers as well as to writing major literary works in their 'vernacular' languages. H. I. E. Dhlomo was the exception in this as he was in many other things. In his intransigent belief in modernity against tradition, Selope Thema imparted a peculiar sense of historicity concerning the relation between the past, the present and the future, to this particular intellectual generation. It was R. V. Selope Thema also who made The Bantu World an intellectual forum for the last flowering period of the great Xhosa poet and biographer S. E. K. Mqhayi (1875-1945), arguably the greatest exponent of African literature in the African languages in South Africa.

It was a sense of historicity that enabled these New African intellectuals as well as their contemporaries to write some of the earliest and durable literary histories of African literature(s) in the African languages, though paradoxically all of them were written in English. To many of them S. E. K. Mqhayi was a transitional figure between tradition and modernity: Mqhayi as a demarcating point in South African literary history. Before S. E. K. Mqhayi there was Thomas Mofolo (1876-

1948), and after the "Imbongi yesizwe Jikelele" (a. k. a. Mqhayi, national poet) there was Benedict Wallet Vilakazi (1906-1947). The following literary histories, in the form of pamphlets or essays, were written within the purview of this dialectical relation between tradition and modernity: D. D. T. Jabavu's (1880-1959) Bantu Literature: Classification and Reviews (1921) and The Influence of English Literature on Bantu literature (1943), Benedict Wallet Vilakazi's "Some Aspects of Zulu Literature" (1942), and C. L. S. Nyembezi's (1919-) A Review of Zulu literature (1961). Besides these preliminary mapping out of the topography of African literature(s) in the African languages, there were other more detailed investigations of the complex relationships between literary generic forms by other members of the New African Movement, two of which were written within the academic context: Benedict Vilakazi's doctoral dissertation The Oral and Written Literature in Nguni (1946), A. C. Jordan's (1906-1968) Towards an African Literature: The Emergence of Literary Form in Xhosa (1973, originally appeared as a series of essays in the 1950s in the journal Africa South), and Mazisi Kunene's (1930-) master's thesis An Analytical Survey of Zulu Poetry: Both Traditional and Modern (n. d., probably 1959). The voluminous columns and various reflections on cultural and literary matters by H. I. E. Dhlomo which appeared in Ilanga lase Natal newspaper from 1943 to 1954 were part of this New African literary and cultural historiography. The foundational text of these New African literary histories was Isaac Bud-M'Belle's (1870-1947) Kafir Scholar's Companion (1903), which emphasized the central importance newspapers in making possible the emergence African literature(s) in the African languages.

It was the Christian missionaries who gave benediction to the making of modern and written African literature(s) in the African languages in South Africa , but not necessarily with the results they intended and anticipated. The missionaries revolutionized African cultural history by introducing the written word in opposition to, and in a Manicheaen struggle against, the oral word. Through the written word the missionaries were able to control the ideological persuasion of many of the first few generations of New African intellectuals and writers. Principally, the missionaries were able to achieve this hegemonic control by initiating the schools in which the New African intelligentsia was educated, by controlling the newspapers in which the preliminary forms of written African literature(s) in the African languages initially appeared, and lastly by founding the publishing houses in which these literatures where assembled in a textual or book form. The missionaries altered in a fundamental way African cultural history by launching the Morija Press in Maseru , the Marianhill Press in Durban , and the Lovedale Press in Alice .

From the moment of the aforementioned Xhosa intellectuals of the 1880s to the Zulu intellectuals of the 1940s such as E. H. A. Made (?-?), Jordan Ngubane, R.

R. R. Dhlomo, H. I. E. Dhlomo and others, the critical issue had become whether the written literary word would serve only Christianity or whether it would also be in the forefront of the struggle to invent African Nationalism. The great Sotho novel Chaka by Thomas Mofolo was an indication of the monumentality of this struggle. Mofolo unequivocally condemned pre-modern and pre-colonial African history as essentially barbaric and backward, and 'Christian' modernity is represented as the very essence of enlightenment and progress. Without renouncing their Christian beliefs, the founding of 'independent' New African newspapers, John Tengo Jabavu's Imvo Zabantsundu (1884, African Opinion), Solomon T. Plaatje's Tsala ea Batho (1912, The People's Friend, originally known as Tsala ea Becoana [The Friend of the Bechuana] when launched in 1910), and John Dube's Ilanga lase Natal (1903, The Natal Sun) was part of the process of the secularization of the New African intellectual and literary imagination.

