TOWARDS AN AFRICAN LITERATURE

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In case the reader should be led to expect a survey of the literature of the entire continent of Africa, let it be explained at once that for purposes of this and subsequent articles under this heading, we focus our attention on literature as expressed through the media of the indigenous African languages spoken in the Union of South Africa and the neighbouring territories.

There are two major language-groups in this area—Nguni and Sotho. The linguistic forms in each group are mutually intelligible. The Nguni group includes *Xhosa*, (spoken mainly in the Cape Province), *Zulu* (spoken mainly in Natal) and *Rhodesian Ndebele* as literary dialects. One of the major non-literary dialects in this group is *Swazi* (spoken in Swaziland and in the Eastern Transvaal). In the Sotho group there are three literary dialects. These are *Southern Sotho* (mainly in Basutoland and in some parts of the Free State, the Northern Cape and the Transvaal), *Northern Sotho* (in the Transvaal) and *Tswana* (mainly in Bechuanaland, in some parts of the Transvaal and the North-Western Cape). In the Union of South Africa and the High Commission Territories alone there are approximately 5,000,000 Nguni- and 3,000,000 Sotho-speaking people, approximately 8,000,000 in all. Besides these, there are 133,000 Venda-speaking people in the Zoutpansberg district of the Transvaal, and approximately 370,000 Tsonga-speaking, 350,000 of whom live in the Transvaal. There are therefore in this area 8,500,000 people whose mother-tongue is a linguistic form belonging to one or other of these four language-groups. These languages belong to that family of languages which, for purposes of linguistic classification, is known as the *Bantu* family. This family covers approximately the whole of the southern half of the continent of Africa, and consists of well over two hundred languages. While we deal mainly with the southern area, we wish to point out that many of the characteristics we are going to touch upon apply to the whole of the Bantu family.

As the title of this article implies, African literature is, by modern-world standards, only in its infancy. The purpose of the present series of articles is to give the reader an idea as to what promise there is of a grown-up literature. This we shall do by first of all showing what the African genius was able to achieve through the

ages, independently of any outside influence. Then we shall go on to show what is being done, and possibly to suggest what could further be done under the influence of modern civilization.

TRADITIONAL LITERATURE

The history of the literature of the Southern Africans begins long before these people knew anything about writing and long before the advent of the European. Like other peoples of the world, the Africans gave artistic utterance to their deepest thoughts and feelings about those abstract and concrete things that came within their experience: to their speculations about the origin of things, including Man himself: to their crude ideas as to the relationship between Man and the universe: to their interpretation of the struggle between Man and the mysterious forces that surrounded him, and to their admiration for those individuals of the human race to whom legend gave credit for the triumph of Man over such forces: to their interest in the lives and doings of ordinary folk: to their interest in the ways and habits of animals: to their traditional wisdom concerning conduct. Lastly, they gave "concrete and artistic expression . . . in emotional and rhythmical language" to their admiration for collective and individual courage and achievement in the mighty contests between clan and clan, between tribe and tribe.

Among other genres in these traditional possessions there are myths and legends, tales about ordinary folk, animal stories, proverbs, songs and lyrics, and, lastly, praise-poems. In the present article we can only deal with a few aspects of *narrative prose*, and we propose to leave out the myths and animal stories and deal with the tales about men and women: first, because in the experience of the writer, the English-speaking world knows far less about the latter, a great deal more attention having been paid to myths and animal stories by English translators, and secondly, because in the tales about people there is a much greater variety of character and incident than in the other two.

MAN VERSUS MONSTER

The world of African traditional literature is inhabited not only by Man and animal, but also by ogres and other monsters—grotesque figures, so stupid that in spite of their superior physical powers Man triumphs over them. Some live on land and others in the deep black pools of the largest rivers. Those that live on land

are usually half-man and half-beast. The best known of these is the *Zimu* (Nguni) or *Dimo* (Sotho). This is an ogre of enormous size. He swallows some animals alive, so that when he is asleep you can sometimes hear live lambs bleating and calves blaring in his vast stomach. At birth, this ogre has two legs, one sweet, the other bitter. His parents cut off the sweet leg and eat it up immediately after the birth of baby-ogre. But on the remaining leg the grown-up ogre runs faster than the wind. The female *Zimu* is even more grotesque than the male. She has great breasts reaching as low as the knees. She has a tooth so long that "it reaches the other side of a river". These ogres are man-eating, but their social system is in many ways similar to the social system of Man. They have their own kings.

