

THE MODERN WORLD OF XHOSA FOLKLORE

by
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The world of the African folk tale and legend is a world of myths developed in order to embody human needs and goals. . .

-Lewis Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks* (1981).

Xhosa cultural and literary history, particularly as articulated and theorized by A. C. Jordan (1906-1968) in his fundamental study *Towards an African Literature: The Emergence of Literary Form in Xhosa* (1973), seems to indicate that Xhosa folklore attained its historicity as a living embodiment of African metaphysical principles and self-consciousness as a form of artistic representation at the moment it encountered the historical divide between tradition and modernity. Not only had Xhosa folklore to embody a different concept of temporality than it had had, be it in sequentially or simultaneously, it had also to negotiate the transition, in actuality or in displacement, from orality to being reduced into written form. This conjuncture is symbolized by the historical figure of Tiyo Soga (1829-1871), the first modern major Xhosa intellectual. He was unequivocally aware that the new history of modernity that was in the process of being made into a living experience compelled forms of cultural expressiveness. Central to him was what would Xhosa folklore make of the religious world of Christianity or, in dialectical reversal, what consequences Christianity and print culture had for this traditional form of expression.

It was because of this consciousness for historicity that one of the great legacies of this extraordinary intellectual was his preoccupation with the immediacy of historical principles. Detesting capitalism, which he rightly viewed as exploitative, oppressive, and responsible for the horrendous making of the New World through slavery, Tiyo Soga was uncertain as to what political position he should take regarding it. He was well aware that this economic system was the enabler of the historical forms that were dear to his heart: modernity and Christianity. Though very much aware that Christianity preceded the economics of capital, he was constantly intellectually engaged with the possibility of other alternative consequences had this religion not been brought to the African shores by this economic system. Concerning modernity, Tiyo Soga sought its theoretical possibility and realization outside the confines of capitalism. Though well aware that this was not possible, these reflections on alternative historical principles enabled him to formulate Xhosa folklore as an eminent intellectual bridgehead between tradition and modernity. These reflections clearly indicate that for Tiyo Soga among the things that mattered most to him regarding Xhosa folklore was its

ability to accommodate itself to new historical circumstances. Should it be able to synthesize new experiences, he thought that Xhosa folklore would be a dynamic process for the instrumentalization of Xhosa historical consciousness.

Tiyo Soga believed that the launching of the missionary Xhosa newspaper *Indaba* (News) by the Glasgow Missionary Society in August 1862 would not only assist in banishing falsehoods about the cultural origins of the Xhosa nation, but it would also be a medium for the preservation of Xhosa cultural traditions. Beginning with the first issue, in whose pages he sometimes wrote under the pseudonym of *Unonjiba waseluhlangeni* ('An enthusiastic enquirer into cultural origins'), he sought to posit Xhosa folklore as a historical bridge across the divide between the past and the present. In a celebratory mood in the inaugural issue, he wrote the following that could be taken as a manifesto of what the Xhosa nation should undertake to achieve at the beginning of a new historical moment:

What are the skin skirts' pockets, and the banks for the stories and fables, the legends, customs and history of the Xhosa people and Fingo people. This is a challenge, for I envisage in this newspaper a beautiful vessel for preserving the stories, fables, legends, customs, anecdotes and history of the tribes. The activities of a nation are more than cattle money or food. .. All is well today. Our veterans of the Xhosa and Embo people must disgorge all they know. Everything must be imparted to the nation as a whole. Fables must be retold; what was history or legend should be recounted. What has been preserved as tradition should be retold. Whatever was seen or or heard or done under the requirements of custom should be brought to light and placed on the national table to be sifted for preservation. Were there not several tribes before? Where is the record of their history and customs good or bad? Had we no chiefs in days gone by? Where are the anecdotes of their periods? Were these things buried with them in their graves? Is there no one to unearth these things from the graves? Were there no national poets in the days of yore? Whose praises did they sing? Is there no one to emulate this eloquence? In the olden days did not some people bewitch others? What were the names of the men of magic? Is it not rumoured that some were tortured severely and cruelly? Are there no people who have an idea of matters of this nature which happened under the cloak of custom? Are there no battles which were fought and who were the heroes? What feathers were worn by the royal regiments? Are there no anecdotes connected with the brave men who wore

decorations? Were there no hunting expeditions in those far off days and why were the breasts of the eland and the buffalo eaten only by those at the great place? We should revive and bring to the light all this great wealth of information. Let us bring to life our ancestors: Ngconde, Togu, Tshiwo, Phalo, Rharhabe, Mlawu, Ngqika and Ndlambe. Let us resurrect our ancestral force bears who bequeathed to us a rich heritage. All anecdotes connected with the life of the nation should be brought to this big corn pit of our national newspaper. I cannot recount all we shall gain by having this journal.

