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THE BLACK BULLS OF H.I.E. DHLOMO: ORDERING HISTORY OUT OF NONSENSE.

The South African state has, since 1910, subjected the black populace to a wide range of exploitative and racially structured social experiences and narratives. The plays of H.I.E. Dhlomo represent an important dissenting response to the state's socio-political projects and narratives. Between 1936 and 1937 Dhlomo wrote five plays based on the lives of 'great' African leaders. Four of the plays, **Shaka**, (presumably lost), **Dingane**, **Cetshwayo** and **Mfolozi** (also lost), he compositely called **The Black Bulls**. The fifth play was **Moshoeshoe**.[1] The overriding character of **The Black Bulls** is that of a persistent exploration of the confluence of social, political and cultural instances in ways which, in many cases, have not been surpassed by more recent dramatic works. The theatre of power that made up African experiences in the nineteenth century occupies centre stage in the plays while the twentieth century continuations of these struggles are signified allegorically. The concerns of Dhlomo's dramatic narratives centre around three broad themes; the factors that facilitated the defeat of the remaining independent African societies and the incorporation of Africans into wage labour and various forms of dependency; critiques of the repressive and discriminatory legislation passed by post-Union governments, and, the need to engage in cultural retrieval and reconstruction, processes that Dhlomo saw as intrinsic to African resistance and liberation. The plays, in their engagement with history, attempt to "combine fragments into living wholes" and to "find a general law in a mass of scattered facts,"[2] while, simultaneously, attempting to effect a range of socio-political and cultural interventions. This could not have been otherwise for Dhlomo's intentions in writing **The Black Bulls** were not only to negate official accounts of South African history by presenting 'accurate' narratives that were more sympathetic to African experiences. Dhlomo accepted, as will become apparent later, that despite our concern with the 'truth status' of contending narratives, what equally counts is the political significance of narratives, "their ability to organise the consciousness and practice of historical agents."[3]

In order to grasp the ways in which **The Black Bulls** order history out of the fragmented South African landscape, their silences, tensions and contradictions, we will need to look, briefly, at a number of social and cultural considerations that helped to shape Dhlomo's thinking and work. The first part of the paper is a short exposition of Dhlomo's political position in the contested terrain of African popular culture between 1920-1956 and his reflections on his craft and aesthetics. The main body of the paper consists of an appreciative interrogation of **Moshoeshoe**, **Dingane** and **Cetshwayo** as historical dramas.

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[1] I am greatly indebted to Tim Couzens's **The New African: A Study of the Life and Work of H.I.E. Dhlomo**, Ravan, 1985 for details of Dhlomo's biography and work. All references to **The Black Bulls** in this paper must be taken to include **Moshoeshoe** as well.

[2] H.I.E. Dhlomo, "Literary Theory and Criticism" in **English in Africa**, 4 (2), 1977, p.19.

[3] Tony Bennet "Texts in history: the determinations of readings and their texts" p.66 in D. Attridge, et al, **Post-structuralism and the Question of History**, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

THE AESTHETICS OF ALIENATION.

In a little more than a decade since the pioneering performances by African students at St.Francis, Mariannhill, theatre was making significant inroads into the activities of elite and lower class Africans.[4] Theatre formed part of a wide range of cultural responses used by Africans between 1920-1950 to respond to the socio-political processes of urbanisation. Theatre was used to define and resist social alienation, construct human identities and social support networks, and articulate African experiences, aspirations and desire for a better future. As a member of the African elite Dhlomo initially shared their aspirations towards gradual assimilation into the important spheres of white society, a process, the African middle class thought, that could only be achieved by adopting a 'progressive' ideology that affirmed, amongst other things, the 'retrogressive and reactionary' nature of traditional and lower class life and cultural practices. This attitude politicised, very sharply, the content and aesthetics of African cultural practices. Middle class cultural practices tended to be consciously formal in nature and they symbolised, in their forms and contents, *a way of life* that middle class Africans aspired to. Their activities took place outside of the restrictive terrain of the slumyards and shebeens, settling instead for institutions such as schools, churches, cultural and sporting clubs. Middle class activities included an annual Transvaal African Eisteddfod, dramatic performances by the Bantu Dramatic Society, and, concert and dance programmes which featured choirs, classical music and dancing.

