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# A REVIEW OF ZULU LITERATURE

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## A REVIEW OF ZULU LITERATURE

IN THIS BRIEF DISCUSSION I propose to give you a general picture of what has been done and what is being done to develop Zulu literature. In discussing the early beginnings I shall refer also to work done among the Xhosa in order to make the picture more complete.

The story of literary development in the Bantu area is a story which cannot be separated from missionary endeavour. What is generally accepted as the first Bantu book appeared in 1624, the work of Jesuit Fathers in Angola. This was a manual of Christian evidence and catechism. The seventeenth century period was dominated by Roman Catholic missionaries. Not much work was done in the Bantu field in the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century, however, considerable work was done and Protestant missionaries made valuable contributions.

In the case of the South African Bantu languages some of the earliest records were found in travellers' accounts. Travellers appended to their publications vocabularies and other information. It should be remembered that the Bantu languages were not written languages. The travellers therefore had to devise their own method of writing. This was not a very simple matter, particularly because the phonology of the Bantu languages embodied sounds which were completely strange to the recorders.

The two Bantu languages in South Africa whose vocabularies appeared in these travellers' accounts were Xhosa and Tswana. For instance Andrew Sparrman appended some sixty-three Xhosa words which he had recorded during his travels between the years 1772 and 1776. Sparrman was a Swedish traveller and his account was entitled *The Country of the Hottentots and Caffres*. Sparrman's record is a valuable one because, as far as we know, it was the earliest vocabulary of any South African Bantu language.

In 1801 John Barrow recorded a few words of Xhosa. In 1806 Lichtenstein, a German traveller, recorded Xhosa. Lichtenstein also recorded Tswana in 1806 and John Campbell recorded some eighty Tswana words in 1815.

It is the missionaries, however, who were the main contributors. Their avowed policy was to spread God's word as widely as possible. To do that it was not enough merely to preach the Word of God to the Africans. It was necessary to make it possible for the Africans to read the word of God for themselves in their own language. This need brought the missionaries face to face with the problem of reducing the Bantu languages into writing. Schools were started and the Africans were taught to read and write.

An examination of the contribution by missionaries in the nineteenth century reveals that the emphasis was on translation of the Scriptures, preparation of grammars and compilation of dictionaries. When Brownlee, Thomson, Bennie and Ross got together at Tyumie in about 1822, they made the rendering of the Bible into Xhosa their paramount literary task. Different books were assigned to different individuals. These four men were all missionaries of the Glasgow Missionary Society.

In 1833 W. Boyce, a Wesleyan missionary, finished a translation of St Luke's Gospel. Other names of importance in connection with Bible translation into Xhosa were those of Appleyard, a Wesleyan missionary, A. Kropf of the Berlin Society and Tiyo Soga, a Xhosa minister. John W. Colenso translated the New Testament into Zulu, and also parts of the Old Testament.

Some of the more important early contributors to the study of grammar were John Bennie, W. Boyce, S. J. Davis, J. W. Appleyard who all studied Xhosa; James Archbell who published the first Tswana grammar; Hans Schreuder who published a grammar of Zulu in 1850; and John W. Colenso, Bishop of Natal, who published *An Elementary Grammar of the Zulu Kafir Language* in 1855. This was abridged in 1859 and published under the title *First Steps in Zulu: an Abridgment of the Elementary Grammar of the Zulu Language*. In 1859 Lewis Grout of the American Board in Natal published *The IsiZulu: A Grammar of the Zulu Language*.

In Southern Sotho missionaries of the Paris Evangelical Society made valuable contributions.

In connection with dictionary work mention should be made of Perrin's *A Kafir-English Dictionary of the Zulu Kafir Language as spoken by the tribes of the Colony of Natal*. This was published in

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1855. In 1857 J. L. Döhne published his *Zulu-Kafir Dictionary*. In 1861 J. W. Colenso's *Zulu-English Dictionary* was published. In 1880 appeared the *English-Zulu Dictionary* by Charles Roberts.

The grammars and dictionaries were not mainly intended for the Africans but for the missionaries themselves. They were intended to help new missionaries in the field to master as quickly as possible the language of the people among whom they were to work. But although the missionaries concerned themselves primarily with grammars, dictionaries and the translation of the Scriptures, some of them recorded folk-lore, proverbs and valuable historical material.

The efforts of the missionaries, however, did not come to a close with the end of the nineteenth century. To this day many of them still devote a considerable amount of their time to the study of Bantu languages. In many areas where Bantu languages are spoken it will be found that the missionaries have played a big part in the development of literature, and for that we owe them an unrepayable debt.