There are several hallmarks in this extraordinary passage. First, it essentially defines the imaginative world of Xhosa folklore. It postulates that this world should encompass the past and the present, the living and the dead, the poetic and the prosaic, the fantastic and the realistic, the tangible and the intangible, the truthful and the imaginary, the magical and the authentic, the fictional and the historical, the plausible and the implausible, and the historical and the legendary. It also recalls the medium through which the revival and retelling of this world had been enacted: through singing and prosaic recital. Second, it establishes the purpose of this world as being to formulate the narrative pathways of the unity of the Xhosa nation made of many clans and several ethnicities: a unity made possible by the imaginary interconnectedness of the living, the religious (spiritual) and the ancestral. Third, it recognizes that the oral form of folklore heritage would of historical necessity be reducible to the written: the traditional would be made negotiable to the modern (modernity). Its endogenous world and the emergent exogenous world would be in closer proximity to each than had been the situation: consequently the temporal and the spatial would be in less contradictory tension with each other. Fourth, the importance of newspapers in making Xhosa folklore available to a larger public sphere than hitherto made it conscious new historical forms and new historical experiences: feudalism in relation to capitalism, the African in relation to the European. Tiyo Soga was buoyant about the resiliency of Xhosa folklore in spite of the challenge of new generic forms (novel and short story).

Perhaps it needs to be pointed out that the formation of Xhosa folklore was not constituted by the Xhosa nation in isolation from other nations in the historical space of what became to be known as South Africa. Xhosa folklore was made in the context of the interaction between the Xhosa nation and the Khoisan (so-called Hottentots and Bushmen) nations. Xhosa folklore was a direct product of this historical interaction and reciprocity. The interactive nature of this formation is evident in the implosive consonants ('clicks') in the Xhosa language which were taken or borrowed the Khoisan. This reciprocal relationship was at its strongest

before the advent of modernity. Xhosa religious beliefs, customs, rituals as well as myths are reflective of the historical adjacency or even interpenetration between the Xhosa nation and these two other indigenous nations of South Africa.

Janet Hodgson in her original book, *The God of the Xhosa* (1982), not only convincingly argues for the profound nature of the reciprocity, but also gives supportive evidence that the earliest written accounts, taken from original oral renditions, of Xhosa myths of origins show their intertwinement with the myths of Khoisan origins. Xhosa myths like other African myths are concerned with the origins of humans and their world rather than with creation myths. Xhosa oral traditions locate these origins in a place called *Eluhlangeni* or *umhlanga*, 'the place of the reeds,' where *abantu bomlambo*, the mythical river people, made residence. These traditions construct an elaborate world of the Xhosa cosmogony, its flora and fauna, its rituals and beliefs, and the proximity between nature and history. Although this myth of origins about *umhlanga* (in Zulu, it is *uhlanga*) has affinities with other African myths of origins, in Xhosa oral traditions it took on a particular distinctiveness: this distinctiveness is that of incorporation, amenability, expansion and constant metamorphoses. Tiyo Soga in transposing Xhosa oral traditions and folklore from oral rendition to written form constructed its expansiveness in correspondence with South African history. One of the Tiyo Soga's intellectual descendants, a member of the Xhosa Intellectuals of the 1880s, John Knox Bokwe (1855-1922), in *Ntsikana: The Story of An African Convert* (1914), attached as an appendix an essay by Robert Balfour Noyi called 'Ama-Xhosa History' (1848) which quoted a Xhosa oral tradition recounting the Xhosa nation's mythical origins as simultaneous with that of the Khoisan:

A certain man had three sons, whose names were Ibranana, Xosa, and Twa. Ibranana was a keeper of cattle, sheep, and goats, as was also Xosa, while poor Twa was satisfied with his honey bird and his game in the desert. Ibranana (the ancestor of the Hottentots) was not a tall man, and his complexion was sallow. Twa (the ancestor of the Bushman) was shorter still and more slender, and also of a sallow complexion, but a shade lighter. And Xosa was a tall, muscular man, and dark coloured. We know nothing on which we can depend, of Sikomo, or his son Togu, or his son Gconde, farther than that they and our fathers occupied a country north of our present settlement.

Although a sociological analysis of this passage would be revealing, what is of immediate interest here is that in including this document in his biography of Ntsikana (1780-1821), the first African Christian convert to pass the historical divide from polytheism to monotheism, from tradition to modernity, from

'heathenism' to 'civilization', John Knox Bokwe, belonging to the third generation of Christian converts, was in effect making an ideological argument that given the heterogeneity and simultaneity of the mythical origins of the Xhosa nation with other nations, the crossing from the 'old civilization' of tradition to the 'new civilization' modernity was not a betrayal of the nation. The heterogeneity of the past gives permission to the conversion in the present.

