

TOWARDS AN AFRICAN LITERATURE X: LAND, LABOUR, LITERATURE

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THE Xhosa prose and verse writings of the last thirty years of the nineteenth century provide a wealth of material not only on the intellectual and literary development of the African peoples, but also on the drastic political, economic and social changes affecting all groups in Southern Africa.

The Nongqawuse cattle-killing episode had broken the economic independence of the Xhosa, hunger and poverty driving them in large numbers into the Colony to earn a livelihood as labourers. Though not yet subdued, the Xhosa chiefs had lost their political and military power. Some of their people, e.g. a section of the Ndlambe and almost the entire Gqunukhwebe, had become Christian. From these and the "loyal Fingoes" there developed not only a class of preachers and teachers, but also a kind of "police tribe", whom the Colonial Government moved into the tracts of land depopulated by the famine and pestilence that had resulted from the cattle-killing. Fingoes and other tribal groups displaced by the internecine Mfecane Wars were pushed away from the Colony and into the "empty spaces" and "no-man's lands" immediately bordering upon unconquered territories and the annexed territories that could not yet be "trusted". Together with the descendents of Ntsikana's disciples and the white missionaries, they carried the "Word" and literacy to these areas. But they also acted as the "ears of the Government", and they "set the example to the backward peoples" by encouraging their sons to go and work in the industrial centres. For this was a period of industrial expansion, and there was a desperate need for labour in the mining industry and its concomitants, like the railways. The Trek Boers were involved in a life-and-death struggle with the indigenous peoples, especially in the Transvaal with the Pedi people under their chief, Sekhukhuni. Everywhere there was unrest, because the shortage of labour necessitated the acceleration of the Wars of Dispossession, in order that all the "able-bodied men" could be squeezed out of the tribal territories and into the labour market. Labour-recruiting Native Commissioners were no less active than the

missionaries in the "backward areas", and there was a positive scramble for converts amongst the church bodies. Literacy was developing in quality as well as in quantity; and all this constitutes the subject-matter of the literature composed during the last thirty years of the nineteenth century.

By 1870, the stage was set for the last phase of the Wars of Dispossession. The writers of the period have a great deal to say about the events they were living through; but what we are most grateful for is the unconscious co-operation between them and the tribal bards. The intellectuals write straightforward narratives, and the tribal bards compose and recite praise-poems in the traditional manner, often making references in figurative language to the incidents narrated by the intellectuals. In this way, much that would otherwise be obscure in the traditional praise-poem is elucidated by the straightforward historical record. Here we can only indicate briefly the nature of this co-operation:

(1) The intellectual writes that, as a result of starvation, the victims of the Nongqawuse fraud have become homeless wanderers, out of touch with any form of tradition, because the white employer does not really accept them into his society. The tribal bard says:

*"Nongqawuse created the homeless squatters;
Can it be that she spoke the truth?
'Slaughter your cattle! But save the dogs,
For plenty of wild game is coming!"*

(2) The intellectual describes the mass removals of "police tribes" to fill the "empty spaces". The tribal bard says:

*"He has made the Fingoes defiant,
Depriving us of land and power.
See how they stretch from Cwecweni to Ngquthu,
How they turn Phalo's land upside down!"*

(3) In the general rising of 1880-1, when the African tribes protested against the Act of Disarmament, the followers of the Mpondomise chief, Mhlontlo, killed the Qumbu magistrate or "Resident", Anthony Hope, and then tried to break through to Basutoland to make common cause with the Basotho then engaged in the Gun War. But they were held up by the "loyal

Hlubi" under their chief Zibi, until the colonial troops and their black allies came and defeated Mhlontlo. The tribal bard says of Zibi:

*"He is the Foiler of the mighty elephant,
For he foiled Mhlontlo and returned unscathed."*

(4) Mhlontlo, however, managed to escape, and was for a long time in hiding while the red-coats sought high and low for him. The tribal bard says:

*"The red-coats throng the Tsitsa Falls,
Awaiting the return of Mhlontlo
Whose name is loathsome to the whites,
For he killed their Resident Hope."*

(5) Finally Mhlontlo eluded the red-coats, crossed the *Gqili* (Orange River) and reached Basutoland, where he found sanctuary. Meanwhile the Colony was engaged in unsuccessful war against the Basotho. The tribal bard says:

*"We espied the trail of Mhlontlo;
He traversed Silwanyana's and vanished in the Gqili;
But the land of the Sotho is a stronghold of mountains
Whence they hurl the spear and the battle-axe,
Putting the white warriors to flight."*

(6) When the Mpondo chief, Sigcawu, came to meet Major Elliot and the Kokstad Resident, Macdonald, his entourage made a display that was interpreted as an act of defiance. Sigcawu was sent to prison. In protest, a large crowd of his followers demanded to be imprisoned with him, "because their chief could not spend a single day or night in a strange house without his attendants."

