CHAPTER 1

Introduction: communities and rites of passage

SOUTH AFRICAN COMMUNITIES: CONFLICT AND LITERATURE

Amidst confusion, violence, and conflict, South African literature has arisen out of a long tradition of resistance and protest.* In order of their arrival, four main communities have emerged in the course of settlement over the past millennia. These are: (a) the ancient hunter-gatherer and early pastoralist Khoisan (Khoi and San*) and their modern descendants, the Coloured community of the Cape; (b) the pastoralist and agricultural Nguni and Sotho (Nguni–Sotho), arriving from around the eleventh century CE; (c) the maritime, market-oriented and industrialised Anglo-Afrikaner settlers, arriving since the seventeenth century; and (d) the Indian community, arriving in conditions of servitude in the nineteenth century. All these and their sub-communities are interwoven through creolisation, the result of daily contacts varying from genocide to love-making. The result of the interweaving is a creolised society and an abundance of oral and written literatures. Super-communities have been formed by women, gays or male and female homosexuals, and religious and political groups. Distinctive literary movements have grown around all these community divisions.

A literary example from the earliest community relates to the extermination and assimilation of the Khoisan community. Kabbo, a San ('Bushman'*) performer from South Africa's most ancient community, with an oral literary tradition that goes back many thousand years, narrated his journey to imprisonment in Cape Town after his arrest for stealing sheep:

> We went to put our legs into the stocks; another white man laid another piece of wood upon our legs. We slept, while our legs were in the stocks. The day broke, while our legs were in the stocks. We early took out our legs from the stocks, we ate meat; we again put our legs into the stocks; we sat while our legs were in the stocks. We lay down, we slept, while our legs were inside the stocks. We arose, we smoked, while our legs were inside the stocks. (Bleek, p. 297)

Kabbo and his Khoisan family had experienced hardship through the white man's appropriation of his hunting grounds, with its animals and plants. In reply his community appropriated the white man's animals and, through imprisonment or extermination, lost their heritage of innumerable generations. Kabbo's formerly expansive and ancient Khoisan community has been described by Donald Inskeep as 'ultra-African', and their cultural modes of survival as 'masterly adaptation to the environment'.[1] Nonetheless, except in outlying districts such as the Kalahari and Namaqualand, as a community the Khoisan have disappeared. The destruction of their corporate communities appears in Shula Marks' article 'Khoisan Resistance to the Dutch in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries'.[2] That ancient dominance survives as a genetic component of varying visibility amongst all the other South African communities, including descendants of the slave community of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Matching their genetic survival, they provide a community background to the work of a diversity of writers, from Olive Schreiner to Zoë Wicomb. Creative admirers abroad, including D. H. Lawrence and the pioneering film director Sergei Eisenstein, have been attracted by peculiarities in Khoisan oral poetics, notably the use of repetition, exact reporting, and straight-faced, restrained yet powerful protest.

The dwindling of the Khoisan presence began with the arrival of the more powerful, iron-using, and agricultural Nguni–Sotho communities. They contributed to the loss of terrain and corporate existence among the Khoisan, but from their creolising precursors gained their golden complexions, click languages, zest for hunting, powers of endurance, and articles of theology. Their early rise to power culminated in division between the descendants of King Phalo of the Xhosa in the eighteenth century, and the rise and fall of the Shaka kingdom in the first quarter of the nineteenth. Consequences of this power struggle include the *mfecane**/*difiqane*,* a fratricidal civil war waged around 1820 by the Zulu nation against neighbouring Nguni and Sotho communities. Massacres exposed the land to armed incursions by white missionaries and farmers after the 1820s. Another cause of loss of power was the Xhosa cattle-killing of the 1850s, a cult movement that resulted in loss of life comparable to the Irish potato famine of the 1840s. A substantial literary heritage has arisen out of these struggles. Notable among these are the Colenso crisis in the Anglican church of the 1860s and its satirical echoes in novels by Olive Schreiner and Douglas Blackburn, the emergence of authentic South African history through the oral performances and memories of poets, theatre writers, and performers such as Krune Mqhayi, Sol T. Plaatje, Thomas Mofolo, Herbert Dhlomo, and

many others. Through abundant literary creativity in recent decades, Zakes Mda and others have brought this dominant community to the summit of South African literature.

