



# The Crisis of African Languages in the context of the Formation of Modernity in South Africa

With the hegemony of the Sophiatown Renaissance intellectual constellation whose mode of creative practice was only in the English language, and whose 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.

By Ntongela Masilela

One incontestable tragic fact of African cultural history across the twentieth century has been the progressive diminishment in the utilisation of African languages as linguistic instruments of literary expression by African intellectuals,

writers and artists. Many of the 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 majority of 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 appropriate because of 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 it possible to pose a fundamental issue regarding our continent: why was India, as well as a few other countries, 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 after suffering under the 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 embraced Islam, the crisis of indigenous languages is profound and persists to the present. A matter that need not concern us here but its seriousness compels one to mention it in passing: Is Islam an 'African' religion any more than Christianity is supposed to be?

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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

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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 is: 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 centre 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 'civilising mission' through capitalism, imperialism and colonialism which was taken as a given in the interests of European domination and superiority, they were not always in agreement about the process of its realisation. This was 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

of the Native as a consequence of the imposition of and proselytising 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 characterised 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 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 (born in 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 civilisation

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

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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 proselytising 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 which was to worsen throughout the splay of the twentieth century. Paradoxically, it was from 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.

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New African intellectuals and writers had entered a state of crisis in their *creative process* as to whether to utilise the African languages at all, the majority of whom preferred the English language, the newspapers 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*, and *Inkululeko/Umsebenzi* (Freedom/Work). 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*. A great twentieth century African woman poet, comparable to any African poet in any language, Nontsizi Mqgqwetho, published her poetry written in isiXhosa throughout the decade of the 1920s in *Umteteli wa Bantu*. We must briefly mention 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 characterised 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

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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 an economic decision caused by the then World Depression of the 1930s, but it was rather 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 unambiguously that 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 centenary we are commemorating this year. Together with Pixley ka Isaka Seme (1880-1951) the real founder of the ANC in that he was the one who brought everyone to Bloemfontein on that historic day of January 8, 1912), 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, Selope Thema belonged to the segment of the *conservative modernisers* within the New African Movement whose predominant unifying ideology was antipathetic to 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 the 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 1950s, 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 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 theorised 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 Selope Thema had done was to appropriate the idea of the New Negro Movement 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

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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 epitomised '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 of 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 possibly 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, Thema surrounded himself with young New African intellectuals like H. I. E. Dhlomo, Peter Segale (1901-1937), Peter Abrahams (1918- ), 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 exhortations 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 Selope Thema. These particular reflections of Peter Abrahams and Ezekiel Mphahlele constitute *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 epitomised 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]) many of whom partially agreed with the supposition of the uselessness of African languages, was their own complicity in this unending African tragedy.

Given the close proximity of Dhlomo to Thema in the precincts of *Umteteli wa Bantu* newspaper throughout the decade of 1920s, it is not surprising that he wrote an article which on its appearance seemed inexplicable. He said that he never had written nor he

ever would write in any of the African languages in preference to English ("Mr. Vilakazi and Writers", *Ilanga lase Natal*, 1 January 1932). The ostensible reason that Dhlomo gave was that he wanted to be recognised 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

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of Dhlomo is cultural criticism of the highest order.

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 through 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 than a historically imposed limitation as was the instance with the others; his high linguistic amplitude is evidenced by his superb translation of the elegy written in 1947 in isiZulu by Emmanuel Henry Anthony Made (1904-1951) 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.

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 characterised 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 the Sophiatown Renaissance intellectual constellation whose mode of creative practice was only in the English language, and whose 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 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.

While Dhlomo and Benedict 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 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, mesmerised 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 serialisation of the autobiographies of Billie Holiday and Louis Armstrong; the popularisation of the lifestyles of Hollywood stars such as Dorothy Dandridge, Lena Horne and others; the tabloidisation of news à la American style; the glamorisation of Hollywood gangster films; the valorisation 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, but also about the 'wrong' cultural turn the magazine had taken.

This point or intent here is not to overlook or minimise 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 centre 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 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 decentralised African literature in the African languages in order to valorise 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 revitalise African literature in the African languages. This was the thesis of the finest poet South Africa has produced so far: Mazisi Kunene. ■