The Zulus, quite naturally, could not be expected to make any significant contribution during the early period and the twentieth century was well in before Bantu writers began to take a hand in the development of their literature. Nevertheless, even in the nineteenth century the Bantu did give some assistance in translation work. For instance Canon Callaway published, in 1871, *Incwadi Yamahubo*, the Book of Psalms translated into Zulu. He is said to have been assisted by trained natives. Unfortunately we are not told just what that training involved. Again in compiling *The Religious System of the AmaZulu* and the *Izinganekwane nensumansumane nezindaba zabantu*, Callaway employed African assistance. There is an 1895 translation of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* by J. K. Lorimer and Benjamin Zikode. In 1897 Fr Th. Lange translated *Izindaba Zencwadi Yezincwadi* from German into Zulu.

A notable contribution was made in 1859. In that year Bishop Colenso, Bishop of Natal, visited the Zulu King Mpande. He took with him two school boys, Magema and Ndiyane, who could read and write, and a teacher William. They were told to keep records of their daily doings. The result was the publication in 1860 of *Three Native Accounts of the visit of the Bishop of Natal in*

*September and October 1859 to UMpande, King of the Zulus. Three Native Accounts* contained three Zulu texts, accounts of the journey recorded by Magema, Ndiyane and William. These texts are, perhaps, the earliest published contribution from the pen of a Zulu.

After 1900 the missionaries still continued to interest themselves primarily in dictionary work, the writing of grammars, studies in phonetics and Bible translation. But important as this work was, what Zulu needed most of all was creative work, and this was the field in which the Zulus themselves had to play a major part. There were difficulties, however.

1. First of all, there were no Zulus who had the necessary training to enable them to write. They were ill-equipped in the technique of writing. There were no books available to them in their language which could serve as a guide. I might point out that we have not yet overcome this difficulty. There is still a crying need for some sort of guidance to be given to aspiring African writers.
2. There was no incentive to write because there was no Zulu reading public. The production of books in Zulu was not an economic proposition. Consequently, for quite a long time no serious work was produced by Zulus in their language.

Even today the absence of a large reading public is still a serious handicap. The habit of reading is not yet sufficiently well developed among our people. As a result publishers who are quite happy to produce books for schools are reluctant to touch anything which is not likely to be prescribed for school use. They fear that such books will not sell. This makes it difficult to produce books for adults.

The fact that books which have been produced hitherto have been mainly school readers has developed in the minds of the Zulus the idea that vernacular books are only intended for school children and that a grown-up will not find anything of sufficient interest in them. They regard vernacular books with some prejudice and one can appreciate their attitude. The emphasis on producing books suitable for school use acts as a limiting factor on Zulu writers; it tends to cramp their style as they must keep



in mind all the time the school children who are likely to be the main readers of those books. Writers who wish to cater for more mature minds find themselves handicapped.

I should also mention that books cost money and the poverty of the people discourages them from using money to buy books instead of buying the bare necessities of life. Besides lack of money, the conditions under which many Africans live are not conducive to the development of a habit such as reading. The homes are small and crowded and there is poor lighting which makes it difficult to read in the evening. Nevertheless, I do believe that it is vital to encourage reading among the grown-ups by producing books suitable for them. This in turn will, I believe, stimulate the production of good books for adults. This is a challenge to Bantu authors to produce work of merit which will encourage their people to read. It is also a challenge to publishers to be ready to take a risk from time to time by publishing manuscripts with merit even if such books are not likely to be favoured with prescription for the schools. Although I do not know how it could be done, I think it would assist tremendously if there was some way of subsidising Zulu books for adults so that publishers would at least be assured of recovering a fair percentage of their printing costs. There should be a campaign to get the Africans to support existing library facilities, and new library services should be provided.

Although there have been factors which have tended to limit the production of Zulu books, there have also been factors which have tended to stimulate such production.

First of all, there has been a general awakening of the people and a new interest in their language. Perhaps this is again the spirit of nationalism manifesting itself. Whereas in the past many Zulus were prejudiced against Zulu books and preferred to read only English literature, I think it is a fair assessment of the position to say that there are many today who will read a good Zulu book if they find one. I hope Zulu writers will not fail to take note of this development and that they will provide the books required.

This new interest in the language may also be seen in the large number of manuscripts received by publishers.

