

# TOWARDS AN AFRICAN LITERATURE

## II: TRADITIONAL POETRY

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IN the Introduction to his *Zulu-Kafir Dictionary* (1857), the Rev. J. L. Döhne, Missionary to the American Board, writes as follows:

"Some have expected to find much poetry among the Zulu-Kafirs, but there is, in fact, none. Poetical language is extremely rare, and we meet with only a few pieces of prose. The Zulu nation is more fond of 'ukuhlabela', i.e., singing, and engage more in 'ukuvuma amagama ezinkosi,' i.e., singing the praises of the chiefs, than any other Kafir tribe. But their capabilities in this respect are very limited. The highest song of praise for their king is composed of a few hyperbolic expressions. Other specimens consist of the frequent repetition of one sentence . . . regarding some object, such as a cow, a dog, a dance, a girl, repeated in a singing voice—or they are a mere imitation of a roaring war noise, that of a wild savage animal, of the clashing of shields or spears. But nothing like poetry or song exists—no metre, no rhyme, nothing that interests or soothes the feelings or arrests the passions—no admiration of the heavenly bodies, or taste for the beauties of creation. We miss the cultivated mind which delights in seizing on these subjects and embodying them in suitable language."

According to his own account of himself, Döhne worked for ten years amongst the Xhosa-speaking people in the Eastern Cape before going to Zululand. His dictionary was published after ten years of work amongst the Zulu-speaking, that is, after twenty years of work amongst several peoples who spoke one or other of the mutually intelligible Nguni dialects. There can be no doubt that during that period Döhne acquired a working knowledge of Nguni in general, and of Zulu in particular. His flat denial of the existence of poetry amongst the Zulu-speaking people can therefore be attributed not to a lack of understanding of the language, but to his conception of poetry. This conception is implied, rather than stated. Apparently, on looking for trochees, dactylic hexameters, iambic pentameters, rhyme schemes, etc., and not finding them, Döhne would have forgiven the Zulu bards if at least they had composed some poems dealing directly with the stars, the moon, and the milky way. Having looked for these in vain, he concludes that there is no poetry. In Döhne's pronouncement one is reminded of that attitude, so well described by Otto Jespersen, of "men fresh from grammar-school training" towards language. To these men,

"no language would seem really respectable that had not four or five distinct cases and three genders, or that had less than five tenses and as many moods in its verbs. Accordingly, such poor languages as had either lost much of their original richness in grammatical forms . . . or had never had any, . . . so far as one knew, . . . were naturally looked upon with something of the pity bestowed on relatives in reduced circumstances, or the contempt felt for foreign paupers."

Watts-Dunston defines poetry as "the concrete and artistic expression of the human mind in emotional and rhythmical language." Accepting this definition, as we do, for our present purpose, we find that in the indigenous languages of Southern Africa, including Zulu, there is a wealth of traditional poetry covering, in its subject-matter, the whole range of human experience and emotion—of the young child excited about the "funny" movements of the frog, or curious about the timid little bird that hops and flutters about from twig to twig; of the youth in the joys and pangs of love; of the vigorous hunter or warrior; of the aging man longing to rest with his fathers in the land of the spirits; of the clan or tribe reliving its past tribulations and triumphs, etc.

These emotional experiences are expressed communally in song, speech and action. There is therefore a strong dramatic element, and to draw a dividing line between the lyrical and the dramatic is impossible. We can, however, make two divisions, namely, *lyric and dramatic verse*, which includes nursery rhymes and jingles and all the various kinds of songs, e.g., love-songs, work-songs, hunting-songs, war-songs, etc., and *praise-poems*. The latter is a *genre* for which no exact parallel is to be found either in classical or in modern Western poetry. In spirit, content and form, it partakes of the features of the epic on the one hand, and of those of the ode on the other. In general, Bantu traditional poetry has much in common with Hebrew poetry. There is no "regular metre" in the classical sense, but there is marked rhythm achieved, *inter alia*, by means of balance of thought.