In contrast marabi culture encompassed the social and recreational activities of the lower classes; ranging from the support networks of *stokvels* to shebeens where daily activities and weekend parties offered patrons various forms of entertainment. While both elite and marabi culture were intended, in their different ways, to mitigate against the social alienation experienced by Africans, they revealed, as Dhlomo recognised, that, despite qualifications, "there...(were)...sharp class differences amongst Africans."[5] The relationship between middle class and lower class Africans has always been a complex one. It is open to being compatible because of a shared oppression and nationalist aspirations, and, antagonistic because of divergent class and cultural interests.[6] Both these orientations are evident in Dhlomo's plays. The social expression of the conflict between middle and lower class Africans is particularly evident in how the middle class seized upon the negative aspects of marabi culture and distorted them to justify middle class activities and aspirations. Marabi culture, apart from its positive qualities, was equally socially restrictive and latent with aspects of dehumanisation, alcoholism, sexism, prostitution and violence. These qualities

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[4] For a discussion of the uses of theatre in native education and projects aimed at social control, and, by elite Africans between 1900-1940, see my paper "All Work And No Play Makes Civilization Unattractive to the Masses: The Emergent Formations of Theatre Amongst Africans from Fr. Bernard Huss to The Bantu Dramatic Society" presented at The Division of African Literature 'Work in Progress Seminar', University of the Witwatersrand, 18 October 1989.

[5] Dhlomo, "Bantu Entertainments", Unpublished essay, p.6. See also Couzens, pp.32-35.

[6] See Phillip Bonner, "The Transvaal Native Congress, 1917-1920: the radicalisation of the black petty bourgeoisie on the Rand" in S. Marks and R. Rathbone Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa, Longman, 1982, especially pp.271-272.

were seized upon by whites and the African middle class who exaggerated their presence and reduced marabi culture to being nothing more than "raucous, sex-charged...(and)...violent."[7] Dhlomo was in agreement with such attitudes. He dismissed the *ndunduma* concerts as "real refuse dump affairs, musically and morally."[8]

While such attitudes reveal that the black elite was imbued with ideas and prejudices consistent with their educational experiences, hopes at gradual assimilation and associations with white liberals, it would be erroneous, however, to conclude that Dhlomo was nothing more than a passive reflector of white interests and values. This would be to disregard the varied forms of resistance, whatever their ideological premises or social transformatory capacities, that members of the middle class engaged in. It would also mean, in our case, overlooking the telling critique's of the state narrativised in Dhlomo's plays.[9] The socially restrictive terrain in which the middle class had to *coerce* the realisation of its hopes, must account, to a large measure, for its gradual disenchantment with the structures of white South Africa and move towards more radical forms of ideology and politics. In this regard, even the struggles experienced by the Bantu Dramatic Society in their attempts to mount productions must have emphasised the disadvantaged social position that its members occupied. In organising its programmes the Society had to contend with the paucity of performance venues and accessories, the infrequency of rehearsals and performance because performers were likely to be in full-time employment, and socio-political pressures such as influx control.[10] The Society and Dhlomo's move towards nationalist themes and aesthetics encapsulates rather than surpasses the above ambivalent social experiences and relationships.

In an important essay titled "Drama and the African" Dhlomo traces the origins of African drama to the rituals performed in pre-colonial African societies. The rituals, he argues, were based on the instinct of imitation, "to make representation of", and *Sympothetic Magic*, that is, "the believe that like always and everywhere produced like." The tribal drama that evolved out of these rituals was characterised by "Action! Rhythm! Emotion! Gesture! Imitation! Desires!"[11] The dramas were "national" and formed part of the social struggles of the community, particularly its "desire to have much food, many children and to conquer in battle." However, Dhlomo is at pains to emphasise that "the ritual representations" did not perform any didactic role, that "the ceremonies did not aim at delineation, education or propaganda...."[12] The purpose of such contradictory qualifications is that

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[7] David Coplan, In Township Tonight, Ravan, 1985, p.109.