Secondly, there is a crying need for good books, even for

use in the schools. To meet this need more and more Zulus are taking an interest in writing.

Thirdly, literary competitions which have been conducted from time to time have had the effect of encouraging African writers. In 1933 Vilakazi submitted a manuscript to a competition organised by the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures, London. His manuscript received an award and it was subsequently published. In 1937 Ndebele submitted a play to the May Esther Bedford competition. His play also received an award and it was subsequently published. In 1953 the APB, Johannesburg, organised a competition which attracted many African writers, judging by the number of manuscripts submitted. Some of those manuscripts have already been published. The APB is organising another literary competition for African writers this year.

Fourthly, the *Ilanga LaseNatal*, a Zulu weekly paper, has played an important part in the development of Zulu literature by providing useful training ground for Zulu writers.

In 1922 appeared *Abantu Abamnyama Lapa Bavela Ngakona*. This was written by Magma Fuze, one of Bishop Colenso's school-boys of 1859. Magma Fuze's desire was to tell the story of his people and to trace their origin. Another book which appeared in the same year was *Isitha Somuntu Nguye Uqobo Lwakhe* by J. L. Dube. Two years later, in 1924, P. Lamula, a minister of the Norwegian Mission, published *UZulukamalandela*, which is a record of historical incidents. It was at this time, in the middle twenties, that J. Stuart's books appeared which for many years were used in the Zulu schools. Stuart's books, five in number, contain much valuable historical material.

In 1930 the first Zulu novel by a Zulu appeared entitled *Insila kaShaka*. This was by J. L. Dube. Rev. John L. Dube, who may be known to some present this morning, was the founder of Ohlange Institute near Durban. He was also the founder of the Zulu weekly paper *Ilanga LaseNatal* in 1904. For his important work among his people Rev. Dube was honoured by the University of South Africa which conferred upon him the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. Dube's book *Insila kaShaka* has been translated into English by Prof. Boxwell. *Insila kaShaka* depicts life in the reign of Shaka. It is a lively story told in Dube's gripping style. Al-

though Dube wrote other books, *Insila kaShaka* is his most important and best known among the Zulus.

The period between 1931 and 1940 saw some big advances in the production of Zulu books. Two names stand out prominently during that period, those of B. W. Vilakazi and R. R. R. Dhlomo. Dhlomo is the present Editor of the Zulu weekly, *Ilanga LaseNatal*, founded by Dube. Vilakazi was born at Groutville, Natal, and went to school at Groutville and Mariannhill where he trained as a teacher. He passed the Matriculation and B.A. examinations by private study. After teaching in several schools in Natal, he was appointed to the staff of the Witwatersrand University in the Department of Bantu Studies. Whilst at Wits he was awarded the M.A. and D.Litt degrees—the first, and so far the only, African in South Africa to hold the degree of Doctor of Literature.

Vilakazi is an important figure in Zulu literature. Although he died at the early age of 42, he had already made an important contribution with his three novels and two books of poems. He also collaborated with Prof. Doke in the preparation of the Zulu-English Dictionary. Vilakazi's three novels are important because, like Dube, he made an attempt to write something which even grown-ups could enjoy. His first novel *Noma Nini* received an award in a competition organised by the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures. The book depicts the beginning of the period of transition for the Zulus with the arrival of the missionaries in Groutville. His second novel, *UDingiswayo kaJobe*, tells the story of the Mthethwa Chief Dingiswayo who was Shaka's guardian. The third novel *Nje Nempela* is based on the events of the Bambatha Rebellion of 1906.

And yet among the Zulus Vilakazi is remembered more as a poet than as a prose writer. I think the main reason for this is that he was mainly responsible for developing poetry whose form departed radically from the traditional Izibongo (or praises). Instead of adopting the style and pattern of the Izibongo, he experimented with European forms. He divided his poems into regular stanzas. He also experimented with rhyme. Many of the poems contained in the first book of poems, *Inkondlo kaZulu*, employ rhyme. If the poems in the second book of poems entitled *Amal' Ezulu* are any guide, Vilakazi was not happy with

the results of his experiment because in *Amal' Ezulu* he discarded rhyme almost completely. In only one poem out of a total of twenty did he employ rhyme. I am inclined to think that even in that one poem he employed rhyme because it was a sequel to a poem appearing in the first book in which he had used rhyme.