The matter of secularization was related to the contentious issue of origins: what was the founding moment of written African literature(s) in the African languages! Was the founding moment of these literatures signaled by missionaries when they translated the Bible into the many African languages, or was it indicated by Tiyo Soga, when he translated John Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress (1678) into the Xhosa text uHambo lomhambi (1866), or was it shown by the same Tiyo Soga reducing into written form in Christian newspapers Xhosa oral forms of literary representation? What was the relationship between oral forms of representation and their written 'counterparts': is it one of continuity or is it one rupture and discontinuity? Is there a symmetry between a form of literary representation and the nature of historical periodization: in other words, are oral forms of literary representation synonymous with tradition and the written forms with modernity?

A historic conference held under the auspices of the Christian Council of South Africa, known as A Conference of African Authors, was convened on October 15, 1936 in the city of Florida, Transvaal, not necessarily to engage the aforementioned questions, but rather, to examine the status and crisis of African literature(s) in the African languages. Reporting on the conference in The Bantu World newspaper, J. D. Rheinallt Jones (1884-1953) named the following participants: D. D. T. Jabavu, Rueben T. Caluza (1895-1969), Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, Z. D. Mangoaela (1883-1950), R. V. Selope Thema, D. M. Ramoshoana (?-?), S. S. Mafoyane (?-?). This is a stellar list of New African intellectuals (including a composer) who wrote in the African languages. Only H. I. E. Dhlomo participated as a representative of African literature in the English language. The invitees who could not make it to the conference were equally stellar: J. J. R. Jolobe (1902-1978), H. M. Ndawo (?-?), S. E. K. Mqhayi, Thomas Mofolo, H. Maimane (?-?), and R. R. R. Dhlomo. Among the Europeans who

participated were the missionaries: R. H. W. Shepherd, Margaret Wrong, A. Sandilands; and the editors of the Bantu Studies scholarly journal, C. M. Doke (1893-1980) and J. D. Rheinallt Jones. Let it be openly said that this unprecedented conference, which in all probability has never been subsequently surpassed in the brilliance of the minds gathered together, was sponsored by the missionaries. Several issues were at the center of the gathering: the obstacles to publication of the manuscripts in the African languages; the establishment of an endowment to assist in the publication of such manuscripts; the role of newspapers and magazines in facilitating such a literature; the instituting of literary criticism that would set the standards of excellence for this literature; and the contentious question of orthography which invariably resulted in bitter quarrels between the New African intelligentsia and the Christian missionaries.

The missionary turned academic C. M. Doke proposed to the conference participants the establishing of An Academy of African Arts; a proposal that was to be re-discovered anew in the 1940s by Jordan Ngubane and Anton Lembede (1914-1947) in Inkundla ya Bantu (Bantu Forum) newspaper, the intellectual forum of the African nationalism of the ANC Youth League. This innovative idea of the Academy was in all probability related to the extraordinary linguistic work Clement Martyn Doke had undertaken in the study of African languages in Southern Africa which he anticipated could inspire African literature(s) in the African languages into creating a renaissance or renascences. His establishing of an imprint in 1935 called the Bantu Treasury Series, whose first volume was Benedict Vilakazi's book of poetry Inkondlo kaZulu, the first of thirteen volumes that were to appear into the 1940s, was part of the hoped for cultural revolution. The assembling of the great Zulu-English Dictionary (1948) by C. M. Doke and Benedict Vilakazi as well as the Sotho-English Dictionary by Doke and S. M. Mofokeng (1923-1957) was fundamental in cultivating the intellectual and cultural space of the New African Movement. It would seem that the objectives and achievements of the conference were overshadowed by the controversial question that was posed by H. I. E. Dhlomo to the participants: would it not lead to the creation of 'tribal' cultures rather than a national culture if African writers persisted in writing African literature in the 'tribal' languages!

