

JACK COPE ON BANTU ORAL POETIC TRADITION

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WE ARE COMING ACROSS a phenomenon in South African intellectual circles which, because it sets the tone in the liberal school of thought and it wields tremendous influence among those at home kindly disposed towards us, cannot be ignored.

Mr. J. Cope has made two damaging statements* which seem to contradict him as a rebel politician, in a sense, protesting against the inhumane policies of his government. It would seem that the statements in question, unfortunately, do not vary much from what the herrenvolk professes. He asserts that Bantu oral poetry is not poetry in the modern literary sense. Secondly, he alleges that contemporary literature in Bantu languages teems with '*poetry based on the traditional izibongi and songs . . . striving with a heavy and sometimes deleterious influence from European forms, theme, and style.*'†

Earlier on he had conceded that the Bantu praise poem has something homeric. That is to say that the Bantu praise poem, like any other, is an epic piece of poetic creation that reflects epoch-making events. It is a depiction of historical feats of a whole people in moments of tension; it is their heroic deeds in times of peace and war. There is something more to it. It is a forthright statement of a people's view of the universe, their philosophy of life, at that particular stage of human development. We find in it the history of human relations, the history of those relations into which people enter irrespective of whether or not they wish so. We find in it an expression of human dignity, an appreciation of beauty and a condemnation of all the anti-human, evil, contemptible. It is a conscious, creative effort in which there is an interplay of both imagination and fantasy.

* "Contrast", Summer 1963-64, Cape Town. Mr. J. Cope is the author of *The Albino* and other novels.

† See my article in *The African Communist*, April-June, 1965, on South African Literature.

Let us take a few examples from the Bantu oral poetic tradition. *Shaka, King of the Zulus* has been rendered into English by Dr. A. C. Jordan, the author of the Xhosa classic, *The Anger of the Gods*.

*He is Shaka the unshakable,
Thunder-while-sitting, son of Menzi.
He is the bird that preys on other birds,
The battle-axe that excels other battle-axes.
He is the long-strided-pursuer, son of Ndaba,
Who pursued the moon and the sun.
He is a great hubbub like the rocks of Nkandla
Where the elephants take shelter
When the heavens frown.
'Tis he whose spears resound causing wailings,
Thus old women shall stay in abandoned homes,
And old men shall drop by the way-side.‡*

Without going into a detailed analysis of the excerpt quoted above, it is quite obvious that this is poetry. It has all the requirements of what has become to be known as poetry. In fact, it is far richer, in form and content, than the stark images that stare from some anthologies of European poetry.

Praise poems of the Zulu chiefs have been collected and published by R. Dhlomo. They comprise very valuable material awaiting study and translation since they are available only in Zulu. Some of the brilliant verses of the Zulu praise poem, in Zulu, figure in Thomas Mofolo's (1887-1948) historical novel, *Chaka*, a classic in Sesotho literature, published at Morija in 1928, exactly a hundred years after Chaka's tragic death at the hands of his younger brother, Dingaan.

In 1838 Dingaan's *impi* played a havoc upon the Voortrekker Piet Relief with his followers. It is held that so many Boers were slaughtered that the river, where this occurred, turned red with blood. That river subsequently bore the name: *Blood River*. Dingaan's praise poem, composed on this occasion, in Mr. Jack Cope's translation, runs as follows:

*River crossing of the slippery stones
for there slipped on the stones Piet and his son.
He felled Piet and the Boers, he slew Pieter,
he ate up the Boer with the broken teeth
and him whose teeth are sharp.
He felled the one with a stone flintlock gun
and the Boer with the powerful arms.*

‡ A Zulu friend says the two last lines belong to a praise poem of Mpande, Shaka's younger brother.

dependence meant above all new possibilities to enrich themselves, and possibilities of access to economic positions which before independence had been held by the French colonialists. Part of the petty bourgeoisie in its turn, while wanting to be protected against the big boys, saw in independence above all the possibility of being able to acquire shops and the like at low prices, as well as good jobs in the administration and in private companies. Thus those whose interests were directly encroached upon and those who feared that their prospects for advancement might be limited, found themselves united against the measure taken by the Government and its non-capitalist choice.