[8] Dhlomo, "Bantu Entertainments", p.6.

[9] Shula Marks in her discussion of the ambiguities of middle class politics and ideology, characterises the "weak African intelligentsia" as "both the most ardent believers in the new colonial order and its most vociferous critics." See Shula Marks, The Ambiguities of Dependence in South Africa: Class, Nationalism, and the State in Twentieth-Century Natal, Ravan, 1986, pp.12-13.

[10] See "All Work and No Play Makes Civilization Unattractive to the Masses" pp.26-29.

[11] Dhlomo, "Literary Theory and Criticism", p.3.

[12] Ibid, pp.3-4.

they are meant to emphasise the organic nature of tribal drama and society. This is further hinted at in the description of tribal performances as not being "commercialized entertainment" or performers "mercenary", and in the emphasis of the interchangeable role between performer and audience in tribal dramas.[13]

The need to assert an organic tribal society with no contending social forces is an implicit critique of the condition of human alienation in modern South Africa. In Dhlomo's unpublished essays there is also the concomitant celebration of the omnipotence and regenerative powers of God, nature and man. These powers are constantly contrasted with the repressive, alienating and destructive 'characteristics' of science, industrial society and modern man; the determinants of an alienated humanity chained to a mechanical, objectivist, rationalist life-style. Dhlomo's essays are littered with such sentiments and the titles of his unpublished essays, "Rain, Fire, Cloudburst, The Falling Leaf" and so on, give an indication of the tenor of his polemic. The true artist that is caught in "the agony of existence" is the "one able to reveal and portray objective experience subjectively...." This is crucial for Dhlomo sees the "human mind" as being capable of "remaining oblivious to subjective reality and experience" while "being wholly susceptible to objective experience."[14]

The frustration of living in an oppressive society and seeing all resistance amount to very little in constructive political or social terms also results in a further retreat into the self, into the **The Peace of the Soul**.[15] The peaceful solitariness of the soul becomes more than just a refuge from the brutalities of racism. It gives birth to its alter-ego, the genius, who is denied recognition and despised for his potential. The stature of the genius is, through a very logical paradox, confirmed and raised by being an outcast and being oppressed. The genius, generally an artist or gifted person with creative abilities, tends to come very close to celebrating this paradox, revealing an acute impotence. For the genius who is an artist, literature, becomes a tangible terrain where s/he can create or allude to the harmony missing in society, the mysterious and organic unity that is being denied by the rampant horrors of racism, industrialisation and science: "If you study the best in Shakespeare...you will observe that there is an atmosphere, an undercurrent, of peace - a sublimating and purifying, an eloquent and revealing peace - despite tragedy.[16]"

Dhlomo was drawn to theatre for a number of reasons. He saw theatre as an accessible form of signification and, grudgingly, propaganda, that could be utilised in promoting 'good' character formation and to "harmonise" race relations.[17] The second motive for writing literature was that Dhlomo was aware that South Africa's conflicts were articulated in narratives that not only justified the oppression of Africans but, when accepted and internalised by people, in turn, bedevilled ideological and social processes. The status of

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[13] Ibid, pp.4-5.

[14] Ibid, p.8.

[15] **The Peace of the Soul** is the title of an unpublished essay by Dhlomo.

[16] Dhlomo, "The Peace of the Soul", Unpublished essay, p.2. See also the prologue to **Ntsikana**, in H.I.E. Dhlomo, **Collected Works**, Ravan, 1985, p.31.

[17] Dhlomo, "Literary Theory and Criticism", pp.6-7.