#### LYRICAL AND DRAMATIC VERSE

In some songs, the words are more important than the tune, while in others there is little or no meaning in the "words." Generally in a song there is a leader and a chorus. If the words are very important, they fit into the part sung by the leader, and the chorus takes up a refrain, either in some meaningful word or words related to the main theme, or in meaningless, monosyllabic ejaculations like the English *fa la la* or *yo ho ho!*

In the following love-song, the Xhosa girl yearns for an

absent lover:

*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.*

The Xhosa young man who looks forward to meeting the girl he loves after a strenuous day's work apostrophizes her as follows:

*Shade wherein I rest when I am weary,  
Fount whereof I drink when I am thirsty.*

The prospect of a mother-in-law is seldom a pleasant one. The Hlubi girl who would rather continue to enjoy her youthful freedom than get married, sings appealingly:

*Alas!  
No more daydreams, tall proud maiden!  
O father! O mother!  
Why marry me off so young?  
Think of her who is not my mother,  
How is she likely to handle me?*

But there is the other Hlubi girl, to whom even the prospect of a cruel mother-in-law pales into insignificance as she realizes how fast she herself is aging:

*Come, it is late in the day!  
All those of my age are married,  
And now I wander, wander all alone.  
Hold back the sun that it may not go down  
Without carrying the news (of my betrothal to some one).*

The song of the aging maid is highly dramatic. As they sing, the leader and the chorus hold their hands appealingly to one side, and they sway their hips from side to side with graceful modesty. Meanwhile the young men, who hum the bass softly in sympathy, walk slowly in a row along the line of girls and gaze tenderly into the face of each one, especially that of the leader.

But the very next day, these young men might be miles away from these scenes of love, out in the wilds after big game, and

some of them might never return. As they left the royal place, they used to announce their departure on such an expedition with a hunting-song. One of these is a famous buffalo-hunt song, versions of which are to be found amongst the Hlubi and the Zulu:

*Ye ha he! Ye ha he!*  
*A mighty whirlwind, the buffalo!*  
*Make for your homes, you who fear him.*  
*They chase them far! They chase them near!*  
*As for us, we smite the lively ones*  
*And we leave the wounded alone.*  
*Ye ha he! Ye ha he!*  
*A mighty whirlwind, the buffalo!*

The Zulu warriors used to salute their king as follows:

*Bayede!*  
*Thou art the heavens,*  
*Thou, elephant-born!*

But the kings had ideas of a heaven elsewhere—a life of peace and quiet in the land of the spirits of their royal ancestors. So to these ancestors they used to offer the following prayer:

*Hear thou, O King, tallest among the tall!*  
*Offspring of Mandondo Gumede, most beautiful!*  
*I linger here to beg of thee, first-born:*  
*Let us weave us a rope, O 'Mandi, son of Jama,*  
*And go to heaven where the evil may not climb,*  
*For should they try, they break their tiny toes.*

The idiom, style and technique of the traditional lyric are easily adaptable to new conceptions. We have evidence of this in a Xhosa hymn composed by Ntsikana, the first convert to Christianity. Ntsikana was completely illiterate. Before he was converted, he was a diviner and a great leader of dance and song. The hymn that he composed was accompanied by dancing and singing in the traditional manner:

*Thou great God that dwellest in Heaven,*  
*Thou art the shield, the stronghold of truth;*  
*'Tis Thou, and Thou alone, that dwellest in the highest,*  
*Thou the maker of life and the skies,*  
*Thou the maker of the sparse and clustered stars,*  
*As the shooting-star doth proclaim.*

*The horn soundeth aloud, calling us  
 To Thee, great Hunter, Hunter of souls,  
 Who maketh one herd of friend and foe,  
 All covered and sheltered under Thy cloak.  
 Thou art the little Lamb, Mesiyas,  
 Whose hands are wounded with nailing,  
 Whose feet are wounded with nailing;  
 Thy blood that streameth for ever and ever  
 For the sake of us men was shed.*

## PRAISE-POEMS

To the Bantu-speaking Southern Africans, the praise-poem is their proudest artistic possession. It is in this *genre* that the greatest possibilities of a Bantu language as a medium of literary expression are to be found.

