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978-0-521-10478-4 - Xhosa Oral Poetry: Aspects of a Black South African Tradition

Jeff Opland

Excerpt

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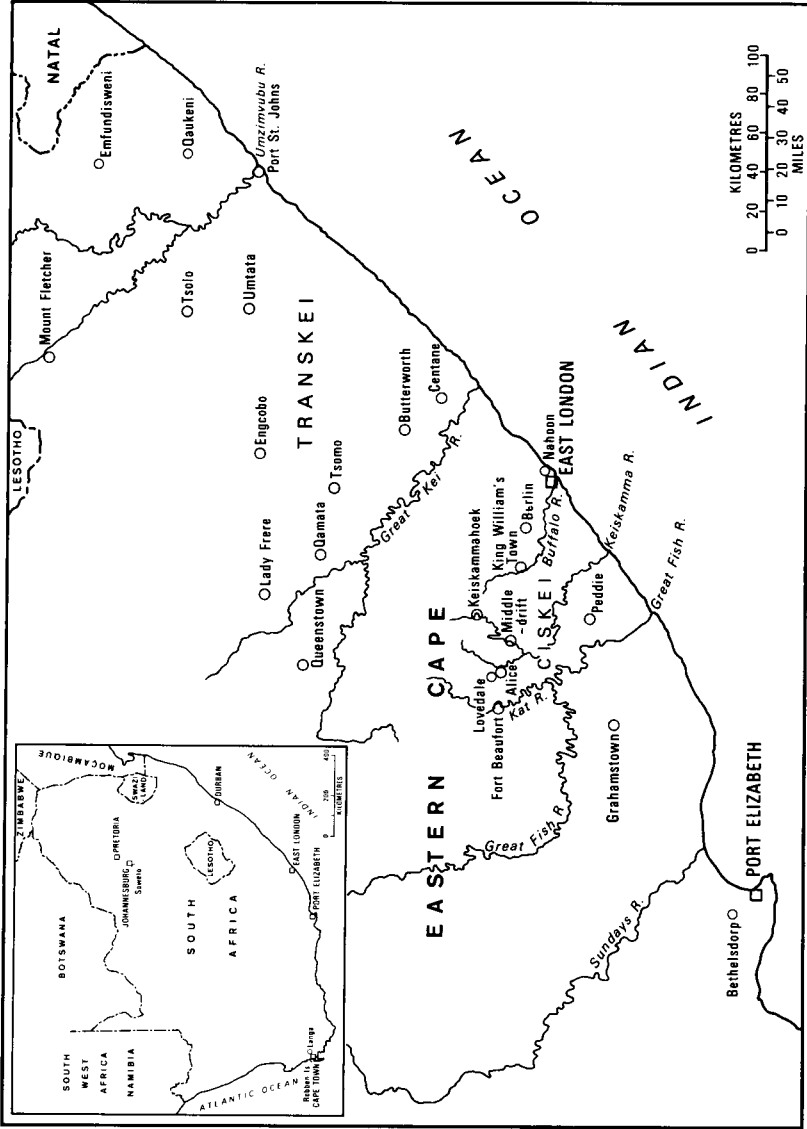
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## DOCUMENTARY PERSPECTIVES

The first Europeans to see the coast of land occupied by Xhosa-speaking people were Portuguese explorers who sailed round the Cape of Good Hope in the fifteenth century. (Bartholomew Diaz raised a stone cross on the coast of southern Africa during his voyage in 1488; not far from the spot where the ruins of that same cross were discovered in 1936—see Axelson 1938—lies the grave of Nongqawuse, who, some four centuries after Diaz’s voyage, was the principal figure in the most disastrous event in Cape Nguni history, the cattle-killing episode of 1857.) In the middle of the seventeenth century the Dutch East India Company established a permanent settlement at Cape Town some five hundred miles to the southwest of land occupied by the Xhosa. Thirty years later the first expedition of white settlers from the Cape traveled eastward until they were attacked by a party of Xhosa who were amazed at their first sight of white men and of horses, and at the capacity of bullets to pierce their oxhide shields; they fled “with hellish cries,” they were pursued, and many were killed (Kropf 1889a:2). From the latter part of the seventeenth century date a number of descriptions of Xhosa-speaking people written by survivors of coastal shipwrecks. By the end of the eighteenth century there were Dutch settlers living not many miles to the west of Xhosa territory. Early in the nineteenth century the Cape passed into British control, and in 1820 a large contingent of British settlers was located to the west of the Fish River. The Dutch and the British engaged in a series of wars fought against their black neighbors across the eastern frontier, the last of which ended in 1878 (see Elphick and Giliomee 1979 and Lamar and Thompson 1981).