In one of the best known *Zimu* stories, a human princess is chased and caught by a band of ogres. But they find her so beautiful that they decide not to kill and eat her, but carry her to their land and give her over to their king as wife. Although this young woman remains in the land of the ogres long enough to have a beautiful human daughter, she never accepts the disgusting ways of the ogres and never accepts her position as the wife of their king, and she sees to it that her daughter does not accept them either. Every day she sings the praises of her brother, *Mbhengu-sonyangashe*, "*Leader of Raiders, Prince of Embho- and Nguniland, Who hits one buck with his weighty club, But fells the whole herd before his feet.*" So the ogres are always on the lookout for *Mbhengu-sonyangashe*.

After many, many years, *Mbhengu-sonyangashe* reaches the land of the ogres all alone. He hides himself among the tall reeds on the bank of the river, very near the place where the girls come to draw water. A group of *Zimu* "girls" come to draw water. With them is a beautiful little human girl whom he recognizes immediately as his sister's daughter. While the young ogresses play about, this little girl breaks away from them and plays "human games" by herself. So *Mbhengu-sonyangashe* finds an opportunity to draw her attention. The little girl takes to him at once, because "you do not look like these ugly things, the *Zimus*. You look like mama and myself." He cuts her beautiful reeds and carves them. These she must carry home with her. When she reaches her mother's hut with the water-pot on her head, she is to place the reeds across the doorway and insist that no one but her mother must come and help take the clay-pot off her head. Then, as her mother is sure to tramp on some of the reeds and break them whil · in the act of helping her, she must cry that her mother must go in

person to cut her fresh reeds from the exact spot where these were found. The plan works out successfully, and *Mbhengu-sonyangashe* comes face to face with his long-lost sister. They decide that he must go with her to the "Royal Place". He covers his whole body with mud and is so well disguised, so sorry-looking when he comes before the king of the ogres, that everybody believes it when the Queen says that she has brought him home as her *vavunge* (menial), in which case no one may do him any harm.

One day, the ogres go hunting. Only an old crone is left behind. As soon as they have gone, *Mbhengu-sonyangashe* reveals himself as the great hunter, takes his sister and her daughter away, together with all the herds of cattle belonging to the ogres. The old ogress tries to raise the alarm, but her voice is too weak, and by the time the ogres realize what is happening, the Leader of Raiders has swum across a flooded river with his sister and niece on his back. And he has managed to get all the cattle across, too. When the ogres come, they implore him to help them cross. They assure him that they will not kill him. Pretending to be taken in by these assurances, the great hunter plaits a long thick rope, ties a big stone to one end, and swings that end to the other side of the river, while he holds the other end in his hands. The ogres immediately seize their end of the rope (as men do in a tug-of-war) and ask the hunter to tow them across. He tows them. But just when they are in the middle of the river, "the rope slips out of his hands", and all the ogres are swept away by the current and drowned.

In these tales you find not only heroes but heroines too—many of them princesses. These are vigorous, resourceful, spirited girls of the Medea type.

A hunter prince named *Tshalu-Tshalu wase Mbho* (the Fleet-footed One of Embholand) is transformed into an eland by an enchantress, a princess whose love he has rejected. He loves another princess who is "as beautiful as the rising sun". When she gets to know this, she immediately takes command of her lover's followers. She leads them to a pool where all the herds of eland go to drink at a certain time of the day. There she collects bundles and bundles of firewood and makes a big fire. When the elands come, she commands the youths to call out aloud with one voice, "*Tshalu-Tshalu wase Mbho!*" As soon as they do so, the leader of the herd looks round sharply.

"Seize him and throw him into the fire at once!" the princess commands. The young men obey. When the eland has been burnt out completely, the princess collects the ashes very carefully

and mixes them with some enchanted grease contained in an earthen bowl that she has brought with her. *Tshalu-Tshalu wase Mbho* comes to life again.

There are some tales about the "Kings of the Waters"—snake-like monsters that could make the rivers flow or dry at will. These monsters travel from one place to another in a cyclone. They are very much attracted to human girls and very often "call" them into the water by their powers and make them their wives.

