

## FOREWORD

# THE HISTORIC AND INTELLECTUAL NECESSITY OF LITERARY HISTORIES OF AFRICAN LITERATURE IN THE AFRICAN LANGUAGES

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The publication of Ghirmai Negash's *A History of Tigrinya Literature in Eritrea: The Oral and the Written 1890-1991* in 1999 by the Research School of Asian, African, and Amerindian Studies, University of Leiden, was a landmark event in the cultural history of African literature. To begin with, no previous manuscript had been written with such meticulous scholarly protocols in articulating a *national history* of an African literature in an African language. What was indeed uncommon about this project was its longitudinal amplitude, characterized by comprehensiveness and, even more significant, its postulation that the construction of a literary history in an African context must be part of not only an *intellectual project* of returning to the source (à la Amílcar Cabral) but also a *national project* of overcoming the consequences of colonial domination. The conceptual framing and methodological outlines of the book clearly reveal that, while using Tigrinya literature as a model, Negash was deeply theoretically conscious that the making of a literary history of African literatures in African languages encounters insuperable historical obstacles. To that effect, he makes painstaking efforts to lay out the factors that (at the practical level) inhibit the crafting of such literary history projects. The marginalizing effects of colonialism, the absence of a long tradition of literary criticism of these literatures, the lacuna of perspectives that integrate literary texts and other intangible forms of representation in a holistic manner, the necessity of not easily obtainable archival resources of print and oral literary forms—these are some of the most vivid impediments. At the theoretical level, however, the most complex—and most compelling—problem that the scholar encounters is the need to establish a periodizing process of style, temporality and ideology that corresponds to

political developments—without that periodization necessarily implying an unyielding, canonizing course. The singular nature of the engagement with these issues, and the staggering theoretical rigor and critical insight offered in the construction of Tigrinya literature have made *A History of Tigrinya Literature* an exemplary model of such an undertaking—have made it a classic deserving a republication.

The impact of colonial modernity in Africa on the literary plane gave rise to two types of literatures: African literature in the European languages and *African literature in the African languages*. The historic Conference of African Writers of English Expression, held at the University of Makerere (Uganda) in 1962 with prominent participants including Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Lewis Nkosi, James Ngugi (later known as Ngugi wa Thiongo), implied that African literature in the European languages was the only credible and valid African literature. Published some decades after this infamous gathering, it is nonetheless within this context that the significance of *A History of Tigrinya Literature in Eritrea: The Oral and the Written 1890-1991* should be viewed, for it dramatically overturns this problematical estimate of these writers and intellectuals, and makes more visible the continuous production and vitality of African literature in the African languages.

True, *A History of Tigrinya Literature* was not the first text to address African literature in the African languages. And limiting myself to my country, South Africa, which has arguably produced the largest body of African literature in African languages, I would like to point out a few predecessors of Negash's work and so show the distinguished lineage to which he belongs. There is the work of Clement Martyn Doke (1892-1980), a linguist and scholar who founded the *scholarship* of African literature in African languages from the moment he assumed a Chair in the Department of Bantu (African) Languages at the University of Witwatersrand in 1923. Before his retirement in 1953, his fourteen books and multiple scholarly essays established the viability of this literature and gave it legitimacy. He edited *Bantu Studies* (later *African Studies*), which became the best scholarly journal in Africa. Then there is Benedict Bambatha Wallet Vilakazi (1906-1947), a distinguished Zulu poet, whose doctoral dissertation *The Oral and Written Literature in Nguni* (1946) was the first manuscript to seriously document a literary history of African literature in the African languages. A protégé of Vilakazi, another prominent Zulu poet, Mazisi Kunene (1930-2006), wrote a Master's thesis, *An Analytical Survey of Zulu Poetry: Both Traditional and Modern* (1958), from which many subsequent scholars have borrowed extensively without acknowledgement. The renowned Xhosa novelist A. C. Jordan (1906-1968) wrote *Towards An African Literature* (1973), a series of essays delineating the diachronic structure of Xhosa literature. Thereafter, numerous publications mapping the lineage on "Vernacular" literatures emerged from the Departments of Bantu (African) Languages in South Africa.