The subject of a praise-poem may be a nation, a tribe, a clan, a person, an animal, or a lifeless object. The poem may be party narrative, or partly or wholly descriptive. It abounds in epithets, very much like the Homeric ones, and the language in general is highly figurative.

The bard, who was both composer and public reciter, was versed in tribal history and lore, as well as being witty. He held a position of honour in his community. It was therefore the greatest ambition of every boy to be at least a public reciter, if not a composer. In fact, every boy was expected at the very least to be able to recite his own praises, those of the family bull, those of the favourite family cow, even if composed by someone else, and was also expected to know the traditional praises of certain species of animals and birds. Any boy who lacked these accomplishments was held in contempt by the men as well as by other boys.

Rubusana's anthology of Xhosa praise-poems includes the "praises" of a boy who knew *Rhini* (Grahamstown), *Qonce* (King William's Town) and *Tinarha* (Uitenhage). On finding at these work centres that all the men had to be at work in the morning at six o'clock, the boy composed a poem in "praise" of himself:

*A mighty bell is six o'clock!  
 I went to Rhini and found the men  
 Driven by six o'clock;  
 I went to Qonce and found the men  
 Toiling at six o'clock;*

*Back at Tinarha I found the men  
Bullied by six o'clock.*

The boy is obviously having a dig at the men. He is amazed and amused to discover that there are places in the world where these supposed "gods" are so helpless and powerless as to be enslaved by a mysterious sound named 'Six O'clock'! His literary effort may seem puerile, but in essence the conception here is not different from that of the "machines of the mines" that enslave "the tribes of the Black One" in Vilakazi's poem. But there is something more. In suggesting that he himself is 'Six O'clock', the boy is cleverly insinuating that he is mightier than any man in the community.

In the experience of the present writer, the tradition of the praise-poem is strongest amongst the Hlubi. Now scattered all over Southern Africa, the Hlubi were once upon a time the most powerful of the Nguni tribes. Their power was broken after the death of the legendary Bhungane. Of the sons of Bhungane the most famous was Mpangazitha (Despoiler-of-the-enemy), who held his own section of the Hlubi together for a long time in the era of Shaka. His downfall was brought about by internal quarrels. Betrayed by one of his half-brothers, he was defeated and killed by the Ngwane chief, Matiwane, on the banks of the Caledon.

Every clan among the Hlubi has its own praises. These make reference to heroic incidents in the history of the particular clan. The language is very hyperbolic, and "the sea" often means nothing more than a big river. From their praises, it is clear that the Hlubi tribe consisted of once independent clans who came together under various circumstances, thus swelling the numbers of some magnificent chief.

In order to join the Hlubi, the Masingila clan had to fight their way across one of the big rivers that flow into the Indian Ocean. They slew so many of the enemy that the water turned red. They are therefore praised as follows:

*Beautiful as the blades of grass in summer  
They came, from the seas, the blood-red sea,  
That mighty river unfordable to men,  
Crossed only by swallows, because they have wings.*

The Rhadebe clan, whose brave sons are always ready to lay down their lives in defence of their homes:

*They whose gates are not barred with poles,  
But barred with the heads of warrior-men.*

The Nozulu clan, whose daughters are famous for their beauty:

*The beautiful Nguni of the Mother-of-the-heavens,  
Who came fresh and beautiful as the cornfields in autumn,  
Smooth and bright as the round stones of the river.*

In this last one, the Hlubi pay compliments to the mother of the famous Mpangazitha. She belonged to this clan. The legend is that her people came as refugees to the Hlubi. In order to enter Hlubi territory, they had to cross a big river. To make sure that they should be welcome, the parents decided to dress all the beautiful girls as attractively as possible and let them go ahead of the rest of the group. The girls crossed the river and took a path through the cornfields. It was autumn. When the Hlubi saw these young women emerge from the fields, their admiration knew no bounds. "As beautiful as the cornfields themselves!" exclaimed one. "As smooth as the stones of the river they have just crossed!" observed another.

