

## Reflections on the New African Movement

by

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One of the master narratives of South African intellectual and cultural history was the formation of the New African Movement across the first half of the twentieth century. The point of its origination and the subsequent one of termination are contentious zones as is invariably the case with the beginnings and endings of periodizations. The beginning moment was constituted by a group of intellectuals designated as the Xhosa Intellectuals of the 1880s which included among others, Elijah Makiwane, John Tengo Jabavu, Isaac W. Wauchope, Walter Benson Rubusana, Pambani Jeremiah Mzimba, William Wellington Gqoba, John Knox Bokwe and Gwayi Tyamzashe. The inauspicious end of the Movement occurred in the late 1950s during historical moment of the Sophiatown Renaissance, a constellation that included among its adherents Ezekiel Mphahlele, Henry Nxumalo, Bessie Head, Lewis Nkosi, Bloke Modisane, Arthur Maimane, Miriam Makeba and many others. Between these two constellations there were many other intellectual and artistic formations such as: The Gandhi School (Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Mansukhlal Hiralal Nazar, Joseph J. Doke, Albert H. West, Henry Saloman Leon Polak, Mandanjit Vyavahark): *Izwi Labantu* Group (S. E. K. Mqhayi, Allan Kirkland Soga, Walter Benson Rubusana, Nathaniel Umhalla): The Zulu Intellectuals of the 1940s (H. I. E. Dhlomo, Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, E. A. M. Made, C. L. S. Nyembezi, Nimrod Njabulo Ndebele, Albert Luthuli, Jordan K. Ngubane, R. R. R. Dhlomo). Whereas the Xhosa Intellectuals of the 1880s came to an end as a living experience in the early 1890s through intellectual exhaustion and internal contradictions, the Sophiatown Renaissance was terminated by the apartheid state at the time of the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960. The violent nature of this termination haunted the New African Movement into a sense of incompleteness concerning modernity.

The historical imperative of the New African Movement was the making and construction of modernity in South Africa. This was the *raison d'être* for its eventuation in South African intellectual and cultural history. In a fundamental way, this imperative was imposed by European history on African history. The violent entrance of European modernity into African history through imperialism, capitalism and colonialism made the question of modernity an unavoidable historical issue. It was modernity that enabled Europeans' defeat of African traditional societies and initiate their destruction. In defeating African societies, European modernity imposed a different sense of temporality and a different sense of history. Equally crucial, whereas the making of modernity in European history was a violent process of secularization from the Reformation through the Enlightenment to the French Revolution, in African history it was a process of violent conversion into Christianity: in one experience, modernity is a secular eventuation, in the other, it is inseparable from proselytizing and religiosity. Since in European history modernity occurred as a process of destruction and creativity over centuries, transculturation was the informing logic of the relationship between the past and the present, in the African context it was the matter of enforced acculturation of the past into the present, the enforced Europeanization of the African which resulted in many tragic consequences. Modernity, specifically European modernity, in Africa was an instantaneous 'eventuation' through imposition that clashed with the social ethos of tradition societies. Arguably, the most intractable crisis imposed by European modernity on African history was the matter of language in all its multivocal complexity: language as a pathway of entrance into modernity; language as an instrument of historical representation; and language as a form of artistic representation.

The Xhosa Intellectuals of the 1880s were the first African intellectuals in South Africa to experience the consequences of the violent entrance of European modernity into African history. It is possible to reconstruct the arc of the trajectory of the New African Movement from the moment of its emergence to its demise through the epistemic constructs of Religion, Philosophy, Politics, Literature,

Music, Art and Film. This trajectory through the articulation and creation of these constructs was a monumental transformation of *European modernity* into *New African modernity*. The termination of the evolution of the Movement through force, rather than through its own internal contradictions or through exhaustion of its intellectual and artistic resources, has posed for the post-1994 era the historical question whether New African modernity was synonymous with South African modernity. Perhaps the valorization of the Sophiatown Renaissance moment of the 1950s today is due to the perception or actuality that it succeeded in transforming New African modernity into South African modernity, despite the fact that it was not on intellectual par with the preceding cultural formations of the Movement.

In the 1880s the Xhosa intellectuals were faced with historical problem that *only* the European languages (in effect English) were the viable cultural facilitators of entrance into European modernity. Their purpose of entering this modernity was to subvert it into a counter-narrative that would serve the imperatives of African people. The African languages could not have been facilitators of entrance and comprehension of this new historical experience. This was the beginning of the marginalization of the African languages in the context of modernity in South Africa. The first major debate in the history of the New African Movement was among these Xhosa intellectuals about the *English language*, that is, about *representation*. Making a virtue out of necessity, Pambani Jeremiah Mzimba argued, in the pages of *Imvo Zabantsundu* newspaper, their intellectual forum, that in the context of modernity, the African languages were dispensable. Disagreeing, Elijah Makiwane gave riposte that to dispense with the African languages was in effect to dispense in toto with African culture. What needs to be remarked is that the founding of this newspaper by John Tengo Jabavu in 1884 did actually serve its purpose of facilitating discussion of intellectual matters, rather than on issues that invariably touched on religious concerns, as was usually the case in missionary newspapers.

