

TOWARDS AN AFRICAN LITERATURE (V): THE EARLY WRITERS

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THOUGH a mere handful, the earliest Xhosa writers deserve at least a whole instalment of this series to themselves, not only because they were the first Southern Africans ever to express their thoughts in writing, but also because of the socio-historical interest of their subject—the life-story of their mentor, Ntsikana. These writers were some of Ntsikana's younger disciples who, in accordance with his dying-wish, were "never to return to Xhosa life, but to go to the school (mission station) at Gwali." This was the time of the endless wars amongst various sections of the Xhosa people, especially between Ngqika (misnamed 'Gaika') and his uncle and one-time regent, Ndlambe. The former was regarded as a traitor by all the other sections of the Xhosa for allowing himself to be used against his own people by the White dispossessors. Two commoners, both of them diviners ('witchdoctors'), had profound social influence among the Xhosa at this time—Ntsikana, a one-time adherent of Ndlambe, later of Ngqika and, ultimately, of Christ; and Makhanda or Nxele (the left-handed warrior misnamed 'Makana'), an adherent of Ndlambe. There was rivalry between these two figures, and, since we know the story only from Ntsikana's disciples, Makhanda inevitably suffers. Although some of them wrote on other subjects later on, it must be emphasized that at the beginning none of these disciples set out to write history as such. They all set out to write about their mentor, and the chiefs are mentioned only in so far as their rule affected Ntsikana. But even from the little that is said about them, we get a fairly clear picture of the characters of Ngqika and Ndlambe.

Ntsikana as depicted by his disciples

According to his own disciples, Ntsikana, until his conversion, lived and enjoyed his pagan life as fully as any man of his social accomplishments. He was a great composer, singer and dancer, as well as a polygamist, adulterer, and diviner. The story of his conversion is told by his own son, William Kobe Ntsikana:

“On the day that he was called by the Spirit, he had risen early and was leaning leisurely against the poles of his cattle-fold. When the sun rose, one of its rays smote him. Then he was heard calling to a boy who was attending the calves, ‘Do you see what I see?’ The boy said, ‘No’. Three times he asked him, and still the boy said ‘No’. . . . Then he went to a *mdudo* (dance), together with other people. But on this day, when he stood up to dance, the wind arose. At last he sat down. Then later on he stood up again to dance, and again the wind arose. Thereupon he ordered all those of his household to accompany him home. And when he came to the river, he washed off the red ochre. And they wondered what had befallen him. . . .

“On reaching home, he told them what had befallen him, and also that they must not listen to Nxele, who was misleading the people, but listen to this Thing that had entered him. ‘This Thing that has entered me enjoins that we pray, and that all must kneel!’ Thereafter he held divine service at all times, and he was wont to put on his kaross of leopard-skins, and read therefrom.”

According to Zaze Soga, Ntsikana was in the land of Ndlambe when it became clear that “this Thing had entered him.” Zaze Soga writes: “It was the time of Nxele, a diviner, who preached vapour and vain sayings that have never come true up to this day. At one time he was telling the people that he would make the heavens fall on the White warriors during the fighting at *Rhini* (Grahamstown). Ntsikana was at first inclined to believe Nxele, and he even went so far as to pay tribute to him, presenting him a white ox. For it was an established practice in those days that Nxele should receive tributes from all the people. But later on, when Ntsikana discovered that he had been duped like so many others, he demanded this ox back. . . . When war began to threaten, Nxele said that the Xhosa warriors would not fight with spears, but would fight by making the heavens fall on the White warriors. Ntsikana contradicted him, saying, ‘Never!’ . . . When these men, Ntsikana and Nxele, opposed each other so, the royal chief Ndlambe gave his ruling, saying, ‘Ntsikana had better lie back awhile, and let us listen to Nxele, otherwise one’s ears will clash with each other (i.e., Ntsikana’s sayings, entering by one ear, would clash with Nxele’s, entering by the other). Why doesn’t Ntsikana stay near Ngqika for a time?’

“And so it was that Ntsikana returned to his own home, among the Ngqikas, and preached to the people, saying, ‘See the people being deceived by Makhanda at Ndlambe’s. My Thing does not tell me so.’”

