

TOWARDS AN AFRICAN LITERATURE XI: THE HARP OF THE NATION

Dr. A. C. JORDAN

Lecturer in Bantu Languages, University of Cape Town

IN the first few years of its life, from 1871 to 1878, 'ISIGIDIMI' was highly respected and trusted by the literate section of the Africans. Politicians, ministers of religion and lovers of general cultural progress paid tribute to it in prose and poetry. But with the sharpening of the struggle between black and white in the bloodiest period of the Wars of Dispossession, the people become disillusioned; and, by 1884, hardly any of the leading writers has a good word to say for the journal.

One of the most outstanding figures of this period was a contributor from St. John's Mission, Umtata, who styled himself "UHadi Waseluhlangeni" (The Harp of the Nation). The author of the poem whose first two stanzas (in translation) concluded our previous instalment, "Hadi" was a highly respected writer of great intellectual integrity, widely read for that period in the literacy of the Southern Africans. It seems that no controversy could be brought to a close in 'ISIGIDIMI' until "Hadi" had made his contribution. If he did not write, either the other participants or interested readers suggested that it was about time that he did so. As a rule his contribution to any discussion was in the form of a prose essay, but he often concluded with a poem inspired by the subject under discussion.

When 'ISIGIDIMI' was adversely criticized by its readers, "Hadi" implored the editor to exercise patience. He commended 'ISIGIDIMI' for not losing heart in the face of such severe criticism, and likened the journal to a warrior at whom the enemy have hurled so many spears that his body becomes like that of a porcupine. Nevertheless, the warrior walks boldly on like an elephant:

*Press on to the heights of Ararat,
Thy people borne bravely on thy back,
Rescued from the torrent of ignorance.
Be patient as a toiling mother
Famished, but hoeing and weeding the corn,
Her baby crying on her back,
Her corn plants withering in the sun.*

It must be remembered that the wars of this period include the War of Nchayechibi, against the Xhosa (1877-8), the Zulu War (1879), and the Gun War, mainly against the Basuto (1880-1). In *'ISIGIDIMI'*, the whole struggle was made to appear to the Xhosa reader as a struggle between Heathendom, represented by "*utshaba*" (the enemy), and Christendom, represented by "our troops", "the troops of Victoria, Child of the Beautiful". Those Africans who were defending their land against the white invaders were cast as villains, and opposition to annexation and white domination was made to appear as hostility to "the progress of the Word". Any reverse suffered by the white troops was greatly deplored, while every one of their conquests was hailed as "the triumph of the Word".

There is evidence in the letters to the editor that for a time the readers were infected by this propaganda—propaganda that successfully neutralized the African Christian intellectuals during the fighting. Indeed, one writer urged that as soon as any territory was conquered, the pagan chieftain should immediately be replaced by a Christian preacher. "Why should territory that has been won for Christ continue to be ruled by a heathen?" Even when the people in general wanted to revolt against the Act of Disarmament, one writer, Daniso Bulube, maintained that the blacks should be forbidden firearms until they had read the Bible! The first indications that the people had lost confidence in *'ISIGIDIMI'* appear in 1881, when a Kimberley writer who styles himself "*Ndingummbi*" (I-am-a-digger) asks indignantly: "Whose messenger is *'ISIGIDIMI'*?" He is followed by several others, including one Ndzeku who condemns *'ISIGIDIMI'* as "*ipepa elifileyo*" (a dead paper).

It was not until April 2, 1883, after the editor had tried to defend himself against these attacks, that "Hadi" wrote as follows: "I am discussing the hostility that exists between *'ISIGIDIMI'* and its readers across the Kei. The reason would seem to be this, that the younger intellectuals say they can never make out the true nationality of *'ISIGIDIMI'*. *'ISIGIDIMI'* never takes up a clear stand on political matters. It sides with the whites, for whenever a writer voices the feelings of the blacks, *'ISIGIDIMI'* immediately makes him understand that he belongs to the side of the enemy. For instance, a writer who tried to put in a word for Langalibalele (a Hlubi chief) was quickly immersed under the waters of silence: while another writer, who expressed the idea that Langalibalele was a mere goat

trying to fight against an elephant, was given praise and his words were echoed far and wide.

“In these days, when the nation is sickening to death, in these days of long-lasting wars and short-lived peace, it is demanded of you by the youth of your fatherland that you give them the length and breadth and depth of national news. Moreover, it is demanded of you that you make a clearing in your paper, a clearing that you have to keep clean for men of conflicting views, so that in this clearing they may discuss all the matters that so affect their welfare and the welfare of all the blacks. Only then shall we know what we are doing. As a result of this practice, there will emerge in this clearing national orators and bards, some praising our side, and others praising the other side. Why cannot a bard emerge for once from the people of Mokhachane (Basuto) and sing as follows:—

*Arise, ye sons of the Mountain-at-Night!
The hyena howls, the white hyena,
All ravenous for the bones of Moshoeshoe,
Of Moshoeshoe who sleeps high up on the mountain.*

*Its belly hangs heavy and drags on the ground,
All gorged with the bones of warrior-kings;
Its mouth is red with the blood of Sandile.¹*

*Awake, rock-rabbits of the Mountain-at-Night!
She darts out her tongue to the very skies,
That rabbit-snake with female breasts²
Who suckled and fostered the trusting Fingos,
Thereafter to eat them alive.”*

In our last instalment we mentioned the attitude of the African intellectuals to the quarrels amongst representatives of the various churches. The Africans would seem to have thought that it did not matter very much which church you joined, so long as you became a Christian. “Hadi” has a fairly long essay on this and kindred subjects.

“The study of theology can never make one Christian body of us blacks. There are books and books on theology, and in their nature they are very polemical, and theology itself is a sea whose waves keep things asunder. Although they all sleep in the one womb of the Bible, these books kick one another

¹Xhosa chief.

²Queen Victoria.

like Jacob and Esau in their mother's womb. Luther and Zwingli are the founders of Protestantism. They are one in their attitude to sin and in regarding the scriptures as the only true beacon of Faith. But in their theology they differed so much that Luther accused Zwingli of being a pagan. . . . If our forebears differed so much over theology, how can we hope to be united? The Protestantism that rescued us with a firm hand from the ignorant worship of the Roman Catholic Church has not the strength to bind us together into a unity like that of the Father and the Son.

"The spirit of enquiry, which is our pride and the pride of these days, has torn the body of the church apart. Even the early leaders of the church, who met at large conferences and tried to put the body together, did not succeed. Instead of coming to some agreement, their views scattered in all directions like crackers on Guy Fawkes Day. . . . And yet the true children of God in the Presbyterian, in the Wesleyan and in the Anglican Church cry to one another wanting to worship together; but the heads of the church do not know where to find the needle and the thread that can sow together the shreds that they have created . . ."

"Hadi's" disillusionment with the churches appears in a poem he wrote for 'ISIGIDIMI' of February 1st, 1884, which begins:

*Some thoughts till now ne'er spoken
Make shreds of my innermost being;
And the cares and fortunes of my kin
Still journey with me to the grave.*

*I turn my back on the many shams
That I see from day to day;
It seems we march to our very grave
Encircled by a smiling Gospel.*

*For what is this Gospel?
And what salvation?
The shade of a fabulous hili³
That we try to embrace in vain.*

In the same year, an article by "Hadi Waseluhlangeni" was rejected by the editor of 'ISIGIDIMI', for being "too hostile to British rule". The great paper was dying indeed.

³Another name for a *thikoloshe* (a spirit).