The other debate between these two Xhosa intellectuals, which immediately ensued on that of the English language, was regarding *politics*. Again, in this instance, Mzimba urged Africans to dispense with politics and leave their fate in the political practice of Europeans. This posture too elicited a sharp response from Makiwane. In postulating the dispensability of African languages in modernity, Mzimba was following on the footsteps of the New Negro religious leader and intellectual Alexander Crummell. In presenting a similar argument concerning politics, Mzimba was influenced by another New Negro intellectual, the historian George Washington Williams. It is in the context of these debates and the search for pathway into modernity that the Xhosa Intellectuals of the 1880s massively appropriated the English literary culture of William Shakespeare, Francis Bacon and John Milton as an intellectual bridgehead into modernity. Their forerunner on this issue was indomitable Alexander Crummell. In all of these searchings and investigations, the Xhosa intellectuals were following on the edict of their predecessor and teacher, Tiyo Soga, the first modern African intellectual and religious leader, whom they took as an example in attempting to use Christianity to salvage modernity from the rapacity of capitalism. In these intellectual peregrinations, the Xhosa intellectuals were attempting to establish a *philosophy of history* in modernity that would give a sense of direction to future generations: a philosophy of history at the intersection of Religion, Politics and Philosophy.

It is Alexander Crummell, the African American man of religion who had studied at Cambridge University, who brings to Xhosa intellectuals the idea that the trinity of Shakespeare, Milton and Bacon is fundamental to any construction or participation in modernity by African people, not by the British missionaries as one would have expected. This is not to gain say James Stewart the intellectual force of Lovedale and other missionaries in transforming these Xhosa intellectuals through Civilization, Christianity and Education into "New Africans". The missionaries initially gave these Xhosa intellectuals high European culture in the form of classics, that is a deep culture of Latin and Greek literatures. This is why these

Xhosa intellectuals of 1880s were uniformly brilliant. There is an editorial by John Tengo Jabavu in *Imvo Zabantsundu* ("Lovedale in 1884", May 11, 1885) profoundly lamenting the discontinuation of the teaching of classics to Africans. What Alexander Crummell and Bishop Henry M. Turner others gave to these intellectuals and the missionaries could not, was perhaps a total vision of modernity and the possible autonomy within it: witness the phenomenon of Ethiopianism. The New Negroes exacted their own heavy price on New Africans: perhaps because the price was 'black' rather than 'white', it was possibly palatable coming from United States 'cousins': the disengagement of Africans from politics. The racism, feelings of superiority and a belief in white supremacy by missionaries had their limits. Despite this, New African intellectuals from R. V. Selope Thema to H. I. E. Dhlomo, from John Dube to D. D. T. Jabavu, from Solomon T. Plaatje to Benedict W. Vilakazi, held missionaries in high esteem. We know the condescension of history expressed by African black nationalists who tend to dismiss these New African intellectuals as mere 'Christian converts'. These New African intellectuals were interacting with Clement Martyn Doke (1893-1980), arguably the greatest South African intellectual of the twentieth-century, who came to South Africa as a missionary with his parents, turned to academic work, and in his old age reverted back to doing missionary work, albeit intellectually like translating the Bible into African languages. Doke is the absolute paragon of missionary practice in intellectual modernity. The real intellectual drama between Christian missionaries and the New African intellectuals has as yet to be theorized.

Alexander Crummell and modernity: probably one of the reasons that explains his inestimable impact on Xhosa intellectuals and on Pixley ka Isaka Seme concerning modernity is that he was effecting in actuality in Sierra Leone what he was historically theorizing. Two essays of his are of immediate concern to us here: one, "The English Language in Liberia", which was delivered on the national independence day of Liberia on July 26, 1860 in Monrovia and was subsequently assembled in a book called **The Future of Africa** that was published in New York in 1862; and the other, "The Need of

New Ideas and New Aims for a New Era" , which was delivered in May 1885 in West Virginia and appears in a book called **Civilization and Black Progress: Selected Writings of Alexander Crummell on the South** (1995). In "The English Language in Liberia" Crummell formulates the following theses that had an electrifying effect on Xhosa intellectuals of 1880s, even if they dissented from some of them: Language and History are the intellectual disciplines by which a people can civilize itself into modernity; Africans can only enter into modernity by rejecting the 'heathenism' and 'backwardness' of old African societies, and likewise African Americans must stop complaining about slavery since it would hinder their entering the modern age; the English language is the fundamental instrument that facilitates entrance into the civilizational culture of modernity; mastery of English enables one to study the Bible, a holy book whose social ethos are the foundations of any civilization that is modern, democratic and progressive; English is superior intellectually to African languages which are primitive and barbaric; English literary culture must be imbibed and acquired by any nation or people claiming to be civilized, because its social and cultural values are critical to the construction of modern cultures and societies; the English language and its literary culture epitomizes the best of the civilizational culture of modernity---Christianity, Education, and polite culture; the English language is the vehicle for democratization of a national consciousness beyond the barbarism of traditional societies.

I would like to consider three major figures who exemplify the brilliance of the New African Movement: a Christian missionary who became a great scholar, an extraordinary Xhosa woman poet who disappeared from South African literary history for about sixty years and was recently discovered in the pages of a particular newspaper, and a great Zulu poet and brilliant scholar: respectively Clement Martyn Doke, Nontsizi Mqgqwetho and Benedict Wallet Vilakazi. I could easily have chosen ten others without even thinking about it. But these three will serve the immediate purpose here. I apologize for using superlatives in regard to them. Doke arrived in South Africa in 1902 at the age of 9 years from England via New Zealand with his