Indeed, Tiyo Soga in his rendition of *the same* narrative of Xhosa mythical origins from the oral tales he collected in the 1860s makes an extraordinary shift of excluding the San nation (Bushmen) in the narration replacing it with the Europeans (whites). The resonance and aura of the narrative is dramatically shifted from the orality of tradition to the writerly of Christianity. John Aitkens Chalmers in his biography *Tiyo Soga: A Page of South African Mission Work* (1877) gives Tiyo Soga's new version of the myths of origins:

The oldest son of the father of all was a Hottentot; the second a Kafir [African or Xhosa]; the third a white man. No creature could have been more happily situated than the Hottentot. He reveled in the abundance of his father's riches and luxuries. At length, by reason of the abundance in which he moved, he grew careless, indolent, and utterly regardless. His great amusement was to follow the honey-bird from day to day in search of bee-hives. One day he went out as usual, and never returned to his father, leaving everything behind him. That is the reason given why the Hottentots are such an improvident people.

The second son, the Kafir, took a special liking to cattle, and the herding of them. Cattle ultimately became his inheritance; and when he came of age, he left his father, and set up for himself. That is why the Kafirs are to this day so fond of cattle. The other thing, received from his father, to retain for ever as his inalienable property, was Kafir corn, for which he has a special liking.

While the oldest son, the Hottentot, was pursuing his wandering chase after the honey-bird, and the second son, the Kafir, was following his flocks in the fields, the youngest son, the white man, was always at home with the old man, his father. As the youngest, he was a great favourite. He was constantly in his father's company, waiting upon him, and hearing his wise talk. In this way he became a precocious child. His father poured into his '*soft head*' all the treasures of

wisdom and knowledge. He told him everything; showed him how to do all things; and thus the white man was in advance of the other races.

Janet Hodgson makes the acute observation that Tiyo Soga was trying to bring the Xhosa myth of origins in line with the second and the third chapters of the Genesis. This attempted alignment across historical worlds and religious systems was part of the effort by Tiyo Soga to convince Sandile (1823-1878), arguably the last great Xhosa Chief of the frontier wars, to cross with the whole nation into modernity. This argument had particular resonance in the aftermath of the consequences of the Nongqwawuse episode of 1857 when the Xhosa nation nearly committed national suicide. In postulating the heterogeneity and simultaneity of origins of whites and blacks in the same Father rather than in the mythical one, Tiyo Soga was desperately attempting to convince Sandile and the doubters that modernity was not a European invention, equally an African invention, or at the very least, was a white invention 'bequeathed' upon the world. Soga was very clear about the distinction between the construction of a genealogy of folk origins for ideological or religious purposes and the actuality of historical facts, since in his historical and philosophical reflections, assembled in *The Journal and the Selected Writings of The Reverend Tiyo Soga* (1983), he believed that modernity was a European invention imposed through force and violence, and hence his mission was to utilize Christianity to disengage and exonerate modernity from the horrendous consequences of capitalism. He wanted to banish capitalism while retaining modernism. For Soga folklore follows history, folklore does not direct give instructions to history, not an obvious fact when tradition and modernity are contesting each other.

Given Tiyo Soga's malleability in the construction of the mythical origins of the Xhosa nation, what then of the folklore that incubated and inhabited this world. In the previously quoted extract from his contribution to the inaugural issue of *Indaba* in 1862, Tiyo Soga formulated an expansive category for Xhosa folklore: its concerns should encompass or embody 'fables', 'legends', 'customs', 'anecdotes', and 'stories' of the Xhosa nation. Although for him Xhosa folklore should undertake the monumental task of preserving the 'rich heritage' of Xhosa history bequeathed by the 'ancestors', Tiyo Soga was very much concerned that folklore should not be circumscribed by history that is not open to the future. What was so extraordinary in this formulation is that he saw Xhosa folklore as contributing to the 'national table' like other ethnic folklores of different other nations. What is so prescient about this idea of the 'national table' is that he expected or wanted Xhosa folklore to have a role in the invention of African nationalism, an occurrence that happened after his lifetime. If one accepts that oral poetry is in many complicated ways an expressive form of folklore, then undoubtedly it was Xhosa poets, who practiced both in oral performance and/or

written form, who initiated this historic realization: William Wellington Gqoba (1840-1888), S. E. K. Mqhayi (1875-1945), J. J. R. Jolobe (1902-1978), Nonstizi Mggqwetho (?-?), and David Livingstone Phakamile Yali-Manisi (1926-1999).

