

TOWARDS AN AFRICAN LITERATURE (VI): LITERARY STABILIZATION

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THE period immediately succeeding that of Ntsikana's disciples may be regarded as one of literary stabilization amongst the Xhosa-speaking Southern Africans. The Bible had been translated into Xhosa, and Tiyo Soga, one of its translators, had also translated *'The Pilgrim's Progress'* (Part I). These two books had profound influence on the thought and style of the writers. The idea of individual, as against communal, formulation had taken root, but writers did not abandon the traditional style in their expression, nor did they cast aside their folklore. New experiments in versification began to appear, but the traditional forms asserted themselves all the time. It must be remembered that this was a transitional period in every detail of the people's lives. While the missionary carried on his work as preacher and teacher, the soldier carried on with his own mission of conquest. While the missionary preached "peace on earth and goodwill towards men," the wars of dispossession were working towards a climax. The people had seen the disastrous effects of the Nongqawuse (Cattle-killing) Episode, which had impoverished them and driven thousands of their sons and daughters to seek work amongst their White conquerors; and the effects of the master-and-servant relationship between White and Black were beginning to be keenly felt. Those who had accepted the teachings of the missionaries were no longer blindly optimistic about the motives of the White man. All this, and more, is reflected in the writings of the sixties—eighties of the last century.

The dominant figures of this period were Tiyo Soga, who wrote essays and a few short stories, and William W. Gqoba, essayist, historian and poet. The novel was not yet born. Imitations of *'The Pilgrim's Progress'* were to come with the next generation.

Prose

The essay of this period was not unlike the English essay of the eighteenth century in content. It was serious and didactic. Soga's essays reflect the social changes of the time very clearly. He writes under such headings as *'Amakristu Neenkosi'* (The Christians and the Chiefs), *'Amakhoiwa Namaqaba'* (The Believers

and the Pagans). The former opens as follows: "It is said by outsiders that as soon as people follow the ways of the Word of God, they no longer pay regard to the earthly chieftainship and its authority. It is said that if a chief or other man of standing finds himself amongst the converted, he is lost, for he enjoys no recognition as a chief or man of standing. And so these outsiders, who still hold out stubbornly against the Word, go on to say, 'As for us, we still stand by the chiefs and the sons of the chiefs who have been deserted by their people, by those people who have accepted the way of God'." The writer goes on to say that the chiefs themselves have become so very much aware of this attitude on the part of the Christians that "as far as they are concerned, the Christians are a separate flock, a different tribe, that has nothing to do with them." The writer deplors this state of affairs, and warns his Christian readers that if the pagans are to be attracted to Christianity, the converted must never be accused of lack of respect for their chiefs. He quotes a great deal from the Scriptures to establish his point that "God recognizes earthly power. It exists at His bequest. And he who rejects the chiefs, rejects God's own bequest."

The essay on '*The Believers and the Pagans*' also shows that the gulf is widening between the converted and the pagan. The converted has lost *ubuntu* (generosity, respect for man irrespective of position). The pagan can no longer expect hospitality amongst the Christians. Soga gives an instance of a pagan traveller who spent a cold night in the open veld because none of the Christians in the village would admit him into their homes. Another essay of this type by the same writer describes the devastating effects of the White man's liquor: "White people brought us knowledge and wisdom in respect of many things. If we were willing that our young people should partake of that wealth of knowledge and wisdom, we should be lifted out of ignorance. For to the white people too, this wisdom and knowledge is not indigenous. It came at a certain time. There was a time when their progenitors were the laughing stock of their more civilized conquerors. To-day, the white people laugh at us.

"More than anything else, it was through the white people that we got to know about God, about Jesus, about freedom and about heaven. But although they have brought many things that are blessings to us in this life and even in the life hereafter,

there are some evil things which we wish that the white people had left behind. Even the blessings have lost their value and can no longer be praised as blessings, if we look at the work done by liquor amongst the black people. Liquor has produced abominations which were not known amongst the Xhosa people, abominations that we cannot discuss now. Liquor is going to destroy, whereas the other things came to uplift us. Liquor is like a firebrand thrown into dry veld grass."

Other essayists of this time dealt with similar subjects. Witchcraft, or belief in 'diviners', is tackled from all angles by several essayists, and all of them, of course, think that superstition is incompatible with 'true Christianity'.

But it must not be thought that the essayists of this period never wrote for entertainment. Soga, even in those essays referred to above, is very humorous. It is only a pity that most of the time he addresses himself to a Christian audience, so that a great deal of what he has to say would receive no sympathy from the pagans whom he himself refers to as 'outsiders'. In what perhaps is the greatest essay that has yet been published in Xhosa, Soga describes a journey by ox-waggon through a drought-stricken area in the Eastern Province. It is a ghastly picture of hunger and desolation. But even in this the man's deep sense of humour occasionally reveals itself, throwing into relief the barren journey between King William's Town and Adelaide.

Far more entertaining than the essay of this period is the short story, though only a few examples of it are to be found. The leading figure here is Kobe Ntsikana, son of the prophet. He deals mostly with scenes from pastoral life. But one of the greatest entertainers and humorists of this period is anonymous. The following is a sample of his writing:

"One day, while riding my father's horse, Stanley, I decided when passing near the great pond on the roadside to give the horse a slight thwack on the flank, in order that by the time I came in sight of the homesteads near the school, all the eyes of the village should be upon me, because I had an eye on someone fair in that village. But Stanley, instead of ambling gracefully as I had intended he should, got completely out of control and made straight for the pond. And the pond was full to overflowing! Imagine me sitting there on his back, a heap of death. But just when he reached the brink, Stanley suddenly stopped. I tell you I flew right over his head and went splash! into the

pond, sinking, and finally sat right on the mud at the bottom.

"Sitting down there, I began to think hard, realizing that I was as good as dead. I could not even swim, because my leggings were full of water. I was like one who had been bound to a heavy stone and cast into the water. Nevertheless, I began to struggle, remembering that God helps those who help themselves. But in vain! I could not move from the spot. . . .

"Then suddenly I caught hold of my hair and pulled it hard, and I realized that my body was rising. Ah! Now I remembered that bodies lose weight in water, so I pulled in earnest. Lo and behold! My body rose easily, and I pulled and threw myself right out of the water and onto the brink!"

And so the story continues in this humorous manner. The first person to see the narrator in his sad plight, covered with mud and all but dead, was the very schoolmistress whom he had hoped to attract from Stanley's back! But the story, of course, ends happily.

Poetry

Apart from one or two lyrical poems, the poetry of this period is didactic. The titles themselves indicate the subject matter—"The Song of the Cross," "Isaiah I", "Acts 28". Then there are Gqoba's long poems on 'Education' and 'Christianity'.

But while the literary poets were experimenting with new themes and new forms of versification, the tribal bards who 'stood by the chiefs and the sons of the chiefs' carried on with their compositions in the traditional style. It is most interesting to see this transitional period from the literary as well as from the social point of view, through the eyes of the Christian literary poet on the one hand, and through the eyes of the tribal bard on the other. Towards the end of this period we also find that some poets live fully in both worlds. It will be necessary to deal separately with the poetry of this period.