The disciple who gives the fullest account of Ntsikana is Makhaphela Noyi Balfour, son of Ntsikana’s leading disciple and successor. Less inclined to romanticism and mysticism than Ntsikana’s own son, Makhaphela now and again makes a shrewd observation about the social conditions of his boyhood:

“Yes, I knew Ntsikana, son of Gaba. . . . He liked to dress well and looked handsome in his kaross, which was made of the skins of male leopards only, and it was in this kaross that the great one used to preach. . . . Ntsikana founded his school at Mankazana, and it was there that my father Noyi was converted. . . .

“It was clear to his disciples that he represented them before God. For the Xhosa people, who were used to diviners, it was easy to conceive of such a thing. Ntsikana had it in him to make his disciples feel the greatness and nearness of God. . . .

“At divine service he used to sit near the doorway, while the rest of the hut was filled completely with people, men and women. His kaross of male leopard skins covered his body entirely—that body that he would not reveal even to himself.

“The prelude to the service was the hymn, *That Great Cloak That Covereth Us*. And when his disciples had thus acknowledged his entry, he would then preach this Thing that had entered him, this Thing that hated sin. And he would name what was sinful in their daily lives, pointing out whatever in them was hateful to God. . . . This man preached Christ, saying, ‘Repent ye! Repent ye from your sins!’ He preached the Son of God, the only begotten of His Father, the Great Cloak, the true Refuge, the Stronghold and Rock of Truth. . . .

“Ntsikana was wont to describe the man Dafeti (David), proclaiming him the great progenitor of all Believers. The names of Adam, Dafeti and the coming Mesiyasi (Messiah) we first heard from Ntsikana. . . . Be it always known that among the Xhosa of old, God produced the prophet Ntsikana, who had no learning at all, in a manner that was dim and vague at the time, but which has become bright and clear in our own days. . . .

“On Ntsikana’s preaching, his people accepted this Thing, even though they did not tumble over one another in going

into it, considering how eagerly he was urging them. . . Ngqika was the first to accept it. He said: 'In order that the Thing may be acceptable, I had better be the first to join it'. But because he adhered so much to this outmoded Xhosa way of life, he was easily led away from his aim by his councillors."

For a long time after being 'led away' by his pagan councillors, however, Ngqika continued to have faith in Ntsikana and his strategy in war. It was an ill-fated military expedition against Ndlambe, in which Ntsikana's divination took too long to foresee "the gnats swarming on the skulls" of Ngqika's dead warriors, that decided the issue for the army commanders. And on their return, the latter clamoured that "these praying men" be killed. "How can we be defeated when they are praying?" they asked angrily.

It was after this disastrous campaign that Ntsikana and some of his leading disciples had to flee for their lives. Makhaphela Noyi Balfour makes mention of 'the flight to Tambo': "Wherever we stopped for the night, we boys, in accordance with Ntsikana's orders, had to make a large clearing in the bush, trim it and make it beautiful, in order to raise a place of worship. . . . We kept this up throughout that flight, and never were we without a structure in which to worship our Great Creator."

The last days of Ntsikana are described by Kobe and Makhaphela. According to both writers, Ntsikana had his grave dug and his coffin made of *mhlunguthi* some time before his death. And every now and then, he would lie in the coffin and have it lowered into the grave, to make sure that everything would go smoothly when the time came. According to Kobe, Ntsikana's relatives used to weep when he did this. Whereupon he would say, "I was only your light. No messenger goes on a mission never to return. I was only a messenger."

"One day," writes Makhaphela, "after they (the senior disciples) had lowered him into the grave, he said jokingly, 'You might as well throw in the soil'. For he was a great joker. 'Hear the *mfundisi* ordering us' exclaimed Noyi. But Matshaya said, 'Never! Even a homeless wanderer must be quite dead and still before his body can be covered with soil.' So they helped him out of the grave. But on a certain night, towards the coming of dawn, the spirit of the prophet departed.