That is basically the reason for the clash of the various tendencies which have torn the F.L.N. since independence and right up to the last crisis in Kabylia. Those opposing forces, whatever flag they fly, in fact defend directly or indirectly the class interests of those who do not accept the political orientation of the new Algeria.

Thus the situation becomes clearer every day—one is either for the Ben Bella Government and its revolutionary measures, or one is against it.

The seekers of personal wealth, of all sorts, have already chosen their side. Rather than accept this 'dictatorship of the poor' they are ready to ally themselves with the neo-colonialists whose positions remain strong. They have sent their money to France and Switzerland and they are plotting more or less openly for the overthrow of the government. And on the other side, the workers in the towns, the agricultural workers, the unemployed, the fellaheen, the revolutionary petty bourgeoisie are with President Ben Bella and his Government.

Abroad the same cleavage came about between the true friends of the Algerian Revolution and those who took fright at the position it took up alongside the world peace forces, alongside those who are building socialism.

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The most recent example is the conflict unleashed on Algeria's western frontiers by King Hassan II, representative of Morocco's big bourgeoisie and feudal lords, because he fears that the Algerian revolutionary 'virus' might contaminate Africa and his own country in the first place. Behind the Moroccan aggression are the imperialists of every hue, who have only been made more prudent by the setbacks suffered over Cuba and the lessons they learned there.

The crushing diplomatic defeat sustained by Morocco at Bamako has shown in striking fashion which side had the sympathies of the African people, and what pressure these sympathies can bring to bear.

*Mokhachane's Letlama crashed thro' a mountain with his chest,
As tho' the big mountain were a sand-dune;
He battered it and shattered the cliffs!
Were the mute mountains with tongues imbued,
His feats by Boqate could be sung:
Because the Illustrious Son is a cannibal
When the booming of the guns his ears assails!*

Again, Chief Seeiso Griffith has the following pieces:

(When he was going to hold Qoatsa)
*The rites of Chieftainship performed,
He was given a stick mixed with the iron piece,
The crooked stick with a jutting part;
And the horn of sooty stuff capped the ritual.*

(When he was going to see the British High Commissioner in Pretoria)
*Off came Letlama's giant,
And sauntered about and around,
Drawing the brows and making faces the while.
His face Mokoena now and again brightened:
With the teasing spectacle of being wooed,
The poor missuses' faces cracked into grins oblique!*

Mr. Cope alleges that this is not poetry because, as he says, it is still in the mainstream of oral tradition. It is unfair to deny the artistic essence of the Bantu oral literature for the simple reason that it has not been made available in writing. A Mosotho poet charges with his spear, shield, and head-dress of ostrich feathers:

*Letlama, gird yourself
That the sea may echo with your stir,
That the wind may blow from all the corners of the earth,
That it may blow down Phuthiatsana (River);
That frost may fall, and cornfields forfeit their promising yield;
That the storm may come, and rivulets overflow;
That the trees may be uprooted,
And the bull-frog be caught up in the flotsam;
That Motanyane may be exposed to the sight of the girls,
Motanyane transformed into a rock,
Transformed into the miracle of the ritual of maiden puberty!*

The year 1880 saw the vicious Gun War in Basutoland, the sole aim of which was to disarm the Basotho people, thereby leaving them to the tender mercies of the Boers, then armed to the teeth. Although some Basotho surrendered to the discriminating law of the colonial government at the Cape, there was a fierce resistance, at Mount Moorosi and elsewhere, in Basutoland. Mr. Mphahlele quotes an extract from a praise poem of the Mosotho hero of that War:

*Deep in his pool, the crocodile glared,
He glared with his blood-red eyes,*

*And lo! the young white braves were drowned,
Ay, they fell into the jaws of the snake,
The black snake, khanyapa.*

The Bantu poetic tradition strikes another, if different, plain. It is poetry of love, where a Bantu young woman grows restless over the absence of her *pupil's eye*. Different from a praise poem, it is confined to the internal world of the lyrical heroine. At once it suggests a penetration into the mind and feelings of an individual, only that it lacks the subjectivism and egotism into which lyrical poetry degenerated later in the day:

