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African Literature

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South African literature in African languages

Introduction

The writing of African literature(s) in the African languages, rather than in the imperial and hegemonic English, was a historical project undertaken by the New African movement in the process of constructing modernity (see **modernity and modernism**) in South Africa. Although Xhosa intellectuals of the 1880s such as Elijah Makiyane (1850–1928), Walter B. Rubusana (1858–1936), Pambani Jeremiah Mzimba (1850–1911), John Tengo **Jabavu** (1859–1921), William Wellington Gqoba (1840–88), and Isaac Wauchope (1845–1917) were part of the movement's historical horizon, it was in approximately 1904 in the essay "The Regeneration of Africa" that Pixley ka Isaka Seme clearly delineated and articulated the conceptual vision of the project. In the essay Seme writes the following:

The giant is awakening! ... Ladies and gentlemen, the day of great exploring expeditions in Africa is over! ... Yes, the regeneration of Africa belongs to this new and powerful period! By this term, regeneration, I wish to be understood to mean the entrance into a new life, embracing the diverse phases of a higher, complex existence. The basic factor, which assures their regeneration, resides in the awakened race-consciousness.

With the unfurling of this banner of modernity over the African continent four years after the beginning of a new century, Seme (1880–1951) effected its political realization by being the principal founder of the African National Congress (ANC) in 1912. Two other New African intellectuals in this critical year of 1904 similarly also hoisted above the continent their particular articulations of modernity in their equally avant-garde essays: Solomon T. **Plaatzje's** "Negro Question" and John Langalibalele **Dube's** "Are Negroes Better Off in Africa? Conditions and Opportunities of Negroes in America and Africa Compared." Plaatzje (1878–1932) was the first secretary-general of the ANC, and Dube (1871–1946) was the first president-general of the ANC. In actual fact, the necessity of modernity had already been given cognizance in the 1860s by Tiyo Soga (1829–71), the first modern African intellectual in South Africa.

At the center of the New African movement were the metamorphoses and phenomenology of the historical consciousness of the New African. That the ideology of New Africanism necessitated the creation and making of the New African movement, which in turn gave expression to the philosophy of "New" African nationalism, is indicated by two journalistic pieces written by two important members of the New African intelligentsia. In "Leaders of African National Congress Must Reconcile Differences," Pixley ka Isaka Seme notes:

The African National Congress is a new movement which is being implanted in the heart and blood of the Abantu people. All nations have national congresses of their own which help mould together the spirit and the good will of those nations ... We want to be able clearly to

express our free will as a nation like all other peoples of the world today.

Two years later, in "European Students and Race Problems," appearing in a different New African newspaper of which he was editor, R.V. Selope Thema (1886–1955) observed:

There is a movement among Africans not only for the betterment of their economic conditions but for political freedom as well. If this movement is barred from its natural road of advance and deprived of its liberty of thought, expression and action, it will become a menace to the security of the white race, and a brake in the wheels of the country's progress.

Although political and intellectual adversaries at the time of the writing of these statements, both Seme and Thema were in unison in theorizing that a New African movement had come into being forging a dialectical unity of agency and structure, thought and life, theory and practice in the making of New African modernity.

It was within the historical parameters defined by the New African movement during the historical period of modernity that African literature written in the African languages of South Africa realized its efflorescence. The brilliant journalism of Thema had an incalculable inspiration on some of the third or fourth generation of the major exponents of this literature: the Xhosa novelist, poet, and translator Guybon Bundlwana Sinxo (1902–62); the Zulu historical novelist R.R.R. **Dhlomo** (1901–71); the Zulu novelist, intellectual provocateur, and political maverick Jordan K. **Ngubane** (1917–85); and the southern Sotho short story writer Peter D. Segale (1901–37), who died relatively young. Thema published the extremely rare Zulu journalism of H.I.E. **Dhlomo** (1903–56), who viewed the language of Shakespeare as the "authentic" language of modernity. Thema's acolytes, who were apprenticed under his editorship on the newspaper *The Bantu World*, went on to exemplary journalistic careers as well as to writing major literary works in their "vernacular" languages. H.I.E. Dhlomo was the exception in this, as he was in many other things. In his intransigent belief in modernity against tradition, Selope Thema imparted a peculiar sense of historicity

concerning the relation between the past, the present, and the future, to this particular intellectual generation. It was Thema also who made *The Bantu World* an intellectual forum for the last flowering period of the great Xhosa poet and biographer S.E.K. Mqhayi (1875–1945), arguably the greatest exponent of African literature in the African languages in South Africa.

The search for a literary history

It was a sense of historicity that enabled these New African intellectuals as well as their contemporaries to write some of the earliest and most durable literary histories of African literature(s) in the African languages, though paradoxically all of them were written in English. To many of these intellectuals, Mqhayi was a transitional figure between tradition and modernity. They considered him to be the demarcating point in South African literary history. But before S.E.K. Mqhayi there was Thomas Mofolo (1876–1948), and after him there was Benedict Wallet Vilakazi (1906–47).