missionary parents. His father Joseph J. Doke, a novelist of no mean talent, was not only Mahatma Gandhi's best friend while the great Indian nationalist was in South Africa, but was also his first biographer. Clement Martyn Doke began his South Africaness as a missionary in his teens, became a formidable scholar in his middle years and in retirement in his senior years reverted to doing missionary work again. From 1923 when he joined the Department of Bantu Languages of what late became the University of Witwatersrand to his retirement thirty years later in 1953, Doke was the greatest scholar within the New African Movement, thereby in the whole country. *In fact, let us pay homage to this great man by stating unambiguously that he was greatest South African scholar across the twentieth century.* Mqhayi recognized this greatness at the very moment of its emergence by dedicating a poem to him ("U-Professor Doke," *Umteteli wa Bantu*, March 19, 1932). I think what pleased Mqhayi enormously was Doke's championing of *African languages*. For example, in a review of Solomon T. Plaatje's English language novel, *Mhudi*, Doke demanded to know why he had written it in the English language rather than in Setswana. Doke was not averse to fighting and dueling with the intellectual giants of the New African Movement, because he rightly saw himself as a legitimate member of it. A. C. Jordan wrote his Master's thesis, "Some Features of the Phonetic and Grammatical Structure of Baca" (1942) and his doctoral dissertation, "A Phonological and Grammatical Study of Literary Xhosa" (1956) in direct response to and challenge of Doke's formidable linguistic theories. This literally means that Jordan was engaged in a stimulating intellectual disagreement across nearly two decades. Phyllis Ntantala (Mrs. Jordan) informed me recently that Jordan wanted Doke to be on his doctoral committee but he demurred feeling that their theories of linguistics diverged so strongly from each other that their close encounter would be intellectually unproductive. Doke worked very closely with Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, conjointly writing the great *Zulu-English Dictionary* (1948), as well as with Sophania Machabe Mofokeng, conjointly writing *Textbook of Southern Sotho Grammar* (1957). Given these extraordinary entanglements of Clement Martyn Doke with the central figures of the New African Movement, how could he not be

one of its exemplary figures? *It is necessary to view his astonishing intellectual productivity as an attempted defense and strengthening of African languages against the imperializing European languages.*

But Doke deserves to be recognized in his own right as an incomparable scholar. Even an abridged version of his scholarly work is breathtaking: *The Grammar of the Lamba Language* (1922); *The Phonetics of the Zulu Language* (1926); *Textbook of Zulu Grammar* (1927); *Report on the Unification of the Shona Dialects* (1931); *A Comparative Study in Shona Phonetics* (1931); *The Lambas of Northern Rhodesia* (1931); *Bantu Linguistic Terminology* (1935); *Textbook of Lamba Grammar* (1938); *Bantu: Modern Grammatical, Phonetical and Lexicographical Studies since 1860* (1945); *The Southern Bantu Languages* (1954); *Zulu Syntax and Idiom* (1955); *English-Lamba Vocabulary* (1963); *Trekking in South-Central Africa* (1975). His other scholarly work is not mentioned in this cataloguing: his many scholarly essays that appeared in books of other scholars, as well as those that appeared in *African Studies* journal (earlier known as *Bantu Studies*), a journal he edited for many years; the many translations he realized. His scholarly religious work is truly outstanding on any terms. Only one biography of Clement Martyn Doke has been written: Sydney Hudson Reed's *Clement Martyn Doke: Man of Two Missions* (1998). Though it is a needed effort, it hardly does justice to the monumental achievement of this missionary/scholar. As long as we do not have a major study of the intellectual brilliance of Doke, we shall never grasp the conceptual structure of the New African Movement. This is true of outstanding figures like R. V. Selope Thema, Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, Silas Modiri Molema, Mazisi Kunene, J. J. R. Jolobe, just to name a few.

I would like to conclude this consideration of Doke by quoting an essay of 1925 he wrote in the early years of his career which I take to be a prolegomenon to his emerging scholarly undertaking or enterprise: "Many centuries ago was propounded the old saying *Semper novum ex Africa* [something new always comes from Africa]. This has proved a true saying down to the present day, and, if South Africans would only realise it, it will prove true for many a long day to come . . . It may be asked: What are the particular subjects of study



which are of such importance? I would suggest the following: the study of native habits and customs, psychology, religious beliefs, law, industries and social systems---all these would come under the general heading of Social Anthropology. Then there is the study of the numerous native languages, with attention to the phonetics, grammar, lexicography, proverbs, songs and folklore---these would come under the general heading of Philology. Further, there are the important subjects of Native History and Native Music. Here surely is a wide field of research, and one the mere fringe of which has hitherto been touched. But I am concerned here with Philological Research only, and that in the Union of South Africa alone. And yet, though this greatly narrows both the area to be covered and the subjects to be undertaken, there still remains a wide field of research to be explored . . . *I would digress here to make a plea for the recognition of the Bantu language family as one which can hold up its head with any other language family on earth.* Bantu languages are extremely rich in vocabulary, and in grammatical, phonetic and syntactic structure, and their study presents a theme as noble as that of Semitic, Romance or Teutonic. But they have a unique grammatical system---one which it is impossible to treat adequately except according to its own genius. Hitherto investigators have come to the Bantu languages with the readymade moulds of European or classical grammar, and have endeavoured to fit the Bantu languages into these moulds. The result is that much of the intrinsic beauty has been lost, and seeming exceptions abound throughout this type of treatment" ("A Call to Philological Study and Research in South Africa," *The South African Quarterly*, July 1925---February 1926, my emphasis). *I would take this as one of the philosophical credos of the New African Movement.* I consider this historic document as an *intellectual manifesto* of the Movement; just as seminally important as Pixley ka Isaka Seme's "The Regeneration of Africa" manifesto of 1904-6. We, the latecomers, who are studying the *history* of the New African Movement, are still very much beholden, exactly 80 years after it was written, to its *philosophical principles of cultural history*. Clement Martyn Doke is still very much *our contemporary*. I see this document as predicting the necessity of the African Renaissance

