AFRICAN PROSE AND POETRY

an anthology for schools

Compiled and edited by

PROFESSOR MPHAMELE
We present here 19 passages of prose and poetry. They are divided into two sections, beginning with oral literature, followed by modern literature. It is important to explain to pupils that our people share the universal talent for using words so that they express powerful feelings, paint vivid pictures in the mind, describe powerful actions, and in such a way that they entertain us. The aim may be to amuse us, to move us to tears or fear or joy and so on, or to deliver a message of wisdom, to strengthen us, console us and so on. In the hands of the poet, powerful feelings make powerful words possible, powerful words convey powerful feelings. But the professional poet of a traditional community did not write down his words. He spoke them. Hence the phrase "oral literature." We had not at that time learned how to read and write.

In some West African countries we still have poets who travel from place to place reciting the history of their people to groups of listeners, who donate money to them for the performance. Such a poet is called a griot (pronounced grio). In many countries the traditional poet was attached to a king. He recited praises and legends to the king, recited the histories of the royal family and of the community. He spoke and sang the words by turns. He used facial expressions and gestures. As the kings were later reduced to chiefs and headmen, and traditional life was changing, such poets became scarcer and in some cases disappeared for good.

We should note that folk tales, like those about talking animals, giants, ancestors, talking elements like thunder, kings and princes and princesses, were first composed by individual poets and then adopted by the community. Thus they continued from generation to generation. Always the man who was proud to regard himself as a poet had a remarkable skill with words. He changed some stories, adding his own "facts" and thoughts and feelings. The result is that one story may have several versions. Some people still remember the poetry and recite it, even if they are not professionals. It has been collected by scholars and translated by Africans and Europeans who know the
languages. So we now have them in English. We are presenting here only a fraction from volumes of such poetry.

When we mastered English, French, Portuguese and other languages spoken by those who colonized Africa, some of us used them for writing novels, poetry, plays, etc., side by side with those of us who prefer to write in the mother-tongue.

The Teaching of Poetry in our Schools

South Africa is one of the few countries today where we still need to explain why we should teach our children and students the literature of Africa. Even South African literature, both black and white, has only just been introduced into university studies, and in small doses at that. Several other countries have simply accepted the study of African literature as a sensible need and are teaching it. This collection was inspired by Mr. N.N. Ndebele, Inspector of Education for Polokwane Circuit, who first asked me to compile poetry and prose by Africans for Std. V.

Only when our children have read and learned the poetry of our own people can they understand that of other nations. Those of us who eventually mastered English did it the hard way. We held on because we loved its literature, and English was, as it still is, the gateway to vast treasures of knowledge. We had very little inspiration outside of ourselves. Fortunately, no curbs were imposed on us. This editor remembers that when he taught Matric English for the first time in Orlando, he was studying his English major with UNISA for the B.A. degree. He is grateful that he was able to share his own discoveries of English literature, and of more rewarding avenues of approach to its beauty and power, with his students. Yes, we did it the hard way, but we were fortunate to survive. We do not have to travel every meter that was today. Methods of teaching are changing. For educationists insist, more than ever before, that learning bears better fruit when the learner enjoys the process, and several possibilities are available for him; we frustrate him when we set tasks for him that must give him pain in the old-fashioned belief that education is possible
only when one suffers for it. Our children do not have to sweat and bleed in the process of learning. We should be able to lead them gently from their own environment (such as African literature talks about) to the bigger concerns of the country, and on to the affairs of the world: from the known to the unknown. The best way to introduce this literature is to begin with the oral. But before you even begin with this, you need to explain in simpler language what we have outlined above concerning our traditional communities: the function of the poet, what he recited — to entertain, to praise kings, warriors, the bridegroom, to relate the legends and history of his people, to pray to the gods through the ancestors to help hunters, warriors, farmers, the doctor in his efforts to heal a patient, and so on.

You should not be afraid, at this stage, to recite a serêto (praise poem) or ask a few of the pupils to learn a few praise poems (dirêto) from their parents to come and recite them to the class — in the mother tongue naturally. When we talk about oral literature, we are also talking about the origins of poetry. Poetry was first spoken and acted (especially during religious ceremonies and during play, at work etc.) before it was written, here and everywhere else in the world. So there is nothing wrong in using praises, idiomatic expressions, proverbs (dîma) in the African language most commonly spoken in your area to introduce the English translations in this collection. On the other hand, do not translate the English into the mother-tongue, either in the Oral Literature or Written Literature. Let this poetry come to them directly in English.

If you the teacher approach oral literature with the idea that it was the word of "heathens", then you are not the right kind of person to teach it. Ancient customs and beliefs served the needs of our people in their time, and we must respect them. Even today we cannot afford to dismiss some of the morals they taught. In many cases our older people had more self-confidence, great moral stability than we have in our time. Indeed, this poetry should be for us a way of looking more closely at our traditions, appreciate the values they taught, know why some of them have persisted to this day, which of them can serve our needs, which are not practical today. If you cannot approach the poetry with an open enquiring mind, if you are hostile to
its contents, then do not try to teach literature at all — any literature. If you still want to teach it, go and read some more to re-educate yourself. Read novels, poems, plays, history, essays. Read the Bible as literature written by man and try to understand the poetry in the Psalms, Proverbs, etc. But of course every teacher must read, for pleasure and scholarship. Prepare each poem well before you present it to the class. Use the footnotes provided by the editor for clarification. They are for you the teacher, not the pupil, to use, so that you understand the poem better before you present it. Tell the class what the poem or prose passage is about, what the speaker or writer is telling us. Make the lesson lively with whatever pictorial illustrations you may possess or find elsewhere. Make the lesson live by relating the poem or prose passage to the real lives of the people that form or formed the poet's community.

