

TOWARDS AN AFRICAN LITERATURE VII: POETRY AND THE NEW ORDER

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THE pagan tribal bard sees life mainly through the social institutions of his own tribe: the Christian literary poet sees it partly through the tribal institutions, and partly through the institutions introduced by the White missionary and by the White administrator. To understand the early literary poet amongst the Xhosa, we must put him side by side with the traditional tribal bard of the same period.

The tribal bard and the new order.

It must be repeated that the African traditional praise-poem is not, as most White people think, just a song of praise in which the tribal bard showers flattering epithets on his chief (see *Africa South* Vol. 2 No. 1, Oct.-Dec. 1957). The "praises of the chiefs" deal primarily with the happenings in and around the tribe during the reign of a given chief, praising what is worthy and decrying what is unworthy, and even forecasting what is going to happen: rivalries for the chieftainship within the tribe: the ordinary social life: alliances and conflicts with neighbouring tribes: military and political triumphs and reverses etc. Thus the tribal bard is a chronicler as well as being a poet. The chief is only the centre of the praise-poem because he is the symbol of the tribe as a whole.

This period being that of "treaties", annexations and "re-settlements", we are able to see, through the eyes of the tribal bard, the encroachment of the Whiteman on the land of the Africans, the breaking of alliances between one tribe and another, boundary disputes, the undermining of the power of the chief by missionary and magistrate, the relations between pagan and Christian etc., etc.

As the Xhosa people were the first to be subjugated, it is in the "praises" of their chiefs that the vast social changes brought about by conquest are first reflected. Most of our illustrations refer to this group.

The "praises" composed in the middle of the nineteenth century and after, begin to make allusions to governors, missionaries and magistrates. In the "Praises of Sandile" (son of Ngika or "Gaika"), reference is made to *Smiti* (Sir Harry Smith)

who was governor when Sandile was arrested and sent to *Rhini* (Grahamstown) via *Monti* (East London). Reference is also made to *Kondile* (Rev. Henry Calderwood) and to *Tshalisi* (the Hon. Charles Brownlee) who became magistrates over the Ngqika section of the Xhosa after their conquest. John Henderson Soga (son of Tiyo Soga), regards Brownlee as "A Friend of the Bantu" (see *The South-Eastern Bantu*, Chapter XV), but the Ngqika tribal bard of the days of Brownlee thinks otherwise. He complains that "the land has been spoilt by the Calderwood" and that "we trust not Tshalisi who seems to be friends with the Germans". He also refers sarcastically to the "guardianship" of Charles Brownlee over Sandile, so choosing his words that the "guardianship" looks like the herding of a domestic animal by its master.

In the "Praises of Sarhili", reference is made to the exile of this chief, and his finding sanctuary among the Bomvana is recorded. The relations between his people and the Fingo buffer state are also evident. But Sarhili himself is not spared. The war that led to his exile started as a mere drunken brawl between some Xhosa men and their Fingo neighbours. Handled properly, the quarrel could have been settled in a local headman's court. But Sarhili was led to treat the "breaking of Mbune's pots" which led to the fight as a *casus belli*. The bard refers sarcastically to this:

"Alas! that the land should die for Mbune's pots!"

In this and many other poems, constant reference is made to the rôle of the fugitive Fingos who, having been "taken under his wing" by the Xhosa chief, deserted him and made friends with "their fathers the Whitemen". Always the Fingos are reminded that their place is with the other Blacks, and their attention is drawn to the kind things that have been done to them. Thus, in the "Praises of Ngangelizwe" (a Thembu chief), the Bhele clan are asked:

" . . . what cause have ye to complain?

We gave you the Mthentu rich in corn."

There does not seem to be any direct bitterness towards the missionaries. But the African Christians are often subjected to sarcasm. Their divided loyalty, even as individuals, often provoked whippings, if not contemptuous amusement. It was the summary manner in which he used to deal with defiant Christians that earned the Mpondomise chief Mhlontlo, the epithet of "Wader-with-the-sjambok among the Christians".