By formulating an expansive construct of Xhosa folklore, Tiyo Soga was in effect postulating it as a dynamic process. Taking a cue from Soga, A. C. Jordan in the essay "Tale, Teller and Audience" theorized Xhosa folktale as divided into three components: *ntsomi*, fiction; *siganeko* or *mbali*, a historical happening or eventuation; and *buntsomi*, fabulation. Given this theorizing, it would be revelatory to trace the literary patterns of imprint of Xhosa folklore and folktales on Jordan's great Xhosa novel *Ingqumbo Yeminyanya* (1940, *The Wrath of the Ancestors*). But much more immediate and noteworthy is that Tiyo Soga's formulation resonates with contemporary understanding of the complex structure of folklore. A recent convincing undertaking was initiated by Dan Ben-Amos in the essay "Toward A Definition of Folklore in Context" (1971). Ben-Amos defines folklore as a body of knowledge and a kind of art that represents 'a particular mode of collective and spontaneous thought.' This collective expression can be in the form of a structure, text and texture of a verbal, musical and plastic product. What makes this body of knowledge folklore is the social context of its realization, the time depth of its making and the medium of transmission. He emphasizes that the central defining feature of folklore is that it be realizable through oral transmission. Given that Tiyo Soga in the middle of the nineteenth century was already grappling with the survivability of Xhosa symbolic knowledge in the context of the intrusion of print in the form of modernity, a definition of folklore that recognized its fundamental characteristic as being oral transmission would unduly limit the conceptual field of its realization. The compelling nature of Dan Ben-Amos's definition of folklore is his concluding argument that it is not so much the life history of the text crucial that is crucial to it being viewed as folklore as much as its present mode of existence. Xhosa *imbongi* (praise poets) have arguably been the most successful in retaining folkloristic nature of Xhosa symbolic system(s) in the context of the massive intrusion of modernity in South Africa. The *imbongi* art form has not lost or forsaken its orality in the context of the challenge of print culture. A critical issue in the African and Xhosa context is the language in which this oral transmission is realized. Although it may seem self-evident, given the challenge of modernity, it needs to be emphasized that Xhosa folklore can only be transmitted through the Xhosa language not by means of any European language.

Despite the challenges of modernity, the expressiveness of Xhosa folklore is through oral transmission. In a major essay, "Africa and the Folklorist," Richard M. Dorson shows the complications engendered by the adjacency of folklore and oral literature. The fundamental issue is: are they synonymous? Challenging a distinction originally made Melville Herskovits that traditional literature being oral

art was the province of the folklorist and traditional custom as the domain of the ethnologist, Dorson postulates that folklore and oral literature should not be identified with each other. The very fact that oral literature and folklore intersect in their concern with myth, legend and folktale, and also the very fact that both are realized through oral transmission, should not authorize their being imbricated with each other because while oral literature is largely preoccupied with tradition, the mass of objects or process central to folklore are largely beyond oral tradition. Expanding his understanding of the concept of folklore beyond the usual forms of tales, customs and beliefs, he defines it as also incorporating ritual, festival, folk art, folk medicine, folk costume, folk cuisine and folk crafts. Although the expansiveness of the category of folklore is legitimate and correct, this by no means obviate the similar symbolic representations that are both germane to oral literature and folklore. The fact they each deal differently with them does not validate the postulation of dissimilarity between them. Another factor he puts forth as militating for the differentiation between folklore and oral literature is based on the mistaken supposition that while the former crosses generic forms and intersects with other media, the latter is seen as stationary and in a state constancy. What Dorson seems not to have taken into consideration is that with same effect of the intrusion of modernity into tradition has compelled folklore to be perpetually in a state of uncertainty about its self-definition, it has also posed a dilemma to oral literature by it being uncertain about the nature of its performance and the site of production. Oral literature too crosses genre and media into that of print culture.

Given that the praise poetry of the Xhosa *imbongi* is predicated on the principle of improvisation, constant re-creation and reformulation, it is not surprising that it is this performance artist who has been most sensitive to the necessity that the traditions of folklore meet and accommodate the challenges of modernity. Arguably it was S. E. K. Mqhayi, born four years after the death of Tiyo Soga, who was to engage most fully the plea and challenge pose by the Xhosa intellectual in 1862. Mqhayi absolutely deserved the designation of 'Imbongi Yesizwe' (National Poet or Poet of the World) for bringing Xhosa folklore into the modern age or at least by making it take cognizance of modernity. It is for this reason that most of the major New African intellectuals of the New African Movement who belonged to the generation that followed that of Mqhayi, be it H. I. E. Dhlomo (1903-1956) or Guybon Bundlawa Sinxo (1902-1962) or Benedict Wallet Vilakazi (1906-1947) or A. C. Jordan, postulated the Xhosa poet as having imaginatively constructed through poetic form the intellectual bridgehead between tradition and modernity. It is in the wake of Mqhayi that Jordan in the aforementioned book expands and reformulates the historical and cultural role of *imbongi* tradition. Because of the revolution initiated by Mqhayi in Xhosa literary culture, in effect in South African culture, Jordan observes that one of the achievements of this great poet was to transform the *imbongi* tradition from being a praise paean to the past about the Chiefs to being a critical vessel concerning the

present. The other achievement of the poet was change the subject of *imbongi* tradition from predominantly being about personalities, preferably royal ones, to being about commoners, processes or objects at the historical divide between tradition and modernity.

