

# TOWARDS AN AFRICAN LITERATURE IV: THE DAWN OF LITERATURE AMONG THE XHOSA

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IN all the speech communities of the Southern Africans, what literacy exists is inseparably bound up with Christian missionary enterprise. To be able to "preach the Word", the missionaries had not only to learn the languages of the people, but also reduce these languages to writing. Translators, interpreters, preachers and teachers had sooner or later to come from among the aborigines themselves. And so some of the apt converts had also to be introduced to the rudiments of modern learning through the medium of the language of the missionary body concerned. But since, outside of the missionary bodies, no one undertook to educate the Africans, acceptance of "the Word" remained the only means of access to any form of modern learning, and literacy became the exclusive privilege of a few Christian converts and their progeny.

The dawn of literacy is to be associated, first and foremost, with the Glasgow Missionary Society, whose representatives reduced the Xhosa language to writing at a small mission station on the banks of the Tyhume (Eastern Province) in 1821. The first man ever to write a book in Xhosa was John Bennie, one of the three Glasgow missionaries who founded Lovedale.

Some time before the coming of the Glasgow Mission, Ntsikana<sup>1</sup> had caught the spirit of the Christian religion from the preachings of Dr. van der Kemp and, indeed, had founded his own Church. Ntsikana refused to be baptized by the Glasgow Missionaries, but on his deathbed expressed the wish that his followers should take their families and his two wives and sons to the mission station at Gwali (Old Lovedale). It is to these converts that we owe the life-story of Ntsikana, and it is to their sons that we are indebted for the earliest record of anything ever written by a Xhosa-speaker in Xhosa. So it is that the earliest record of anything written by any Bantu-speaking African in his own language in Southern Africa was made at the small printing press at Old Lovedale about the end of the first

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<sup>1</sup>See *Africa South* Vol. 2 No. 1 pp. 100-101

quarter of the 19th century.

The earliest writings appeared in a periodical called *Ikwezi* (The Morning Star), published by the mission, and were done by those first converts who must have learnt to read and write in their old age. By 1862, when *Indaba* (The News) succeeded *Ikwezi*, the first truly literate generation of Xhosa speakers was in a position to make contributions whose literary merit established once and for all the status of this dialect as the literary medium, not only of the original Xhosa-speaking people, but also of the Mbho people (so-called "Fingos") who found sanctuary with the Xhosa about 1834, and of other sections of the Nguni whom literacy was beginning to reach through various missionary bodies throughout the Cape Province.

The leading figure amongst the contributors to *Indaba* was Tiyo Soga, a brilliant son of Ntsikana's most trusted friend and convert. Tiyo Soga was sent to Scotland in 1846 with the sons of the missionaries Ross and Thomson for further education, and he returned to South Africa an ordained minister of religion in 1857. His famous hymn, *Lizalis' Idinga Lakho* (Fulfil Thy Promise) was composed when the author landed on African soil on his return from Scotland. But his greatest contribution to Xhosa literature was *Uhambo lo Mhambi*, an excellent translation of the first part of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which has had almost as great an influence on the Xhosa language as the Authorized Version of the Bible upon English. In 1868, he was elected to a Revision Board whose task it was to prepare a revised version of the Xhosa Bible, and was engaged in translating *The Acts of the Apostles* when he died in 1871, at the early age of forty.

Among Tiyo Soga's younger contemporaries was a versatile man named William W. Gqoba. Originally a waggon-maker by trade, Gqoba became editor of *Isigidimi Sama-Xhosa* (The Xhosa Messenger), a periodical that succeeded *Indaba* in 1870. Gqoba collected a large number of Xhosa proverbial and idiomatic expressions, and he explained the derivation and/or meaning of each expression in excellent prose. He also wrote some history, confining himself to specific episodes like the scattering of the tribes in the Shaka era and the Nongqawuse cattle-killing episode of 1856-7; and some verse, including two didactic poems, one on *Paganism versus Christianity*, 850 lines, and the other on *Education*, 1,150 lines. Gqoba died in 1888 at the age of forty-eight. Some of his writings appeared in *Isigidimi* during his lifetime. The rest appeared eighteen years after his death in an anthology of

prose and poetry, *Zemk' Inkomo Maqwalandini!* (Preserve your heritage!), collected and edited by W. B. Rubusana and published in 1906.