The following literary histories, in the form of pamphlets or essays, were written within the purview of this dialectical relation between tradition and modernity: D.D.T. Jabavu's (1880–1959) *Bantu Literature: Classification and Reviews* (1921) and *The Influence of English Literature on Bantu literature* (1943); Benedict Wallet Vilakazi's "Some Aspects of Zulu Literature" (1942); and C.L.S. Nyembezi's (1919–) *A Review of Zulu Literature* (1961). Besides these preliminary mappings out of the topography of African literature(s) in the African languages, there were other more detailed investigations of the complex relationships between literary generic forms by other members of the New African movement, two of which were written within the academic context: Benedict Vilakazi's doctoral dissertation "The Oral and Written Literature in Nguni" (1946), A.C. Jordan's (1906–68) "Towards an African Literature: The Emergence of Literary Form in Xhosa" (1973), which originally appeared as a series of essays in the 1950s in the journal *Africa South*, and Mazisi Kunene's (1930–) master's thesis, "An Analytical Survey of Zulu Poetry: Both Traditional and Modern" (n.d., probably 1959). The voluminous columns and various reflections on cultural and literary matters by H.I.E. Dhlomo,

which appeared in the newspaper *Ilanga lase Natal* from 1943 to 1954, were part of this New African literary and cultural historiography.

But the foundational text of these New African literary histories was Isaac Bud-M'Belle's (1870–1947) *Kafir Scholar's Companion* (1903), which emphasized the central importance of newspapers in making possible the emergence African literature(s) in the African languages.

The role of Christian missions

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

From the moment many of the Xhosa intellectuals of the 1880s mentioned above first emerged, to the rise of the Zulu intellectuals of the 1940s, such as E.H.A. Made, Ngubane, R.R.R. Dhlomo, H.I.E. Dhlomo, and others, the critical issue in literary and cultural circles was whether the written literary word would serve only Christianity or whether it would also be in the forefront of the struggle to invent African nationalism (see **nationalism and post-nationalism**). The great Sotho novel *Chaka* by Thomas Mofolo was an indication of the monumentality of this struggle. Mofolo unequivocally condemned premodern and preco-

lonial African history as essentially barbaric and backward, and represented Christian modernity as the essence of enlightenment and progress. Without renouncing their Christian beliefs, the founding of "independent" New African newspapers, such as John Tengo Jabavu's *Imvo Zabantsundu* (African Opinion) (1884), Plaatje's *Tsala ea Batho* (The People's Friend, originally known as *Tsala ea Becoana*, The Friend of the Bechuana, when launched in 1910), and John Dube's *Ilanga lase Natal* (The Natal Sun) (1903), were part of the process of the secularization of the New African intellectual and literary imagination.

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

A historic conference held under the auspices of the Christian Council of South Africa, known as "A Conference of African Authors," was convened on 15 October 1936 in the city of Florida, Transvaal, not necessarily to engage the aforementioned questions, but rather to examine the status and crisis of African literature(s) in the African languages. Reporting on the conference in *The Bantu World*, J.D. Rheinallt Jones (1884–1953) named the following participants: D.D.T. Jabavu, Rueben T. Caluza (1895–1969), Vilakazi, Z.D. Mangoela (1883–1950), Thema, D.M. Ramoshwana, and S.S. Mafoyane. This was a stellar list of African intellectuals (including a composer) who wrote in the African languages. Only H.I.E.

Dhlomo participated as a representative of African literature in the English language. The invitees who could not make it to the conference were equally stellar: J.J.R. Jolobe, H.M. Ndawo, S.E.K. Mqhayi, Mofolo, H. Maimane, and R.R.R. Dhlomo. Among the Europeans who participated in the conference were the missionaries R.H.W. Shepherd, Margaret Wrong, and A. Sandilands. Also in attendance were the editors of the scholarly journal *Bantu Studies*, C.M. Doke and J.D. Rheinallt Jones.

It is important to note that this unprecedented conference, which in all probability has never been subsequently surpassed in the brilliance of the minds gathered together, was sponsored by missionaries. Several issues were at the center of the gathering: the obstacles to publication of the manuscripts in the African languages; the establishment of an endowment to assist in the publication of such manuscripts; the role of newspapers and magazines in facilitating such a literature; the instituting of literary criticism that would set the standards of excellence for this literature; and the contentious question of orthography which invariably resulted in bitter quarrels between the New African intelligentsia and the Christian missionaries. The missionary-turned-academic C.M. Doke proposed to the conference participants the establishing of an Academy of African Arts, a proposal that was to be discovered anew in the 1940s by Jordan Ngubane and Anton Lembede in the newspaper *Inkundla ya Bantu* (Bantu Forum), the intellectual forum of the African nationalism of the ANC Youth League.

This innovative idea of the academy was in all probability related to the extraordinary linguistic work Doke had undertaken in the study of African languages in southern Africa, which he anticipated could inspire African literature(s) in the African languages into creating a renaissance or renaissances. His establishing of an imprint in 1935 called the Bantu Treasury Series, whose first volume was Benedict Vilakazi's book of poetry *Inkondlo kaZulu* (Zulu Poetry), the first of thirteen volumes that were to appear into the 1940s, was part of the hoped-for cultural revolution. The assembling of the great Zulu–English dictionary (1948) by Doke and Benedict Vilakazi, as well as the Sotho–English dictionary by Doke and S.M. Mofokeng (1923–57),

was fundamental in cultivating the intellectual and cultural space of the New African movement.