Read the poem aloud and as well as you are capable of. Select some of your best pupils to read individually and in chorus by turns, but do not waste time picking on every error in pronunciation. The purpose of reading aloud is for the class to hear the ring of words and get the feel of the poem. Nor should every poem be read aloud by the class. You should read every poem in the collection aloud in class.

THE LANGUAGE

Literature uses language intensively. This is the main difference between the language of literature and that of the average newspaper reporter or of ordinary everyday speech. The language is intensive and therefore memorable. By "memorable" we mean worthy to be remembered, striking enough to draw your attention, not to be memorized for recitation before an inspector. We would advise that if any recitation is demanded at all, it should be for prose passages. But it must be something the pupil likes.

Powerful and memorable words or phrases or lines are what we should point out to the pupil. Because such words carry powerful feelings. Such words in poetry paint vivid pictures in the mind of the reader. Lead the pupils to tell you what pictures they form in their minds at the sound of this word, that phrase, this line, and so on.
Examples

Poem No. 2: I am the spoiler

" " 3. the boat of death
" " 4. his coat is woven by spiders
" " 5. he has piled a throne upon a throne
" " 6(a). the blood of lice under his nails

Prose passage No. 9 - the whole of Paragraph 2

Poem No. 11: the blood of your toil

the sweat of your toil

Several other intensive words in the above and in the other poems can be picked out. The pupils who find it difficult to express themselves in English should be encouraged with leading questions, with examples from their own environment. When you discuss the actual poems and prose passages in this collection, do not allow them to answer in the mother-tongue.

Avoid the pitfall that is so common in the teaching of poetry to juveniles, i.e. the oft-repeated notion that poetry has rhyme and metre. Not all poems by the English or American writers have rhyme, although they may have metre. Nor do they all have metre. No African poem to my knowledge has rhyme or can be identified according to this or that metrical pattern. If you translate an English poem that has rhyme into Sesotho or any other African language, you cannot rewrite it in rhyme because Sesotho poetry does not rhyme. If you translate a Sesotho poem into English, it would be foolish to use rhyme. Rhythm is too complicated to explain to Std. V pupils, so do not say anything about either of these two - rhyme and rhythm. It is the way words follow one another, the intensive way in which they are used, the powerful feelings they carry, the vivid pictures these words paint, the vivid actions they describe, that make literature. Be content to let the pupils know what a poem or prose passage is telling us and the powerful words that are used to convey intensive feelings. Let them draw pictures in their minds related to the words or lines. This way, you will lay a solid foundation for understanding poetry in other cultures later.

When we say that a line in a poem or story is "beautiful", we mean it is powerful, vivid.
There is a good deal of poetry by English-speaking writers the beauty of which lies mostly in the sound and rhythm, which in turn make the meaning more exciting. The sound may be in rhyme, in certain consonants that recur many times in a row or in the sing-song movement of the poem. We find this especially in poetry for young people. Examples: The writer of the following lines wants them to imitate the rhythm and sound of a mining operation: the stamping, crushing, and breaking:

Stamp and throb.
Stamp and throb.
Trembling and shaking
Crushing and breaking
Noisy and mighty stamps
Quivered and rang,
Vibrantly sang
(from "Song of the Mine Stamps" by Patricia Lee)

If you read the lines with the accent on the syllables that are marked, you will be imitating the timing of a stamping machine. Listen also to the sounds of the machine:

TREMbling, CRUSHing, BREAKing

Here is another imitation, even more impressive, of the movement of a train:

Song of the Engine

With anort and pant the engine dragged
Its heavy train uphill.
And puffed these words the while she puffed
And laboured with a will:

(Very slowly)
"I think - I can - I think - I can,
I've got - to reach - the top,
I'm sure - I can - I will - get there,
I simply must - not stop!"

(More quickly)
At last the top was reached and passed,
And then - how changed the song!
The wheels all joined in the engine's joy,
As quickly she tore along!
With the possible exception of one, African poets writing in English do not write poems in which sound and rhythm consciously or deliberately play an important part. We write to tell you what we feel and think on matters of great importance. Two reasons suggest themselves for this. First, we do not grow up speaking English except in school. We Africans can therefore never develop an instinct to create sounds that are native to English and would please children. Second, there is evidence that we generally think in our mother-tongue, even though English sneaks in and out to an extent and frequency consistent with how much our lives are tied up with the English word, at work and in our social intercourse. In any case, by the time thoughts are expressed on paper in English, the words for them have undergone changes in arrangement that are not the same for the English-speaking writer. The sound and the meaning are very much affected by the choices the African has to make in finding the English words to express thoughts that have already formed themselves into his native idiom. We write poetry, therefore, for readers that happen to range from Std. V upward, i.e. without even thinking of juveniles. Nor is there cause to regret that we do not write rhymes like those just quoted. We do have in African languages anonymous play songs that please because of the sound of the words and the tune. But we certainly need, as writers, to produce literature for the young, such as those by the Nigerian novelist, Cyprian Ekwensi.