Although it could be said that Negash stands on the shoulders of these extraordinary scholars, in *A History of Tigrinya Literature in Eritrea* he has made distinctive marks of his own, in many ways going beyond his predecessors. Published at the height of the hegemonic power of African literature in the European languages,

the book was startling in its unexpectedness and in the boldness of its certainties and affirmations. First, whereas the formulations of his predecessors are either *generic* or *sectoral* or “*ethnic*” or *episodic* or *linguistic*, his book is the first I have encountered that provides a comprehensive *national profile* articulating African literature in an African language, at the same time seeing it as a national project for modernizing the national consciousness in a distinct way. Negash strongly emphasizes that Tigrinya played a principal role in the independence struggle of Eritrea by assisting in forging national consciousness or nationalism. Second, written at the dominant moment of literary theory, the second chapter of the book, “Theoretical and Methodological Considerations: Issues and Perspectives on Literary History,” makes well informed forays into the theoretical systems of René Wellek, Hans Robert Jauss, Peter Bürger, Paul de Man, Hayden White, and others, demonstrating how to read and order into cohesiveness the history of Tigrinya literature despite the contradictory nature of its continuities, discontinuities, disruptions, elisions and omissions. This achievement is remarkable, given the disruptive external forces that intruded into the organic developmental processes of this literature. Third, as though he has taken to heart Fredric Jameson’s slogan ‘Always Historicize!’ in *The Political Unconscious*, Negash traces a historical logic through the troughs and high points of a demographically small but durable literature that has been profoundly tested by the traumas of African history. Fourth, the book is not merely a literary history—in the restricted, narrow formalistic sense—but also a history of the genesis and development of Tigrinya literature within the ideological struggles against Italian colonizing modernity and against Ethiopian national domination. Instead of confining himself to examining the evolution of generic processes, he has fruitfully explored the ideological principles at work in the making of this national literature.

The fundamental implication of *A History of Tigrinya Literature* for Africa is plain but profound: the writing of African literary histories on the basis of African literatures in the European languages is an inadvertent endorsement of European domination in African history. In other words, without the literary histories of African literatures in African languages, the construction of national literatures in each of the African countries will always be an incomplete and compromised project. Without the embracing of written and oral African articulations, no complete national bibliographies are possible and no credible national intellectual histories are realizable. The book makes clear that the writing of literary histories of African literatures in the African languages, as well as their accompanying national intellectual histories, should be the primary focus for Africans in the twenty-first century. As such, it is heir to the tradition that was launched in the second decade of the twentieth century by the great Xhosa poet S. E. K. Mqhayi, and by the distinguished scholar Clement Martyn Doke.

Both Mqhayi and Doke were major figures in the New African Movement, an intellectual, political, and cultural awakening concerned with matters of modernity in South Africa in the first half of the twentieth century. Both men were preoccupied with facilitating the capabilities of African languages in representing and articulating the complexity of modernity as it metamorphosed from European modernity to New African modernity. Although *modern* Xhosa poets preceding Mqhayi, such as

William Wellington Gqoba and Isaac William Wauchope, had written both in isiXhosa and in the English language, it was Mqhayi, writing in the early years of the twentieth century, who initiated a revolution in South African cultural history by establishing the classicism of the Xhosa language through mastery of its expressive forms in essays, novels, novellas, biographies, reportage and poetry. Mqhayi was historically conscious of the divide between tradition and modernity. The poems he published in the *Izwi Labantu* (The Voice of the People) newspaper during its run from 1897 to 1909 were a landmark in the intellectual history of the country.