When the rest of the fugitives saw how kindly the girls were received, they decided to follow. On reaching the royal place, they were told, "If you are related to such beautiful young women, you cannot be bad people. We welcome you!" Mpangazitha's mother was a descendant of the leader of this fugitive clan.

So much for the praises of clans. We now proceed to give extracts from the praises of the chiefs.

The praises of Mpangazitha, leader of the Hlubi:

*The Despoiler-of-the-enemy, kinsman of Jobe,  
He is the clearing-and-frowning skies,  
A thunderer like the heavens above,  
Ever smiting man, but never decried;  
He is the thudding myriads of Zikode and Dlomo  
That came thudding amidst the land,  
Till all the nations quaked with fear;  
He is the wielder of the brain-weighted club,  
The true guardian of his people.  
He is the fleetfooted buck of Mashiya and Dlomo  
That gores as it dashes along.*

Shaka, King of the Zulus:

*He is Shaka the unshakable,  
Thunderer-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 wayside.*

Apart from describing the hero in general terms, a praise poem may devote some lines to narrating specific exploits in the life of the subject of praise. Lerotholi, grandson of Moshoeshoe ("Moshesh") and hero of the Gun War (1880-1), has his triumph recorded as follows:

*Deep in his pool the crocodile glared,  
 He glared with his blood-red eyes,  
 And lo! the young White braves were drowned,  
 Aye, they fell into the jaws of the snake,  
 The black snake, khanyapa, King of the Waters.*

*Khanyapa*, King of the Waters, is supposed to have the power to "call" people into the deep pool where he lives, by merely glaring at them. But these powers are sometimes attributed also to the crocodile, *koena*, which is the totem of the House of Moshoeshoe.

Ncaphayi, leader of the Bhaca, was famous for his skill in jungle warfare. His favourite tactic was to make his men retreat into a forest or jungle in a seemingly disorderly manner, as if routed. But in a short time, the pursuing enemy would find themselves encircled by the Bhaca. Ncaphayi used this tactic against the Mpondomise and defeated them, slaying their leader, Velelo, below the Nqadu mountain-forest (about fifteen miles east of the Umtata River). So,

*He is the light feather arching and vanishing  
 Only to feast on men below the Nqadu mountain;  
 He is the jungle-home of leopards and lions.*

But it must not be thought that these bards were mere flatterers. While they drew attention mainly to the good and praiseworthy, they also had the licence to make sharp criticisms of the habits of their subjects. It is here that the bard found the



greatest scope for his wit.

Dingane, murderer and successor of Shaka, was mean and greedy, always having a ready excuse to "eat up" the cattle of his wealthy subjects:

*He is the needy offspring of Mpikazi,  
With eye forever cast on the people's herds;  
His cattle are gathered like honey-combs,  
Found and seized wherever he goes.*

Luhadi, chief of the Bomvana, was very licentious:

*Below the rocks it is dreadful to behold,  
For there are the handsome and their concubines.*

Ngangelizwe, chief of the Thembu, was so tyrannical that many of his subjects fled to other lands:

*See how the doves flutter and huddle,  
Dismayed at the sight of the eagle.  
Woe to the dove that has no wings!*

There are some modern Bantu-speaking poets who seem to think that the praise-poem has had its day. But there are others who have shown very successfully that the idiom, style and technique of the traditional praise-poem can be applied most effectively to modern themes. Among the latter is the Xhosa poet, Mqhayi. When the Prince of Wales visited South Africa in 1925, Mqhayi "praised" him, and in the "praises" he apostrophized Britain as follows:

*Ah, Britain! Great Britain!  
Great Britain of the endless sunshine!  
She hath conquered the oceans and laid them low;  
She hath drained the little rivers and lapped them dry;  
She hath swept the little nations and wiped them away;  
And now she is making for the open skies.  
She sent us the preacher: she sent us the bottle,  
She sent us the Bible, and barrels of brandy;  
She sent us the breechloader, she sent us cannon;  
O, Roaring Britain! Which must we embrace?  
You sent us the truth, denied us the truth;  
You sent us the life, deprived us of life;  
You sent us the light, we sit in the dark,  
Shivering, benighted in the bright noonday sun.*