African poets today rely for rhythm on the natural movement of language. This in turn is determined by the mood or feeling, the idea and any set of chosen words expressing them, plus the writer’s attitude to the people he considers as his readers. For instance, in oral poetry the language of a prayer (poem 6)
moves differently from that of a praise poem. In written poetry the language of reflection (Poems 16 and 18) moves differently from the more urgent, agitated poems 11 and 17; the pace in all of these is different from that in the dramatic poem 19.

Our forefathers recited poetry and folk tales for the power of the words and feelings they carry; words that have the natural sound to please and inspire, not artificially rhymed. And yet they also played with words for the fun of it. But even when the listeners laughed, the words continued to vibrate in the mind, making them realise the seriousness of the meaning.

We repeat: Let us not confuse our pupils with terms like rhyme and rhythm or metre at this stage. Only in Matric should we introduce them, but not in a manner that will dazzle them with the various kinds of metre. Let us rather expose them to the meaning, power (beauty) of words in both prose and poetry. The intensive use of language - the power of words - lies in the vivid pictures it paints in our minds or in which we can visualize action. Praise poems reveal a good deal of dramatic action, (as also poem 19 by Ndebele). These pictures, these actions, arouse certain feelings to us as readers. Std. V pupils should be able to come out of their lessons with this mental and emotional refinement.

The editor of this collection is going to propose that African poetry alone be taught in Stds. 5 and 6. In Stds. 7 and 8 we should present poetry by Africans and by English-speaking writers, either in one balanced anthology or two separate ones. Particularly in Std. 8, the verse should be mainly narrative and descriptive.

Lebowakgomo

E M.
TRADITIONAL ORAL LITERATURE

What we call "oral literature" consists of tales that have been told, songs that have been sung throughout the centuries from generation to generation. There have been praise songs, songs for mourning or dancing, wedding songs, etc. The lyrics of the songs, the tales, all came from the imagination and mean much more than the words at first suggest. In this sense they make literature, which generally, is the intensive use of language to express powerful feelings. Many of the songs and tales can still be heard today, but the art is unfortunately disappearing. Usually one man composed a story or song, and then his community adopted it. The poets who succeeded him made their own changes when they recited it or sang it, according to their own performing genius.

I. THE ORIGIN OF DEATH

NOTE: Among the Kalenjin people in Kenya, death is said to have begun with the foolishness of a certain hunter. His descendants are known to have intermarried with the present hunters in the forest. They feed on nothing except honey. They have tamed the stinging bees and are brown, tall and wiry, with red mouths. Their arrows are deadly. It is their poison that killed the son of Thunder who was sunning himself at the lake side.

The story goes this way:

The number of hunters had grown in number in a certain forest, so much that the wild animals had been almost wiped out. The hunters moved to hunt the animals of the plain. One day, one of them stopped to drink from a pool. He put down his quiver, his bow and the arrow he had in his hand. While he was drinking from the pool, he noticed a reflection in the water. It was a beautiful reflection of a bird that looked like a cock. The feathers were very beautiful. But instead of two legs, this image showed four. The head was large and had a blue comb.

The hunter wondered at the image. What was it? he asked himself. He had never seen such an animal or bird in his life. He thought he was dreaming. Somehow he continued to drink water. When he rose, he saw the real creature. It moved to where it could watch the hunter better. The man also watched the creature. What a strange creature! The hunter made ready to aim an arrow at it. It might make a good meat. He let go the arrow, but was not sure whether he hit or not. All that he remembered was that the arrow had left the bow.

There followed rain that was heavier than had ever been known before. It came down with thunder. Nobody knows where the hunter went. All that is known is that he never returned to his family. From the day of the heavy rain, there came a time in the lives of people when a long sleep covered them, a long sleep that nobody had known before.

Thunder had become very angry at the shooting of his son, so he sent heavy rain and long sleep to punish the people. Before the rain, people had slept and woken up the following morning. But now we know the long sleep called death, brought about by the foolishness of the hunter.
1. Theledi of Marota clan, roll boulders and sand down together. Theledi turned the south to ruins. I of Matuba regiment am the spoiler. I make widows out of women. You armies, beware of the stocky rhinoceros, beware the whirlwind is near. I am the father of Ngwana Mohube whose copper rings around the ankles continue to beat against the heels when he chases after the enemy.

I am the killer in the Matuba regiment, drag me away by the horns when the horn is sounded, me the thundering Theledi.

I crush and keep Ngwakwane and company, I am the brave man who keeps even a price of earthenware. I am Masile who ground Diphale and his men under my feet, so take care of yourself, you little animal. The huge elephants will be all over you. I stamp with my hoof and only then can Nyekale stamp. I am Morakele river, fierce, I am fierce even against the armies of Theophilus Shepstone whom we call Ramapantana. (2)

1. Sekukhun is praising himself here.

2. Shepstone was British agent in Natal from the 1840's, and then secretary for Native Affairs of Natal, which was a British settlement before and after 1850. He was connected with the famous attack on Sekukhunse. He was called Ramapantana because he wore leather belts.