Early competition for hunting and grazing grounds among hunter-gatherer, pastoral, and agricultural communities was intensified through the arrival of settlers from Holland, England, France, and Germany, in the seventeenth to twentieth centuries. Horses, wheeled vehicles, and firearms ensured early military triumphs. Strife between the colonising communities led first to the Trek of 1835 from the eastern Cape into KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng (Transvaal), and the Free State, and later to the fratricidal conflict between Afrikaners and English imperialism in the wars of 1879–80 and 1899–1902. The industrial process of the later nineteenth century resulted in a twentieth-century struggle for the suppressed black majority to achieve recognition and democratic representation. Struggles persist to the present. Survival is not easy in a landscape beset by droughts, viruses, economic hardship, and a society infected with criminality and the legacy of segregation and apartheid. The white community's experience and perspective has appeared over the past century among numerous writers, from Olive Schreiner and Eugène Marais to André Brink and J. M. Coetzee. In fragmentary and largely unpublished form, C. Louis Leipoldt offered an early and searching analysis of colonisation and the wars leading to the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910. He dramatised the early colonial period in his play *Die laaste aand* (1930), an attack on segregation in early Cape society. The situation leading to the war of 1899–1902, and the war itself, appear in his novels *Chameleon on the Gallows* and *Stormwrack*. As writers trapped in the creolisation process, writers such as Peter Abrahams, Bessie Head, Alex La Guma, Lauretta Ngcobo, and Zakes Mda have exposed the white community to searching interpretations.

The Indian community arrived in KwaZulu-Natal as part of a nineteenth-century labour recruitment drive that amounted to slavery. Though scantily assimilated through creolisation into other communities, the writing repertoire of this community includes Mohandas K. Gandhi, Ronnie Govender, Deena Padayachee, Ahmed Essop, and Agnes Sam. These have contributed substantially to modern political awareness, theatre work, and prose writing. Together with all the others, this community's leadership contributed materially to the peaceful outcome of the 1994 election. In practice, a vast and eventually successful majority resulted from the apartheid era's classification of South Africans into voting whites and voteless non-whites. It became a question of time for the majority to assert its independence.

Each community has an oral tradition, and each has achieved recognition through literature and political struggle during the twentieth century. Like the oral performers who are forerunners of all literary texts, literary writers generally adopt subversive or satirical attitudes to the grand designs of political parties and individuals. In their survey of the oral tradition in southern Africa, Vail and White point to the liveliness and penetration of oral performances: 'At its best, praise poetry is lively, mischievous, dense with history refined to metaphor, and capable of redefining the terms of authority and the qualities of the nation in a manner that can make the prevailing ruler "pensive."'[3] Recognition of the Khoisan oral literary heritage began in the nineteenth century with transcriptions of oral performances, written out by Wilhelm Bleek and his sister-in-law, Lucy Lloyd, from authentic performances made in their household by Kabbo and others. These were published in *Specimens of Bushman Folklore* (1911), edited by Lucy Lloyd and Dorothea Bleek, daughter of Wilhelm Bleek, from verbatim transcriptions made around 1870 by Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd. Through dramatisation of power and the supernatural, northern Nguni (Zulu) poems and novels on the rise and fall of the Shaka kingdom have penetrated other literatures, notably the West African writings of Léopold Senghor, Wole Soyinka, and Chinua Achebe. Transcription of their extensive oral repertoire began in the nineteenth century with Henry Callaway's *The Religious System of the Amazulu*, and have continued to the present with numerous collections and studies by scholars, notably M. Damane and P. B. Sanders, Daniel Kunene, Jeff Opland, and Harold Scheub. Third in the sequence of settlement in South Africa, Anglo-Afrikaner writers from Thomas Pringle to Antjie Krog have written poems, plays, and novels that reflect the violent colonial past, and drawn upon the northern hemisphere's extensive oral repertoire. They have drawn on songs and stories from collections made in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries by Charles Perrault, Thomas Percy, Walter Scott, the Grimm brothers, and numerous others. Through transcriptions from ancient oral performances in churches, synagogues, and temples, narrative themes have come from the Bible and the *Mahabharata*. A prominent example of literary creolisation, or hybridity, appeared with *The Flaming Terrapin* (1924), Roy Campbell's most celebrated poem, which combines the Hindu and Hebrew versions of the world flood, both surviving through written transcriptions of ancient oral performances.[4]