The "Praises of Dalindyebo", Ngangelizwe's son and successor, refer to the Christians' love for "the song":

*Which they sing in praise of the King,
Proclaiming Jehovah and Christ:
How strange to us that they turn to Him their buttocks,
Albeit proclaiming Him King!*

The Xhosa bards are painfully aware of the havoc wrought by the Whiteman's liquor amongst the displaced and perplexed chiefs. Ndimba, grandson of Ndlambe, was ejected by *Makeleni* (Col. Mclean) from his rightful home, and came to live in Charles Brownlee's magisterial district where he apparently received an allowance of some kind. This he spent on liquor in a canteen owned by one Kelly at Draaibosch:

*"He helplessly lives in the House of Tshalisi
Whom he leaves for paying a wage;
This child may be found in Keli's canteen,
Bearing patiently the kicks of the German."*

But most tragic of all in this respect is the reference to Maqoma. A great orator, a regent with a very keen sense of justice, the hero of the Battle of Mthontsi (War of Mlanjeni, 1852), Maqoma after his defeat bore himself with such dignity at the rough *physical* handling of Sir Harry Smith as to shame this arrogant soldier-governor. But before he was banished to Robben Island where he met his death, he has so succumbed to liquor that the anonymous bard, while giving him genuine praise for his exploits, also refers to him as one "whose ways are strewn with broken bottles".

The early literary poets

The Christian African found a new meaning in life. He fully accepted the new culture with its promise of a fullness of life. The way to this promised life went by way of the baptismal font, the church and the school. These were incompatible with the tribal institutions, and so at this period the African Christian is at the crossroads. To the semi-literate one, the new road, though preferable, is misty. He is not so far removed from the old ways as not to be attracted by them. The intellectual has a clearer understanding of both roads. He prefers the new, but is keenly aware of the changing attitudes of the conqueror. The fullness of life that was promised him is not to be realised in the foreseeable future.

On the other hand, he regards the tribal institutions as backward and only serving to delay this fullness of life for himself and

his people. His aspirations and his feeling of frustration are to be seen through the eyes of the poet of this period. The influence of Christian teaching is evident everywhere.

William W. Gqoba

In the field of verse, Gqoba is famous for his two "Great Discussions", one between the *Christian and the Pagan*, and the other *On Education*. The names of the participants in these "Discussions" show the influence of Tiyo Soga's translation of the *Pilgrim's Progress* in that they are symbolic. In the *Discussion between the Christian and the Pagan* there are two participants, namely, *Present-World* (Pagan) and *World-to-come* (Christian). They discuss "matters related to The World, matters related to education, to social life and to government".

Present-World praises the earth and its pleasures and richness of life—so rich that even the Christians look this way and that, and finally join the ranks of the pagans who openly and joyfully welcome everything that life can give.

He enumerates the pastimes of the pagans. He alleges that if the Christians were truthful, they would admit that in fact they had lost their faith. Their youth were drunkards. Meanwhile, the Whiteman in whose favour the Christians abandoned their chiefs made no difference between the Christian and the pagan. He subjected them all to the same laws. All things considered, the life of the pagan was much fuller and richer because, while in addition to present-world self-denial and sufferings, the Christian still feared to go to hell after death, the pagan looked forward to a peaceful and becoming life with his fathers in the land of the shades.

*"Deserting your chiefs, you came to the Whiteman;
Destroying our rule, you side with the enemy;
But now your faith is lean and shrivell'd
Even like a chameleon whose mouth is smear'd
With nicotine on a sultry summer's day."*

World-to-come replies. He reminds his interlocutor that Ntsikana did prophesy that from the East there would come the claypot of corn beer (brought by the Fingos), and from the West the "little barrel" (brought by the Whiteman): that these two would bring misfortune. But how could Present-World talk of "the pleasures of this life"? What did they amount to? What was the end of those who aimed at riches? In life were they any happier than their poorer brethren? Did they not suffer from disease? Did they not lose their loved ones by death? At

death were they any happier?