3. LONGING FOR DEATH

I have been singing, singing.
I have cried bitterly
I'm on my way.
How large this World!
Let the ferryman bring his boat on the day of my death.
I'll wave with my left hand,
I'm on my way.
I'm on my way,
the boat of death is rocking near,
I'm on my way,
I who have sung you many songs.

1. from the Xosa people of south-east Chweng (pronounced Chora)
2. Among the Xosa, it is believed that when you die, the ferryman, i.e., the man who carries passengers by boat, has come to carry you away. The Xosa are a fishing community.
3. I have sung enough for you, and now I can die. I, the poet. Remember that in Africa the poet sang his poetry, his recitation was musical.
4. GLORY TO MOESHOEHOE

The herds are saying
We guard these muddy plains
They are saying
We tread deep paths into the fields
Because the earth is dry.
The warriors are sweating
The men these real men are dying of thirst
wiping in vain the sweat
that runs from their brow.

The brave Lisiane even
had to sit down to breathe
He is sitting
showing no weariness.
Mosheshoe advances on the city
and reaches the gate through which enter the brave.

They say
Mosheshoe is an old toothless leopard,
he has torn out his claws
his coat is woven by spiders 3
his arm is spotted
his shield shines like flowing embers
and he himself like the half moon.

They say Mosheshoe's cattle
are the fruit of war
of the war that is won by braves who fight.
These heard from where do they come?

You may ask Macheli
You may ask Mamacheli
You may ask those who like
to sit on flat rocks near the hills
You may ask those who can see
what goes on around them.

Ask only those who know from where the booty comes
Ask only those whose wisdom planned the war
and led the warriors,
Ask the old ones.

1. A praise song for Mosheshoe
2. The herds refer both to livestock and herdmen
3. His coat is old, full of cobwebs.
4. Mosheshoe's shield does not shine bright; embers signify a dying fire. A half moon is not bright either. Stanzas 3-4: some people are talking bad about Mosheshoe. They say, among other things, that he is rich from wars fought by others, but the poet is advising whom one should ask if one wants to know the whole truth - how great Mosheshoe was.
5. THE OBA OF BENIN

He who knows not the Oba
let me show him.
He has mounted the throne,
he has piled a throne upon a throne.
Plentiful as grains of sand on the earth
are those in front of him.
Plentiful as grains of sand on the earth
are those behind him.
There are two thousand people
to fan him.
He who owns you
is among you here.
He who owns you
has piled a throne upon a throne.
He has lived to do it this year;
even so he will live to do it again.

1. Oba is a title in Nigeria (in Yoruba Language) meaning king. This praise song is from the Benin people who occupy the ancient kingdom of Benin, mid-western Nigeria.

2. Grains of sand are uncountable. That is how powerful the Oba is, surrounded by so many people.

3. Repetitions like this are common in songs.

6. PRAYER TO THE MOON

Take my face and give me yours!
Take my face, my unhappy face.
give me your face,
with which you return
when you have died,
when you vanished from sight.
You lie down and return -
Let me put your face
together again,
because you have joy,
you return evermore alive,
after you vanished from sight.
Did you not promise us once
that we too should return
and be happy again after death?

7. From the San people. Today we do not use the names "Bushman" and "Hottentot", which are ugly and show contempt for these people. We use "San" for the former, "Khoikhoi" for the latter. They never called themselves "Bushman" or "Hottentot". The khoikhoi referred to the so-called Bushmen as the "San". Together, these two communities are today referred to as the Khoisan people. The San are spread over Botswana, largely in the Kalahari desert, and Namibia. The Khoikhoi have largely disappeared, the last surviving camp being in Namibia. The name "Kasarwa", given to the San by Botswana is equally nasty.
Other African groups use Barwa and Batwa, which are not unkind. Because of the Sun's closeness to nature, they have a number of stories about the Moon, the Sun and other stars. Their hunting activities depend on the Moon and the Sun. The Moon stands high among the things the San pray to. The Praying Mantis is their supreme God, and prayers are said to or through the Moon. To explain how death began, the San tell us that Moon told Have not to cry over the death of his mother. Because she was merely sleeping and would return and live again. Have did not stop crying, saying Moon must be deceiving him. Offended, Moon cursed Have and caused a clef to the silly fellow's lip. Death came to stay among all creatures. The last three lines of the above poem recall Moon's promise, which he told Have. Just as Moon comes and disappears, so must man die and live again, in another form.

6. (a) The Poor Man

The poor man knows not how to eat with the rich man. When they eat fish, he eats the head.

Invite a poor man and he rushes in licking his lips and upsetting the plates.

The poor man has no manners, he comes along with the blood of lice under his nails.

The face of the poor man is lined from the hunger and thirst in his belly.

Poverty is no state for any human being. It makes him a beast to be fed on grass.

Poverty is unjust. If it befalls a man, though he is nobly born, he has no power with God.

1. Translated from Wahili. This is the national language of Tanzania, East Africa, and spoken also in the towns of Kenya, Uganda and part of Zaire. It is a Bantu language with some Arabic words and expressions because the Arabs once traded on the coast of East Africa.