With numerous super-communities, sub-groups, and interfaces, the four main communities have generated a cohesive creole society. Beyond community segments, the rise of South Africa's industrial social order since the

1880s has drawn all writers into its orbit. Championing the possibility of a national literary awareness in that new social order, Nat Nakasa in his pioneering essay 'Writing in South Africa' recognised South African society as 'a single community with a common destiny and, therefore, requiring common ideals, moral values, and common national aspirations'. The first step for the South African writer, Nakasa maintained in his essay, is to shed the apron strings of the community to which he or she may be born:

> I believe it is important for our writers to illuminate all aspects of our life from a central point in the social structure. That is, whatever their colour or views may be, they must accept their presence in the country as members of one community, the South African community. After that they can choose to be what they wish.[5]

Nakasa's thinking lends support to a remark made by Axel Olrik, that a participant at any oral literary event experiences 'a sense of recognition even if this folk and its world of traditional narrative were hitherto completely unknown to him'.[6]

Writers and performers around the world have used a universal literary language within the isolating tendencies of their community origins. Ritual and ritualised stories, the universal language of our species, provided the underlying pattern in Lord Raglan's pioneering study *The Hero* (1936), where the hero's actions and development are presented in terms based on Arnold Van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage* (1909). Raglan writes that the hero's journeys and crises 'correspond to the three principal *rites de passage* – that is to say, the rites at birth, initiation, and at death'.[7] Similarly uniting oral and written literary experience, Wole Soyinka defined literature as dramatisations of 'the passage-rites of hero-gods'.[8] These underlying configurations appear in all written, sung, and spoken works of literature, from the briefest haiku in Japan to enormous festivals of music and drama in Africa, India, and Europe. The literary experiences of self-recognition and release through comic or tragic endings result from the functioning of this principle in literary works. This literary language provides a key to the common ground in South Africa's extensive literary output, and to the literary value of given works.

IDEOLOGIES

The term *ideology** began its explosive career with Destutt de Tracy's *Elémens d'idéologie* (1801), the book that launched the idea and the word. De Tracy defined 'what is strictly designated as idéologie' as 'the formation and filiation of our ideas . . . of expressing, combining and teaching these ideas,