Literature, language, and national culture

However, it would seem that the objectives and achievements of the conference were overshadowed by the controversial question that was posed by H.I.E. Dhlomo to the participants: would it not lead to the creation of "tribal" cultures rather than a national culture if African writers persisted in writing African literature in the "tribal" languages? It was this question that led to the bitter intellectual argument between two great friends, H.I.E. Dhlomo and Vilakazi, a quarrel that two years after the conference broke out on the pages of *Bantu Studies* (subsequently changed to *African Studies*) and *South African Outlook* in 1938 and in 1939. The ostensible reason for the argument concerned the nature of Zulu poetic form and its capacity to absorb and incorporate European rhymes and stanzas.

But the real issue in contention was the role of African languages, not only in creating a national literature but in facilitating the construction of a singular national culture: was it possible to constitute a unified national culture through the use of multiple languages? It is the complexity of the question posed and the vehemence of the response rendered that has made the Dhlomo/Vilakazi debate such a legendary event in South African intellectual history. H.I.E. Dhlomo's position was enigmatic, for while he had absolutely demurred in writing creative work in the Zulu language, he wrote many journalistic pieces in *Ilanga lase Natal* extolling the greatness of the Zulu language. On the other side of the debate, Vilakazi never felt the necessity to extol the virtues of Zulu, the language in which he wrote his three novels *Noma Nini* (No Matter How Long) (1935), *Udingiswayo ka Jobe* (Dingiswayo, Son of Jobe) (1939), *Nje Nempela* (Just So) (1944), and his two books of poetry, *Inkondlo kaZulu* (Zulu Poetry) (1935), and *Amal' Ezulu* (Zulu Horizons) (1945). The question posed by H.I.E. Dhlomo would continue to persist in debates on the identity of African literature and its relation to national culture.

The establishment of a literary tradition

All literary histories of the major literature(s) in the African languages in South Africa are generally in agreement about certain fundamental issues pertaining to them. First, they concur in establishing that the foundational texts of Xhosa literature were M'Belle's *Kafir Scholar's Companion* (1903) and Walter B. Rubusana's anthology *Zemk' Inkomo Magwalandini* (The Cattle are Departing, You Cowards) (1906); those of Sotho literature were Azariel M. Sekese's *Mekhoa le maele a Basotho* (Basotho Customs and Proverbs) (1907) and Thomas Mofolo's *Moeti oa Bochabela* (The Traveler to the World of Light, also translated as *The Traveler to the East*) (1907); and that of Zulu literature was Magma M. Fuze's *Abantu Abamnyama: Lapa Bavela Ngakona* (The Black People: And Whence They Came) (1922). Second, they are in synchrony in designating the canon of these literatures: in regard to Xhosa literature, in poetry it is S.E.K. Mqhayi, in the novel it is A.C. Jordan, in the short story form it is Guybon Bundlawa Sinxo, and in the essay form it is J.J.R. Jolobe (also a major poet). In the field of Zulu literature, the major figures are Walel Vilakazi in poetry, R.R.R. Dhlomo and C.L.S. Nyembezi in the novel, Violet Dube in the short story, E.H.A. Made in the essay form, and Nimrod Ndebele in drama. In Sotho literature the leading figures are considered to be Z. Mangoela and Ephraim Lesoro in poetry; Mofolo is considered to be the major novelist in this tradition, but there also other important novelists including A.M. Sekese and E. **Segoete**. Third, these literary histories imply that the historical conjuncture of tradition/modernity was a central preoccupation of African literature in the African languages. The last of the pioneering literary histories of African language literature(s) was Nyembezi's *A Review of Zulu Literature*, which appeared in 1961, an appearance that coincided with the end of the New African movement marked by the Sharpeville massacre of 1960.

The Sophiatown Renaissance was perhaps the cultural expression of the movement in the period just before Sharpeville. Since the early 1960s, many extraordinary things have happened to African language literature(s) in South Africa. Arguably the most important has been the emergence of the poetic voice of Mazisi **Kunene**,

an achievement that can stand comparison with any African poetic achievement in the twentieth century. Also impressive has been the scholarly work devoted to African oral literature(s) in South Africa, from Daniel Kunene's *Heroic Poetry of the Basotho* (1971) to Jeff Opland's *Xhosa Poets and Poetry* (1998). In between these two publications, there have been the three remarkable essays on the three major streams of this literature by Harold Scheub that appeared in *Literatures in African Languages: Theoretical Issues and Sample Surveys* (1985). But the most exhilarating event of the last two decades of the twentieth century in regard to this literature has been the rediscovery of two major women writers: Lydia **Umkasetemba**, the Zulu prose writer who wrote in the 1850s and in the 1860s, and Nontsizi **Mgqwetto**, a Xhosa poet who published approximately ninety poems in the newspaper *Umteteli wa Bantu* between 1920 and 1929, and who seems to have been a younger contemporary of S.E.K. Mqhayi.

Their appearance has completely altered our understanding of the cultural and literary history of the New African movement: it is with Lydia Umkasetemba that modern Zulu literature begins, not with Magema M. Fuze, as had been presumed for decades by major literary scholars including H.I.E. Dhlomo, among others; it is Nontsizi Mgqwetto who brings literary modernism through poetry to South Africa, not Vilakazi or H.I.E. Dhlomo or S.E.K. Mqhayi, as we had all supposed.