In many ways *imbongi* tradition or oral poetry is situated at the center of Xhosa folklore. In an "Introduction" to *Words That Circle Words*, an anthology of South African oral poetry, Jeff Opland, one of the leading authorities in the world on Xhosa culture, states unequivocally that 'oral poetry belongs to the domain of folklore.' In support of his thesis, Opland mentions that the creation of oral poetry in performance is not only a social activity that requires the participation of the community but the very constancy of its style, techniques and themes makes it amenable to being one best conduits of the cultural and historical heritage of a people or nation. Taking the cue from Franz Boas' definition of folklore as a mirror for a culture, Opland argues that *imbongi* tradition belongs in this realm because by its very nature it is a 'people's autobiographical ethnography.' Engaging the issue of the intrusion of modernity on the historical space of tradition, he argues that since Xhosa oral poetry is a living organism reflecting the aspirations of a people or nation, it is able to adapt to new social circumstances brought about by urbanization, literacy and assimilation. Other scholars have argued for the resiliency of folklore in the form of *imbongi* tradition (*izibongo* tradition in the Zulu context) in response to the new political and cultural context of modernity. In a splendid essay, "A Dying Tradition? African Oral Literature in a Contemporary Context", Elizabeth Gunner shows how the *imbongi* tradition was reconstituted and reformulated in the workers' movement in opposition to apartheid in the 1980s. The heritage coming from folklore was reshaped anew in the context of the politics of modernity thereby closing the historical divide between print culture and oral performance.

Beginning with Mqhayi, in the early part of the twentieth century, to Yali-Manisi, at the end of the century, both oral performance and print culture are part of the *modern imbongi* poetic process. Archie Mafeje, in a major essay, "The Role of the Bard in a Contemporary African Community", articulates a thesis that *imbongi* tradition has developed a self-reflexive mode of criticism as it engaged the consequences of the impact of modernity on tradition. The oral poet establishes a permanent mode of criticism that interrogates those institutional forms of folklore that are regressive and not democratic: for instance, the chieftainship. One of the factors that has sustained Xhosa folklore in the cauldron of modernity across the twentieth century is undoubtedly the *imbongi* tradition. One of the extraordinary phenomenon leading to the demise of apartheid and consequently the spectacular democratic elections of 1994 was the role of the *imbongi* tradition in mobilizing the democratic aspirations of the South African people against the politics of oppression. No modernistic cultural form was as effective as the *imbongi* tradition

in intervening in the politics of modernity. What is even more amazing is that it was an *imbongi* (praise poet) in 1954, a half century before, who practically foretold the role Nelson Mandela would play in 1994. Before saying a word or two about David Livingstone Phakamile Yali-Manisi, who as an emerging *imbongi* when he made this foretelling at the age of twenty-eight, it is necessary to say a word or two, about an *imbongi* who could be said to have initiated this self reflexiveness of the *imbongi* tradition, Samuel Edward Krune Mqhayi.

Mqhayi's impact was so profound that J. J. R. Jolobe, a major Xhosa poet in the Xhosa language in written form, proposed in 1956 that the first fifty years of South African literature in the twentieth century should be designated as 'the age of Mqhayi.' Mqhayi's historical and critical imagination was formed at a time of extreme turbulence wrought by modernity marked by two historic dates: the Nongqawuse episode of 1857 and the Anglo-Boer war of 1899-1902. The first date was a moment when the Xhosa nation was virtually on the verge of national suicide as it sought historical solutions to the fact that English imperial modernity had shattered its national soul. The second date demarcates that same imperial modernity imposing itself on the white nation of Afrikaners (Boers). It was at this moment of historical divides, between tradition and modernity, between the English and the Afrikaners, between black and white, between black Ethiopianism and white Protestantism, between the Xhosa nation and the Mfengu people, between the progressive New African intellectuals around the *Izwi Labantu* (The Voice of the People) newspaper and the reactionary New African intellectuals of *Imvo Zabantsundu* (African Opinion) newspaper, between the secularizing New Africans and the religiously inclined New Africans, that Mqhayi inaugurated his poetic voice in the *imbongi* tradition, a tradition that was for the first time seriously confronting the challenge of print culture. In this conjuncture Mqhayi revolutionized *imbongi* tradition by means of three unprecedented achievements: he made the tradition concern itself with the future and the present, and not only with the past; he changed its orientation from being about historical personages to forging its interrogative mode about historical situations; and made certain that its largely celebratory mode would be transformed into a thorough going criticizing process. Here is an instance of this in the very early years of his poetic career (the interrogative mode). As a budding *imbongi* of the newly launched forward-looking *Izwi Labantu*, he criticized the regressive *Imvo Zabantsundu* for pandering to white interests at the expense of Africans as well as having compromised the newspaper's vitality of the 1880s through unsavory and opportunistic alliances.