Descriptions of or references to poetic activity among the Xhosa-speaking peoples date from the early nineteenth century (for a survey of nineteenth-century references to Zulu poets, see Gunner 1976). We have observations of Cape Nguni practices by European travelers who pass through their territory on hunting expeditions in search of game, scientific specimens, or souls; we also have accounts of Cape Nguni practices by Europeans—colonial administrators or missionaries—who lived for extended periods in close contact with their charges; and we have references to their own traditional customs written by native Xhosa-speakers themselves.

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Map 1.

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The accounts of passing travelers are the least reliable, tending to be superficial and based on chance observation. Even what passes for personal observation is often of questionable authenticity, since most travelers write for a foreign market—their works are published in England or Germany—and incorporate into their narratives, often without acknowledgement, sections from the published accounts of their peripatetic predecessors. Many are at pains to spice their writing with exotic descriptions of primitive behavior or pagan savagery, and most describe Cape Nguni culture from a dogmatically ethnocentric perspective: As Katherine George put it, “The observer of alien cultures has tended to be prejudiced, in the simple sense that he has preferred his own to all other existent cultures and has viewed the strange as a malformed deviant from the familiar” (1958/1968:23). Cowper Rose offered his brother in England the following anecdote in a letter written from the Cape in the early nineteenth century: “When a Kaffer returned to his own country from Cape Town, to which he had been taken by an English officer, and, full of the strange things he had seen, told his tale to the dark group around him, describing the wonders of a ship, which he called ‘a waggon that moved upon the waters, and that never *uitspan’d*,’ (unyoked,) and many other marvels; he was greeted at the close of each story, when he expected applause, by a unanimous comment, ‘*That’s a lie!*’ – a very common fate with travellers” (1829:156–7). Certainly many early travelers among the Xhosa-speaking peoples richly merit that common fate, but not all. I shall start my selection of perspectives on Xhosa poetry with extracts from the narratives of transient travelers.

Ludwig Alberti described the return of a Xhosa hunting party in 1807:

When the hunting party has returned to the neighbourhood of its village, the one who inflicted the first wound on the Lion that was killed, is hidden from view by shields held in front of him. At the same time one of the hunters leaves the troop and praises the courage of the slayer with a screaming voice, accompanied by a variety of leaps, and then returns again, when another one repeats the performance, during which the others incessantly shout hi! hi! hi! and beat their shields with knobkiries at the same time. This is continued until one has really reached the village. [1968:77]

The screaming voices might have been producing “heightened prose,” but I am confident that we are dealing here with a description of poetic utterances in praise of the courage of the hunter. The performances are histrionic in that they are excited and accompanied by vigorous ges-

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tures. A number of individuals separately extol the virtues of the same man, and their performances are accompanied by nonverbal shouts and noise from their companions. Since none of the performers is especially singled out, we may assume that these poets (if poets they are) are amateur rather than professional performers; whether or not they each repeat the same words or produce separate poems of their own, whether the poems are improvised for the occasion or memorized, we cannot say, though in view of the excitement of the performers and their reference to “the courage of the slayer,” it is likely that the poems refer to the recent hunt and to the slayer’s prowess in it.

Henry Lichtenstein visited the Cape from 1803 until 1806, but the account of his travels was published after that of Alberti, from whom he quotes at times. Lichtenstein notes that “the Koossas, when they want to affirm anything very solemnly, or to utter any malediction, make use of the name of their king, or of some of his ancestors, as *Non Geika! Non Chachábe! Non Khambuhsje*” (1812/1928:310). This practice participates in a ritual system that also provides a context for Xhosa poetry, as we shall see. Lichtenstein’s comment about the invocation of a chief or his ancestors is closer to the mark than his later statement about salutations: “Though the Koossas have no mode of saluting each other when they meet, yet there is a courtesy practised towards the king wherever he is seen, by pronouncing his name with the syllable *Ann* before it, thus, *Ann-Geika*. His title is *Inkoossi*, which signifies *ruler*” (p. 353). Established modes of salutation are universal among the Cape Nguni, although it is true that the chief (Xhosa *inkosi*) is greeted in the manner described, a form of salutation that generally is incorporated into poems in praise of the chief; Ngqika, however, would not have been greeted by a commoner with his given name, but with his praise name, *A! Lwaganda!* The practice of honoring people with praise names is alluded to elsewhere by Lichtenstein: “When the Koossas wish to do honour to anybody, they give him a new name, the meaning of which nobody knows but the person who gives it. This is particularly done by any white people, who come among them, and remain with them for any time. Vander Kemp had in this way three names given him, *Jinkhanna*, *Gobuhssso*, and *Tabeka-Kelehre*. It is incomprehensible how soon a stranger is known throughout the country by his new appellation” (p. 318). As we shall see, names of one kind or another are a significant ingredient of Xhosa poetry. Generally, praise names are commemorative of a significant deed or striking characteristic (*Nyengana* refers to the shining bald head of J. T. van der Kemp, the first missionary to visit the Xhosa in 1799, and *Ngobuso* refers to his countenance), and their meaning would accordingly be evident to the bearer of the name and to his