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colonial moment (see **colonialism, neocolonialism, and postcolonialism**) to formulate a proper and correct reconstruction of the African intellectual and cultural history in the making of modern Africa. The importance of intellectual integrity in reconstructing African cultural history cannot be possibly be over-emphasized in the context of the present profound crisis of Africa in relation to modernity (see **modernity and modernism**). The role of missionaries with the support of European imperialism and colonialism in initiating Africa into modernity cannot be denied. It is easier to criticize the imperial adventures and misadventures of missionaries in Africa than to specify their extraordinary contribution to the making of a “New” Africa. As Frantz Fanon has amply taught us, African cultural history is too complicated and too painful for quick and unreflective Manichean separations and judgments. For example, the missionary-turned-academic Clement Martyn Doke (1893–1980) is arguably the foremost South African intellectual in the twentieth century, partly because of his active participation in the construction of New African modernity (Jordan Kush Ngubane characterizes it as a “New Africanism”) through the New African movement.

A recent crop of books by Michael Echeruo and Tiyo Falola and Philip S. Zachernuk on the intellectual history in the making of modern Nigeria (Nigerian modernity) gives prominence to the role of the vernacular press. Likewise too in South Africa in the late nineteenth century and across the first half of the twentieth century, the press played a similarly critical role. There is no reason for doubting that this was not also true in many other colonial territories or African countries. The vernacular press was instrumental in facilitating the historical transition from tradition to modernity. Three fundamental themes were at the center of this progressive movement from the “Old Africa” to the “New Africa”: acquisition of an education propagated by missionaries, conversion into Christianity, and negotiation of European civilization.

The African vernacular press was also instrumental in forging the new articulations of resistance to European imperialism and colonialism, the very historical forces making modernities

vernacular press

Introduction

To consider the importance of the vernacular press in the making of African literature is simultaneously to encounter the paradoxical role of Christian missionaries in both enabling and equally disabling the emergence of modern African literary sensibilities (see **Christianity and Christian missions**). It is vitally important at this post-

possible in particular African national contexts. It is because of the integrated nature of African experience at particular phases of the continent's history that the instance of South Africa concerning the relationship between the vernacular press and African literature can be seen as representative of what happened in other parts of Africa. While historical and cultural circumstances may have been different, there is no reason to believe that the relationship between the vernacular press and African literature in South Africa was not paralleled in many other African countries in the first half of the twentieth century.

Christian missions and the vernacular press

It was the missionaries of the Glasgow Missionary Society and the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society who founded the *Ikavezi* (Morning Star) newspaper in Chumi mission station near Lovedale in the Eastern Cape as an instrument for proselytizing the Xhosa nation into Christianity. Four issues appeared irregularly in English and Xhosa between August 1844 and December 1845. It was in this newspaper that the writings in Xhosa by the Xhosa themselves first appeared. These writings, written by the children of the first Xhosa converts, were unsurprisingly stories about their and their parents' conversion into Christianity. These authors were William Kobe Ntsikana (son of the prophet), Zaze Soga, and Makhaphela Noyi Balfour. It was the founding of the *Indaba* (The News) monthly by the Glasgow Missionary Society for African teachers and students that made a lasting impact on the evolution of Xhosa intellectual culture. It was through the monthly, published in Xhosa and English between August 1862 and February 1865, that the first incipient forms of Xhosa literary modernity emerged. Tiyo Soga (1929–1871), the first major modern Xhosa intellectual, published in its pages African fables, legends, proverbs, ancient habits, and customs of the Xhosa people, as well as the genealogy of Xhosa chiefs.

With these literary preoccupations, Tiyo Soga was forging an intellectual bridgehead from tradition to modernity for his students who were to become his intellectual bridgeheads. Among these students were Elijah Makiwane (1850–1928), John

Tengo **Jabavu** (1859–1921), John Knox Bokwe (1855–1922), William Wellington Gqoba (1840–88), Gwayi Tyamzashe (1844–1926), Pambani Jeremiah Mzimba (1850–1911), Isaac Wauchope (1852–1917), and Walter Rubusana (1858–1930), who two decades later were to make a cultural renaissance of some sort in the newspaper *Imvo Zabantsundu* (Black Opinion). Like Soga, all these men were ordained African ministers of the Church.

Soga was anxious to impart to the students not only Xhosa customs and traditions but also a sense of African history as a counter-narrative to the European history that they were receiving in the form of the history of the Christian Church. It should be recalled that these students were learning classics (Greek and Latin literatures) from the Christian missionaries. Later on a remarkable debate occurred between the European missionary teachers and the African students as to the relevance of classics in the forging of modern consciousness and modern sensibility among the emergent Xhosa intelligentsia. This is among the reasons that made Lovedale such an important center of high intellectual culture in the nineteenth century.

The other importance of Soga beyond his launching of historical narrations of representation is that he appropriated the European essay form to interrogate the historical relationship between Christianity, racism, oppression, capitalism, and modernity. He was deeply engaged with the question of whether Christianity, European civilization, and modernity could have been imparted to the Xhosa people without the oppression and exploitation so endemic to capitalism. In these notations, which took the form of both essays and also letters to various newspapers, Soga was unrelenting in claiming that modernity was an unavoidable historical experience of the present.