Africans within official historiography was such an instance. Dhlomo felt that the "activities of great African geniuses and heroes such as Dingane, Moshoeshoe, Shaka, Nongquase and many others are treated superficially and dismissed as barbaric. The social, psychological, everyday life of the people is shamefully neglected or misconstructed."[18] The inverse of such eurocentric predispositions was the attempts by colonial authorities, and later on the South African state, to appropriate the political and ideological instances of the defeated pre-colonial African kingdoms for their own hegemony, using them "to perpetuate and extend retrogressive tribalism" and to install the colonial government as "the supreme chief and dictator."[19] Dhlomo's realisation that "where there is an ideological struggle such as we have today, the work of the artist is of vital importance", impressed upon him the need to construct counter narratives.[20] The literature of Dhlomo, then, is an attempt to write *aside*, to displace, white accounts of African experiences. The other dimensions of this intervention are its concomitant unleashing of the processes of cultural retrieval and reconstruction which are realised, primarily, in the presentation of precolonial African history and society without eurocentric prejudices. The need to stare through the present into the past is, firstly, to reveal "what actually happened in the past",[21] and, secondly, to build onto the legacy of the past for "we cannot build by forsaking our origin. We must go back to go forward."[22] However, the processes of retrieval and reconstruction, demand that the artist should not dig up "the bones of the past without dressing them with modern knowledge and craftsmanship", and "grappling with present-day realities" such as "the school, the train, the police,...economic problems of housing, trade unionism and trading, even the international situation and the world fiscal policies."[23] Developing such attitudes, it is only a matter of mere formality for Dhlomo to broaden the role of theatre from its previous fixation with character formation and correcting historical accounts, to emphasising its importance as a mobilising and conscientising medium in cultural and political struggles: "tribal dramatic compositions are, as it were, an extensive dense forest where we may go and gather sticks to fight out literary and cultural battles....Today, when the theories of certain scholars, the work of literary fanatics, the tactics of politicians, the poverty and exploitation of the people, all combine to threaten Bantu unity, it is most important that this essential Oneness of the African Peoples be broadcast from the hilltops and on the most powerful 'horns'.[24]"

The way in which Dhlomo realised his different aesthetic and political prerogatives in The Black Bulls was through the use of allegory. Allegory,

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[18] Ibid, p.19.

[19] Dhlomo quoted in Couzens, The New African, p.139. See also Jeff Guy "The destruction and reconstruction of Zulu Society" in S. Marks and R. Rathbone (eds) Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa, Longman, 1982, pp.172-182, and, Marks The Ambiguities of Dependence in South Africa, pp.110-113.

[20] Dhlomo, "Literary Theory and Criticism", p.71.

[21] Ibid, p.3.

[22] Ibid, p.37.

[23] Ibid, pp.7, 40, 58.

[24] Ibid, p.37.

as Jameson has noted, is "the privileged mode of our own life in time, a clumsy deciphering of meaning from moment to moment, the painful attempt to restore continuity to heterogeneous, disconnected instants."[25] Allegory posits parallel frames of reference and it does so in ways which surpass simple metaphorical significations. The Baroque allegorist, according to Walter Benjamin, does not see in a symbol something which represents something else, but that each symbol's meaning is derived from the other. Allegory is "not merely a sign of what is to be known but it is itself an object worthy of knowledge."[26] The import of Benjamin's statement that allegory privileges multiple referents is that it allows us to grasp the many levels on which **The Black Bulls** operate. For instance, the representation of precolonial African societies in **The Black Bulls** serves as an allegorical critique of the politics of the present while being, at the same time, a powerful cultural reconstruction of the past in its own right. The multiplicities of signs and signifieds in **The Black Bulls** are eventually unified by the demands of the nationalist project that they are a part of. Allegory tends to flourish in periods going through profound social transformation, when the certitudes of old beliefs and epochs are called into question. The response of the allegorist to such social challenges is to wander, in his fascination with alienation, through the ruins that are his historical inheritance, seizing fragments, emblems, and subjecting them to a scrutiny that will reveal their hidden truth and knowledge. As Benjamin eloquently remarks, "Allegories are amidst ideas what ruins are amidst things."[27]