In a poem called "EzikaSarili" (Praises of Sarili), Mqhayi critically and interrogatively poeticizes:

NguZwe lafa ngeembiza zikaMbune;
Hayi! Ngomon' amaMfengu a seGcuwa!

IGcuwa libhaliwe nhabafundisi.
 Zindingenil' izizwe zade zaxelelana.
 Zindingenil' izizwe zade zace' umlungu.
 Ukuze zithi nje zakulil' izinandile,
 Abizw' uFulele kuthwe, "Wayek' amaMfengu"
 kub' ohlwaywa nguyise,
 O wawafak' ekhwapheni mhlana afika.
 Kukuze lixole ngoNgcayechibi,
 Isizwe siwel' uMbashe.
 UEditor mayingabi nye kulo mzi uyintabalala
 UNdiya kuNondiza ngomfaz' o qhomfayo.
 He is Land-at-War because of Mbune's beer pots.
 Good gracious! The Mfengu of Butterworth are mean-spitited
 Butterworth has been alienated by the missionaries.
 The clans hesitated to go against me and took counsel.
 The clans feared me and asked for the white man's help.
 As a result when sad occasions came
 Veldtman was summoned, and it was said, "Leave the Mfengu
 alone"
 For they were ill-treated by his father /Hintsu/
 Who /in fact/ put them under his wing, the day they arrived.
 Hence, when the War of Ngcayechibi ended
 The nation had to cross the Bashee river.
 Let there not be just one Editor in this numerous community
 I-will-go-to-Nondiza /the Herbalist/ on account of a woman
 who commits an abortion.
 (Translated by Wandile Francis Kruse)

There are several historical issues that resonate in this excerpt of the poem written in the beginning years of the twentieth century. First, Mqhayi, being an upcoming Xhosa poet, criticizes, John Tengo Jabavu, a Mfengu editor of the *Imvo Zabantsundu*, for lacking a sense of rootedness in a community that lacked spiritual and material anchoring. Given that the Mfengu people were predominantly Zulus and other ethnic groups who had run away from *mfecane* (social upheavals of constant wars) caused by Shaka, they lacked a stabilizing folklore that would give them certainty about their belongingness to a nation with a historical vision. Second, given the absence of anchoring of the Mfengu people before becoming a 'nation,' they are suspect to all kinds ideological currents that happen to cross their path. Mqhayi does not so much criticize the Mfengu people for converting to Christianity, which is a turn toward modernity which he favored, as much as the convictions for conversion that would make them align themselves with the interests of white people against what he perceived to be the greater interests of black people. Here Mqhayi was beginning to awaken to the ideology of

African nationalism against the ideology of Christianity. It is possible that Mqhayi was responding to the philosophy of Pan Africanism that F. Z. S. Peregrino, the expatriate from Ghana who came to Cape Town in 1900 from United States, was propagating in his *South African Spectator* newspaper. Third, as he clearly states, Mqhayi was well aware that the Xhosa nation had not been accommodating to the Mfengu people when they settled among them. But to Mqhayi this disdain and rejection of the Mfengu by the Xhosas cannot be a historical justification for *Imvo Zabantsundu* to disfavor the ideological and political interests of New Africans of whatever ethnic persuasion who had embraced modernity in favor of the particularistic interests of the Mfengu. Clearly Mqhayi is arguing for an acceptance of modernity that does not reject tradition, which is where folklore is anchored. Fourth, in criticizing John Tengo Jabavu for being the only editor of his newspaper in contrast to the collective editorial board of Mqhayi himself, Allan Kirkland Soga, Walter Benson Rubusana and Nathaniel Cyril Mhalla in *Izwi Labantu*, Mqhayi was castigating the individualism of modernity that Jabavu had uncritically embraced. Fifth, characterizing it as an attempted 'abortion', Mqhayi was incensed by Jabavu's hostility to the new ideas, aims and aspirations in modernity that were beginning to emerge on the pages of *Izwi Labantu*. What is apparent from this extract is that it was Mqhayi who completely altered the *imbongi* tradition by giving it a critical edge, that interrogated within and outside folklore, and also by making it be a part of discourse about the tribulations of modernity. Given this achievement, it is with absolute justification that Guybon Bundlwana Sinxo, arguably the best Xhosa prose writer in the generation that followed that of the great poet, wrote in 1935 in the *Bantu World* that Mqhayi had launched a 'renaissance' in Xhosa literature. Indeed, the ample publication of Mqhayi's poems on the pages of this newspaper in the decade of the 1930s by the newspaper's editor, R. V. Selope Thema, was more than a testimony to this fact.