*The far-off mountains hide you from me,
While the nearer ones overhang me;
Would that I had a heavy sledge
To crush the mountains near me;
Would that I had wings like a bird
To fly over those farther away.*

In Basutoland the maidens have broken forth with a song, in the same vein: *The mountains are barriers . . .*

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In this article we have tried to demonstrate that Mr. Cope's allegations do not hold together. The pieces quoted (they are extracts since the praise poems are long) speak for themselves and, more than that, for the people who created them. Let us not be hoodwinked into believing that we owe our poetic tradition to Europe. Without history and culture. The white man's burden.

What about European influences in the contemporary poetry in Bantu languages? European influence is another stereotype that springs from the wrong assumption that the African is not capable of a single creative effort worthy to talk about. The poems by Mqhayi, Jolobe, Jordan in Xhosa, and Vilakazi, Kunene, Jr., in Zulu, and D. C. T. Bereng, Ntsane, Khaketla and Makara in Sesotho are all deeply rooted in the Bantu oral poetic tradition. The two latter poets in Sesotho, it is true, have allowed mysticism and simplistic aping mania to creep into their otherwise splendid poetic effort. This is a reflection of the forces at work in their world rather than the imitation of the European style, theme and what-not that Mr. Cope suspects.

In our complicated world, oral poetry can only be a starting point, our cosmodrome as we scale the literary heights. The modern poet cannot fetter his creative imagination with themes and concepts connected with the harmony of the seasons and the changing phases of the moon. There are far-reaching aspects, thoughts and

experiences which, having outgrown the limitations of the past century, are now pressing forth for a bold and apt expression in poetic images by genuine, as opposed to half-baked, poets.

The modern poet is having his pulse on the events of the epoch, and not those of a tribe which beyond seasonal feasts may not have sufficient business in life.

Mr. Cope has mistaken the African poet's genuine desire to merge himself, in the mother tongue, in the greater sea of world culture. People who advocate the so-called separate development—at any rate an impossibility—of races can insist on the so-called purely Bantu poetry, which can only exist in the dwarfed minds of the swollen-headed hobgoblins.

Mr. Cope has made a mess of the praise poem of Chief Masopha, one of the most popular pieces in Basutoland. (These pieces are learnt as a matter of fun in Basutoland schools, without sufficient consciousness as to their significance, both artistic and historical.) He calls it *The Boast of Masopha*. That is, according to him, Masopha is boastful! Heroic poetry is a boast, at the best a rigmarole, says Mr. Cope! He has omitted some brilliant passages in translating the heroic piece of this

*Gate-crasher of guarded gates,
Guarded by Chere's Bushmen, cheap as dust.
These millions milled in thro' chance gates,
Milled in thro' inroads fit for women,
Milled in amidst cries of push-me-up!*

Thus Mr. Cope, in dealing with Bantu oral poetic tradition, has not exercised sufficient care in breaking down the language barrier. His theory of the imitation of European models is not convincing. Those interested in things African will have to work more and more with competent Africans who are able to puzzle out those nuances of language and shades of thought that make up so much of their poetic wealth. Any paternalistic approach and domineering attitude are bound to failure.

The author of the article has not been blind to Mr. Cope's initiative and interest in Bantu oral poetic tradition. His pioneering effort is a challenge to the capable and well-informed Africans to shake off the dewdrops from their heavy eyes, and face up to the morning sun breaking over the new horizon. Our well-meaning European friends have had the day. It is high time for the African, with the smell of cow-dung still fresh under his soles, to spell out the magic of the glory gone by, never to return.

Bantu oral poetic tradition plunges totally into that stream of

hitherto neglected treasure-trove of oral literature which the Oxford printers have handled with self-effacing glee: *Oxford Library of African Literature*. That Library must find its rightful place in one of the teeming cities of turbulent Africa. It is conspicuously out of place. A grand idea for Mr. Cope and others!

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