In his writings, written in both Xhosa and English, Tiyo Soga left a rich cultural legacy to future generations of Xhosa intellectuals as to what their historical vision should be in their preoccupation with the making of African modernities. Soga was perhaps one of the first Africans to postulate the idea that the making of African modernities needed to be linked to the making of black modernities in the African diaspora. It should also

be remembered that this political position was formulated by Tiyo Soga at the very moment Edward Blyden and Alexander Crummell were arriving in Africa. Crummell was to have an astonishing influence on Tiyo Soga's intellectual descendants. It was, however, left to William Wellington Gqoba, Soga's intellectual descendant and the first modern Xhosa poet, and later a newspaper editor, to negotiate the cultural space between the European and African forms of representations.

With the collapse of the aforementioned vernacular newspapers, the European missionaries founded yet another outlet, *Isigidimi SamaXosa* (The Xhosa Messenger), which appeared between October 1870 and December 1888. Initially editing it himself, James Stewart, the principal of Lovedale and publisher of Lovedale Mission Press, later had the foresight of giving the editorial responsibilities to the new African Christian intelligentsia. Many of Tiyo Soga's intellectual descendants, such as Makiwane, Bokwe, Jabavu, and Gqoba, at one time or another edited the newspaper. With the assumption of the editorship by Africans, the newspaper acquired a critical voice on the matter of the violent entrance of European modernity into African history. It also began a process that can be characterized as the secularization of the theologically shackled African imagination or imaginary.

With his translation of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* into Xhosa approximately two decades earlier and its serialization in the previous missionary newspapers, Soga had made the emergent modern Xhosa literary imagination largely preoccupy itself with theological matters, which were the fundamental and central aim of the missionaries. Within a decade of Tiyo Soga's death, the process of secularization of the modern Xhosa literary imagination produced significant critical essays, which are literary and philosophical, concerned with ontological matters rather than purely with things theological. There also began to appear extraordinary poetry about matters of existence, as well as protest poetry. Concerning the essay form, Elijah Makiwane ("Livingstone's Last Journals," 1 June 1875, and "Native Churches and Self Support," 1 August 1881), Gwayi Tyamazshe ("A Native Society at Kimberley," 1 April 1884), and

William Wellington Gqoba ("Notes from the Transkei upon Witchcraft," 6 January, 7 February, 7 March 1874, "Notes of Cases, from Fingoland Dispensary," 1 April 1880, and "The Native Tribes: Their Laws, Customs and Beliefs," 1 June, 1 July, 1 September 1885), are the major voices. Gqoba also started to write serious major poetry ("A Winter Scene in Fingoland," 1 August 1879). Other intellectuals like Pambani Jeremiah Mzimba concerned themselves with orthographic issues of the Xhosa language. With the death of William Wellington Gqoba in 1888, the *Isigidimi SamaXosa* newspaper collapsed. One of the reasons for the demise of the newspaper is that despite its achievements, the missionaries still sought to stifle its critical and secular literary voice in order to return it to theological matters.

The making of a literary tradition

When A.C. **Jordan**, author of the great Xhosa novel *Ingqumbo Yeminyanya* (The Wrath of the Ancestors) (1940), in the 1950s wrote a series of essays on the history of Xhosa literature in the journal *Africa South*, he praised William Wellington Gqoba as the dominant literary figure of the late nineteenth century. Discontented with the intervention of the missionaries concerning the content of *Isigidimi SamaXosa*, John Tengo **Jabavu** founded the *Imvo Zabantsundu* newspaper. Although the newspaper focused on political matters, it could not avoid the literary legacy initiated by Soga and expanded upon by Gqoba. In order to consolidate their thinking on cultural and political issues, the intellectual descendants of Tiyo Soga founded the Lovedale Literary Society and, in 1879, the Native Educational Association. Both organizations sought to facilitate the passageway of African people from tradition into modernity. As president of the Association, Elijah Makiwane made presentations, some of which were published as essays in *Imvo Zabantsundu*.

One of the cultural issues Makiwane grappled with was to what extent Africans would retain their "Africanness" when modernity demanded that they master English literary culture from William Shakespeare and Francis Bacon to John Keats and Alfred Tennyson. Would not this acquisition confirm the superiority of European cultures over

African cultures, something the missionaries considered self-evident fact? What should be the role of African languages and of traditional forms of literary representation in the context of emergent modernity? The consensus among these intellectuals of the Xhosa cultural renaissance was that the English language had to predominate in South Africa in order for the African people to make a transition from “barbarism” and “heathenism” to “progress” and “civilization.” In the process of grappling with these issues, Makiwane expanded the essay form beyond the attainments that Soga and Gqoba had achieved. These cultural and literary debates were spectacular in many ways. In the context of these debates, Isaac Wauchope in the pages of *Imvo Zabantsundu* published his biting poetry in Xhosa protesting the hegemony of European modernity in South Africa.

The Xhosa intellectuals were caught in the maelstrom of paradoxes and ironies so singularly characteristic of modernity. One other achievement of Makiwane is that he was the first African intellectual to write essays on the role modern cities in making modernity possible. It should be emphasized that despite these debates on the “necessity” of the hegemony of English literary culture as a facilitator of modernity, the monthly continued to publish literary contributions in both English and Xhosa languages, as it had always done. While these debates were occurring in the English language, the actual poetry and prose published in its pages in the Xhosa language were far superior to those published in the English language.