It was this question that led to the bitter intellectual quarrel between two great friends H. I. E. Dhlomo and Benedict Wallet Vilakazi that broke out two years after the conference on the pages of Bantu Studies (subsequently changed to African Studies) and South African Outlook in 1938 and in 1939. The ostensible reason of the argument was about the nature of Zulu poetic form and its capacity to absorb and incorporate European rhymes and stanzas. But the real issue in contention was the role of African languages in not only creating a national literature but in facilitating the construction of a singular national culture: is it possible to constitute a unified national culture through multilinguality! It is the

complexity of the question posed and the vehemence of the response rendered that has made the Dhlomo/Vilakazi debate such a legendary event in South African intellectual history. H. I. E. Dhlomo, truly an enigma, for while absolutely demurring in writing creative work in the Zulu language, wrote many journalistic pieces in Ilanga lase Natal newspaper extolling the greatness of the Zulu language. Is it surprising that Benedict Vilakazi never felt the necessity to extol the language in which he wrote his three novels, Noma Nini (1935), Udingiswayo ka Jobe (1939), Nje Nempela (1944), and his two books of poetry, Inkondlo kaZulu (1935), Amal' Ezulu (1945). The question posed by H. I. E. Dhlomo still seems not easily answerable even in our contemporary times.

The aforementioned literary histories of the major African literature(s) in the African languages are generally in agreement about certain fundamental issues pertaining to them. First, they concur in establishing that the foundational texts of Xhosa literature were Isaac Bud M'Belle's Kafir Scholar's Companion and Walter B. Rubusana's anthology Zemk' Inkomo Magwalandini (1906, The Cattle Are Departing You Cowards), and those of Sotho literature as being Azariel M. Sekese's (1849-1928) Mekhoa le maele a Basotho (1907, Basotho Customs and Proverbs) and Thomas Mofolo's Moeti oa Bochabela (1907, The Traveller to the World of Light, also translated as The Traveller to the East), and that of Zulu literature as Magema M. Fuze's (1845-1922) Abantu Abamnyama: Lapa Bavela Ngakona (1922, The Black People: And Whence They Came). Second, they are in synchrony in designating the canon of these literatures: in regard to Xhosa literature, in poetry it is S. E. K. Mghayi, in the novel it is A. C. Jordan, in the short story form it is Guybon Bundlawa Sinxo, and in the essay form it is J. J. R. Jolobe (also a major poet); in so far as it relates to Zulu literature, in poetry it is Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, in the novel it is R. R. R. Dhlomo and C. L. S. Nyembezi, in the short story it is Violet Dube (?-?), in the essay form it is E. H. A. Made, and in drama it is Nimrod Ndebele (1913-2000); as for Sotho literature, in poetry it is Z. Mangoaela, in the novel it is undoubtedly Thomas Mofolo but there also other strong figures like A. M. Sekese and E. Segoete (1858-1923), and in poetry it is Ephraim Lesoro (?-?). Third, these literary histories imply that the historical conjuncture of tradition/modernity was a central preoccupation of African literature(s) in the African languages.

The last of these literary histories was C. L. S. Nyembezi's A Review of Zulu Literature which appeared in 1961, an appearance that coincided with the termination of the New African Movement marked by the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960. The Sophiatown Renaissance was the cultural expression of the Movement. Since that date of four decades ago many extraordinary things have happened to this literature. Arguably the most important has been the poetic voice of Mazisi Kunene, an achievement that can stand comparison with any African poetic achievement in the twentieth-century. Also impressive has been

the scholarly work devoted to African literature(s) in the African languages in South Africa: from Daniel Kunene's Heroic poetry of the Basotho (1971) to Jeff Opland's Xhosa Poets and Poetry (1998). In between these two publications, there has been the three remarkable essays on the three major streams of this literature by Harold Scheub that appeared in Literatures in African Languages: Theoretical Issues and Sample Surveys (1985). The most exhilarating event of the last two decades of the twentieth-century in regard to this literature has been the re-discovery of two major women writers: Lydia Umkasetemba (?-?), the Zulu prose writer who wrote in the 1850s and in the 1860s; and Nontsizi Mgqwetto (?-?), a Xhosa poetess who published approximately ninety poems in Umteteli wa Bantu newspaper between 1920 and 1929, and seems to have been a younger contemporary of S. E. K. Mqhayi. Their appearance has completely altered our understanding of the cultural and literary history of the New African Movement: it is with Lydia Umkasetemba that modern Zulu literature begins not with Magema M. Fuze as it had been presumed for decades and decades even by H. I. E. Dhlomo, among others; it is Nontsizi Mgqwetto who brings literary modernism through poetry to South Africa not Benedict Vilakazi or H. I. E. Dhlomo or S. E. K. Mqhayi as we had all supposed.

## **Further Reading**

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