The Black Bulls, in a manner symptomatic of historical plays, address themselves to the continuities and divergences between past and present in the experiences and destiny of the African community. When signifying historical experiences, historical plays do not simply reflect a world past or an episode *complete* in itself but interact in intricate ways both with the past world and the one inhabited by their playwright and audiences. Far from simply reflecting certain historical moments, historical narratives insert the modern socio-political concerns of their authors with the result that their representations are deeply mediated. We can, in this regard, attribute some of the qualities that Dhlomo ascribes to traditional rituals and performance to his own plays as well. Dhlomo characterises the objective of traditional plays as being the desire to show "what actually happened in the past" while calling into the question the possibility of such a representation by insisting on being "anticipatory" at the same time; that is signifying "not what happened, but what they wished to happen."[28]

ASSEMBLING THE BROKEN GOURDS.

The Black Bulls, in their return to the past and allegorical critique of the present, establish the historical and socio-political parallels between the periods spanning c.1818-1879 and 1910-1936. The plays reveal a complex and profound shift in Dhlomo's ideology and aesthetics from a Christian-liberal worldview to a militant liberal-democratic nationalism. In order to appreciate the nature of this development it is important to briefly consider the first

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[25] Fredric Jameson, **Marxism and Form**, Princeton University Press, 1971, p.72.

[26] Walter Benjamin, **The Origin of German Tragic Drama**, Verso, 1985, p.184.

[27] Benjamin, **The Origins of German Tragic Drama**, p.178.

[28] Dhlomo, "Literary Theory and Criticism", p.3.

two plays written by Dhlomo between 1935-1936, **The Girl Who Killed to Save** and **Ntsikana**. The narrative structure of both **The Girl Who Killed to Save** and **Ntsikana** is based on the dramatic conventions typical of medieval drama. Whereas miracle plays considered the life-histories of exemplary individuals, particularly their struggles to resist a range of earthly vices, **The Girl Who Killed to Save** and **Ntsikana** also posit their conflict around exemplary individuals with, however, a slight shift towards a socio-religious emphasis. (Nongqause is a tragic variant of Ntsikana the saint.) The two plays, in this sense, also explore the motif of redemption, or if you prefer, African attempts to attain freedom. The thematic conclusions of **The Girl Who Killed to Save** and **Ntsikana** are that freedom and individual fulfilment cannot be attained in the old world because of its restrictive traditional beliefs and practices. The destruction of precolonial societies, though lamentable, will force Africans into new ways of thinking, living and social action which, because of their Christian and 'progressive' nature, will provide a more powerful base in the search for individual and social freedom. Because freedom is not automatically guaranteed in the new phase, as Dhlomo's personal experiences testified, the contrasts between old and new are not simply those between good and evil. There is consequently a measure of tragedy and ideological ambivalence in the events themselves and in their dramatisation.

The presence of colonialism is reduced to the appearance of Christianity which proceeds to subsume socio-political conflicts at both the local and national levels. Christianity privileges, instead, the conflict between good and evil. This is explicitly apparent in the unsympathetic portrayal of dissidents as villains. Tyrants and devils in medieval drama are not granted any space to articulate their motivations. All we see and hear from them are those actions and reasons that condemn them, their purpose was to display their base schemes, viciousness and wickedness. Similarly in **The Girl Who Killed to Save** and **Ntsikana** those who are in favour of militant resistance to colonial encroachment are depicted as being morally base and as irrational war mongers. (pp.11 and 15)[29] Dhlomo's intentions, however, are not merely to advance the cause of Christianity but also to suggest alternative readings of colonial oppression. Although colonialism does not occupy centre-stage, both plays allude to its contributory effects on the conflicts explored (pp.3, 12, 37 and 46), and even though anti-colonial sentiments are generally expressed by characters who we have been prejudiced against, Dhlomo's purpose is not to deny the existence of colonialism but to question African responses to it. Apart from the few dissenting voices of Dhlomo's protagonists, the majority of Africans in the two plays are inclined towards militant resistance with millenarian undertones; a feature that also characterised some forms of lower class resistance during the '20s.[30] **The Girl Who Killed to Save** and **Ntsikana** confront their audience with the futility of violence and millenarian dreams. The 'evils' of marabi culture, violence, sex, liquor and witchcraft, are indirectly chastised as "Man's childish games with short-lived toys." (p.32) Dhlomo presents freedom as being attainable through individual repentance (p.34) and Christian reconciliation. (p.28) The subjugation of other tribes or races is rejected while the need to recognise the 'brotherhood of man' is stressed. (p.30) Other forms of socio-political responses, such as industrial action, are equally frowned upon.