2. Nobly born: like a son or daughter of a king or some other person of high standing. No power with God: God does not listen to a poor man. This was the general attitude of merchants during the days of wealthy Arab traders.
Manchild
Left to the vultures like an ox!
We've been conquered twice:
Having been slaughtered
We're dealt out to the eagles
We're shared by crow and vulture!

Stop hovering over us.
0 vulture,
we're burying a man!
Home is not the burial ground
For a warrior,
Him we bury in the mountains,
The grave of a warrior
Is the tall shokou grass

Men we're been
Left to the vultures.
They bring death upon their heads,
They can call it when they brandish spears,
The young brave
Leaves his mother mourning.

The young maiden cries,
Cries
When the sun goes down.
"When you were told to stay
You said you'd go."
"Leave me alone 0 vulture
Let me go to see the homestead."

Do not deceive yourself,
0 woman,
Because your man is still alive;
We're still going back tomorrow.
"Woman,
Give me food to eat,
I'm going to battle,
All night long.
I'll be squatting at the ready
On one knee."

1. A song recorded by A. T. Sekele in Lesotho in 1937. Sekele comments that the song "shameful for the warriors
derogates those who die.
When it is sung, it is enough to draw tears.
Such songs are called in Southern Basotho "mekoroa".
This is a translation from the original Basotho poem.

2. Manchild: a male child, now a grown-up person.
3. This is what they say to the warrior at home.
4. This is what the warrior says on the battlefield.
8. **TSONGA PRAISE SONG**

Muhlaba Shiluvane, you are like the rhinoceros who seizes a man, bites him through and through, rolls him over and cuts him in two! You are like the crocodile which lives in water; it bites a man! You are like its claws; it seizes a man by his arms and legs, it drags him into the deep pool to eat him at sunset; it watches over the entrance to prevent other crocodiles from taking its prey. . . . . Muhlaba! You are like the ram; when it butts with its head, it knocks a man down; like a goat, like the son of a goat, which is herded by the boys, which is very cunning; it pricks up its ears, it prepares itself for defence when attacked. Muhlaba Dabuka! Men are coming, oxen are coming. You are on the top of the hills, you are like heaven which roars. . . . . The lightning is like you, it is full of strength, it is terrible. . . . . Your body is like the stone of gold; your fingers are long. You are known in every country. . . . . You are like the grass on the road; when people trample on it, they crush it to the ground, but when the rains come, it grows and covers the earth. . . .

I. Translated from Tsonga, first composed by the poet of the clan called Mauuse. Shiluvane was a ruler. Praise songs, as we have observed, depend very much on exaggeration, so that the man praised should appear bigger than life-size. Oral literature was first recited or sung, for entertaining listeners, for dances and weddings, for re-telling history, for funerals, for praising kings, warriors, etc., for expressing love, for inspiring men before a hunt or battle and so on. Then scholars came and wrote it down in the original languages and later translated it into European languages, e.g. English, French, etc. There are still living poets who compose such poetry, but in the case of ancient poetry and tales we shall never know who in particular first composed them. Obviously the praise song of Sekukhune must have been composed by someone other than the king himself. What follows now is literature originally written in English, French, Portuguese. The last two languages were then translated into English. We shall always indicate this. Where we do not, then it should be understood that the author wrote in English.

9. **MANGY-DOG**

The following piece is from a short story entitled "We killed Mangy-Dog" by LUIS BERNARDO HONWANA of Mozambique. Born in 1943 in Maputo, he became a journalist. The story appears in his book, We killed Mangy-Dog and other Mozambique Stories, published 1969, before Mozambique gained its freedom from the Portuguese. He writes in Portuguese, and these stories have been translated. The story itself is about a mangy dog that has to be killed because the sight of it makes some white officials sick. The animal doctor is ordered to kill it. He orders a gang of schoolboys to do the job with their fathers' rifles. All of them must shoot. The writer, who imagines himself one of the boys, cannot bring himself to do it! It is a sick dog, but it has survived bitter experiences, so why end its life so soon? Now read on:

Mangy-Dog had blue eyes with no shine in them at all, but they were huge, and always filled with tears that trickled down his muzzle. They frightened me, those eyes, so big, and looking at me like someone asking for something without wanting to say it.
Every day I saw Mangy-Dog walking in the shade of the wall around the school patio, going to the corner where teacher’s chickens made their dust beds. The chickens didn’t even run away, because he left them alone, walking slowly and looking for a dust bed that wasn’t taken.

Mangy-Dog spent most of the time sleeping but sometimes he walked, and then I liked to watch him, with his bones all sticking out of his thin body, and his old skin full of white hairs, scars, and lots of sores. I never saw Mangy-Dog run, and I really don’t know if he could, because he was always trembling all over, even though it wasn’t cold, and swaying his head to and fro like an ox, and taking such crazy steps he looked like a rickety old cart.

One day he spent the whole time at the school gate watching the other dogs playing on the grass at the other side of the street, running, running, and smelling under each other’s tails. This day Mangy-Dog trembled more than ever, but it was the only time I saw him with his head raised and his tail erect and far away from his legs and his ears pricked up with a desire to know something.