"Alas! The wailings that were to be heard! . . . They have never ceased ringing in my ears. . . . It was as if even the cliffs and forests had joined in the wailing! He was buried by Noyi

and Matshaya with great ceremony. His coffin was fastened with thongs made from ox-hide, not nailed as we do nowadays.

“And so the famous son of Gaba slept in the cold ground just at the age of real manhood.”

After Ntsikana's Death

The story is carried beyond Ntsikana's death by the writers we have already quoted and by other contemporaries. Makhaphela writes: “Some of these disciples of the son of Gaba were baptized by the first White missionaries and given more training in the Truth that they had accepted. . . . Each person was given a new name by which he would be known as a Christian. So it was that Noyi (Makhaphela's own father) was renamed ‘Balfour’. This became the practice for us who had chosen this new road. Nonetheless it was strange, because we had never seen anything wrong with our own names. But so eagerly was this new teaching accepted that many a man, even while still a pagan, kept in mind some new name that he fancied, so that, in the event of his becoming a Christian, he should be known by that name.”

This explains such names as William and Balfour, which make such very strange reading in this context.

Ntsikana's disciples were always watchful lest the teachings of the missionaries should clash with what they had themselves been taught. John Muir Vimbe writes: “I am thankful that the Maker-of-all-things has preserved me until I even saw His Word written in our own tongue. . . . This Word too regards as evil those things that we have always regarded as evil: theft, adultery, killing, lying and many other abominations as enumerated in Leviticus xviii, 6-30.”

The name of Satan, which they first got to know from the missionaries, did not clash with Ntsikana's teaching, for his disciples accepted it immediately and associated it with all the things that looked ugly to them. Says Zaze Soga: “In their prayers they used to say that all those things that were pleasing to the eye were from God, and all the ugly ones from Satan. So it was that they were wont to say in their prayers, ‘Thou God Who art in Heaven! Most Beautiful! Creator of birds and beasts (all the beautiful ones being named), unlike Satan who, in trying to create birds, produced the bat and the owl.’ ”

Ntsikana's place in African life and literature

It is unfortunate that, due to the universal human weakness

for 'miracles', latter-day zealots have disregarded verifiable historical facts and all but deified Ntsikana. We cannot blame Kobe for recording his father's religious experiences as told to him. After all, when his father was 'called by the Spirit', Kobe was only a child and could not have been present at the festivities where the rising wind was supposed to have forbidden Ntsikana to dance. The same Kobe records that 'Nyhengane' (Dr. van der Kemp) preached among the Xhosa people, and that Ntsikana's contemporary and rival, Makhanda, who preached the 'resurrection of the dead' and condemned witchcraft and adultery, declared openly that he was a follower of 'Nyhengane'. There can be no doubt that Ntsikana, who was so closely associated with the chiefs who gave 'Nyhengane' permission to preach, must have heard this man preach and read from 'the Book.' Yet the zealots want to believe that the names and stories of Adam, David and the Messiah were communicated to Ntsikana 'directly from God'. Again, in spite of the mission at Gwali, where Ntsikana enjoined his disciples to go after his death, the zealots assert that Ntsikana never saw a White man, but 'prophesied' the coming of 'a people with flowing hair'. Kobe records also that, when Ngqika made it known that he was going to seek the help of *amaNgesi* (English soldiers) against Ndlambe, it was Ntsikana who warned him that if he did so, the land of the Xhosa people would be the booty of the White man. Again, it was during Ntsikana's life-time that Makhanda succeeded in uniting the Ngqikas and the Ndlambes in order to raid Grahamstown. This was in 1819. Ntsikana's biographers tell us that he died in 1821, that is two years after Makhanda, who was drowned in his attempt to escape from captivity on Robben Island.

The importance of Ntsikana lies not in the legendary smitings by the shafts of sunrise, nor in the rising winds and readings from karosses. The fact that his Hymn of Praise is the first literary composition ever to be assigned to individual formulation—thus constituting a bridge between the traditional and the post-traditional period—is of great historical significance. But even more important than this is the fact that, through his influence, a few young disciples were introduced to the arts of reading and writing, and that, inspired by his exemplary life and teaching, these men became the harbingers of the dawn of literacy amongst the indigenous peoples of Southern Africa.