Two periodicals appeared almost simultaneously in 1897. These were *Imvo Zabantsundu* (The Opinions of the Blacks), edited by John Tengo Jabavu, and *Izwi Labantu* (The Voice of the People), edited by Nathaniel Cyril Mhala. Rubusana was closely associated with *Izwi Labantu*, and much of the material in his anthology originally appeared in this periodical.

A much younger writer who began to draw attention when *Imvo* and *Izwi* flourished was S. E. Krune Mqhayi<sup>2</sup>, a man destined to carry the literary tradition into its second phase. Journalist, poet, novelist, biographer, essayist and translator, Mqhayi has done more than any other writer to reveal the beauty of Xhosa. He dominated the Xhosa literary field until his death in 1945, and for many years was the model for everybody who tried to write in the language.

The publication of Rubusana's anthology marks the end of the first fifty years of literary activity amongst the Xhosa-speaking people. It is a volume of 570 pages including a glossary, the latter being necessitated by the large number of traditional praise-poems which occupy nearly half the text<sup>3</sup>. But this anthology does not fully reflect the achievements of the writers of this first period. It does not include any of Tiyo Soga's writings, nor does it include some of the best prose that Gqoba originally contributed to *Isigidimi*. These appear in *Imibengo* (Tit-Bits), another anthology of prose and poetry prepared by W. G. Bennie, grandson of John Bennie, and published by the Lovedale Press as recently as 1936.

Since the main literary diet of the first writers was the Bible and other religious books, it was only natural that most of them should devote their writing to what they considered the most serious things of life. Their published work consists mainly of history, biography, ethnology, didactic verse and religious hymns. In spite of the great tradition of the heroic praise-poem, even a man of outstanding literary talent like Gqoba seems to have regarded poetry as a medium through which to express one's religious fervour and nothing else. Gqoba is so soaked in history and legend, as his prose writings reveal, that one is puzzled that none of the "moving accidents" he describes with

<sup>2</sup>See *Africa South* Vol. II No. 1 p. 105

<sup>3</sup>See *Africa South* Vol. II No. 1 p. 101

such spirit ever moved him to immortalize some of these great legendary heroes in poetry.

Soga's superior education put him at an advantage over a man like Gqoba, unquestionably more talented than himself. Soga lived in a much larger world of ideas than his contemporaries, and this is reflected in the range of subjects on which he was able to write as well as in the forms. He wrote short stories, essays and hymns, in addition to the translations mentioned earlier. His very first contribution to the first issue of *Indaba* showed clearly that he was going to write to entertain, and all his contributions to this periodical are characterized by sound common-sense blended with wit and humour. His influence became evident in the contributions of some of the younger writers, e.g. his brother Zaze Soga and William Kobe Ntsikana. The latter has a particular liking for anecdotes connected with cattle-raids, and his style is most entertaining. Many other prose writers who broke entirely with sermonizing unfortunately wrote anonymously or just gave their initials. Evidently they were known to the readers of those days, but it is extremely difficult to identify them now. Mqhayi, who began to write just before the Anglo-Boer War, really belongs to the second phase, when literacy had spread to the Sotho- and the Zulu-speaking communities, and his place is in a future instalment.

The legacy of the first fifty years of Xhosa literary activity is to be respected. If some of our readers are inclined to think that we are over-indulgent when we make this remark, we have only to remind them that these first writers had no written tradition to guide them, no Homer or Sophocles, no Herodotus or Plutarch, no Dante or Petrarch on whom to model themselves. If we remember this, then we must agree that theirs was no small achievement.

*(The early writers will be treated individually in the articles devoted to Post-Traditional Prose and Poetry.)*