solve the growing problems. When the polarization became more marked, when the people began to reject the cautious measures of the liberal approach and assert their ability to organise themselves and advance their own cause, some took fright and retreated into support of the status quo. Others, younger and perhaps thus fortunate not to have lived through the trauma of revolutionary wars, retained their faith in liberty, equality and fraternity and remained committed to the cause of the people. But is it perhaps significant that it was from the distance of his self-appointed exile in Italy that Shelley wrote his rallying cry in reaction to Peterloo:

> Rise like lions after slumber
> In unvanquishable Number!
> Shake your chains to earth, like dew
> Which in sleep had fall'n on you
> Ye are many – they are few.

Weeks have now passed into months since we left England. Around me the Eastern Cape is in daily turmoil as unfulfilled and rejected aspirations are being transformed into angry and assertive demands. The Eastern Cape's history of early black/white frontier conflict and consequent politicization, its long tradition of missionary educational foundations, combine now with its crippling economic decline to ensure that it is now one of the country's most troubled areas. Returning to a quiet backwater I find it an area which promises to be in the vanguard of change. I must acquiesce to the reality of my being here, painful as it is. Perhaps the sensitivities honed by the respite abroad make it a little more painful but I welcome that opportunity to have been resensitised. May I retain what sensitivity and perspective I have gained thereby, for if that is dulled all that I have thought about and re-examined will cease to be creative forces, sustaining my awareness, and those seven months will subside into a dream.□

---

review by M.G. Whisson

DISSECTING THUNDER

Jeff Opland: **Xhosa Oral Poetry – Aspects of a Black South African Tradition.** Ravan, Johannesburg.

The **Imbongi** in the Xhosa tradition combines in his person several elements which have their own terms in English. He may be the **poet laureate** to his chief – the person singled out by virtue of his various gifts, to produce his poetry for special occasions. He may also be a **bard** who, through the memorable phrases he declaims, ensures that the history of his chief and chiefdom remains close to the consciousness of the people. This he achieves less through poetic narrative or anecdote than through allusion as he refers to the qualities of his chief and ancestors. He may be the **cheerleader,** rousing his audience to support their chief by acclamation or by their arms in battle. He may be the charismatic **soothsayer,** speaking in a state of ecstasy the truths (which are not always palatable to the authorities) which he perceives through his unique combination of knowledge and inspiration. While any element may be dominant according to the occasion, all are, in essence, combined in the one person – the character who dominates Dr. Opland's book as wholly as he dominates his audiences.

To try to pin him down – to record the cascading words whose reflections glisten in the hearer's eyes; to translate them out of the resonances of Xhosa into the nearest approximate literal meaning in English; to examine each phrase to see if it is an original creation or a recollected "formula"; to count the allusions to beasts, ancestors, gods or events as indices of his changing role in a transformed political culture, – and say, "this is the **Imbongi,**" is to try to dissect thunder, or to take a bucket of water and say "this is the Victoria Falls".

To the early European travellers to Xhosa country, the **Imbongi** had something of the quality of Cacofonix, the bard who sings to Asterix the Gaul, as the visitors understood neither the words nor the cadences and rhythms of the language. Contemporary non-Xhosa audiences, treated to the poetic performances of even such luminaries as David Yali-Manisi or Chief Burns-Ncamashe, are probably no more sophisticated in their application, and the translations do little to help them in the absence of a detailed commentary. Further, the examples of those events which Opland gives – the installation of a new Chancellor at Rhodes, an address to St. Andrews School, the opening of the International Library of African Music in Grahamstown – are as circus performances beside the olympic gymnastics for the **Imbongi,** whose genius is in his power to communicate with his own people. It is perhaps, one of the few regrettable aspects of **Xhosa Oral Poetry** that the

author treats his poets almost as "suitable clinical material" and tests their versatility and ability by demanding special performances in his quest for understanding. By doing so, he robs them of a part of their artistic integrity, even as the translations in print rob the performances of their life.

To those who have been fortunate enough to experience a poetic performance in its proper context, with the **Imbongi** inspired by the occasion and urged on by an appreciative, participating audience, the circus turns for white audiences and the translations in print are about as inspiring as reading an Italian opera libretto in English. We had such an experience with Yali-Manisi in a darkened house in a squatter camp. A research team, including Yali-Manisi, had been received hospitably by the impoverished community and had joined in a modest ritual "to tell the ancestors we are here" shortly before we left. It was an appropriate occasion to say, "thank you", but Yali-Manisi had more in store for us. After various elders had spoken their praises and boasts, against a background of quiet chatter, the stranger rose. By the time that he had announced himself the room was silent, but soon the people were grunting their appreciation and the muse took over. For a few minutes out of time the words flowed in a growling torrent and then, "Ncincilili", (I disappear). He sat down, vanishing into the crowd around him. After a moment of total silence, the babble of voices proclaimed that here indeed there had been the magic of artistry.