In *The Kafir Scholar's Companion* (1903), Isaac Bud-M'Belle (1870–1947), another member of the third generation of Xhosa intellectuals since Soga, observed the shifting literary practices and debates and recognized the role of African newspapers in facilitating the literary culture of modernity. Bud-M'Belle's book was a short history of vernacular newspapers in South Africa, from early missionary newspapers such as *Indaba* in the middle of the nineteenth century to those owned by the “New Africans” in the late nineteenth century, including C.N. Umhalla and Allan Kirkland Soga's *Izwi Labantii* (The Voice of the People; November 1897–April 1909) and Solomon T. **Plaatje's** *Koranta ea*

Beoana (The Bechuana Gazette; April 1901–February 1908).

The person who made this dramatic shift in the late nineteenth century possible, despite the debates of the 1880s, was S.E.K. **Mqhayi** (1875–1945). Mqhayi made two incomparable contributions to the pages of *Imvo Zabantsundu*: he wrote modern Xhosa poetry in the traditional form of Izibongo that had no precedence in South African culture; and he wrote prose works whose complexity had not been attained before (autobiographies, novellas, short stories, biographies, articles, and essays). Mqhayi in effect completely transformed Xhosa literary culture. The serialization of his novella *Ityala lama Wele* (The Case of the Twins) (1914) marked a new beginning in Xhosa literature which was consolidated by the fourth generation of Xhosa intellectuals: Guybon Bundiwana Sinxo (1902–62), James J.R. Jolobe (1902–76), and A.C. Jordan (1906–68). With this novella and other prose writings, Mqhayi was in effect the founding moment of literary modernity, if not modernism itself, within the context of the New African modernity. It is because of this epoch-making event that later intellectuals like H.I.E. **Dhlomo** (1903–56) and Jordan K. **Ngubane** (1917–85) were to celebrate his contribution to South African literary history as marking a fundamental break between tradition and modernity. The year 1914 also saw the publication of John Knox Bokwe Ntsikana's *The Story of an African Convert* (1914), portions of which had been published in Xhosa monthly publications earlier.

A testament to the role the vernacular press had played in the emergence of a modern literary culture in South Africa was the 1906 publication of *Zemk' uinkomo maGwalandini* (The Cattle are Departing, You Cowards), a collection of the writings of Xhosa intellectuals and writers such as Bokwe, Ntsikana, and Gqoba collated from various newspapers. Another important anthology was *ImiBengo* (1936), put together by W.G. Bennie from writings in Xhosa newspapers and journals. What these collections show is that perhaps one of the reasons that the vernacular press played such a critical role in facilitating the emergence of modern South African literature is that intellectuals from Tiyo Soga to S.E.K. Mqhayi were from time to time editors of newspapers and journals. During his

tenure for approximately two years as editor of *Imvo Zabantsundii* in the 1920s, Mqhayi used the newspaper to launch the literary careers of Jolobe and Sinxo, two major figures who were to dominate Xhosa literature in the twentieth century.

At least two of the three novels by Thomas Mofolo (1876–1948) were partly serialized in the *Leselinyana* newspaper (The Little Light, founded November 1863 and owned by the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society in Maseru), before they were published in book form. *Moeti oa Bochabella* (Traveler to the East) (1907) and *Pitseng* (n. d., but written in 1910) were read by well-educated Christian Africans as well as by those who were struggling with issues of illiteracy. There is no doubt that the works of Mofolo had profound influence on the development of modern literary consciousness in the Sotho nation. Although a novel like *Moeti oa Bochabella* was an allegory closely based on John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Mofolo's works attempted to open a secular cultural space for the nation relative to the religious space of the Sotho-translated Bible. This was one of the factors that caused the strained relations between Mofolo and the French missionaries who owned *Leselinyana* and the Morija Mission Press. All the novels of Thomas Mofolo were vetted for their religious correctness before they were published by the Press. This is the reason that although his classic novel *Chaka* was already written by 1910, it was only published in 1926 after many delays. Thomas Mofolo's biographer Daniel P. Kunene mentions that this is the reason he never subsequently engaged himself with literary matters after this traumatizing experience.

The French missionaries played both a negative and a positive role in the emergence of modern Sotho literature in the early part of the twentieth century, and this influence is evident in the problematic representation of the relation between tradition and modernity in Mofolo's *Chaka*. The ideological framework of Thomas Mofolo's fiction is constructed on Manichean terms as the unending struggle between African "barbarism" and European "civilization." It postulates the absolute necessity of the triumph of "enlightenment" over "darkness." In effect, Thomas Mofolo harnessed African literature to the civilizing mission of Christianity. It is not surprising that the next major

Sotho writer who followed a few decades later, although finding much inspiration in Mofolo, projected African literature in the direction of the then emergent African nationalism. B.M. **Khake-tla** (1913–2000), novelist, poet, and playwright, founded his own monthly, *Mohlabani* (The Warrior; September 1954–April 1968) on whose pages politics were not displaced by literature.

The entanglement with colonialism

It was partly because of these entanglements with the forces of colonialism that Solomon T. Plaatje (1876–1932) founded his own newspaper, *Koranta ea Becoana*, as did John Langalibalele **Dube** (1871–1946) who launched his own newspaper *Ilanga laSe Natal* (The Natal Sun) in April 1903. As H.I.E. Dhlomo noted in an obituary in 1932, there has been a general consensus that Plaatje is the most important New African intellectual in the twentieth century, especially with regard to the question of modernity. Although an earlier generation of intellectuals and writers such as Gwayi Tyamzashe and John Knox Bokwe were concerned with the orthography of African languages, Plaatje was the first one within the New African movement to examine this issue from a linguistic perspective. He was conscious that, without a correct resolution as to the proper orthography for the African languages, the makings of a great modern African literature he anticipated would be hindered. In *Koranta ea Becoana* he bitterly criticized the missionaries for proposing what he felt was incorrect orthography for the African languages.