If Mqhayi was the major voice of Xhosa *imbongi* tradition in the first half of the twentieth century, then undoubtedly Yali-Manisi was its major articulator in the second half. If it could be said of Mqhayi that he brought the tradition across the historical divide into modernity, Yali-Manisi could be posited as having pulled it across the chronological divide into the new millennium, even though he died a year before the beginning of the twenty first century. In the Foreword to Yali-Manisi's epic poem, *Inkululeko* ("Freedom," 1977), Jeff Opland writes of him in the following manner: ' . . . we believe [him] to be one of the greatest poets in this country. . . He is one of the most powerful *imbongi* [praise poets] practicing today, an inspiring performer with a deep sense of history, an intimate knowledge of his subjects, and a quite remarkable poetic talent.' Fifteen years later in his anthology of praise poems by various performers, *Words That Circle Words* (1992), Opland re-affirmed his high estimation of Yali-Manisi: 'Since then [their first meeting in 1970] my association with Manisi as performer, informant, colleague, teacher and friend has grown, and I regard him as the greatest living

exponent of the traditional art of the Xhosa oral poetry.' Partly writing on Yali-Manisi in his magisterial book, *Xhosa Poets and Poetry* (1998), Jeff Opland mentions that although his Xhosa traditional birth name was Phakamile “Elevated”, his Christian name was that of the English imperial explorer David Livingstone. Both Mqhayi and Yali-Manisi strangely enough had names that reflected the historical drama between tradition and modernity in South Africa.

With Yali-Manisi also, an excerpt of his magnificent poem “The Cattle-Killing” in *Words That Circle Words*, is sufficient to show the fertility and monumentality of his poetic imagination. The narrative of the circumstances of its production is fascinating. On December 20, 1970, on their second meeting, having met briefly for the first time the day before, sitting together in Jeff Opland's car, wishing to test the authenticity *imbongi* tradition in actual live production, on impulse Opland requested Yali-Manisi whether he would be willing to recite a poem on a subject or event that had never before exercised his imagination. Yali-Manisi was taken aback and replied whether Opland meant that very instant. Opland replied that very instant. They both settled on the theme of the Nongqawuse tragedy. Opland writes that Yali-Manisi reflected for only ‘23 seconds’ and began without the slightest hesitation to recite. We repeat this is only an excerpt of an astonishing achievement or realization:

And so catastrophe crippled this land,
 for Mhlakaza's daughter emerged from the pool,
 came back home noising the problem,
 made her demented report to men,
 who never pay any attention to females.
 That in itself of course was suspect,
 a veritable curse to this land of Xhosa,
 for a woman to claim that the shades had addressed her,
 that she'd met and conversed with them face to face.
 Where were this country's thinking people?
 Where were the great men?
 Where were the dignitaries?
 Where were the senior men of experience,
 who danced to the beat established by others,
 dancing besotted on cattle?

So then, my fellow countrymen,

this is the problem Nongqawuse announced,
informing the Xhosa, who sat back unsuspecting:
she claimed to have talked to the shades in person,
and they called for the wholesale slaughter of cattle
and the total destruction of grain,
for the One Everlasting would speak to the nation,
the one we know by the name of Qamata.
It was this same Qamata who had pressed her to prominence
on the day the unheard-of occurred,
events without precedent in the country of Phalo.

It so happened that when this girl made her announcement
the Xhosa were in virtual control of the land,
a nation custom-sustained.
So they made preparations to receive what was coming
and began to slaughter their innocent cattle.

All of our problems began with conversion:
conversion entailed the acceptance of God,
yet this God we said we accepted,
this Bible---is pregnant with evil incarnate,
it's held by a man who faces westward,
his clerical collar primly folded in front
is secured by a butterfly stud at the back,
and concealed at his back a cannon is lodged
which looms into view when he opens his mouth
and shatters the sinews of those he confronts.
And when confusion afflicted the land
the Christian missionaries cut right through,
they cut right through urging peace and calm.