From PETER ABRAMANS’ Tall Freedom. The book is his life story. Born in 1919 in Vreedorp, Johannesburg, Abrahams attended high school and later went to Setelolwane. In 1939 he left for England, where he settled and became a full-time writer—a novelist. 1938 he and his family went to settle in Jamaica, West Indies, where they still are. Abrahams tells in his book how his father died when he was still a boy. He had to leave his mother to go and live with Aunt Liza and Uncle Sam at Elsberg, far from Johannesburg. He describes his first rough winter. And then summer came, making the world a softer, kindlier, and more beautiful place. Now read on:

Summer had come indeed.

In the long summer afternoons, after my day’s work, I went down to the river. Sometimes Andries and some of the other children went with me. Often I went alone.

Often, with others, or alone, I climbed the short willows with their long drooping branches. The touch of willow leaf on the cheek gives a feeling of cool wonder. Often, I jumped from stone to stone on the broad bed of the shallow, clear, fast-flowing river. Sometimes I found little pools of idle water, walled off by stones from the flow. I tickled long-tailed tadpoles in these. The sun on the water touched their bodies with myriad colours. Sometimes I watched the springhaas—the wild rabbit of the veld, going leaping across the land, almost faster than my eye could follow. And sometimes I lay on my back, on the green grass; on the bank of the river, and looked up at the distant sky, watching thin, fleecy white clouds form and re-form and trying to liken the shapes with people and things I knew. I loved being alone by the river. It became my special world. Each day I went to find out more about the river, going further up or down stream, making my world bigger. One day, going further downstream than
I had been before, I came upon a boy. He was on the bank on the other side from me. We saw each other at the same time and stared. He was altogether naked . . . .

11. AFRICA (To my Mother)

By DAVID DIOP, who was born in France of a father who was a native of Senegal (West Africa) and a mother who came from Cameroon (West Africa, near Central), 1927. He died in an air crash, 1960. He knew Africa only from what he was told and read — and later through visits to West Africa. Hence the statement in line 5. The poem was written in French, later translated into English by others.

Africa of proud warriors in the ancestral savannahs
Africa of my grandmother sings of
Beside her distant river
I have never seen you
But my gaze is full of your blood
Your black blood spilt over the fields
The blood of your sweat
The sweat of your toil
The toil of slavery
The slavery of your children
Africa, tell me Africa,
Are you the back that bends
Lies down under the weight of humbleness?
The trembling back striped red
That says yes to the sjambok on the roads of noon?
Solemnly a voice answers me
'Impetuous child, that young and sturdy tree'
That tree that grows
There splendidly alone among white and faded flowers
Is Africa, your Africa. It puts forth new shoots
Slowly its fruits grow to have
The bitter taste of liberty.

1. Savannah are grasslands. The northern part of West Africa is on the edge of the Sahara and is grass country. The people here are pastoral. Diop must have had a special fondness for it, which is why he selects it as his ancestral ground.

2. Africa is the black man's continent, so her blood is black in the poet's imagination. It has been spilt not only through war between Africans and colonial Europeans but also during the hard labour the European masters demanded from the people... On the land and on slave ships that carried Africans to Europe and the Americas during colonial times, the people were made to sweat and bleed, and several suffocated to death. These labourers had to humble themselves under the ship.

3. Impetuous child: One who acts or speaks unthinkingly carried away by sudden emotion. In feeling for those who suffered cruelly, the poet means, he has forgotten the truth contained in the wisdom of the last five lines: that Africa is strong; like a strong tree, she will bear children who
will move towards freedom.

4. The strong tree (Africa) will grow in spite of the faded flowers around it. The faded flowers are the European civilization which is weakening. How is European (or Western) civilization weakening? The poet is thinking of city life with its factories and unclean air, the chase after money, greed, mental illnesses that arise from anxiety, the making of deadly weapons like the atom bomb, and so on. He is hoping that Africa will not follow the same way and become corrupted.

5. Liberty is sweet, but the road to it is hard and bitter. Even when people are free, life can be bitter because they have now to think for themselves instead of the masters thinking for them; they have to make their own decisions and direct their own lives; they have to make their own laws and run the administration: all these do not make liberty light or perfect.

12. I MET AN OLD WOMAN

By RAPHAEL AHMADU, who was born in 1913 in Ghana. His father was a prosperous merchant in nearby Togo. He sent Raphael to universities in Germany, France and Scotland, where he collected three doctorates: Philosophy, Anthropology and Medicine. Ahmadu died in December 1953.

I met an old woman,
Talking by herself
Down a lonely road.
Talking to herself,
Down a country road.
Child, you cannot know
Why folks talk alone.
If the road be long,
And travellers gone,
A man talks to himself.
If showers of sorrow
Fall down like arrows
The lone wayfarer
May talk by himself.
So an old woman
On lone country roads,
Laughing all the same,
May babble to herself
To keep the tears away.
Woman, you are sad!
'Tis the same with me.

13. RIVER BIRD

By J.P. CLARK. Born 1934 in Nigeria, he began writing poetry in English at University. He has also written several plays. The poem presented here is the kind of song that is common in all African languages. Especially is it common in folk tales where animals talk and act like human beings. Often the talking animal or bird predicts something evil or cheerful, or wise.
Child: River bird, river bird,  
Sitting all day long  
On hook over grass,  
River bird, river bird,  
Sing to me a song  
Of all that pass (1)  
And say,  
Will mother come back today?