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[29] All page references in brackets refer to Dhlomo's **Collected Works**.

[30] See Phillip Bonner, "The Decline and Fall of the I.C.U. - A Case of Self-Destruction?" in Eddie Webster (ed) **Southern African Labour History**, Ravan, 1978, pp.114-115.

[31] It is important to note that **The Girl Who Killed to Save** and **Ntsikana**

(pp.17-18)[31] **The Girl Who Killed to Save** and **Ntsikana** are texts that owe their slant to middle class optimism about the eventual integration of educated and 'civilised' Africans into the power corridors of white society.

The passing of the Hertzog bills in 1936 which consolidated the inequities of the 1913 Land Act and dashed all hopes of African representation in parliament must have impressed upon Dhlomo that petitions to the central government were as much pipe-dreams as the millenarian actions of peasants and workers. **The Black Bulls** were written at about this time and they reveal a marked move towards a consciously pronounced nationalism but not to the extent that the central tenets of Dhlomo's Christian and liberal ethics are obliterated, although both doctrines are extensively criticised in **The Black Bulls**. Dhlomo's interest in the history and politics of the nineteenth century is focused on the contemporaneous developments of the struggles between African kingdom's for socio-political supremacy in Natal and Transvaal, and, the increasing presence of British and Afrikaner forces in these regions. We get a sense of the dynamics of the African kingdoms through Dhlomo's presentation of the genealogy of, primarily, Zulu kings and the wide-ranging social and regional transformations accompanying their coronations and dethronement. In **Dingane** and, to a measure, **Moshoeshoe** the legacies of the centralised state created by Shaka, c.1818-1928, exercises a powerful presence. In **Moshoeshoe** on the other hand, the reign of Moshoeshoe, no less eventful, provides a telling contrast to the political policies and intrigues that characterise the Zulu state. The transfer of political power amongst the Zulu's, from Shaka to Dingane (1828-1837), Dingane to Mpande (1837-1872) and Mpande to Cetshwayo (1872-1884), is the result of dynastic feuds. While celebrating the efficacies of the independent African societies, Dhlomo's point is that their disunity ("Thyself thy gourds have broken" p.82) facilitated, in many ways, the unchecked expansion of colonial settlement; that the formation of the centralized Zulu state laid "the basis for its substitution by a new colonial power."[32]

The colonial conquest of the remaining independent societies facilitated the transformation of African societies into reserves and the coercion of Africans into forms of wage labour. The formation of the national South African state in 1910 ushered in a period which, for Dhlomo, parallels the dispossession, resettlement, oppression and exploitation that Africans were subjected to in the aftermath of the *mfecane*. The Hertzog bills were a major blow to middle class hopes, and, coming after decades of being spurned and denied avenues of upward social mobility, it added a sombre colour to middle class politics. There is a discernable disenchantment with the politics of negotiation and diplomacy. The Hertzog bills led to the formation of the All Africa Convention (AAC) in Bloemfontein on 16 December 1936. Although delegates were

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contain a number of ambiguous representations that suggest an incipient revision within Dhlomo's consciousness. In both plays there are tentative acknowledgements of the daily struggles of peasants and the possible hypocrisy of settlers and the church. (pp.24, 62, 63) There is also a more complex understanding of cultural resilience and appropriation, especially the possibilities of grafting "the old world to the new." (pp.26-28, 45) The most significant ideological concession is Ntsikana's involvement in the war between the Nqgikas and the Ndlambes after he had previously advocated what amounted to a pacifist stance. (p.65) Is Dhlomo suggesting that despite his abhorrence of violence, the political intransigence of colonial governments could lead to justifiable militant resistance?