It is in the context of these interminable linguistic battles that he published two books: *A Sechuana Reader in International Phonetic Orthography* (written with Daniel Jones) (1916) and *Sechuana Proverbs with Literal Translations and their European Equivalents* (1916). It is also in relation to these matters that he translated four of Shakespeare's plays into Tswana, including *A Comedy of Errors* (*Diphosho-Phosho*) and *Julius Caesar* (*Dintshontsho tsa bo JuliuSe Kesara*). The last volume was published in the Bantu Treasury Series edited by Clement Martyn Doke.

When Solomon T. Plaatje moved from Mafeking to Kimberley in 1910, he founded a new newspaper, *Tsala ea Batho* (The People's Friend), also

known as *Tsala ea Bechuana* (The Friend of the Bechuana). *Tsala ea Batho* would sometimes appear in three or four African languages within a single issue of the newspaper. With many of his writings in the new newspaper there began the prefigurations of the idea of a national literature. With *Mhudi* (1930) it is possible to argue that Plaatje sought to indicate how a “national” novel would be different from “regional” novels such as Enoch S. Guma’s *Nomalizo* (1918), R.R.R. **Dhlomo**’s *An African Tragedy* (1928), and John Langalibalele Dube’s *uJeje insila kaShaka* (Jeje the Bodyservant of King Tshaka) (1933; 1951). In contrast to these writers, Plaatje attempted to infuse a national consciousness into South African literary imagination. One other innovative contribution of Plaatje is that in *Tsala ea Batho* politics and literary culture engaged each other as well as history across its pages.

Although Plaatje never actually edited *Umteteli wa Bantu* (The Mouthpiece of the People; May 1920–) his name appeared on the paper’s masthead with that of John Dube as co-editor in the first few months of its appearance. Although it did not concern itself with literary matters directly, since it was preoccupied with political, social, and cultural issues, *Umteteli wa Bantu* had an inestimable impact on South African literary history. It was this newspaper that proclaimed in unambiguous terms that the fundamental national project that all African intellectuals had to confront was the construction of modernity. Previous to *Umteteli wa Bantu*, modernity had been theorized as merely the product of history, a historical process in which the African intelligentsia could intervene. The newspaper grappled with the nature of modernity in the 1920s in ways that have yet to be surpassed: it analyzed the industrial transformation of the country; it traced the emergent historical consciousness that transformed the “Old African” into the “New African”; it traced the genealogy of the New African; it established the connection between New Negro modernity and New African modernity; it theorized the role of cities in enabling the New African to emerge; it articulated the politics of African nationalism beyond tribal identifications; and it formulated the lines of intersection between politics and culture.

The contingent of “journalists” who worked for *Umteteli wa Bantu* was one of the most formidable

cluster of African writers and intellectuals ever to work together: R.V. Selope Thema (1886–1955), H.I.E. Dhlomo, Allan Kirkland Soga (1862–1938), Abner Mapanya (c.1880–?), S.M. Bennett Ncwana (dates not known), H. Selby Msimang (1886–1982), Mark S. Radebe (dates not known), Richard Msimang (1884–1933), and Marshall Maxeke (1874–1928). *Umteteli wa Bantu* was a demarcating line in South African cultural history by arguing that literary modernism should be as much about national consciousness as about the literary devices of representation. The central figures on the newspaper were R.V. Selope Thema and H.I.E. Dhlomo.

Founded seventeen years earlier, John Langalibalele Dube’s *Ilanga lase Natal*, in contrast with *Umteteli wa Bantu*, in its early years sought to establish the lines of continuity between the past and the present that had been ruptured by the entrance of European modernity into South African history. Given that it saw itself as descending from the heroic deeds of Shaka, it is not surprising that in its early years the newspaper emphasized matters of historical recovery, but it gave a forum to young unknown Zulu novices who later became major South African intellectuals in the twentieth century: the essayist and cultural historian H.I.E. Dhlomo; the journalist and political maverick Jordan K. Ngubane; and the scholar and poet Benedict Wallet Vilakazi. The essays, prose poems, satires, articles, and poems they published in the newspaper in the 1930s and in the 1940s made the newspaper one of the outstanding enlighteners of modernity in the twentieth century.

Concerning literary matters, *Ilanga lase Natal* by far surpassed *Umteteli wa Bantu*. From its inception Dube’s newspaper announced itself as a forum for literary matters. Within eighteen months of its appearance, *Ilanga lase Natal* published Robert Grendon’s epic *Pro Aliis Damnati* (For Others Doomed) which consists of 4,412 lines divided into twenty parts. It also published voluminously his other excellent poems. Generally, Grendon has unjustifiably disappeared from South African literary history. Another epoch-making event in its early years was the publication of excerpts from the writings of Magema M. Fuze (1845–1922) which were to be assembled together in a book

called *The Black People and Whence They Came (Abantu Abanyama)* (1922). A genealogy of the founding of the Zulu nation, though not wholly original, the book was the work of modern prose written in the Zulu language by a New African intellectual. H.I.E. Dhlomo was to celebrate it in his cultural history of the making of modern South Africa.