Clement Martyn Doke was a contemporary of Nontsizi Mqgqwetho. What he achieved on an *intellectual plane*, she achieved on the *poetic plane*. The approximately 90 poems Mqgqwetho published in *Umteteli wa Bantu* beginning with “Imbongi u Chizama” appearing on October 23, 1920 to “Zemk’ Inkomo Zetafa---Vula Ndengeni (1928) (1929)” appearing January 5, 1929, show this woman to have been an extraordinary poet. Nothing is known about her except for some basic information about where she was born to which clan she belonged which can be extracted from her brilliant poems. Sadly, she has somewhat disappeared from our literary history. As to the date of her birth and that of her death are unknown to us. She seems to have been a younger contemporary of Mqhayi, probably about twenty years younger than the great Xhosa poet. One is fascinated by the possible relationship that existed between them. It is hard for me to believe that they did not know of each other. I’m fascinated to know what they might have discussed regarding the art of poetry. I would like to have known what each of them thought of William Wellington Gqoba, a member of the Xhosa Intellectuals of the 1880s, and arguably the *first modern African poet*, in the sense of being historically conscious of the historical divide between tradition and modernity. Although Mqhayi consciously wrote against the Xhosa Intellectuals of the 1880s, in that whereas they were enthralled with the English language he himself sought to revive the Xhosa language as an instrument of historical representation in modernity, nonetheless one can see how Mqhayi was spiritually close to Gqoba. This spiritual connection between Mqhayi and Gqoba is indirectly confirmed by the affinity A. C. Jordan felt for both of them. The judgment of Jordan is fundamental since he was the author of the true great novel in the Xhosa language: *Ingqumbo Yeminyama* (1940, *The Wrath of the Ancestors*). Jordan was probably the first important New African literary critic of Xhosa literature. In thinking of Jordan as perhaps the first major literary critic of this literature, I’m not overlooking J. J. R. Jolobe who was a major intellectual in his own right who wrote Xhosa epics that have only been matched by the Zulu epics of Mazisi Kunene. Although A. C. Jordan’s *Towards An African Literature* concerned itself with many issues, it is easy to see that at its center is a celebration of William Wellington Gqoba.

Regarding Mqhayi, A. C. Jordan's obituary essay of 1945 which appeared in *South African Outlook* ("Samuel Edward Krune Mqhayi," December 1945) is too well known to necessitate commentary from me. What is very surprising about this obituary notice is the very critical tone Jordan voices against Mqhayi. This critical tone of Jordan reminds one of the equally critical tone the young Mazisi Kunene adopted towards Benedict Wallet Vilakazi in his Mater's thesis of 1959: *An Analytical Survey of Zulu Poetry: Both Traditional and Modern*. There are some symmetries between A. C. Jordan and Mazisi Kunene that would be fascinating to investigate and analyze.

Xhosa literary lineages are complex yet fascinating to behold. Whereas one can see a certain line of poetic continuity from Gqoba to Mqhayi, there is another one from William W. Wauchope, another member of the Xhosa Intellectuals of the 1880s, which leads directly to Nontsizi Mgqwetho. That is because Mqhayi was a *sublime* poet of the landscape, rivers, oceans and traditional customs, Mgqwetho was a *rhetorical* poet of the outer horizons, be they political, social and cultural. This is not to imply that Mqhayi was not a political poet or a poet not concerned with political feelings. One needs only look at one of Mqhayi's early poems which appeared in *Izwi Labantu* in September 17, 1901 "Wolokohlo Kwelimnyama: Hay' Ukuwa Kwe Gorha!!," to be abused of the idea that he was not a political poet. This poem has recently been translated by Phyllis Ntantala (Mrs. Jordan). It explains why younger Xhosa intellectuals founded *Izwi Labantu* to counter the reactionary politics promulgated by John Tengo Jabavu through his newspaper *Imvo Zabantsundu*. In rendering this poem into the English language, Phyllis Ntantala has given this telling title: "Into The Abyss He Fell!! How Are The Mighty Fallen!!". The political distance and differences, which in many ways define the conflict of generations, between John Tengo Jabavu and S. E. K. Mqhayi reminds one of the crucial role of newspapers in defining the cultural climate of a particular historical period. In as much as Mqhayi was defined by the cultural politics of *Izwi Labantu* at the turn of the twentieth century, Mgqwetho was defined by cultural politics of *Umteteli wa Bantu* of the 1920s. Given

their particular historical moments, it is not surprising that Mqhayi had inclination towards *nationalism* and Mgqwetho towards *Pan-Africanism*. In many ways it is astonishing to see how Mgqwetho anticipates the poetic voice of the Senegalese poet David Diop.

Here I would like to quote a few stanzas from her remarkable poems of this great woman Nontsizi Mgqwetho. The English translations are by Phyllis Ntantala and Jeff Opland. The first poem I would like to consider is “Maibuye! Afrika! Awu!” (“Oh! Bring Africa Home”) which appeared in *Umteteli wa Bantu* on December 8, 1923. I have selected three stanzas from it, which are in the sequential order of their appearance in the newspaper, with a few stanzas in between left out as well as a few after:

Kede simmeza naso isijwali sako ke  
Afrika! Ntsimi ye Afrika,  
Wadliwa zintaka ke wahlakazeka uni  
Kodwa wena ungazange unke  
Amazwi atshile kuk’uk’waza wena  
Sigqibe lamazwe sikwaz’ inikisi,  
Yonanto ifunwa zintaka inkuku kusa  
Ziqondele kuhlwe zingay’ boni

Uti Maibuye? Makubuye wena izizwe  
Zomhlaba zix’witana ngawe.  
Zipuma e Node zipuma e Sude kwas’  
Empumalanga nase ntshonalanga.  
I Afrika ihleli ayiyangandawo kangela  
enc’eni wofik’ isahluma,  
Kangel’ imitombo yamanz’ isatsitsa  
kangela youk’ into imi ngendlela.

Nikony’ izililo? Niti maibuye nopala  
nisopa makubuye nina  
Akuko nasiko lakumisa umzi akuko  
bukosi akuko ntwisento.  
Seninje ngekumbi zisele kwezinye na-

shiywa bubuzwe nashiywa bubuntu  
Nashiywa yimfuyo zonke ezo zinto se-  
nizixolisa ngo Cimizingqala.