on regulating our sentiments and actions, and directing those of others'.[9] Within a few decades, however, *ideology* degenerated from de Tracy's educational project into the modern conception of a punitive measure, its victims faced with a choice between death in captivity or in revolution. A similar degeneration awaited the seemingly innocent word *hegemony*,* from *hegemon*, Greek for 'leader'. As with *Führer*, another word for 'leader', violence accompanying *hegemony* converted it into a symbol for oppression, with death for deviant individuals, groups, nations, and international movements. The inversion of de Tracy's *idéologie* was pioneered by Karl Marx and his associate in England, Friedrich Engels. In their joint work *Deutsche Ideologie* (1845), the term adopted its modern dress as a mental darkness, imposed, they alleged, by a feudal and monarchical confederacy. They brought a secular version of the Inquisition to bear on the ideological enemy. They wrote: 'The Young-Hegelian ideologists, in spite of their allegedly "world-shattering" phrases, are the staunchest conservatives . . . It has not occurred to any one of these philosophers to inquire into the connection of German philosophy with German reality.'[10] Adding their emphasis, they wrote: 'As soon as this idealistic folly is *put into practice*, its *malevolent* nature is apparent: its clerical lust for power, its religious fanaticism, its charlatanry, its pietistic hypocrisy, its unctuous deceit.'[11] These conflicts reverberated in the newly emerging industrial South Africa, where society was rapidly transformed after the 1880s, following the discovery of diamonds around 1870 and gold in 1883. The war of 1899–1902, a curtain-raiser for the war of 1914–18, followed from that development. The impact of that change appeared in the character of Bonaparte Blenkins, the Irish adventurer and exploiter in Olive Schreiner's novel *The Story of an African Farm* (1883). Disillusion over experiences in South Africa during the war of 1899 contributed to the pioneering Marxist novel *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists* (1914), by 'Robert Tressell' (Robert Noonan). Ideological interpretations of industrial, capitalist, and imperial society contributed frameworks for characters and actions in later novels such as Peter Abrahams' *A Wreath for Udomo* (1956) and Alex La Guma's *Time of the Butcherbird* (1979).

An ideology of great antiquity and seeming inevitability lies behind the title of Chief Albert Luthuli's autobiography, *Let my People Go*. He observed that blacks had become virtual slaves in their own land: 'We Africans are depersonalised by the whites, our humanity and dignity is reduced in their imagination to a minimum. We are "boys," "girls," "Kaffirs,"* "good natives"* and "bad natives." But we are not, to them, really quite people, scarcely more than units of their labour force and parts of a "native problem."'[12] More pointedly, Bloke Modisane recognised in his

autobiography, *Blame me on History*, that a biblical narrative had stood for centuries as an ideological justification for slavery and colonisation. Pointing to the source of that wandering in error, he wrote: 'The religious instruction which I received . . . revealed to me that God in his infinite wisdom singled out the sinful issue of Ham for punishment even unto the thousandth and thousandth generation.' On contemplating escape, he reflected: 'I am a slave in the land of my ancestors, condemned to a life of servitude.' Recognising the biblical origin of the ideology, he proposed: 'Someone ought to undertake to rewrite what – in South African terms – can justly be called, the ten fables of Moses.'[13] His experience confirms the view in Feldman and Richardson's *The Rise of Modern Mythology*: 'It was a staple thesis of Christian mythology to see pagan myths and religious practices as only a degraded plagiarism of the true Mosaic account.'[14] Professor Z. K. Matthews, a founder of modern South Africa, recognised the problem. He was struck by the conflict between Christian and Hebraic professions of racial impartiality and the exclusivist practices and beliefs of colonising societies. He wrote: 'I never doubted the Christianity in which my mother so unshakeably believed, but I also knew that this Christianity had nothing in common with the professions and practices of the great majority of white men' (Matthews, p. 27).

The problem arose with orally composed and transmitted tales in Genesis and Exodus. Moses' plea for liberation, 'let my people go', his resort to violence and his redemptive journey (Exodus 5:1–10:3) reappear as a model for the liberation struggle of South Africa's Khoisan, Nguni–Sotho, and Indian communities in the twentieth century. These communities were construed by the architects of colonisation and its derivative, apartheid society, as descendants of Ham, a son of Noah (Genesis 5:32–10:1). Justification for colonisation's destructive process arose with the allegorical characters named Ham (also Gam, or Chaim) and his brothers, the pure Shem and the slightly less pure Japheth. According to the legend, Ham, allegedly the most decadent son of the Semite Noah, formed relationships in the south with female descendants of another mythological character, the fratricidal murderer named Cain (Genesis 5:32–10:1; 4:2–25). Resistance to this tale appeared in eighteenth-century Philadelphia, where John Woolman and others in the Benjamin Franklin circle began listening to what the blacks said, joining in their conversation instead of giving orders or offering insults. That event has led to changes in world society as well as in South Africa. Before departing on his anti-slavery mission to England in 1773, Woolman encountered the ideology in the narrative form that sought to justify slavery. It ran: 'After the flood Ham went to the land of Nod