On his return from a great hunt that has lasted many moons, a prince named *Tfulako* is dying of thirst. He and his comrades come to a big river. Some of the hunters immediately stoop to drink. But as soon as *Tfulako* stoops, the river dries up completely. This goes on the whole day while the hunters rest on the bank of the river and roast meat. At last, in sheer desperation, *Tfulako* calls out: "King of the Waters! I die of thirst. Allow me to drink, and I will give you my beautiful sister to be your wife." At once the river flows, and *Tfulako* drinks and quenches his thirst. When the hunters reach home, they report what has happened. Nobody has any idea what the King of the Waters looks like, but everybody, including the beautiful sister, feels that this is the only offer that *Tfulako* could have made in the circumstances. So they await the coming of the King of the Waters.

One afternoon, after some moons have died, a terrible cyclone approaches. It makes straight for the hut of the maidens where the princess and the other girls are, and there it disappears, and calm is restored. When the dust clears, the girls discover that they are in the company of a long, long snake whose girth is greater than the thigh of a very big man. Then they realize that this must be the King of the Waters, come to claim his bride. One by one the girls leave the hut, until the princess is left alone with the bride-groom. When she turns to go, the King of the Waters quickly unfolds himself, coils himself round her body, rests his head on her breasts, and gazes longingly into her eyes.

The princess runs out of the hut with her burden round her body and, without consulting anybody, sets out on a long, long journey to her mother's people. As she goes she sings in a high, thin voice:

Shall I, the child of the people of Tfulako,
Shall I, the child of the people of Tfulako,
Sleep with that which is called a snake, a snake?

In reply, the King of the Waters sings in a deep voice:

Long and graceful though I am, so long, so graceful,
Long and graceful though I am, so long, so graceful,
May I not sleep with that which is called a woman, a woman?

And so they travel through forest and ravine, the whole night and the following day, singing pride at each other.

At nightfall they reach the home of her mother's people. But the princess waits in the shadows until she is sure that there is no one in the hut of the maidens. Then she enters there unnoticed. She asks the King of the Waters to undo himself and rest while she goes to make herself beautiful. She goes to the Great Hut and explains everything to her mother's brother and his wife, and then asks them to give her some grease. She greases her whole body very freely, and then covers herself with a beautiful kaross and returns to the hut of the maidens alone. Once inside, she throws off the kaross and invites the King of the Waters to embrace her. He accepts eagerly, but the princess's body is so slippery that for all his scales he cannot hold her. She then offers to go and remove the grease. Again he accepts eagerly. The princess picks up her kaross, walks out of the hut, closes and fastens the door very securely from outside. Then she sets the hut on fire, and the King of the Waters is burnt to death.

MAN AND ANIMAL

In these tales there is seldom, if ever, any conflict between Man and the ordinary animal. (The hunting of the animals by Man, which is very often incidental to the encounters with the monsters, would seem to belong to a different "universe".) Far from being hostile to Man, the animal—especially the small one—often comes to his help in the contests with monsters.

A group of young men, on approaching the house of a dangerous sorcerer named *Ngangezulu* (As-great-as-the-heavens), meet a mouse who persuades them to flay him and take his "talking skin" with them, so that it may give the alarm when danger is near.

Birds, especially doves in pairs, figure a good deal in stories about ordinary folk and babies.

In one story, two doves find a young married woman weeping because she cannot beget children. The doves advise her to make two little loaves of bread, equal in size, and leave them covered in a clay-pot for five days. She carries out their advice, and when she looks into the pot after five days, she finds not loaves of bread but beautiful twin babies.

Then there is the story of the beautiful *Sikhambha-nge-nyanga*

(She-who-walks-by-moonlight). This was a beautiful girl, so beautiful that if she stepped into the light of day, the men would not go hunting, the women would not go to hoe the fields, the girls would not go and draw water from the river, the herd-boys would not drive the cattle to the pastures, and the animals, too, would not go to the pastures. All living things would flock where she was and gaze at her, feasting their eyes on her beauty. She was therefore not to come out during the daytime. She came out by moonlight and went to draw the water from the river by moonlight, when all the people had finished their day's work and could gaze and gaze at her.

When She-who-walks-by-moonlight got married, her people-in-law were warned to observe this custom. They did so, and everything went well until a baby was born. Then one day, all the people of the house went out to work in the fields, leaving the young mother with her baby and the *mpelesi* (nurse girl sent specially by her mother's people). Besides them there was an old, old woman who was too weak to help herself in any way. In the middle of the day, the old woman felt very thirsty. *Sikhambha-nge-nyanga* gave her some water, but it was not fresh, and the old woman would not drink it. So *Sikhambha-nge-nyanga* was forced to pick up the water-pot and the ladle, step into the light of day and go to draw water from the river.