(For a long time now we've been calling, Africa.  
Hear our wailing, Garden of Africa!!  
Your crop was consumed and scattered by birds,  
but you stood firm and never left us.  
Our voices are hoarse from imploring you;  
we track through countries, appeal to phantoms,  
nothing more than chicken's scratchings,  
eager at dawn, at dusk empty-handed.

You say "Bring her home?" *You* must come home!!  
All the earth's nations profit from you,  
they come from the north, they come from the south,  
from the east and from the west.  
Africa stayed still! She's nowhere else:  
look how the grass continues to sprout.  
Look at the springs still bubbling with water.  
Look everywhere, all's as it should be!

Are you raising a cry, "Bring her home?"  
You'll cry yourselves hoarse: *you* must come home!  
Gone are our customs for setting up homesteads,  
royalty, values, nothing is left!  
You live like locusts left by the swarm,  
you've lost all dignity, your sense of a nation,  
lock, stock and barrel, everything's lost:  
you seek balm in the bottle that blots out all pain.)

First thing that should be noted is the totalizing poetic vision of Nontsizi Mqgqetho which has no truck with particularism, provincialism and individualism. Her uncompromising vision may be the product of the intersecting point of the then emerging black ideologies of modernity in the late nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century: respectively, in South Africa the ideology of

Ethiopianism, and in the black New World the ideology of Pan Africanism. Given that Ethiopianism was ostensibly about religious matters, and Pan Africanism about political affairs, it is not surprising that the poem is suffused with religious symbolism and imagery as well as secular ones. The refrain of the poem "Bring her home" is a deliberate misprision of Pan-Africanism's ideology of "Africa for the Africans. There is a third ideology invented by black people in the context of modernity that resonates in this poem, that is the Unity of African People, as opposed to black unity which narrowly focused, and this ideology was singularized in Enoch Sontonga's "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika," which today is the national of quite a few African countries, of course including our own nation. In articulating these ideologies in poetic form, Nontsizi Mqgqwetho was voicing her opposition to the domination of African people by European nations through imperialism, colonialism, capitalism and racism. Quite a few of her poems are a refrain on the necessity of *African Unity*, consequently I would characterize her as the great poet of *African Patriotism*. I do not know of any other African poet who has equaled her intensity and passion about this fundamental matter. She undoubtedly belongs to the pantheon of major African poets of the twentieth century.

The third person I would like to consider who symbolizes the brilliance of the New African Movement is Benedict Wallet Vilakazi.

The historical portrait of Benedict Wallet Vilakazi that has been rendered for posterity by his New African contemporaries such as H. I. E. Dhlomo, Walter M. B. Nhlapo, Clement Martyn Doke, Emman Made, Jordan Ngubane is that of a man who in his intellectual practice and commitment was characterized by a *high moral seriousness*. This is the intellectual appraisal that informs several poems written *before* his early tragic death at the age of 41 years in 1947 by his fellow poets, be it H. I. E. Dhlomo or Walter M. B. Nhlapo. This characterization became even more prominent in the remarkable threnodies written after his death by again H. I. E. Dhlomo and E. H. A. Made. This moral seriousness came from his deep Catholicism which also accounts for his conservatism. It is

easily forgotten today that Vilakazi was very conservative to the point of being completely apolitical. One could say he had a reactionary political cast. Strangely, Vilakazi's Catholicism was intellectual rather than religious, because it came from two brilliant Zulu intellectuals of the 1920s who were Catholics: A. H. M. Ngidi and Josiah Mapumulo. In the an essay of 1933 in which he reflects on his own intellectual formation, Vilakazi recollects that reading the articles and essays by these two intellectuals in the pages of *Ilanga lase Natal* newspaper was what led him into his intellectual vocation. Here in parenthesis one needs to mention that it is nearly impossible to overpraise John Langalibalele Dube for having founded Ohlange Institute in 1901 and for having launched *Ilanga lase Natal* in 1903, since with these prescient revolutionary gestures, even though he was politically reactionary and conservative, Dube not only made Zulu intellectual culture possible in the first half of the twentieth century, but also made possible the transition from tradition to modernity realizable by making "New Africans" model themselves on "New Negroes", especially on Booker T. Washington. Since both Ngidi and Mapumulo were products of the British imperial culture in the late nineteenth century when classical studies (Greek and Latin) were being replaced by English Studies (English grammar and modern English literature), Vilakazi learned from them two things: a historical consciousness of the *importance languages as modes of historical representation* and a *classical posture* in matters of culture.

Vilakazi viewed *language* and *classicism* as intellectual and cultural weapons for shaping and constructing a *modern culture* in South Africa. Although he seemed to have been a gentle person and was liked by many, if not most, of his contemporaries, he was very combative regarding intellectual matters. H. I. E. Dhlomo seems to have had high anxiety about Vilakazi's intellectual combativeness given the famous intellectual duel between them of 1938-9. The undercurrents of this fight between them were already there in the early 1930s, as I will try to show elsewhere. Basically the contention between them was Dhlomo's persistence in writing his creative work (plays, poems, short stories, prose poems) in the English language rather than in isiZulu as Vilakazi believed should the case in the