*“Why boast thou of sin
That stalks man to the grave?
Wilt thou stay a sinner,
Like a locust that dies
On a dry stalk of grass?”*

This discussion covers 900 lines. In it Gqoba shows his knowledge of history and folklore. The participants refer to numerous incidents in history and now and again a folktale is told to illustrate a point. Present-World has a very strong case throughout, but somehow at the end he gives in.

The participants in the *Great Discussion on Education* are youthful people of both sexes. They include such characters as Sharp-eyed, Crooked-eyed, One-sided, Miss Vagrant, Miss Gossip, Miss Truthful and Miss Upright. Here the aspirations of the young intellectuals are revealed. They are critical of the educational practices of their days. They are denied access to certain fields of knowledge: they are poorly paid. There is a conspiracy amongst the rulers, and it is this: “If they cry for Greek and Latin and Hebrew, give them a little. But make no mistake about the wages. Keep the wages low. If they are employed in respectable jobs, flatter them by addressing them as ‘Mr. So-and-so’, but as ordinary labourers, they are to be addressed as plain ‘Jack’ or just ‘Boy’!”

But the inevitable “moderates” are to be found even in this small group. Accusing the first group of being “ungrateful” and of “finding fault with everything”, they warn them not to expect to get everything at once. They must expect to take just as long to acquire civilization as the White people. After all, hadn’t the White people brought them happiness?

*“While the lion of darkness still roaved and roared,
They gave up their homeland for love of us blacks.”*

A participant by the name of Tactless confesses to disillusionment. We thought, he says, that this way of life was going to be a refuge for those who had been smelt out as sorcerers, for suffering womanhood, for young children who had none to protect them. For these and many other blessings we gave up our independence. But now the main thing is *taxes*—a tax on firewood, a tax on water, a tax on grass even. We are deprived of our pastureland. In good faith, we allowed White traders to come and live among us, sharing our pastures with us. To-day

the land belongs to them, If our cattle go anywhere near, they are impounded.

Nevertheless, says Tactless, we must admit that the White-man's things are good. We must get them, no matter how much pain this costs us. If you want the honey, you thrust in your hand and grab it no matter how vicious the bees: no matter how painful the stings.

There is an interesting variety of participants and therefore a variety of opinions, left centre and right shading into each other. In this long, long discussion, no one says that the Blacks are getting a square deal from the Whites. The best defence that the extreme right can put up is that things are not so bad, and that if the ingrates will only exercise patience, the best is yet to be. The last speaker is Ungrateful, who "admits" that his eyes "have been opened" to "the good things" that the White people have brought them, and brings the Great Discussion that covers 1,800 lines to a close by telling the participants to "go seek learning" and "love the White people".

Smaller in quantity but decidedly greater in quality is H. M. Mthakathi's *Song of the Cross*. A poem of 200 lines, it calls upon the "Bringer-together of hostile homes . . . whose blood didst flow whilst Thou didst hunt for our souls" to "proclaim the news of heaven in the rough places of the earth". He thinks of the great upheavals in his homeland, of the thousands whose bones lie scattered at Mthombe and Sandlwana, and prays that these may dance at the gates of Zion. He prays that the Lord reveal himself to the youth:

*"Reveal Thyself to the youth of our land,
That they give up the song and the dance,
And go arm in arm to the places of learning,
And go arm in arm to the praise of the highest."*

Such is Mthakathi's prayer to the Christ,

*"Whose shoulders bore the cross of shame
That the pagan might wear a crown."*

Mthakathi speaks from the heart: Gqoba, on the other hand, is forced by the very manner in which he handles his subject matter to speak from the head. In the latter's two great poems there is more wit than emotion. But both these, the greatest poets of this period, preserve the imagery that characterizes the traditional praise-poems as well as showing the influence of the new learning not only in subject-matter but also in technique.