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contemporaries who use it, though the reference might well become obscure in transmission over distance and time.

*Recollections of a visit to British Kaffraria* is a fascinating, anonymous, undated account of a tour of mission stations undertaken – it is evident from the content – by a lady in 1857, the year of the disastrous cattle killing, to which she frequently alludes. The author clearly has her prejudices, but her concerns, fortunately for our purposes, are not exclusively evangelical. She is an interested observer of and inquirer after Xhosa culture, as the following description of the singing of unconverted Xhosa reveals (“red Kafirs” retained their garments traditionally dyed with ochre, which converts to Christianity abjured): “I could not hear of any traditional songs. The wild chant in which the red Kafirs uplift their united voices when they assemble for a feast, is most monotonous. A sort of see-saw chant, from highest pitch to lowest bass, continued without variation, except as it is now and then broken by a shrill whistle or a long-drawn howl. One cannot imagine it expressing any kind of sentiment, yet the Kafirs soon learn to sing hymns pleasingly, when taught by the missionaries” (p. 90). African musical rhythm is cyclical rather than linear, and might well strike a passing Western observer as monotonously repetitive. Elsewhere, the author muses on the presence of poetry among the Xhosa after receiving a striking welcome at St. Luke’s mission station near present Nahoon on 15 July 1857:

I was then introduced to the women, who looked at me with as much curiosity as the girls had done. One of them made a speech which, being interpreted, signified that I was a chief’s daughter, pleasant as a river of water or a flower in the bush. Now, I think that a more poetical effusion than that with which the governor was greeted – they told him he was the great cow. Nevertheless that was the highest eulogy that could be pronounced, as the cow is held in the highest estimation. I think the Kafirs are a poetical people, though Mr Greenstock will not allow that; he says they have practical, reasoning minds, which suggest questions it is sometimes very difficult to answer; but they express themselves figuratively, as do all the uncivilised, and that is associated with poetry in our minds. [p. 115]

On her return to Grahamstown, the author attends a missionary meeting on 29 July and records the exhortations of Bishop Cotterill: “The Bishop said the conversion of the heathen must be a work of time. No great progress can be made till missionaries are acquainted with the natives, and understand their language thoroughly. He recommends

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them to collect and preserve proverbs, legends, and tales illustrative of their history and national character” (p. 140). The bishop’s progressive exhortation might well have been taken to heart by some individuals, but, as we shall see later, in the seventh chapter, a good fifty years were to elapse after the arrival of the missionaries before mission presses published Xhosa folklore.

Gustav Fritsch toured South Africa from 1864 until 1866 in order to gather ethnographic and physiological material for his description of the inhabitants. His book contains a long section on the Cape Nguni, as well as sections on the Natal Nguni, Tswana, Herero, and Khoisan and a linguistic and a historical section. Given the range of his endeavors, the generally high quality of his information is all the more commendable. He is the first of our foreign travelers to refer explicitly to Xhosa poetry: “The ideal of the Kaffer, the object of his daydreams and the favorite subject of his songs (*Liedern*), is his oxen, which are his most valuable possession. With the praise songs (*Lobgesängen*) of the cattle those of the chief mix themselves, and in these in turn the chief’s cattle figure prominently. In these praises (*Preisen*) of his ruler he does not so much express loyalty as—deriving from the awareness of his dependence—a fear of the despot, who can ruin him” (1872:50). Cattle form the basis of the traditional economy of the Nguni, and are always used for the most significant sacrifices to ancestors; women from other clans, and therefore the wives as well, are denied access to the cattle and to the cattle enclosure (*kraal*) of the homestead. (The vocabulary of Xhosa includes scores of adjectives to describe the colors of cattle, but does not distinguish between blue and green.) Each animal in a herd is known individually, and a dancer often imitates the movements of his favorite ox. Just as men or women compose poems in praise of each other, so too men compose poems about their cattle. Such poems might well share stock descriptions of cattle with other poems in the tradition, including those that refer to chiefs; this seems to be what Fritsch is referring to when he writes that poems about chiefs “mix themselves with” the poems about cattle.