instance of Zulu intellectuals, writers, and artists. This is the principle that Vilakazi believed in and adhered to for the rest of his life: that New Africans should write imaginative literature in the African languages and not in the European languages. The supreme exemplary figure for Vilakazi regarding this was S. E. K. Mqhayi. But Mqhayi went much, much further than Vilakazi was willing to go in that Vilakazi made allowance that critical works and essays could be written in the English language, whereas Mqhayi opposed this. Consequently, Vilakazi wrote his remarkable dissertation and essays in the English language. But Mqhayi wrote his *creative work* (novellas, poetry) and *critical work* (biographies, essays, reportage, etc) in isiXhosa. No one has been able to match Mqhayi in his complete commitment to the African languages. The explanation for this may be that Mqhayi was historically an intellectual bridgehead between tradition and modernity, and very much struggling with the entanglements of tradition, whereas practically all the New African intellectuals of his historical moment felt themselves situated in modernity and gazing back on tradition with different levels of intensity. Mqhayi was unique in taking the *translation* process seriously: translating from the English language into isiXhosa, as Tiyo Soga had done in the nineteenth century. I cannot recall Vilakazi doing any translation work which was actually published. There were New Africans who aspired like Mqhayi to write their critical work in the African languages: the essays of Emman Made, of J. J. R. Jolobe, and of S. M. Mofokeng, written respectively in isiZulu, in isiXhosa, and in Sesotho; the newspaper columns of R. V. Selope Thema and Jordan Ngubane, written respectively in Sesotho sa Leboa (formerly known as Pedi) and in isiZulu. But to bring to a conclusion this reflection on the 1938-9 dueling between Vilakazi and Dhlomo, it needs to be said that although Dhlomo did not disagree ideologically with Vilakazi concerning the primacy that should be given to the African languages over the English language, he argued that the imperatives of capitalist publishing dictated that he should write in the English language in order for him to have a larger public. Vilakazi never accepted the logic of this argument because for him writing in the African languages was a fundamental issue of *national and cultural identity*. Dhlomo was bothered and haunted by this



response if one reads between the lines his many intellectual sketches of his dead great friend, especially the one he wrote for the newly launched *Drum* magazine in the early 1950s. Dhlomo is an enigma in many ways because he wrote several pieces extolling the intellectual and cultural virtues the Zulu language yet practically never wrote anything in this language, except for three or four small articles that appeared in the 1930s in *The Bantu World* newspaper.

The question of classicism was very important for Vilakazi because like other New African intellectuals of the Zulu Intellectuals of the 1940s the real historical challenge in modernity was how to replicate the exemplariness of Shaka's greatness in militarism by realizing it in the field of intellectual culture. It is not surprising that Zulu intellectuals such as Mazisi Kunene, R. R. R. Dhlomo, Jordan Ngubane, H. I. E. Dhlomo, Benedict Vilakazi, John Langalibalele Dube wrote either essays or novellas or poems or epics *in search* of the historical meaning of Shaka in South African history. I do view the Zulu Cultural Society, especially at the moment of the Zulu Intellectuals of the 1940s, as an intellectual laboratory of this search. All the aforementioned intellectuals were members of it, except Mazisi Kunene since he was too young to have been a member, yet he wrote the greatest the historical representation of Shaka in an imaginative literature. Of course Mazisi Kunene was responding to Thomas Mofolo; he told me this personally. Let me add in parenthesis that the Zulu Cultural Society to them stood in the same relation as the Lovedale Literary Society did to the Xhosa Intellectuals of the 1880s in the nineteenth century. The search for the meaning of Shaka was not uniform throughout this period: for example H. I. E. Dhlomo wrote a negative appraisal of the great ruler in *Umteteli wa Bantu* in 1930s which is in total contrast to the positive evaluation he wrote in the 1950s in *Ilanga lase Natal*. Vilakazi wrote a somewhat ambivalent take on the great chief in *Ilanga lase Natal* in the 1940s. Perhaps the historical figure of Shaka brought to Vilakazi a conflict in his spiritual self between his *Catholicism* and his *cultural nationalism*. I think the real purpose of the essay on Shaka by Vilakazi was to meditate on the dialectic between tradition and modernity, as is true of the short obituary notice he wrote in *Ilanga lase Natal* on the

death of Isaiah Shembe in 1936. I think what fascinated Vilakazi about the Shakan period was great imbongi [griot, poet] Magolwane of the Royal Court who performed dramatic *izibongo* (poems) in the classical vein. *It is classicism of Magolwane that Benedict Vilakazi sought to bring from tradition into modernity.* Whether this transposition is doable from one historical period to another is open to intellectual debate. Regarding the appropriation of this classicism from this great Royal Court poet, Mazisi Kunene followed on the footsteps of Benedict Vilakazi. This is the reason that Kunene could not escape the shadow of Vilakazi, which shifted in the 1950s from being overcritical of his predecessor to absolute adulation from the 1970s onwards.

Another point that needs to be mentioned as we are approaching the centennial year of the birth of this great intellectual next year in 2006, is that Vilakazi was the first *literary historian* and *literary critic* of African literature in the African languages in South Africa. Clement Martyn Doke was rather a great linguist of the African languages rather than a historian of these literatures. In this domain, Vilakazi was a predecessor of A. C. Jordan and Mazisi Kunene, both formidable intellectuals in their own right. In many ways the path breaking opening made possible by Vilakazi's doctoral dissertation *The Oral and Written Literature in Nguni* (1946) opened a discourse which was joined by Mazisi Kunene's thesis *An Analytical Survey of Zulu Poetry: Both Traditional and Modern* (1959) and A. C. Jordan's *Towards an African Literature* (1973, originally appeared as a series of essays in *Africa South* journal in the 1950s). Although the missionaries brought to us the written word and culture of modernity, for which practically all the New African intellectuals were grateful, and although they opened traditional African cultural and intellectuals systems to modern knowledge, they were not in a real position to systematize the intellectual products of this encounter. As far as I'm aware Vilakazi was the first person to systematize, periodize and create diachronic conceptual structure of the literary history of African literature in the African languages. In effect Vilakazi was attempting to de-center the hegemonic position occupied by the literature in the English language. In other words, he wanted the

tradition of African literature in the African languages, which for all intents and purposes began with Mqhayi and in which he placed himself, to be positioned into its proper central place in the literary system of South Africa. In the domain of poetry, African literature in the African languages, beginning with Mqhayi and Nontsizi Mqgwetho through J. J. R. Jolobe and Vilakazi himself to Mazisi Kunene and David Livingstone Phakamile Yali-Manisi, that is across the twentieth century, is intellectually and imaginatively stronger than that written in the English language. Regarding prose, which is closer to philosophy and is constituted by the genre of the novel, English language literature has been more dominant. Vilakazi's project of constructing a literary history was both ideological and evidently intellectual.