Those of you who know Zulu will realise just what it means to attempt rhyme in that language. In Zulu only five endings are possible—in the vowels a, e, i, o, u because Zulu has open syllables. Any rhyming scheme is confined to these endings. English on the other hand uses not only open syllables but closed syllables, that is, syllables ending in consonants. The English poet is, therefore, not hampered in the same way as is a Zulu poet. A Zulu poet who attempts rhyme might have on paper something which looks like rhyme but which does not produce the desired effect on the ear. I believe that rhyme is for the ear more than for the eye. The controversy still rages as to whether or not Zulu is a suitable medium in which to attempt rhyme.

Unlike the traditional poet who recited the praises of chiefs and heroes, Vilakazi wrote on a variety of subjects. The following are a few titles (in translation) of poems contained in the first book—*The Tragedy of the Xhosa*; *Sonkomose's Claypot*; *The Victoria Falls*; *Aggrey of Africa*. Rev. J. Dexter Taylor translated *The Victoria Falls* into English. His translation appears in the *Journal of Bantu Studies*, Vol. IX, No. 2, June, 1935. The poems in the second book reflect much more than those in the first book the influence of the times on Vilakazi. He pays more attention to the misery and suffering of the black people.

The second name of importance during the period 1931-1940 is that of Dhlomo. His books are mainly concerned with the lives of Zulu kings—Shaka, Dingane, Mpande, Cetshwayo. Dhlomo has two novels to his credit—*UNomalanga kaNdengezi*, a historical novel based on an incident during the reign of Shaka. The second novel *Indlela Yababi* is a sociological novel depicting life in our present-day big cities. There are other books by Dhlomo which are mainly intended for the junior classes in the schools.

Besides the works of Vilakazi and Dhlomo many small books by various writers appeared during the period 1930-1940 which, however, made little or no impression. After 1940 more and more books began to appear and today we have about twenty-five

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novels in Zulu. But none of these, in my opinion, can be regarded as really outstanding. They all reflect in varying degrees weaknesses which reveal that the writers have not yet mastered their art. Although it is not my intention to discuss these novels, there are two observations which I would like to make.

First of all, I think it is true to say that the Zulu writer has not been very successful in the creation of characters. Quite often characters are mere pegs on which the events hang. They are lifeless. They do not move through the pages of the book like living men and women. We do not remember them as men and women.

Secondly, there has been a tendency to adopt the same theme. A popular theme has been that of a boy who grows up in the country and goes to the city where because of bad influence he becomes corrupted.

In poetry many of the contributors have followed the style of Vilakazi. There are some Zulu writers who still experiment with rhyme, but without much success. To my mind the chief weakness of Zulu poets is that they seem unable to create clear, bold pictures. The imagery is not satisfying.

I am sorry that, in the main, Zulu poets do not seem interested in developing the style of the *Izibongo*. They like to use the European forms. And yet I think that a blending of the style of the *Izibongo* with the European forms might produce some interesting new forms which might be a valuable contribution. Vilakazi did this in some of his poems, e.g. *Aggrey weAfrika*.

Apart from Vilakazi, the other main writers of poetry have been E. E. N. T. Mkize, E. H. A. Made, GilikaSobantu, J. C. Dlamini.

There are very few plays in Zulu. The first play was published by the Witwatersrand University Press in 1937, a play written by N. Ndebele. The title of the play is *UGubudele Namazimu*. Then there was a long break of about ten years before the appearance of another play by L. Mncwango entitled *Manhla Iyokwendela Egodini*. This was followed by *Kusasa Umngcwabo wakho nami* and *Ngenzeni*, both of them by Mncwango. In 1960 a new play *Ukufa KukaShaka* appeared, written by E. Zondi. Perhaps I should also mention the existence of a number of unpublished plays in Zulu written for broadcast.

Very little indeed has been done in the field of translation. Apart from the Bible, the more important translations are three books by Rider Haggard viz. *Umbuso kaShaka* (a translation of *Nada the Lily*), *ULowokazi* (a translation of *She*), and *Imigodi YeNkosi uSolomon* (a translation of *King Solomon's Mines*). Then there is *Umhwebi waseVenisi* (a translation of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*), *Isisulu Sabaphangi* (a translation of *Treasure Island* by Stevenson) and *Lafa Elihle Kakhulu* (a translation of Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*). K. E. Masinga of Broadcast House, Durban, has adapted several of Shakespeare's plays for broadcast in Zulu. The Union Bible Institute at Sweetwaters has published a few translations of religious books.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the picture which I have attempted to paint for you this morning is one of small beginnings. We take courage, however, from what has been done and we are determined to do all in our power to promote the development of Zulu literature.

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