## 

***UNOMSA* for African Renaissance**

This long essay was edited on 06 June 2016 by Thobeka Sinxo from the Motherwell Township, Eastern Cape, addressed to S.A.H.O. (South African History Online, S.A.H.A. (South African Historical Archives) and The Centre for African Studies; with hopes that the non plagiarised and copyrighted info furnished within, finds employment in the African cultural industry.

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## INTRODUCTION

In July 2012, organisations that attended the **National Arts Festival Wordfest** showed interest in reviving African classical books. *Unomsa* (1922) was counted as one of the books included in the government programme to ‘Reprint South Africa’s Classics’. As usufructuary of the book, I assigned myself with the task of adapting *Unomsa* into Drama.

# *Unomsa*, by Guybon Sinxo, is a coming of age story about a gothic heroine named Nomsa Ntobeko, who migrates from the Eastern Cape to work as a teacher in the Karoo.

I staged *Unomsa* at the Nelson Mandela Bay Opera House in 2013, then at the Damelin Walmer Campus, before premiering the production at the Athenaeum Building. The last run of the play was at Soweto Theatre for **Drama for Life’s Mvuso Festival** in 2014, and then at the Wits University Nunnery Theatre. The play gained popularity on TV programmes such as CNBC Africa.

This report will be discussing *Unomsa* as an example of Xhosa Renaissance Literature in the midst of Africa’s global development.

## BODY

### The History of Xhosa Renaissance Literature

In early 2013, a librarian at the **NLSA (National Library of South Africa)** offered me two hours to peruse through *Unomsa* (1922). The book was in isiXhosa, written with the intent to inform audiences about the British conquest that characterized the hardship of South Africans, due to propagated white supremacy that was antagonistic to the customs and rituals of the black peoples (Jabavu, 1922).

Writers, Mr. D.D.T. Jabavu, Mr. J.J.R.Jolobe, Mr. S.E.K. Mqhayi, wrote in vernacular in order to articulate the impact of the British conquest on Xhosa culture. Mr. S.E.K. Mqhayi takes credit for the coining of Xhosa Renaissance Literature, since Mr. Tiyo Soga’s record of translating the entire bible into isiXhosa. Xhosa Renaissance Literature thence provided social commentary during 1910 and 1988 (Moropa, 1991):

The popularity of the Xhosa language is due to his tireless efforts. Against a strong opposition he preached the doctrine that Xhosa could be made respectable and powerful language. Not only did Mr. Mqhayi preach but also practiced this doctrine. […] Mr. S.E.Kr. Mqhayi [is] known throughout Bantu South Africa as the National Poet; and by pen and word of mouth created a Renaissance in our literature (Sinxo, 1935).

The purpose of this report is to suggest the manner in which Xhosa Renaissance Literature can be adapted into Drama and the value in doing so for Africa’s economic growth.

### *Unomsa* as Drama: the Treatment of Feminism

Nomsa Ntobeko reminds me of Mrs. Charlotte Bronte’s governess *Jane Eyre* in the way that the colony Nomsa relocates to has classical Goth elements. Mr. Sinxo is generous in accommodating psychological space for the confrontation of unconscious ideas about women in leadership roles, as Nomsa evolves from a daughter to a teacher, hinting to a developing adolescent girl’s traumatic transition from a rural to an urban area in Africa, without the supervision of her parents.

My discovery was that the ‘goddess movement’ and the ‘superhero movement’, common in black consciousness institutions, are feminist ideas that can distract young women from applying political action to the African Renaissance agenda. In which case, *Unomsa* (1922) offers a historical reference that is not based on a goddess or superhero fantasy.

While a student at the Wits University Faculty of Humanities, I recorded a short documentary to investigate the pan-African approach towards my socio-economic disposition. In the documentary, I sing “Masiy’e Mbo,” a song that reminds Africans of the black diaspora. Some comments on the documentary *She-Might-Be* (2014) are as follows:

“The visuals are dope but I sorta couldn’t get what it’s all about. A minute I thought it was political, but then there's the part when it switches to your experiences with theatre then I sorta feel like it’s a biography.” – Artist Siyakha Mdhluli, Eastern Cape

“Your film is powerful - it feels like the start of something even bigger - there is so much depth and ideas going on that I think a viewer is only going to scratch the surface of your mind - I can’t wait to see what you do next with your filmmaking.” – Cinematographer Jenna Bass, Cape Town

“We hope that you will do us the honour of presenting us your next film.” – 69th Festival de Cannes, France

### *Unomsa* as Drama: the Treatment of Education

My attending school in Motherwell was characterized with participation in the national **GIS Day**. The annual seminar tasked us, learners, to investigate the impact of the following organizations:

• S.U.N. Microsystems • U.C.G.I.S. • U.S.G.S. Science for Changing World • National Geographic • and E.S.R.I.’s

Development Plans in our Township.