Benedict Wallet Vilakazi needs to be regarded as a brilliant *scholar*. The scholarly collaboration between Vilakazi and Clement Martyn Doke was one of the best that ever happened in South African intellectual history. The immediate product of this collaboration was the great *Zulu-English Dictionary*. Unfortunately, this great intellectual collaboration was cut short by the tragic and sudden death of Vilakazi. One can only dream as to what other intellectual marvels would have come from this collaboration. This gives one an opportunity to make an important observation, which is that the brilliance of Vilakazi would not have been realizable as it was and in the form it was without the support of, and collaborative with, Clement Martyn Doke. I think the greatest tribute given to Doke by anyone of his New African stature was by Mqhayi in poem of 1932 in which he celebrated his linguistic genius and his extraordinary contribution to African cultures. Doke was also engaged with intellectual and religious matters also in both present day Zimbabwe and Zambia. In this sense, Mqhayi was prescient in his intellectual appraisal of Clement Martyn Doke.

Lastly, Vilakazi was an *enabler* of the greatness of Mazisi Kunene. I limit myself here to quoting the whole poem by the younger poet in *The Ancestors & the Sacred Mountain* (1982) about his great predecessor:

## A Meeting with Vilakazi, the Great Zulu Poet

Sleep tried to split us apart  
But the great dream created a new sun.  
Through its towering rays two worlds emerged  
And our twin planets opened to each other.  
I saw you descending from a dazzling hill,  
Your presence filled the whole world.  
I heard the drums beat behind your footsteps  
And the children of the south began to sing.  
They walked on the ancient path of the goddess Nomkhubulwane  
And the old dancing arena was filled with festival crowds.  
Your great songs echoed to the accompaniment of the festival horn.  
It was the beginning of our ancient new year  
Before the foreigners came, before they planted their own emblems.  
I came to the arena and you held my hand.  
Together we danced the boast-dance of our forefathers  
WE sang the great anthems of the uLundi mountains.

I think that for Mazisi Kunene, and as he imputes of Vilakazi, the “planted foreign emblems” were among other things the English-language literature in South Africa. As is well known, Kunene regards Afrikaans literature, whether by Coloureds or whites, and English-language literature, whether by Africans, Indians, Africans or Coloureds, as *literatures of occupation*. Interestingly, I do not believe that the Vilakazi would have agreed with his protégé about regarding his Catholicism as an ideology and a religion of occupation. When he sings of Vilakazi that “you held my hand” and “we danced the boast-dance of our forefathers,” I take it to mean that Vilakazi was exemplary to Mazisi about enhancing and making hegemonic African literature in the African languages. Although it is an open question whether African literature in the African languages will eventually predominate over English language literature in South Africa, there is no doubt in my mind that in a monumental quest for this realization, Mazisi Kunene willed himself to being the

greatest African poet in the twentieth century, which is something that Vilakazi could not have anticipated.

Now as to the connection between Benedict Wallet Vilakazi and Chief Bambatha who led the Rebellion 1906, which now is historically known as the Bambatha Rebellion, I first came across this interlinking in the mid 1990s when I read H. I. E. Dhlomo's magnificent threnody "Ichabod: Benedict Wallet Bambatha Vilakazi", which originally appeared immediately after the death Vilakazi in *Ilanga lase Natal* (November 8, 1947). It was clear to me that since Vilakazi was born in the same year as the Bambatha Rebellion of 1906, his full name was in homage to the great warrior chief. As far as I'm aware H. I. E. Dhlomo never wrote Vilakazi's full name in the many portraits of him other than in this threnody written after his death. As far as I'm aware Vilakazi never in his magnificent intellectual career wrote anything about this chief whose name was given to him. I would have expected him to have done so in at least one of his numerous poems. But it remains to us who will be celebrating next year 2006 as the centennial year of the birth of the "Great Zulu Poet" as well of the Bambatha Rebellion, to establish concrete historical, cultural and intellectual connections between the two.

I think it is advisable to begin by quoting an extraordinary stanza brimming with allusions in H. I. E. Dhlomo's remarkable threnody:

The Beauty that he loved and sang is one  
With him. He is beyond the stars and sun.  
Mamina, his imagined Love, doth kiss  
Him with immortal kisses, not of bliss!  
Like Beatrice guide she stands to him who made  
Love hermit pure while others love degrade;  
Goddess of Love Nomkumbulwana, shakes  
His hand, while heaven with music wondrous quakes!  
Black bards and heroes greet their friend and peer;  
Great Shaka, Magolwana there appear,  
Mbuyazi, Aggrey, Dube, Mqhayi, ache  
To meet him---so Bambatha, his namesake;

Not these alone, for here below he loved  
And spoke with long haired bards, among them moved;  
Now Keats, his idol, whom he prayed to meet,  
Chaste Shelley, too, come forth our Bard to greet,  
And Catholic great Dante, Comedy  
Divine enjoying, smiles to meet and see  
A Catholic bard mate.