The third intellectual who featured prominently on the early pages of *Ilanga lase Natal* was Josiah Mapumulo. He has also unfortunately disappeared from South African cultural history. For approximately forty years, Mapumulo wrote columns in the form of short essays on the history of the Catholic Church and its philosophy, on the incomparable nature of Christian civilization, and on the importance of written culture. As though this embarrassment of riches were not enough, the newspaper published for decades the satires of R.R.R. Dhlomo. Though written in English, these satires were the training ground for the Zulu historical novels R.R.R. Dhlomo wrote in the 1930s. Lastly, the newspaper made available to the public over many years the short pungent miniature essays of A.H.M. Ngidi (1869–1951).

There is a fascinating symmetry of mutual admiration between the *Ilanga lase Natal* intellectuals in over a decade, and several acknowledge the influence of their predecessors. Among his earliest writings for the weekly in 1932, Vilakazi pointed out that the newspaper had been instrumental in his intellectual formation, especially the meditations of Josiah Mapumulo. H.I.E. Dhlomo himself selected A.H.M. Ngidi as having been instrumental in the formation of Vilakazi's literary imagination. In 1946 in *Inkundla ya Bantu* (Bantu Forum; April 1939–November 1951) which he was then editing, Jordan Ngubane marked for praise Ngazana Luthuli (1874–?) who replaced John Dube as editor of *Ilanga lase Natal* from 1917 to 1943.

Also in the same newspaper in the same year of 1946, H.I.E. Dhlomo singled out his brother R.R.R. Dhlomo, who from 1943 to 1962 was the editor of *Ilanga lase Natal*, for praise. Ngubane wrote the first serious literary criticism to appear in a New African newspaper. In a 1941 critical appreciation of H.I.E. Dhlomo's *Valley of a Thousand Hills* (1941), Ngubane praised the poem as representing a new national spirit of modernity as well as giving expression to a New Africa. An

appraisal of such serious intellectual content had not appeared on the pages of any New African newspaper before. Intellectual portraits of political and religious leaders had been appearing for decades, but not in the form of a penetrative literary appraisal of a brilliant literary work.

H.I.E. Dhlomo's achievements on the pages of *Ilanga lase Natal*, of which he was then an assistant editor to his brother, reflected his wide and amazing range of interests: he wrote a major theorization of literature, specifically the poetics of dramatic form; he contributed a cultural history of New African literature; he constructed an intellectual portrait of the most important New African intellectuals and political leaders; he appraised the possibilities of the Zulu language in creating a new modern national literature; and he formulated a cultural history of the New African writer and intellectual. In 1947, moving from theoretical preoccupations, he wrote a series of great prose poems, and then for over a decade before his death in 1956 he published a new series of essays. In one of his last important essays, written on the occasion of the golden anniversary of *Ilanga lase Natal* in 1953, H.I.E. Dhlomo made a retrospective evaluation of the contribution of the New African newspaper to the literary imagination of South Africa.

Conclusion

The short story form was to find its ideal representation in the 1950s in *Drum* magazine (March 1951–April 1965, original series). The monthly held numerous short story writing competitions, some of which were adjudicated by prominent writers like Langston Hughes and H.I.E. Dhlomo. It is not far-fetched to argue that Richard Rive was "discovered" by Hughes through one such competition. In dedicating his book of short stories, *African Songs* (1963), to the African American poet, Rive was taking cognizance of this fact. It was Langston Hughes who enabled Richard Rive and Ezekiel (Es'kia) Mphahlele to be aware of each other. This is one of the concrete manifestations of the unity between New Negro modernity and New African modernity.

The immediate effect of *Drum* magazine on South African literary history was in giving rise to a group of brilliant journalists and short story writers: Can **Themba** (1924–68), Henry Nxumalo (1918–57), Lewis **Nkosi** (1936–), Bloke **Modisane** (1923–86), Ezekiel (Es'kia) Mphahlele (1919–), and Arthur **Maimane** (1932–). Some of these intellectuals attempted to write novels during their exile period, although these were largely unsuccessful. The only member of the *Drum* writers who was successful at being both a novelist and a short story writer was Bessie **Head** (1937–86), who strangely enough during this historical moment of the hegemony of the *Drum* writers was marginalized from this intellectual constellation. This constellation of writers, including the brilliant photographers and outstanding musicians of the decade, has been retrospectively designated the “Sophiatown Renaissance.” Another important contribution of *Drum* magazine as far literary matters is concerned was the brilliant intellectual portraits of New African intellectuals, writers, and leaders (religious and political), which graced its early years of publication. Both H.I.E. Dhlomo and Jordan K. Ngubane contributed portraits, respectively, of Benedict Vilakazi and A.W.G. Champion (1893–1975).

Although *Drum* magazine commissioned first-rate intellectual portraits, including those of African political leaders in other parts of Africa as well as those of African-American intellectuals and artists, as a forum of creative writing and intellectual thought it never reached the productivity and cogency attained by the publications whose genealogy has been traced here. In addition, it was the only publication that was monolingual, while most of the publications discussed above were trilingual. It is hence ironic that today *Drum* occupies a legendary status in South African cultural history. A new intellectual history needs to be written with the intent of repositioning the decade of the 1950s in its proper dimensions in relation to the intellectually and culturally stronger decades preceding it.

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