and took a wife, that Nod was a land far distant, inhabited by Cain's race'; and 'Negroes were understood to be the offspring of Cain, their blackness being the mark God set upon him after he murdered Abel his brother.'[15] Rejecting a legendary narrative that claimed to represent historical truth, Woolman recognised whites and blacks as varieties of a single species. A century ahead of Darwin, he advocated and used *species* in preference to *race*.*

The redemptive journey of Moses, perhaps the most widely known oral and written tale around the globe, has an African precursor in 'The Eloquent Peasant', an ancient Egyptian story circulating in the Middle Kingdom, around 2040–1650 BCE, before the 'Hyksos' (Semitic) conquest of Egypt and the advent of Moses. The prophet took his name from *mosheh*, ancient Egyptian for child. Described by Lichtheim as 'a serious disquisition on the need for justice, and a parable on the utility of fine speech', 'The Eloquent Peasant' defines a rite of passage in the life of an individual and his society (Lichtheim 1, pp. 169–84; Breasted, pp. 182–6). With the addition of the eloquent refrain 'let my people go', the first nine petitions of Moses are anticipated in the Eloquent Peasant's nine petitions to Pharaoh for release from unjust imprisonment. A further dramatic refiguring appears in the tale of Moses after Pharaoh's duplicity in overturning his next two pleas, and the Hebrews' recourse to violence to secure their escape. Breasted cites other Egyptian anticipations of biblical themes. Besides the tale of Moses, thematic elements in the Bible that are foreshadowed in Egyptian sacred texts include divinely ordained moral commandments, the pessimism of Job and the lamentations of Jeremiah, messianic prophecy, the prophet Nathan's criticism of King David, psalms and proverbs, parables, the seasonal death and resurrection of the living god and redeemer, pilgrimages to his holy sepulchre, and the doctrine of the origin of the universe in the creator's word (Breasted, pp. 37–8, 168, 199, 218, 372, 357–8).[16] To this series we may add the underlying ingredient of incantation and narration that forms a source of power in the Bible as a whole.

Foreshadowing writings by Luthuli, Modisane, and many others, a merging of the Hebrew and the more ancient Egyptian and African traditions took place during the nineteenth century in KwaZulu-Natal. The conflict over the first publication in 1862 of the book *The Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua Critically Examined*, by John William Colenso, first Bishop of Natal, arose out of an encounter between the Pentateuch and northern Nguni (Zulu) oral tradition. This South African conflict originated in the Anglican clergy's rejection of African oral tradition as a guide to a Hebrew narrative. In contrast, Colenso emphasised that his Zulu informants and

teachers drew on experience that approximated more closely to biblical social conditions than the state of affairs in modern industrialised societies. Adding his own emphasis, he wrote:

> The mode of life and habits, and even the nature of their country, so nearly correspond to those of the ancient Israelites, that the very same scenes are brought continually, as it were, before our eyes, and *vividly realised in a practical point of view*, in a way in which an English student would scarcely think of looking at them.[17]

Instant recognition of the impossibility of the numbers given for Moses' army in Exodus came from Colenso's interpreter, informant, and teacher, William Ngidi. He appears in Peter Hinchliff's study (among others) as 'the "intelligent Zulu" who "converted" Colenso, by pointing out that the Old Testament seemed to be in no way superior to the folk tales of his own people'.[18] This important individual merits further study. In his role as Colenso's domestic helper and teacher in a living oral tradition, Ngidi, Colenso, and Bleek (the latter acting as language consultant) anticipated by a half century the modern technique of aligning the oral techniques in Biblical texts with their probable oral antecedents and modern analogues.[19] Traditional Nguni–Sotho skill with large numbers, arising from pastoral communities' daily contact with their animal and other resources, enabled Ngidi to see no reason to quarrel with the exaggerations and stylising that characterise the oral narratives and songs in the Bible. Through Colenso's advocacy, modern students take Ngidi's insights for granted. Stephen Taylor has observed that 'most of [Colenso's] heresies are the orthodoxy of today's churchmen'.[20] As teacher in later years to Magema M. Fuze, and onwards through Fuze's following in KwaZulu-Natal, notably the poets Dhlomo and Vilakazi, William Ngidi stands as a mediator and interpreter of enlightenment for South Africa and the world at large.