The “beauty” alluded to was the “Beauty and Truth” aesthetic principle of the English Romantics promulgated by John Keats in one of his great letters. In the same way that the English Romantics were enthralled with Nature as a spiritual and a philosophical process which would enable them to hold Industrialism at bay, so too the poets in the Zulu Intellectuals of the 1940s group, be it Vilakazi or Dhlomo or Madope, appealed to Nature as a mediating process between tradition and modernity. Although all the Zulu aforementioned poets were for modernity, they all wanted its temporality de-accelerated in order to give tradition a momentary space for reflection on the new culture. Mazisi Kunene in his 1959 thesis, written when he was twenty-eight years old, articulated a bitter contempt for the Zulu poets’ weakness for the English Romantics. Written in a state of bitter anger at what he perceived as his compatriots’ unacceptable adulation of the aesthetics that reinforced the cultural and philosophical “occupation” of the country, it is remarkable to observe the force with which he makes judgments about excellence and mediocrity in the history of Zulu poetry. In the section where he analyzes the poetry of Vilakazi, Mazisi Kunene demotes any poems which he suspects the influence of the Romantic sensibility has predominated in its construction. There is a perceptible moral outrage in Kunene when he perceives the extensive influence of Shelley on Vilakazi, to the point of believing that the English poet had seriously damaged the Zulu poet. He salvaged only two poems in the whole oeuvre of Vilakazi as truly great because they were free of Romantic influence.

Rightfully so, Dhlomo emphasizes Vilakazi’s Catholicism, which affected his philosophical outlook, artistic sensibility and his famous

apolitical indifference. In other stanzas not quoted, Dhlomo examines Vilakazi's Catholicism in relation to "Death," "Fate," "Mother Nature," and "Eternity." Playfully he compares Dante's Beatrice to Vilakazi's Mamina. Then Dhlomo postulates that with his death, Vilakazi has spiritually migrated to join Bambatha in the realm of Zulu ancestors rather than joining Dante in the circle of Catholic immortals: here Dhlomo is postulating that the *social being* of Vilakazi's Zulu existence is more determinant than the *moral sensibility* of his Catholicism: in other words, Bambatha or Dante? With this postulate of placing Vilakazi on the historical side of Bambatha rather than the spiritual side of Dante, Dhlomo then proceeds to situate him in Zulu national history and in New African intellectual history. As already mentioned above, Vilakazi seems to have wanted to emulate the heroics of Shaka, shifting them from militarism to poetics. Regarding Magolwana, as already mentioned too: he was important in relation to poetic classicism. Dhlomo alluding to them in this threnody confirms with his authoritative opinion what we already observed. Aggrey, a Ghanian, whose full name was James Emman Kwegyir Aggrey, sought to bring to South Africa in 1921 the conservative modernity of Booker T. Washington, a yearning that had already been aspired towards by John Tengo Jabavu in 1885 in one of his editorials in *Imvo Zabantsundu*. John Langalibalele Dube and S. E. K. Mqhayi have already been mentioned, especially the latter, and Dhlomo authorizes the above observations with his intellectual power.

One of the strands in this remarkable threnody is an issue that has confronted Zulu intellectuals throughout the twentieth century: *is Zulu nationalism as legitimate as African nationalism, or is it a contradiction of the latter?* Many, if not most, of the Zulu members of the New African Movement were on the side of African nationalism against Zulu nationalism: this is true of Pixley ka Isaka Seme as it was of Benedict Wallet Bambatha Vilakazi. Albert Nzula stood for Marxism. Only John Langalibalele Dube and A. W. G. Champion, among the important Zulu intellectuals and political leaders, who now and then when they lost political battles at the national center retreated to the region of Natal in anger to flirt with Zulu nationalism

against African nationalism. They never crossed the line despite their political anger. Exile in many ways was a terrible experience, consequently it led a *major intellectual* like Jordan Ngubane to abandon African nationalism in the latter part of his life for Zulu nationalism. In exile too, Mazisi Kunene in the Introduction to *Emperor Shaka The Great* flirted with Zulu nationalism while the epic itself was solidly a discourse on African nationalism. This occasioned outbursts of terrible violent arguments between him and me in Los Angeles in the late 1970s. I remember one day Lewis Nkosi mentioning to me in January 1989 in Warsaw, Poland that the thing he feared most about his cousin, the great poet, is that he would unintentionally lead Zulu intellectuals into Zulu nationalism with disastrous consequences.

In conclusion therefore, for us in a liberated South Africa in 2005 in preparation for the centennial year of 2006, we should celebrate Chief Bamba and Benedict Wallet Bamba Vilakazi as two great icons who stood for African nationalism against Zulu nationalism. This was a great historic achievement. The recent defeat of Afrikaner nationalism has lessons for all of us. The one absolute danger of African literature in the African languages is that it can spontaneously give rise to *ethnic nationalism* against *African nationalism*. Despite this danger, it is imperative that African literature in the African languages be at the center of South African intellectual and cultural experience, and not English language literature. In her most recent critical work, *Living in Hope and History* (1999), Nadine Gordimer has had the most interesting things to say about this fundamental historical issue: "If we are to create a twenty-first century African literature, how is this to be done while publishing in African languages remains mainly confined to works prescribed for study, market-stall booklets, religious tracts? We have long accepted that Africa cannot, and so far as her people are concerned, has no desire to, create a 'pure' culture in linguistic terms; this is an anachronism when for purposes of material development the continent eagerly seeks means of technological development from all over the world . . . But we writers cannot speak of taking up the challenge of a new century for African literature unless writing in



African languages becomes the major component of the continent's literature. Without this, one cannot speak of an African literature. It must be the basis of the cultural cross-currents that will both buffet and stimulate that literature" (p. 33-34). This was the position of Benedict Wallet Bambatha Vilakazi in his intellectual quarrel with H. I. E. Dhlomo of 1938-9, which in fact began in the early 1930s. A full sixty years later it is a position endorsed by our greatest living novelist, *who could only write in the English language no less!*