Bird: You cannot know  
And should not bother;  
Tide and market come and go  
And so has your mother.

I. all that happens.

2. The bird seems to think that the child is asking a silly question: who can tell whether someone will come back, or when she will? So the bird gives an indifferent answer. Just as tides come and go, so will your mother, so why bother? In eastern Nigeria there are special market days in the week. The vendors carry their goods away at the end of the day and return the following three or seven days.

14. MOTSWASELE’S FAREWELL

By LEETILE DI SANG RADITLADI, born 1910 in the Bamangwato area of Botswana (Serowe). He was educated partly in South Africa. He became an administrator under the colonial British Government and then under independent Botswana. In 1971 he was honoured by President Seretse Khama with an award for distinguished service.

In 1936 Tekedzi Khama, the paramount ruler of the country, wanted the British Government to banish Raditladi and his father on a flimsy charge, but the scheme failed. This incident gave birth to Raditladi’s play, Motswasele II, from which this poem comes. He writes in Tswana, and the poem is a translation.

According to the play, Motswasele II is ruler of Bakwena in Botswana. Some of his people rise against him, and he speaks here just before the battle in which he will be killed and his forces will be beaten.

Is this my country or it mere soil  
Which I must lick with my tongue?  
Is this the seat where I must  
Rest when I’ve been driven out  
Of kingship here, in this my country?  
Must I live in the wilds  
Like a beast of prey that roams alone,  
Far, far away from my people’s love?  
Goodbye green fields of my home,  
I bow my head to you, terrors of this place  
I bow my head to you, my country of sorrows  
And you the great enemy, death,  
Receive me into your big, wide kingdom ....

........................

Open, grave, take me in, I come!  
Free me from this world, spear of mine,  
I’m weary.
1. terror include hate, suspicion, banishment etc.
2. he would like to spear himself to death.

15. ZEBU

By FLAVIEN RANAIVO, who was born in 1914, in Madagascar. After his country had become independent, he became Director of Information, 1960. This poem was translated from the French. The zebu is an ox with a huge hump, common in Madagascar.

His lips move unceasingly
But they are not swollen or worn;
His teeth are two fine rows of coral;
His horns form a circle
Which is never closed. (2)
His eyes: two immense pearls shining in the night;
His hump is Mount-Abundance (3)
His tail lashes the air
But is not more than half a fly-switch;
His body is a well-filled coffer (4)
On four dry sticks.

1. coral: a hard chalky substance that comes out of certain low forms of life under the sea. It piles up and gives them safety and protection against fish that may want to eat them. Coral forms in rows.

2. The horns form a circle upwards, the points separated by a few centimeters.

3. The big hump suggests that the zebu has food in abundance.

4. Coffer: A box of valuable things, but in this line, any container full of good things. The legs look dry because they do not have much flesh; they are mostly bone and sinew.
By Birago Diop. Born 1906 in Dakar, capital of Senegal (West Africa). He studied in France and graduated as a veterinary doctor. Later he became a cattle inspector in Dakar. He travelled widely in other parts of West Africa, working as a veterinary surgeon. Diop became an ambassador for Senegal in Tunisia, North Africa, and after four years of this, he returned to Dakar to open a private veterinary clinic. He is best known for re-writing African folk tales in French. This poem - we present only part of it here - has been translated from the French.

Listen more often to things than to beings
Hear the fire’s voice,
Hear the voice of water.
Hear, in the wind, the sobbing of the trees.
It is the breath of the ancestors.

The dead are not gone forever
They are in the paling shadows,
The dead are not beneath the ground,
The dead are not beneath the ground,
The dead are in the rustling trees,
The dead are in the rustling trees,
The dead are in the rustling trees,
The dead are in the rustling trees,
The dead are in the rustling trees.

Listen more often to things than to beings.
Hear the fire’s voice.
Hear the voice of water.
Hear, in the wind, the sobbing of the trees.
It is the breath of the ancestors.

1. The things are listed below: water, wind, woods, fire etc. beings: human beings, listen to the natural elements rather than to people’s words. Africans believe that the dead live as the spirits of the ancestors (padimp). The spirits live everywhere - in nature: mountains, rivers, trees, fire, crowds of people, in the home, among animals etc. When you till the soil you pray that the ancestors bring a good harvest; you ask them to be present in everything you do: weddings, funerals, etc.

2. When wind blows through them, or they are full of dew or sap flows out.

3. Falling because day is approaching.
YOU MONSTER OF STEEL

By B.W. Vilakazi, born 1906, at Grootville, Natal. He was educated at St. Francis, Marianhill, and later taught there. Still later he taught at Olonga Institute. He was appointed to the staff of Witwatersrand University in 1939 after his M.A. degree. He then graduated D. Litt. at the same university. Vilakazi wrote novels and poetry, all in Zulu. He and Dr. C.M. Dake produced the Sulu-English Dictionary. Died in 1947. This poem is part of a longer one, and is a translation.

Come, you monster made of steel,
You strutting dancer of the road,
You, whose tracks are double
Nailed with iron braces;
You bend and climb and rise and wind
Across the hills and plains.
You took our fathers' fathers,
Tempting them to leave their homes,
We ask for news of them, but you,
Being deaf, still run with greater speed.
As if you never heard
You disappear around a bend.