As far as this author is aware Jeff Opland has never printed the original Xhosa
version of this oral praise poem. Perhaps in a critical study on Yali-Manisi which
Opland just recently published in South Africa a few months ago contains the
original version. Nevertheless, one presumes that this poem can only be the
achievement of a person deeply immersed in folklore tradition who has folklore, a

tradition that stretches from Tiyo Soga through Mqhayi to J. J. R. Jolobe. In fact in one of his books, *Izibongo ZeeNkosi ZamaXhosa* (Praise Poems of Xhosa Chiefs, 1952), Yali-Manisi gives homage to all of these figures, including many others, among them Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, the brilliant Zulu New African intellectual and most assuredly distinguished poet.

Several issues present themselves in Yali-Manisi's reconstruction of one of the most dramatic moments in Xhosa history. First, the poem gives cognizance to the fact that the violent intrusion and the subsequent imposition of European modernity on African traditional societies unleashed a profound crisis in the Xhosa nation about the certitude of its historical and spiritual existence. Since folklore in many ways is the spiritual center of any nation still negotiating the historical moment of tradition, it is not surprising that this 'encounter' shattered Xhosa folklore. The momentary breakdown of Xhosa folklore gave rise to apocalyptic visions such the Nongqawuse episode. It was perhaps in response to the tragic consequences of 1857 that Tiyo Soga in 1862 called for the restoration of Xhosa folklore, a restoration not intended to reinforce what had been but rather to make sense and accommodate the historical forces of modernity that had entered Xhosa society. In a certain sense Tiyo Soga's appeal to Sandile was to engage the great Chief to face in the direction of the future which had announced itself in the form of modernity. The reconstitution and reconstruction of Xhosa folklore by Tiyo Soga was with the purpose of preserving that would enable the future into being and interrogate that was holding it bay. By his example and by that of his children who were among the leading Xhosa intellectuals in the early years of the twentieth century, Tiyo Soga was hostile anything that was an enabler for instance something like polygamy. For him at this moment of serious crisis there were things that could be preserved and those that could not be. Second, Yali-Manisi shows that the practical breakdown of the principles constituting the beliefs in traditional society, hence of Xhosa folklore, manifested itself in the confusion concerning the production and transmission of knowledge. Instead of knowledge coming from wisdom of old age through lived experience, it purports to announce itself through youthfulness. Here Yali-Manisi fully engages himself with beliefs fundamentally expressive of the institutional forms of tradition, hence deeply implicated in the philosophic beliefs of Xhosa folklore: patriarchy and superstition. Given the crisis into which patriarchy was plunged by the advent of the new, the production of knowledge was inorganically shifted from the recognizably constituted agents. Inorganic in the sense that Nongqawuse represented the agency not aligned with the construction of the new but one that proclaimed the breakdown of the old. Given her youthfulness, Nongqawuse was in no position to understand the historical necessity of the breakdown of the old as Tiyo Soga could because of his education and wisdom. Because of the crisis, the knowledge of the ancestors was not mediated by the knowledge of lived experience. Perhaps because of the disastrous consequences engendered by the

crisis, Yali-Manisi is unwilling or unable to give cognizance to the momentary shift in the production and transmission of knowledge from the male to the female principle. Another possible explanation for Yali-Manisi's reticence about the seeming gender shift is that Nongqawuse was an actual pawn of the power struggle within patriarchy of the Xhosa nation. It has been argued by some historians that Nongqawuse was coached by her maternal uncle who a traditional medicine man through her maternal aunt who was a prophetess to express her apocalyptic visions.

Third, Yali-Manisi is prescient in observing that the crisis was about the value and ownership of land not so much about the production and transmission of knowledge. Fourth, Yali-Manisi indicts Christianity and the Bible as implicated in the damnable aspects of modernity. He positions himself in opposition to Tiyo Soga who desperately sought to salvage modernity from capitalism through Christianity. In his estimation, the Christian missionaries were not disinterested observers and arbitrators of the 1857 tragedy. In this concern Yali-Manisi broaches a subject that contentiously preoccupied many New African intellectuals throughout the history of the New African Movement in South Africa: the role of Christianity in colonial domination. His condemnation of Christianity is one of the strongest, if not the strongest, to come from the political imagination of a major New African creative artist. The condemnation was most likely expressive of Yali-Manisi's search for the third way between tradition and modernity.

In his condemnation of Christianity in the context of modernity and criticism of the positioning of the production and transmission of knowledge in tradition societies, Daving Livingstone Phakamile Yali-Manisi was continuing to expand and deepen the poetics of interrogative mode that Samuel Edward Krune Mqhayi had made germane to the *imbongi* tradition in order for it to survive the historical divide between tradition and modernity. In this both they have enabled Xhosa folklore to survive into the twenty first century

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