Beginning his intellectual career in the context of what later generations of New African intellectuals were to see as the Mqhayi-pioneered "literary renaissance," Clement Martyn Doke in the early 1920s effectively argued that the lexicographical, grammatical, phonetic and syntactic structure of the African languages were equal to those of other languages:

I would digress here to make a plea for the recognition of the Bantu language family as one which can hold up its head with any other language family on earth . . . they have a unique grammatical system---one which it is impossible to treat adequately except according to its own genius. ("A Call to Philological Study and Research in South Africa," *The South African Quarterly*, July 1925-February 1926)

Doke wrote many texts on the linguistic structures of many Southern African languages and also on their lexicographies. A partial listing may give the reader a sense of his accomplishment: *The Grammar of the Lamba Language* (1922); *The Phonetics of the Zulu Language* (1926); *Textbook of Zulu Grammar* (1927); *Report on the Unification of the Shona Dialects* (1931); *A Comparative Study in Shona Phonetics* (1931); *The Lambas of Northern Rhodesia* (1931); *English-Lamba Dictionary* (1933); *Bantu Linguistic Terminology* (1935); *Textbook of Lamba Grammar* (1938); *Bantu: Modern Grammatical, Phonetical and Lexicographical Studies since 1860* (1945); *Zulu-English Dictionary* (1948); *The Southern Bantu Languages* (1954); *Zulu Syntax and Idiom* (1955); *Textbook of Southern Sotho Grammar* (1957). Doke also contributed many essays and book reviews to the *African Studies* journal. From his retirement from the University of Witwatersrand in 1953 to his death in 1980 (he was born in 1892 in England), he continued the missionary work with which he had begun his African experience in the early years of the twentieth century. He translated the Bible into many African languages. Just as S. E. K. Mqhayi had been celebrated in the 1930s, Clement Martyn Doke was held in high esteem by various New African intellectuals in the 1940s-1950s, and was admired by South African scholars such as Mqhayi, H. I. E. Dhlomo, Benedict Wallet Vilikazi, and A. C. Jordan. Without a shadow of a doubt, Clement Martyn Doke was one of Africa's greatest scholars of the twentieth century, belonging to the pantheon that includes Joseph Ki-Zerbo and Cheikh Anta Diop.

Without being aware of the Movement's earliest metamorphoses, Negash has continued the legacy of the scholarship of the New African Movement. His profound understanding of the logic of African cultural history in relation to the colonial

experience has led him to an awareness that African literature in the African languages should take precedence over African literature in the European languages. Though Doke had little affinity for literary history as a concept, his brief essays on the history of African literatures signal the onset of a new paradigm. However, Negash has more in common with Doke's protégé and later colleague, the distinguished Zulu intellectual and poet Benedict Wallet Vilikazi, the author of the aforementioned *The Oral and Written Literature in Nguni*. Both postulate the inseparability of the oral and written forms of African literature in African literary history. Both authors' books in a real sense begin their narrative at the moment of the aftereffects of the encounter between European modernity and African tradition. In contrast, Mazisi Kunene's *An Analytical Survey of Zulu Poetry: Both Traditional and Modern* constructs a larger diachronic structure that shows the achievement of the great Zulu poets such as Magolwane and Mshongweni of the nineteenth century. Perhaps Mazisi Kunene was able to achieve this longitudinal perspective because his study is confined to poetic form, whereas those of Benedict Wallet Vilakazi and Ghirmai Negash criss-cross and intersect through various literary genres. As the titles of these three texts indicate, any theorizing or reconstruction of African literary discourse in its historical formation must problematize the historical trauma of the encounter between tradition and modernity.

This juxtapositioning of *A History of Tigrinya Literature in Eritrea: The Oral and the Written 1890-1991*, with *The Oral and Written Literature in Nguni* and *An Analytical Survey of Zulu Poetry: Both Traditional and Modern* is an effort not only to appraise the importance of this book and to indicate the originality of the Eritrean scholar, but, much more fundamentally, to also display the prodigious richness of African literature in the African languages, which has labored under the colonial condescension of African literature in the European languages. Despite the "odds," the extensiveness and vitality of African literature in the African languages is incontestable. With this original work Ghirmai Negash overturns the order of things: he exposes and decenters the fatuousness of any colonial condescension, and valorizes African literatures in African languages, carrying their legacy into the future.

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