[32] Shula Marks and Anthony Atmore (eds), **Economy and Society in Pre-industrial South Africa**, Longman, 1980, p.18.

receptive to proposals for militant action, the AAC opted for a more moderate, if vocal, approach. After the bills were proclamated many Africans, including those associated with the AAC, decided to make use of the new representative structures set up by the bills.[33] The social and political cul-de-sac that faced the African middle class after the proclamation of the Hertzog bills illicited at least two basic responses. It revealed the inadequacies of the political strategies thus far adopted and it focused attention on the problems within African political organisations regarding policy, leadership and membership.[34] Dhlomo turned towards a consideration of the questions of African unity, leadership and mobilisation in the plays **Moshoeshoe**, **Dingane** and **Cetshwayo**.

The Black Bulls represent the dual task that Dhlomo set for the nationalist writer, to retrieve, reconstruct and uphold the dignity of the African past and, simultaneously, to show how the present historical legacy can be grasped and transformed. **Dingane** and **Cetshwayo** deal with the events leading to the defeats experienced and point towards more vigorous nationalist resistance while **Moshoeshoe** is the more reflective, though still nationalist, play, turning inwards towards the self and the community. Unlike **Dingane** and **Cetshwayo** which start with an organic society which disintegrates from internal and external pressures, **Moshoeshoe** starts with a fractured society and unfolds towards its successful reordering. The allegorical significance of **Moshoeshoe**, and its link to **Dingane** and **Cetshwayo**, stems from the intermediary phase that the community of Thaba Bosiu occupies between two periods of turbulence in South African history. The Basotho reorder their society following the devastation resulting from the *difaqane* which left many destitute. The achievements of Moshoeshoe are thus remarkable for a number of reason. Firstly, the play implicitly criticises through contrast the nature of political discourse and practice within the Zulu state. Secondly, it foreshadows the bankruptcy and destruction wrought on viable African communities by colonial conquest: "One would like to see things remain as they are. But I see trouble ahead. Our own white adventurers and farmers push upwards. Soon Moshoeshoe will be called to deal with problems of land-purchase, boundaries, trading and other matters.... (p.260)" Finally, a performance of **Moshoeshoe** was intended to illustrate to African audiences and leaders how they could, by drawing on the example of Moshoeshoe, unite Africans in order to effectively counter the socio-political policies of the state: "Moshoeshoe, the man-mountain....And like this towering mountain cold, which will endure when we have departed and *our kraals scattered*, thy name, like Truth, shall abide - questioning, *inspiring*. (p.266, emphasis added.)

The reintegration of the Thaba Bosiu community is not, however, a straight-forward process. The personal and societal contradictions that obstruct or retard the reconstitution of unity are the primary focus of **Moshoeshoe**. The play opens with a scene that depicts the contradictions that need to be resolved in the new society. The daily activities of the community are marked by a sense of alienation, and is typified in people looking for livestock and companions. There is also a destructive competitiveness as in the fight between two rival suitors. This motif is an important one in the play and also symbolises the search for companionship. The fractured nature of the community is intensified by the constant stream of refugees, displaced by the *difaqane* who pass through the village. A sense of the humanisation

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[33] Gwendolyn Carter and Thomas Karis, **From Protest to Challenge**, Vol.2, Hoover, 1973, p.7-11.

[34] See Couzens, **The New African**, pp.163-164.

that is already taking place in the village is the assistance rendered to the refugees by the locals. This, we are told, is the result of the influence of Moshoeshoe who "builds fast and wisely." (p.280) The play then considers the character of Moshoeshoe and details his ideas and actions. Moshoeshoe is Dhlomo's archetype of a 'progressive' leader and, in a manner of speaking, he provides a modern audience with an 'index guide' on leadership. A distinctive quality of Moshoeshoe is his closeness to the history and culture of his nation. This link is symbolised in his relationship with Mohlomi, an old chief, bard, herbalist and great traveller. Mohlomi is described by Moshoeshoe as "the spirit of the ancestors" (p.237) and he has a formative influence on Moshoeshoe. It is Mohlomi who cites the need to give shelter to the refugees, suggests with foresight the fortress of Thaba Bosiu as the ideal space (p.237) and proposes a political policy that is anti-war and conquest. (p.237) War as demonstrated by the *mfecane* fosters disunity, and conquest, as demonstrated by the white oligarchy, creates its own conflicts within the dominant race and chains them to the traumas of maintaining an oppressive system. (p.237)