Colenso and Ngidi are among pioneers of the modern recognition that the young communities of northern Europe and their colonising outposts have drawn morality, art, and civilisation from Africa, their ultimate source. This reverses the colonisers' Hamite* ideology, which endows the whites with a unique civilising mission. Nelson Mandela recalls a lecture to the Youth League of the ANC in 1944 by Anton Lembede, alumnus of Adams College, a pioneering American foundation in Natal. He relates: 'Lembede gave a lecture on the history of nations, a tour of the horizon from ancient Greece to medieval Europe to the age of colonization. He emphasized the historical achievements of Africa and Africans, and noted how foolish it was for whites to see themselves as a chosen people and an intrinsically superior

race' (Mandela, pp. 92–3). Recalling his visit to the National Museum in Cairo, Mandela recognised that it was 'important for African nationalists to be armed with evidence to refute the fictitious claims of whites that Africans are without a civilized past that compares with that of the West' (Mandela, p. 284). In a personal and international crisis that resulted from betrayal of the ancient Egyptian principle of *maat*,* or truth of the heart, President Clinton learned from Mandela to purge himself of hatred when 'all that was left were [Mandela's] mind and heart'. At the height of his crisis, Clinton received a single question from Mandela: 'Did you give your heart or mind to them?'[21] Recognition of the Egyptians as African teachers of the West appears in Njabulo Ndebele's story 'Uncle'. In this story, Lovington, the eponymous uncle, explains his apprenticeship in writing hieroglyphics to his nephew: 'This . . . is the Egyptian language. In this language, Mshana, is written all the ancient wisdom of Africa. Know that. From Egypt we gave our glory to the world. Now it is time that we got it back.'[22]

In broad outline, the biblical narratives were performed orally, it appears, in the period after the fall of the Egyptian empire around the eighth century BCE and were later written as the Torah or Pentateuch, the Mosaic books of the Bible. The modern name Ham was derived from *Kmt*, the Egyptian name for the dark earth of the Nile Delta.[23] Dark Egyptians and their darker slaves bore this nickname on becoming captives and slaves of more powerful kingdoms to the north and east.[24] Through metonymic* association with the black earth of the Nile Delta, the ancient Egyptians were termed Hamite or descendants of Ham until well into the twentieth century. However, J. H. Greenberg has shown that the Berber, Galla, and ancient Egyptian peoples spoke a related group of African languages, and that the term 'Hamitic . . . does not refer to any valid linguistic entity'.[25] Breasted refers to Egypt as the 'great African neighbour' of the Hebrews (Breasted, p. 357), and compares the Egyptian journey of the soul towards resurrection as reminiscent of 'the "spirituals" of American negroes' (p. 237). An early recognition of Egypt and Africa as the origin of civilisation appeared in Peter Heylyn's *Cosmographie* (1652). Heylyn wrote of the Egyptians that they were 'a witty and ingenious People, the first Inventors of Geometry, Arithmetick, Physick, and also of Astronomy, Necromancy, and Sorcery. They first taught the use of Letters to the neighbouring Phoenecians, by them imparted to the Greeks.'[26] Surveying this topic in his book *The Egyptians* (1961), Sir Alan Gardiner observed: 'There was an affinity between Libyans, Egyptians, and Nubians which confirms our description of the earliest culture of the Nile valley as essentially African.'[27]