She tried to draw water with the ladle, but it slipped out of her hand and disappeared. She tried to draw with the water-pot itself, but it slipped out of her hands and disappeared. She took off her head-cover to immerse in the water and carry home quickly so that the thirsty woman could suck the water from it. But this, too, slipped out of her hands and disappeared. She cupped her hands and tried to draw some water with them. Then *she* disappeared under the water.

Her people-in-law did all they could to recover her. In vain. Meanwhile the baby was hungry and crying for its mother.

At moonrise the *mpelesi*, without telling any of the in-laws, carried the baby to the edge of the pool where the mother had disappeared and sang a sad song, calling on the mother to come out and suckle the baby. *Sikhambha-nge-nyanga* came out, suckled and fondled her baby and, without saying a word, handed it back to the *mpelesi* and disappeared. This went on for a number of days until the in-laws discovered it. Then the men decided to go and waylay the mother. They hid themselves in the reeds near the pool and heard the *mpelesi* sing her sad song, saw the mother come

out of the water, saw her suckle and fondle her baby. And just when she was handing it back, they sprang upon her, seized her and would carry her home. But the river followed them, followed them beyond the reeds, followed them through the woods, beyond the woods, up the slope, right up to the village. Then the people were seized with fear and they put her down, and the river received her and receded to its place.

When the people were at a loss what to do, two doves appeared and offered to fly swiftly to *Sikhambha-nge-nyanga's* own people, report what had happened and seek advice. On reaching the place, the doves perched on the gate-posts of the cattlefold. When the herdboys saw them they wanted to throw sticks at them and kill them in order to roast and eat them. But the doves sang:

We are not doves that may be killed,
We come to tell of her that walks by moonlight;
She dipped the ladle, and it went down,
She dipped the pot, and it went down,
She dipped her head-cover, and it went down,
She dipped her hands, and then she went down.

The people gave the doves some corn to eat, and then asked them to fly back swiftly and tell *Sikhambha-nge-nyanga's* in-laws to slaughter and flay a dun-coloured ox and throw its carcass into the pool after nightfall. The doves flew back swiftly and delivered their message. The order was carried out.

At moonrise that night, when the *mpelesi* carried the baby to the water's edge, all the people of the village followed her. They heard her sing her sad song, and they saw *Sikhambha-nge-nyanga* come out of the pool and suckle and fondle her baby. But this time, after the baby had been fed, the mother did not hand it back to the *mpelesi*. Instead, she carried it lovingly in her own arms. And as she walked quietly back to the village, the people gazed and gazed and gazed at her beauty in the moonlight.

It will have been noted that most of the factors that constitute the subject-matter of the great human literature are to be found in rudimentary form in these tales — courage and resourcefulness : love and readiness to sacrifice for one's loved ones : the vindictiveness of despised love : the power and influence of beauty : conflict of duties (*Sikhambha-nge-nganga's* duty to the community conflicting with her duty to the old woman who is dying of thirst) : retribution for upsetting the moral or social order : the triumph of brain over brawn : the triumph of good over evil. If these and

many other tales of this kind have survived through the ages, it is because of their artistic value, each one of them symbolizing something of permanent meaning to Man as Man. Evidence of this permanence is to be found not only in the hyperbolic language of the traditional praise-poems, in which mighty men are very often likened to fabulous monsters, but also in the living language of every day, in the numerous idiomatic expressions, proverbs and aphorisms, many of which are based on the characters and incidents of the traditional tale.

The few specimens that have been given here will have shown that African soil is by no means barren. When overseas critics complain that South African art, in any form, lacks local character, is it not probably because the cultural world is looking for just these and other traditional artistic possessions, of which South Africa itself has not become aware? Would not some of these tales and songs provide great themes for symphonic poems, opera, ballet? Would not a great South African poet or painter, whether black or white, find as inspiring a theme in *She-who-walks-by-moonlight* as English poets and painters found in *The Lady of Shalott?* One can only hope that by the time South Africa develops a correct attitude to human culture, at least some of these treasures will still be there for genius to utilize and leave as a legacy to humanity.