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Jeff Opland

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XHOSA ORAL POETRY

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PREFACE

Since Xhosa oral poems generally locate their subjects in a genealogical context, it seems appropriate to start with a genealogy. Xhosa was the great-grandfather of Tshawe, who was the great-grandfather of Togu, who was the father of Ngconde, who was the father of Tshiwo, who in turn fathered Phalo. Phalo's senior son was Gcaleka, and Rharhabe was one of his junior sons. Gcaleka was the father of Khawuta, the father of Hintsa, the father of Sarhili; Rharhabe fathered Mlawu, the father of Ngqika, who was the father of Sandile. These men were all royal chiefs, who came to settle with their followers in the southeast of what is today the Republic of South Africa, displacing Khoi and San inhabitants (formerly known as Hottentots and Bushmen). According to custom, the members of a chiefdom were known by the names of their founding chiefs, so that all followers of these chiefs could be called *amaXhosa*, the Xhosa people; after the major split in the royal line, the followers of Gcaleka, Khawuta, Hintsa, and Sarhili were known as *amaGcaleka*, the Gcaleka people, and the followers of Rharhabe, Mlawu, Ngqika, and Sandile were known as *amaRharhabe*, or, consequent upon the split between Ngqika and his uncle Ndlambe, *amaNgqika*. The language they spoke was transcribed and printed for the first time by Christian missionaries who settled in Ngqika's chiefdom, and was identified in name with the Xhosa people. The Xhosa people, however, were not the only ones who spoke the language called Xhosa. Dialects of Xhosa were spoken by various peoples living to the northeast all the way through present-day Transkei to the Umzimvubu River. All these Xhosa-speaking peoples, known as the Cape Nguni to distinguish them from the Natal Nguni, who speak the Zulu language, are ethnographically related though distinct, constituting separate clusters under independent chiefs, although both the Cape and the Natal Nguni peoples as well as their languages were originally called Kaffir by their European neighbors. The major members of the Cape Nguni or Xhosa-speaking peoples are the Xhosa (Gcaleka and Rharhabe), Thembu, Xesibe, Bomvana, Mpondomise, and Mpondo. It is the traditions of oral poetry current among these Xhosa-speaking peoples—and not just among the Xhosa people—that form the subject of this book: The “Xhosa” of the book's title thus refers to a language and not to a nation.

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Xhosa is a member of the Bantu family of languages spoken in Africa roughly south of the Congo; the family includes such languages as Kikuyu, Luba, Luganda, Mongo-Nkundu, Nyanja, Shona, Swahili, Thonga, and Umbundu. The southeastern Bantu languages include the Sotho family (Tswana, Southern Sotho, Pedi, for example) and the Nguni family (such as Zulu, Swazi, Xhosa, Ndebele, Ngoni). The Xhosa language, spoken by the Cape Nguni, and the Zulu language, spoken by the Natal Nguni, are sufficiently close to be mutually intelligible, though a Zulu- or Xhosa-speaker would not be able to understand a speaker of Tswana or Southern Sotho. Perhaps the most famous of Zulu rulers was Shaka, the Harald Fairhair of southern Africa, who early in the nineteenth century embarked on the conquest and subjugation of his neighbors, driving large numbers of Zulu-speaking refugees in all directions in a disruptive movement known as the Mfecane. Those who moved southwest settled down somewhat uncomfortably in Cape Nguni territory, and although they intermarried and came to speak Xhosa, they generally supported the white colonists in their frontier wars against the Cape Nguni; these people, known collectively as the Mfengu (Bhaca, Bhele, Hlubi, Ngwane, Zizi, etc.), are here treated as Cape Nguni, and their poetry is treated as Xhosa poetry.