Opland has known such moments with Yali-Manisi, and his attempt to describe and analyse the poetry (both written and truly oral, despite the title of the book) veers somewhat unevenly between his efforts to communicate the magic of the experience and what he sees to be the demands of scholarship to locate the tradition in its historical, cultural and formal academic context.

Contexts

The historical context is dealt with in three of the eight chapters – in the first, where we are introduced to the **Imbongi** through the writing of early travellers and missionaries; in the seventh, where we learn of the efforts of the missionaries and educationalists to control the evolution of Xhosa literature through their initial monopoly of literacy and the printing press; and in the eighth where changes in the tradition are examined. In each case, whether it is the novel of A.C. Jordan which overwhelms the observations of Lichtenstein or Kropf, the poet Mqhayi who challenges and eventually conquers the bowdlerisers of Lovedale, or Sabata's **Imbongi** Qangule who hurls his verbal darts against the might of Matanzima, it is the poet who transcends the history and the political forces which to lesser men would seem supreme.

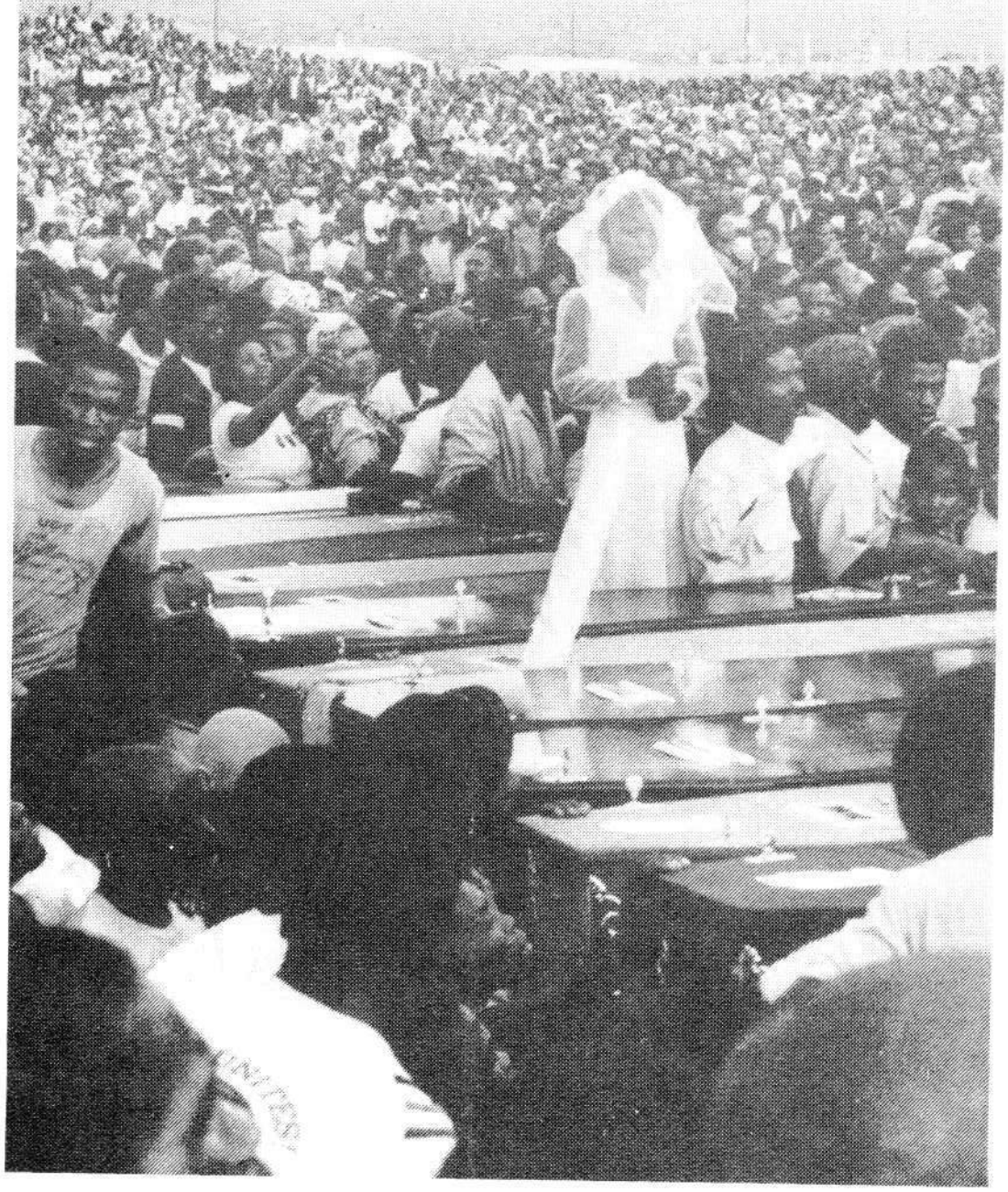
The more formal academic analysis, which occupies the middle third of the book, is clearly aimed at the specialist, the patristic fathers of folklore and oral performance who are endeavouring to build some sort of ordered structure out of the ritual chaos of creative performance. The input from the Xhosa material is of great value in the debates which rage in this somewhat esoteric field, for here there is some first-hand material from a truly oral tradition (though the poets that dominate this volume were or are literate). Serious language scholars, however, may find the absence of the original Xhosa texts for many of the poems a hindrance in their attempts to do more with the material than simply accept the author's word, while those more interested in the social meaning and context of the poetry will have grave doubts about Opland's research technique of demanding spontaneous performances from his informants.