Fritsch also offers us an intimate description of a typical evening’s entertainment in a hut:

At night or in cold, unfriendly weather the hearth fire in the huts forms a point of attraction around which the company gathers, and for hours on end they pursue their harmless entertainment in an atmosphere which—because of the secretions of the compact mass of people, the smoke of the fire and of tobacco—is hardly likely to afford the European much opportunity of drawing a breath. If the gathering is at its

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ease, communal singing (*Gesänge*) might well commence—provided that one dares to use that word for the ear-shattering noise that has little more in common with music than the beat; humming, hand-clapping or foot-stamping enrich the musical pattern and only thereby afford the proper emphasis which stirs the performers at the very least to unbelievable enthusiasm. The words of the songs are pretty indifferent and highly repetitive, as a rule turning to the chief's power and strength, his wealth in cattle or to their fanatical passion for their own cattle. Translators of such songs have laboured hard to avoid triviality; success comes only partially . . . If women are admitted [to dances in general], they form the outermost circle around the dancers or a compact group, and establish the time with hand-clapping and ululating songs in which they more or less express their admiration of the men's performance. [Pp. 90–1]

Fritsch depicts here the typical context for the production of many forms of folklore, the central hearth in the circular, single-roomed, wattle-and-daub hut with a conical, thatched roof. It is not clear whether Fritsch's *Gesänge* are songs (*amaculo*) or poems (*izibongo*); to the comment on translation is appended a footnote referring the reader to a published translation of a poem in praise of the Zulu chief Mpande, so perhaps it is *izibongo* that are alluded to. The practice described is known as *ukutshayelela*, the encouragement—usually poetic or nonverbal—of men shouted out by women. Fixed poems in praise of individuals might be uttered on such occasions, and their utterance would account for Fritsch's comment about the recurrence of words, although he might equally well be referring to the stock phrases common to poems in the tradition. The women in this passage are doing what the hunters did in the Alberti passage, expressing poetically their admiration for the performance of another. The anonymous lady traveler observed that to call someone a great cow was a sincere form of flattery; Fritsch emphasizes the prominence of cattle in the Cape Nguni world view and in their poetry. Lichtenstein noted that the Cape Nguni invoke their chief or his ancestors; Fritsch emphasizes the prominence of the chief in Xhosa poetry. As we shall see in the fifth chapter, the chief and cattle play a significant role in the ritual belief and practices of the Cape Nguni; poetry participates in this system.

Ralph Deakin's perspective is of particular interest, since he is the first of the travelers whose testimony I have selected who mentions a specialist poet, someone distinct from the common man or woman. Deakin was a British journalist who accompanied the Prince of Wales

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on his tour of the empire in 1925. He offers this description of part of the ceremonies attendant on the prince's visit to Port Elizabeth:

Elsewhere there was a huge gathering of natives—Zulus, Xosas, Basutos, and Fingos; and their deep-toned thunder of salutation to the “Great Son of our Sovereign Lord and Protector, the Great White King over the Seas” precluded the first native welcome the Prince had received in an important native area of South Africa. The *mbongo*, the poet who walks before any great chief, summoned the tribesmen to bow down and tremble. He chanted the *Izibongo*, or song of greeting, and at the end of each of his stanzas, the whole assembly burst in, chanting in unison. [1925:83]

And when the prince passed on to King William's Town:

Opposite the rose-smothered stand sat the ubiquitous *mbongo*, official tribal chanter of praises, who wore a vermilion cape and sat with a look of dread uneasiness on his wizened countenance. Behind him were lined chiefs of the Imidushani, Aman-tinde, Imiqayi and other Cis-Keian tribes . . . Then the *mbongo* drew himself up to his full height and opened his capacious mouth; with teeth shining in his black visage he half-recited, half-chanted the Prince's praises and gave him greeting into the land. “*Imvula Mayine!*” (Let the heaven drop blessings!) shouted the natives of Dortrecht and the chiefs clapped hands and the ten thousand voices cheered merrily. [Pp. 91–2]

In place of the man or woman praising or encouraging the efforts of others or of his cattle, we have here an official personage, the tribal poet, *imbongi*, who greets in poetry the visiting dignitary on behalf of the assembled gathering, awarding him poetic titles. Deakin's account depicts the warm and harmonious welcome offered to the prince by his loyal black subjects. There is considerable irony in this portrait, as well as some significance: The *imbongi* in King William's Town was S. E. K. Mqhayi, the greatest figure in Xhosa literature, and we have a text of the poem Mqhayi produced about the Prince of Wales (Mqhayi 1943/1957:59–61). A. C. Jordan translated as follows the climax of this poem, a poem that does not quite express the servile loyalty Deakin readily assumed:

Ah, Britain! Great Britain!  
Great Britain of the endless sunshine!  
She hath conquered the oceans and laid them low;  
She hath drained the little rivers and lapped them dry;



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She hath swept the little nations and wiped them away;  
 And now she is making for the open skies.  
 She sent us the preacher, she sent us the bottle;  
 She sent us the Bible, and barrels of brandy;  
 She sent us the breechloader, she sent us cannon;  
 O, Roaring Britain! Which must we embrace?  
 You sent us the truth, denied us the truth;  
 You sent us the life, deprived us of life;  
 You sent us the light, we sit in the dark,  
 Shivering, benighted in the bright noonday sun.

[Jordan 1957–60/1973:27]

Missionaries or colonial administrators share many of the prejudices of the travelers who observed the Cape Nguni at home, but their testimony promises to be more informed as a result of their greater intimacy with the people and especially with the language. Dr. J. T. van der Kemp of the London Missionary Society spent fourteen months preaching among the Xhosa from 1799 until 1800 before withdrawing to establish a mission at Bethelsdorp near present-day Port Elizabeth, where he ministered largely to the Khoi population; Joseph Williams established a mission station near present-day Fort Beaufort, but on his death two years later in 1818 his Kat River Mission closed (see Holt 1954). In 1820 John Brownlee established a station in the Tyhume Valley near present-day Alice that after a change of site became Lovedale, the first permanent—and the most important—mission station among the Xhosa-speaking people (see Holt 1976). It was the dialect of these descendants of Xhosa that the Lovedale missionaries transcribed and used in their early publications; it is this dialect that has given its name to the language and that has become the standard literary dialect of all the Xhosa-speaking peoples. Brownlee John Ross describes the work of his grandfather John Ross and of John Bennie, who soon joined John Brownlee at the Tyhume Mission Station:

Mr Ross had brought out with him a small printing press, the first ever set up among the Eastern tribes. His energy is shown by the fact that it was unpacked and set up the day after he arrived, and fifty copies of the alphabet were thrown off two days later.

Owing to good work already done by Mr Bennie, a lay agent, but a man of remarkable talent and genuine poetic gifts . . . a small spelling-book, a portion of Brown's catechism, a few hymns, and the Lord's Prayer were printed in Xhosa within fourteen days of Mr Ross's arrival.

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Very soon there followed a grammar and a vocabulary; and by 1825 translations of the Scriptures had made considerable progress. A solid foundation for Native literature was thus early laid. Mr Bennie may well be regarded as the pioneer; Mr Ross made the work scholarly, sound, and final. [Shepherd 1948:8]

Ross testifies to the intimacy with which his uncle Richard, John Ross's son, learned to know the Xhosa, to the extent that he could address them in the appropriate manner:

He also acquired the ability, considered by them the peculiar mark of a man of high rank, to ask an African a few questions and then say: "I know you: you are of the house A, clan B, tribe C, your chiefs were D, E, F, and G; of them your bards sang thus, and thus . . ." To this kind of talk no man on earth, with the exception of the old-time Scottish Highlander, is more susceptible and responsive than the African of good blood who knows his people's past. It is fine to see how a disreputable-looking, broken-down old Native pulls himself together, stands erect, and realises once more his manhood when a White man meets him thus. [P. 16]

The ethnocentrism aside, this passage is interesting for the testimony it affords of the effect of reference to clan and group relationships and a recital of the traditional, memorized poems about chiefs.

Clearly Charles Brownlee, a Xhosa intimate who was the son of the pioneer missionary John Brownlee and who served as commissioner to the Xhosa under Ngqika, intended to achieve much the same effect when he wrote a letter in Xhosa to the newspaper *Imvo zabantsundu*, jointly thanking all those who had sent him messages of condolence on the death of his son in 1889:

I thank you, Makaula, chief of the Bacas,  
 The deliverer who has rescued  
 Flame in the hearth of Madikana,  
 Being quenched by the borders of Ngqungqushu.  
 The deliverer who rescues till succour is accomplished.  
 Who delivers repeatedly:  
 Who delivers and wearies not.  
 There is the dragon gloating over the children!  
 To you, Albert White Makaula, I give thanks.  
 Grandson of Ncapayi,  
 Who takes the path that leads up the mountain slope.  
 Upon whom gaze many eyes.  
 Disappoint them not!