You brought the moles who come from far
To bore their way deep down and through
Our land until today we see the mine-dumps,
That lie along the rivers and the seas.
Now I'm sitting here inside
This station waiting-room where others left
To be swallowed up alive by you.
As I look towards the east today
I see the smoke and chalky dust go up
And slowly climbing to the skies.

Away, you iron monster;
Do not come so fast,
I'm busy at the moment
And wish that I had hidden deep
Inside the fields of maize at home
Now rich with cobs and pumpkins,
So that I may not be disturbed
By all these people
Passing, chattering ...
I see them passing by at dawn.
I see them passing at sundown.

1. The train looks like a monster to the poet. Like a monster it swallows up workers whom it carries from their homes in faraway lands to the mines and factories.

2. Moles are blind rodents that live underground. Mine-dumps look like mounds of earth raised by some giant moles.

3. Chattering people walking up and down make him feel unsafe, as he might be picked up by the train too.
18. THE SUN HAS SLEPT

By MONGANE SERONE, born 1949 in Sophiatown, Johannesburg. He went to school in Alexandra and later in Soweto. He now lives abroad.

The sun has slept,
There are no more shadows following anything,
The fright is gone under cover
Of darkness. ¹

The night throbs,²
Through the silence of the footsteps of a shadow
The truth hides, only seen by the stars
Of darkness. ³

Something is breathing,
There is a silent life in the light walking to the horizon:
The moon follows the sun
Of dawn.

1. Fright: This includes all the things we fear at night: ruffians, shadows, screams that are common in the townships. One seems to be safe only in the dark when one is not visible.


3. Darkness covers everything, even truth. We can imagine many kinds of truth: the truth that there is poverty, that the streets are dirty, that men and women are tired of work, that some people may be going to bed hungry, that there may be quarrels in the home, that other people may be breaking into a house, etc. - all these truths are hidden by the dark, seen only by the stars, which will not tell you.

19. THE MAN OF SMOKE ¹

By NJABULO NDEBELE, born July 1948 at Western Township, Johannesburg. Attended primary school in Nigel, but did Std. 6 and high school in Basutoland. Obtained the B.A. at what is now the National University of Lesotho. A scholarship enabled him to take the M.A. degree in English at Cambridge, England. He is at present lecturer in the Department of English, National University of Lesotho.
Strapped on my aunt's back
I find warmth
We walk through many streets
I don't know which,
but I know when we turn.

Even in my blanket,
I can feel the dust of the wind
pecking at me, like many needles,
but I cling to my aunt,
her back is warm and moist.

There are voices in this house
I don't know which,
I'm in the warm darkness
of my blanket.
"Mshlwane," voices greet.
"Mshlwane," auntie answers.
Then I am unstrapped.

to the gaze of silence

to the gloom of a candle

to the frightening stares

of a huge face of a person of wood

with teeth as big as fingers
smoke comes out of his mouth,
smoke comes out of his wicked smile.

Put me back, auntie, put me back,
it is cold here
but my words are not lips
they are my hands
clutching at her dress.

She puts me under a table,
but I move out to a corner.
A drum begins the beat:
GOGOM GOM... GOGOM GOM...

and there is song and dance.

Wild song and dance
and I am watching alone

from a corner; my corner.
I am wide eyed.
I am shorter than the table
and dancing legs are massive pillars.
I cling to my corner
lest I am crushed by dance.

round round round they dance

circle the table

GOGOM GOM .... GOGOM GOGOM ...

Alleluya! Alleluya ...........

I am a child watching

from a corner
I am a child clinging
to my corner.
I am a child fearing
   to be crushed.
   I watch my aunt who is mad
   quite mad.
   All are mad here.
   They kneel before the face of smoke
   they cry, they shriek,
   they breathe in gasps
   they say a wind must enter them
   they are mad quite mad,
   rising to sing and dance and clap hands.
   I fear.
   I fear people with the wind, praying
   like a cow bellowing ...........

1. This is part of a longer poem. A vivid account of the
   fears of a child who finds himself in a room, at night,
   where people are singing, dancing, praying to a wooden
   image, while smoke is coming out of his mouth.

2. He can feel the aunt's movements as she turns a corner.

3. As if silence were a living thing that can gaze. Not that
   everything the poet says here intensifies the fear in a
   child, who is highly imaginative. Everything is bigger
   than usual.

4. wooden carving.

5. wicked because it is grinning, showing large teeth.

6. Another exaggeration. The child is watching through the
   legs of the table and sees the people's legs as huge
   pillars.

7. The repetition of dance throughout the poem is to em-
   phasize a continuous act, to imitate repeated movements.
   The sound of the drum, the song, the sight of grownups
   in the dark, of the smoke coming out of the mouth of an
   image - all these crowd up in the child's mind.

8. mad with the excitement of song, dance, prayer. We mean
   this kind of madness when we speak of a person being
   possessed.

9. Wind is the spirit that is believed to possess a person
   who worships with song and dance.
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Luise Bernardi Korona: He killed Mangy-Dog & Other Stories Heinemann Educational Books, 1969, for excerpt from the story "He killed Mangy-Dog".


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Mingana Service: Songs, Johannesburg, Picador Books, 1972, for "The Sun, Slept".