Spontaneous?

The clinical exercises which Opland imposes on his poets make some sense when what is at stake is the extent to which such compositions and performances are truly spontaneous, or involve the manipulation of set phrases or formulae to a significant extent, or are largely the recitation of previously composed and memorised poems. The answers are not always satisfactory, although adequate to support the school of Ong against the more rigid school of Lord. The scholars who ask the question, "How do they do it?" in various ways could do worse than explore the concept of the **bricoleur**, as used by Lévi-Strauss in his analyses of myth. The **Imbongi** is a poetic **bricoleur**, a composer who rummages in the great box of idioms and images, phrases and conventions of his culture in order to produce a work of art relevant to the occasion. No two successive arrangements are identical, nor do they necessarily use the same elements, even when the occasions are virtually the same. What marks out the greater from the lesser **Imbongi** is his detailed knowledge of his subject (traditionally his chief and tribal history); the size of his collection of verbal bits and pieces so that he may use many only once or twice, and always be able to locate the most appropriate in meaning or assonance for his purpose; and, most crucially, his intuitive powers of recall, ordering and performance.

Another general theme which Opland explores with the aid of his poets is the spiritual or philosophical status of the poet and his utterances. The ground here is tempting and treacherous – not least because of the interaction for about two centuries between western religion and philosophy and the Xhosa world view, and the dominance of English, and of people educated in the English tradition, in the interpretation of the Xhosa tradition. Aware of the problems, Opland treads gingerly, but an interesting idea emerges. In a society without documentation (which can include interpretable material objects as well as written records) the past lives only in the hearts and minds of the living, and can be communicated only in words of oral testimony. Since it is words which create the past for the living, and the living venerate their ancestors, the words that recall the ancestors have a more than passing significance. In a sense they are what they create, and the Name is the person. Small wonder then that the men who can re-create the past, and the ancestors who peopled the past, in a form that is truly memorable, should themselves be objects of awe and respect – and obtain some sort of sacred status in the community. Their status will protect them from reprisals when they proclaim their vision of truth and the moral order – and condemn those, even their own chiefs, who fall short of the cultural ideals.

The history, the analyses, the speculations about meaning and even the frozen translations are not what is important about **Xhosa Oral Poetry**. What is important is the poetry and the poets themselves who transcend the scholarly structures erected around them. They speak of an indomitable, creative human spirit which is not crushed by cultural imperialism or by puppet dictators – nor even by the paralysing burdens of scholarship. It is to Opland's credit that he allows that marvellous spirit to shine through his study. To those who despair for the culture and institutions of the Xhosa, the poets offer hope, for did not God agree to spare the evil city of the plain if but ten righteous men could be found in it? Yali-Manisi, Qangule and their fellow **Imbongi** have not bowed the knee to the alien gods.□



THE FUNERAL IN KWA-NOBUHLE

Printed by L. Backhouse, Pietermaritzburg S 880