My own interest in Xhosa oral poetry derives from the comparative study of Anglo-Saxon poetry and other oral poetic traditions. I commenced my fieldwork among the Cape Nguni in 1969 in order to draw comparisons between Xhosa and Anglo-Saxon poetry; the living Xhosa tradition was used to illuminate the dead Anglo-Saxon tradition. That line of inquiry culminated in a book on Anglo-Saxon oral poetry (Opland 1980a), the completion of which has now freed me to concentrate on the Xhosa tradition in its own right. The impulse to write the present book came in the form of a suggestion from Ruth Finnegan, to which I responded favorably largely because it gave me the opportunity to formulate a general statement on the tradition of Xhosa oral poetry. This book is not an edition of Xhosa texts in my collection; I have taken the opportunity here of offering a preliminary analysis of the Xhosa tradition as I see it. I call this a "preliminary analysis" since much of my fieldwork was conducted in the framework of my comparative research, and in writing this book I have become aware of painfully large areas demanding further research that I have not yet myself undertaken. Hence I have relatively little to say here about the meter of Xhosa poetry, for example, or about the poetry of women, or the relation of the poetic tradition to Xhosa song. I have tried to express here my own fascination with Xhosa oral poetry through an exhibition of some of its aspects, each of which may be apprehended with profit from a number of disciplinary van-

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tage points. A study of the tradition of Xhosa oral poetry should hold interest for the likes of anthropologists, folklorists, historians, political scientists, psychologists, sociologists, and persons interested in the history of religion and education, poetry, and comparative literature, but I believe that a rounded view of the tradition cannot be gained exclusively from within any one of these disciplines. My approach to Xhosa oral poetry is essentially interdisciplinary.

I have quoted the original Xhosa texts only where necessary; original material in both German and Xhosa is here generally presented only in translation. For assistance with the German translations I am indebted to Dietrich Hofmann and Dieter Welz; for assistance with Xhosa translations I am deeply indebted to Sydney Zotwana, Buntu Mfenyana, Wele Manona, and Vuyani Mqingwana. As far as possible, translations of Xhosa texts have been checked with the poets themselves. My early fieldwork was facilitated by the award of a Lestrade Scholarship from the Department of African Languages at the University of Cape Town in 1970 and 1971; I am grateful to Ernst Westphal for his support. It is my pleasure here to acknowledge my gratitude to friends and colleagues who accompanied me on my field trips: Norman Mearns, Richard Moyer, Morton and Caroline Bloomfield, John Leylerle, Fred Robinson, Roberta Frank, and my sons Russell and Daniel. Assistance and encouragement were willingly offered to me by many people, some of whose names I now forget; among those who come to mind are Michael Berning, Martin and Gill Browne, Trevor Cope, Derek Fivaz, Sandra Fold, Jackson Magopeni, Richard Mfamana, Douglas Mzolo, P. M. Ntloko, Herbert Pahl, Rudolph Schwarz, and Silas Tindleni. I am grateful to Oakley West for drawing Map 1. Of course, this book could not have been written without the cooperation of chiefs, poets, and others in Transkei, Ciskei, KwaZulu, and Cape Town, to all of whom I am grateful for their support and to some of whom I am in addition indebted for their friendship.

I started thinking about this book during a year spent on sabbatical from August 1980 to June 1981 at Yale University, where I inflicted some of my thinking on participants in the Southern African Research Program; I am grateful to Leonard Thompson, director of the program, for according me fellowship status. I started writing the book in Kiel during the latter six months of 1981 as a Fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation; I am deeply indebted to the foundation for affording me the freedom from commitments that enabled me to complete the bulk of my work, and to the Board of Management of the Institute of Social and Economic Research at Rhodes University for recommending my leave. While I was free to write, Derek Fivaz and Renee Vroom carried the administrative burden back home. I am

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grateful to them both, but especially to Renee Vroom, who not only kept things going in my absence but also typed the manuscript on my return: To exploit a Xhosa turn of phrase, *ungunobhala woonobhala*, she is a secretary among secretaries. I am also indebted to Michael Whisson and Simon Bekker, who read and commented on the manuscript; to Janis Bolster, who copyedited it; and to Susan Allen-Mills of Cambridge University Press, for her courteous and efficient handling of both the manuscript and its author. But my deepest debt of gratitude is and will always be to my wife, Cynthia, who continues to tolerate so much more than it is fair of me to expect, and who provides me with a reason and a purpose for it all. This book is dedicated to my son Daniel, who wasn't with us while it was being written.

*Grahamstown
March 1983*

Jeff Opland