TOWARDS AN AFRICAN LITERATURE VIII: CONFLICTS AND LOYALTIES

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In our last instalment, we paid special attention to William W. Gqoba, the dominant literary figure of the earlier part of the 19th century. His poetry, as we have shown, reflects the social changes of his time. But in order to get as full a picture as possible of this epoch, some attention must be given to his lesser contemporaries, most of whom were far less ready than he was to accept the idea that the white people "gave up their homeland for love of us blacks". In fact, the great *Discussions*—on Education and Christianity—would seem to have been an attempt on Gqoba's part to meet the sceptics of his time.

This period marks the most rapid, most drastic political, economic and social changes hitherto ever known by the Southern Africans. It marks the climax of the Wars of Dispossession; the final conquest of the Xhosa (1877), the Zulu War (1879) and the Gun War in Basutoland (1880-1). Having been led to believe that this was a conflict between Christianity and Paganism, most of the Christian Africans had either remained "neutral" or had made common cause with their "Christian brothers" against the "pagans". But now they were doubtful about their own peculiar position in the new establishment.

In *Isigidimi SamaXhosa*, the monthly which was the main organ through which they could express themselves, many writers of this period give some attention to the war, its purpose and achievements. Somehow, this endless fighting, in which they often find themselves involved, is in conflict with the Christian idea of "peace and goodwill towards men". These doubts are aggravated by the actions of the conquerors, who seem always able to speak "with a double tongue".

Writing about unemployment in Port Elizabeth, L.L.D. relates that those who sought employment were told that there was road work to be done in Cradock. Transport was provided for those who wanted to go there, and a large number of men at once came forward. They were given two shillings each and told to climb on to the waggons. It was then learnt some months afterwards that these men had never been taken to Cradock, but packed off for compulsory military service.

In April, 1878, William Ayliff, Native Commissioner, made an announcement through *Isigidimi* that "women and children who took food to the Xhosa warriors in the fastnesses were prolonging the war unnecessarily. It had therefore been decided that such women and children were to be shipped to Cape Town, to remain there until the war was over. Those of them who chose to remain in Cape Town could do so. When the war was over, the husbands and fathers would be shipped to Cape Town, free of charge, to claim their own".

What happened at the end of the war is to be found in two articles. One is written by 'Hlati Lomtontsi' (Mtontsi Forest), who says: "What has anybody, whether black or white, Christian or Pagan, gained by this war? Yes, the white people perhaps may claim to have gained something, for don't we see little magistrates all over the land? But for us, blacks, the position is so bad that even those trustful people who always sang the praises of the large-hearted White Queen are silent. We were told that after the war, those men whose wives and children had been shipped to Cape Town would be allowed to go there at no expense to themselves in order to claim them. But what do we hear now? That instructions have been issued that no black male may be given a permit to travel to Cape Town."

An eye-witness of what happened in Cape Town wrote as 'S.B.M.' and said: "I write in tears. Children of the ages 3, 5, 6, and 10 have been hired out as servants. The mothers, who were kept at a place called the "Kaffir Depot," had no idea what had become of their children. This morning, I happened to be at the "Kaffir Depot" when five policemen came and ordered the women to pack up and board a ship which would take them to East London immediately. When the women refused to leave their children behind, they were forced out at the point of the bayonet. One woman actually took out a knife and tried to stab herself to death. But she was immediately seized and dragged like a log of wood to the docks where all the women were shipped amidst heart-rending cries."

In his article, 'Hlati Lomtontsi' makes it clear that there is only one solution to this suffering. "Is it the spear? No, we have tried this and failed. The only solution is learning and knowledge. By knowledge I do not mean just book knowledge. I mean that kind of knowledge that will make us realize that each one lives for all. Nor must this knowledge be confined to the males. Our young women must have it too. When you

weed a mealie-field, you do not jump from one mealie-stalk to another, removing only those weeds immediately around the plant. You remove every weed whether it is near a plant or not."

I. W. W. Citashe, a poet of this period, writes in a similar strain:

"Your cattle are gone, my countrymen!
Go rescue them! Go rescue them!
Leave the breechloader alone
And turn to the pen.
Take paper and ink,
For that is your shield.

Your rights are going!
So pick up your pen,
Load it, load with ink.
Sit on your chair,
*Repair not to Hoho,**
But fire with your pen."

The few short stories written at this period make depressing reading. The rapid changes are undermining the African's manhood in all walks of life, and the writers are concerned with this rather than with entertainment. A story about "the King of Death" shows the havoc wrought by liquor. The King of Death issues a proclamation that he will award a prize to the courtier who brings the greatest number of subjects to his Kingdom. A number of courtiers come forward and take turns in giving an account of their stewardship; among them, Asthma, Fever, Cyclone, Accident and Liquor, in that order. When Liquor enters, he is not steady on his legs, and his speech is thick. But he is sure of himself. He shows that he has served his king more loyally than the others have. Among other things he has made young men age before their time and die. He has picked on the most beautiful girls, destroyed their virginity, deprived them of their youth and beauty, and finally brought them to the King of Death. After listening to Liquor's account, the King of Death does not wait to hear any more. Satisfied that Liquor is the most loyal of all his courtiers, he awards him the prize.

* Mountain-forest stronghold where the Xhosa Chief, Sandile, was shot and killed.

Here then, we have the African writers now face to face with the military conqueror who lurked behind the missionaries. The earliest writers saw no connection between the two. But before the end of the century, the writers had begun to wonder if the interests of the spiritual and the military conquerors were not identical. The sons of the missionaries now fill the "little magistracies", mentioned by 'Hlati Lomtonsti'. An occasional writer goes so far as to express some doubt as to whether the missionaries themselves are likely to remain long amongst the people. When a later writer, Mqhayi, said that Britain, "sent us the preacher and sent us the bottle; sent us the Bible and sent us gunpowder", he was expressing a disillusionment that had been felt as keenly, if expressed less artistically, by his predecessors fifty years before him.

Papas