

Xhosa Poets and Poetry: A Review

by

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This book is very impressive because it is a product of solid scholarship that has unfolded over a decade. The fourteen chapters constituting this compelling text are unified by the dialectical tension across a century of South African literary history between oral forms of literary representation and the written forms. Despite this contradictory historical unity, Jeff Opland has thematically divided the chapters into a triadic structure: the nature and structure of praise poetry (*izibongo*), the actual and performative practice of major poets in a moment of historical transition, and the impact of written or printed literature on the poetics of Xhosa literary imagination. The fundamental theme that Opland is preoccupied with is the making of literary modernity as a consequence of the unending contestation between tradition and modernity: in other words, the literary effects of the entrance of European modernity into African history.

In South Africa this historical drama has been arguably more spectacularly violent than in any other African country, with the attendant consequences that have been familiar to all of us. The unveiling of the political curtain in 1994 has revealed the cultural density of this historical theatre. The thesis Opland seems to be postulating is that *izibongo* is not a literary practice that belongs to a particular historical period in traditional societies which will disappear under the weight of modernity, but rather, for him this literary form is a generic process whose very poetics define the permanency of the interior spirit of African literariness. It is because of this felt permanency that Opland engages the structure of its form.

With the ideas of Milman Parry and Albert Lord about the poetics of European orature as the theoretical framework and historical background, Opland undertakes in several chapters a critical examination of how general improvising, memorizing, improvising of the *imbongi* (oral poet or *griot*) and writing have effected the form of the Xhosa poetic tradition. Appropriately enough, he analyzes *izibongo* in Walter Rubusana's 1906 landmark anthology, *Zemk'inkomo magwalandini* (There go your cattle, you cowards). In an inspired appraisal of Xhosa *izibongo* in contrast to the Zulu *izibongo* in the 1928 anthology *Izibongo zenkosi zama-Hlubi nezama-Baca* assembled by Henry Masila Ndawo, Jeff Opland argues that the Xhosa *imbongi* improvises in performance, while her Zulu counterpart invariably only utters what has been memorized. This deep analysis of these two contrastive performance styles is undoubtedly one of the reasons which will make Xhosa Poets and Poetry be revisited many times by scholars in the future.

Other significant chapters of the book, which one suspects has not been done before by any other scholar in such detailed presentation, are those in which Jeff Opland concretely records and analyzes the actual improvisory making of Xhosa *izibongo* by recording the performances of the major *imbongi* David Livingstone Phakamile Yali-Manisi (1926-1999) across two decades. The intent of Opland was to show the still living tradition of *izibongo*. At the same time Opland details the transformations that the great Xhosa poet S. E. K. Mqhayi (1875-1945) effected in Xhosa literary history by shifting from *izibongo* to written Xhosa poetic forms: in other words, by making the transition from tradition to modernity. Enamored to comparative analysis, Jeff Opland contrasts the effects of Mqhayi incorporating European rhyme and stanzaic structure into Xhosa poetic form to the similar undertakings of the Zulu poet Benedict Walley Vilakazi (1906-1947) in relation to Zulu poetic form. It is in this context that Opland shows how the impact of newspapers on the making of Xhosa poetry and prose has both simultaneously inspired and diminished this literary tradition.

The truly extraordinary aspect of the book for this reviewer is the chapter on the major female Xhosa poet Nontsizi Mgqwetto (?-?) who was discovered by Jeff Opland on the pages of *Umteteli wa Bantu* (The Mouthpiece of the People) newspaper. It is not possible exaggerate the importance of this discovery. Her first poem " *Imbongi U Chizama* " was published on October 23, 1920, and the last one " *Zemk'Inkomo Zetafa--Vula Ndingene!* (1928) (1929)" appeared on January 5, 1929. Between these two, she published eighty-eight other poems. A few of the poems are excellently translated by Jeff Opland. This astonishing discovery makes clear the fundamental role of women in the making of South African modernity or literary modernism. If nothing else, because of this extraordinary finding, higher praise of Xhosa Poets and Poetry cannot possibly be imagined.

Written by Jeff Opland

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