The tribal bard says:

*Thou snake with ever-lengthening tail
That impeded the house of the white men,
Even the houses of Meja and Madonele.*

There are numerous other references of this nature in the praise-poems of this period. And an interesting feature about

them is that the allusions to the exploits of any chief are not necessarily confined to his own praises. For instance, of the allusions to Mhlontlo that have been quoted, none appears in his own praises. They appear in the praises of contemporaries who were obviously taking a lively interest in what was going on elsewhere. This means that the vision of the tribal bards themselves was broadening, and their tribes had begun to regard themselves as units of a much bigger whole than hitherto.

The Church Bodies

The attitude of the African intellectuals to the rivalry amongst the churches is best illustrated by an editorial in 'ISIGIDIMI' of August 1st, 1875.

"It amazes us to find that people who should know how to live side by side in peace, who ought to forget that So-and-so belongs to this church, and So-and-so to that one, never cease to quarrel amongst themselves. As for us, this is one thing that we can never understand. We thought they had brought one Saviour, one God, because they carry one and the same Book of Scriptures, which will save any one who accepts it, no matter to what church he belongs. These quarrels amongst the missionaries puzzle not only the Christians at the schools. Even the pagans are discussing them, wondering which one to believe. For a missionary belonging to a certain church comes to us and says, 'Beware of the So-and-so's', whereas these So-and-so's bring to us the same Scriptures that he has been preaching. We remember a certain Sabbath Day when a pagan said, 'Countrymen, we do hear you, but we are still at a loss. We don't know which God to follow, whether the *Rhabe* one (Presbyterian) or the *Wesile* one (Wesleyan)'."

Linguistics and Semantics

The intellectuals were now taking a lively, active interest in other languages too. Hitherto, the Xhosa people had only known Xhosa and English, and perhaps a little Dutch, while a very small section of theologians had been introduced to Greek and Latin. But the coming together of people in the industrial areas brought a number of African languages together. We therefore find an occasional article on the linguistic structure of some language or other, spoken in the diamond fields or some other centre. Rev. G. Tyamzashe, who was in Kimberley in the 1870's, makes short comparative studies of Xhosa and Sotho,

enumerates other languages spoken by the labourers there, and even attempts to group and classify them according to their grammatical structure.

This interest in languages results in a critical study of the Xhosa renderings of the Scriptures. There are numerous articles discussing even the translations of words like "Alas!" A discussion of the Xhosa equivalent for the word "conscience" results in a protracted controversy over several issues of 'ISIGIDIMI', in which the participants discuss not only the derivations of the words suggested, but also the meanings of the equivalents in other languages.

But perhaps the most interesting of these controversies is that over the word "*Thixo*". Vimbe questions the use of this word for the Supreme Being. He argues that if there is only one God, as the Scriptures claim, he should have one name only, and that name should be found in the language in which the Scriptures were originally written, that is Hebrew. The word *Thixo*, he says correctly, is a Khoisan ("Hottentot") word for a certain insect, and that the Xhosa people, copying the Khoikhoi, use it as a swear word when they sneeze! There are many participants in this controversy, some of whom are scandalized. The participants show an amazingly wide knowledge of languages. The words *Jehovah*, *Theos*, *Deus* and others are freely discussed. One writer reveals especial erudition. He shows how words even in a given language change their meaning. Among other examples, he cites the English word *cattle*. According to him, this word in Elizabethan English meant *belongings*. Then later on, the form *chattels* came into being, indicating *lifeless possessions*, as against live ones. After criticizing Vimbe, he concludes his article encouragingly with a poem beginning:

*"I aim not to quench any glimmering light
In this land of shadows and darkness;
I deride not the light of a flickering star
When the sun and the moon are no more.*

*There being no light from the sun and the moon,
I will hail the lone star of evening,
And the flash of the floating fire-fly—
Little bird that glows in the night."*