The first assignment involved comparing China’s available crude resources to that of our own in South Africa. The following year of 2004 involved feasibility studies on the replacement of Incandescent light-bulbs with C.F.L. light-bulbs in Motherwell. The next saw us presenting more research findings to the Wildlife & Environment Society of South Africa and Eskom.

It is thus plausible to suggest that the adaptation of Xhosa Renaissance Literature into Drama programme could involve the activism of learners and teachers. In this sense, African classical books could be taught in more innovative ways, increasing the potential for productivity of our youth in South Africa.

It is possible for government organizations such as the National Library of South Africa to collaborate with the Department of Basic and Higher Education in enforcing the value of African classical books and their relevance to modern society. Television channels can venture into this project as a community of university graduates who are enrolled as interns.

### The Future for Xhosa Renaissance Literature

The following is a sample script treatment to advocate for the adaptation of Xhosa Renaissance Literature into Drama.

The following treatment was written for the adaptation of *Unomsa* into a teleplay, with four main characters: Nomsa Ntobeko; Nongendi Adams; Themba Sindile and Velesazi Diniso.

We see a hand reaching out for the candle in the dark, putting out the flame. VOICE OVER: In the dark screen, Nomsa calls out for Themba. FLASHBACK: Themba talks to the young ladies in the classroom. Nomsa does not look well, but she tries to put on a brave face. She walks over to her classroom cupboard and takes out uhadi. She implores Themba to play a tune; he bashfully takes on the challenge. He recites a poem about missing home and breaks into tears. Nomsa notices and asks him about his home. Nongendi notices the chemistry between the two.

Eerie sounds are heard from Nomsa’s window. Under the night sky, seated in the woods by a river, Themba drinks himself to a stupor. He closes his eyes and pulls out a revolver. He puts it in his mouth and sobs. As he pulls the trigger, a voice comes to him. It is the voice of Nomsa. She says ‘if you can’t handle life on this plain, what’s to say you can handle life on the next plain. Shocked by the apparition, he drops the gun and runs off.

FLASHBACK: In the classroom Nomsa asks Themba if he will ever stop drinking. He replies, “Kungcono ukuncamisa ibhotile yegranqa kunoncamisa intombazana.” [It is better to kiss a bottle than to kiss a woman.] He stops and looks at Nomsa.

FLASH FORWARD: In her sleep, Nomsa dreams that she is in trouble, trapped in the dark and that Themba comes to rescue her, this time looking sober.

FLASHBACK: In the classroom Themba stops and looks at Nomsa, a naïve-looking girl with braided hair and a slender frame. FLASH FOWARD: Nomsa sits up from her bed and sees that her window is open. As she makes to close it, she hears an eerie sound again. She reassures herself with herself reciting her clan-names, and as she turns the handle, she sees a pair of eyes looking back. She screams and faints.

Themba overhears rumours at a bar about the new teacher, Nomsa, having a love affair with his friend, Velesazi. He leaves the bar without saying. Nongendi reads a letter from the Johannesburg court commissioner about Velesazi by a river. She finds a revolver gun. FLASH FORWARD: Back at her house, Nongendi latches on to her bed covers and vows to destroy the teacher who has come between her and the love of her life, Themba. She looks at the revolver gun.

FLASHBACK: In the classroom Themba tells Nomsa that whenever a good woman leads, a man will follow and he has decided to follow her back to their home village, in the Cape Province. Nomsa, caught by surprise, becomes speechless. Nongendi eavesdrops behind the door.

At the train station, with her luggage bags, Nomsa anxiously awaits on Themba to arrive. A shadow moves inside Themba’s house, as a stalker’s hand appears from the window holding a revolver gun. The shadow is shot from the back and falls onto the ground.

A male figure approaches Nomsa, but cannot walk properly. Nomsa notices blood, as the figure drops to the ground. Nomsa gasps and screams, “Themba!,” as she rushes to see who it is. She pushes through a crowd and sees the wounded Velesazi. She screams for help, when Velesazi tells her it is too late. Themba embraces Nomsa from behind and she is relieved to see him. Themba tries to calm her down, but Nomsa breaks to tears, as Velesazi takes his last breath.

Inside the train to the Cape Province, Themba and Nomsa study each other. VOICE OVER: Themba’s father tells Nomsa’s father that Themba must take part in World War One, and stresses that he cannot refuse his father and his duty to his clan. Nomsa’s father says he knows that Themba is brave, but will not break his daughter’s heart by sending him to war. The train disappears into the fields.

## CONCLUSION

I wish to propose the above teleplay as the first project to settle anxieties about the future of ‘vernacular writing’ in South Africa (Mokoena, 2011). I see the project putting Xhosa classical books on the map, alongside English Renaissance Literature that is often adapted into Drama.

# In closing, I offer this report as a response to SABC’s current plans for community outreaches.

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