In the kingdom of Moshoeshoe tribal affiliations are of no importance as stress is laid upon recognising a common humanity. This is made possible especially by Moshoeshoe's refusal to use his office for personal interests. He challenges a number of traditional attitudes towards achievement, especially the perception of children as the "makers of wealth." (p.259) Moshoeshoe's sensitivity and selflessness comes through in his close relationship and interest in the activities of Mokuena, the resident bard of the village. (p.254) Moshoeshoe is thus in touch with the living geniuses of the community and experiences, like Dhlomo the modern bard, the pain of beauty and wisdom. (p.261) Moshoeshoe is receptive to missionary activities and he deplores traditional customs that he feels have outlived their social functions but does so in a manner that puts equal blame on society for creating the powerful currency of such practices. For instance, his response to cannibalism is that: 'Everyone has the right to the soil and its blessings. Every person must eat and laugh and play. No chance have cannibals to do these things. Give them these, and they will cease to do what they do and be men like ourselves. (p.243)'

In order to achieve the integration of outcasts and dissidents into society Moshoeshoe cautions against the ineffectiveness of unjust laws and instead emphasises the need to rule through popular consent and to recognise human potential: "I trust and rely on all my subjects. If men are not a law unto themselves, no law is law to them." (p.245) Where there is a need to reprimand individuals, Moshoeshoe prefers to convert offenders through positive example rather than through coercive methods. (p.247) Finally, his wisdom emanates from his meditations on the organic qualities of nature: "You who have seen this old world wondrous, bold!/ Have you not thought a tale it holds to tell?/ Sop, list, around you gaze! and you life mould/ to nature's pattern - so will all be well!." (p.265) The dramatic construction of Moshoeshoe is an attempt to embody these qualities of nature. Apart from the minor jealousies of Tladi and Lebuso, Moshoeshoe has very little dramatic conflict. A measure of conflict is evoked in the historical contrasts that are established and in the implicit dialogue with the audience/reader. The absence of pronounced *dramatic* conflict coupled with the entire community's involvement in the affairs of the village gives the play a feeling of *serenity* in reading; reflecting an exemplary cohesiveness to the modern audience. Moshoeshoe is given a similar status. He is Dhlomo's idealised leader and like Dhlomo, who based this play on a Sotho leader, Moshoeshoe is anti-tribalism and devotes his energies in the search for unity, equality and peace as exemplified in nature and tantalisingly offered to modern Africans. Dhlomo suggests that Africans have "stumbled" on the secret magic of unity,

probably referring to the ANC and the AAC, but that they, unfortunately, "...work without plan and consistency." (p.236)

Dingane explores the pressures that facilitated colonial conquest. It's aim is to show how and when "the gourds...(were)... broken." (p.93) Commencing with the assassination of Shaka, it explores internal strife within a disintegrating Zulu kingdom and how it paved the way for Afrikaner victory. The theatrical conventions of Elizabethan drama loom large over the play. Dhlomo in defining his African aesthetics was not adverse to advocate that African drama "must borrow from, be inspired by, ...(and)...shoot from European dramatic forms."[35] The Elizabethan presence is epitomised in the motif of conspiracy that dominates the play and is pivotal in the unfolding of the plot. Elizabethan theatre inherited the motif of conspiracy from the miracle plays; Satan and Judas Iscariot are, lest we need reminding, the earliest and most popular conspirators. In Dingane the plot is encapsulated between three major historical acts of treachery. These are Dingane's assassination of Shaka at the beginning of the play, Mpande's alliance with the Afrikaners which is seen as a further violation of the spirit of Shaka (p.105) and, the largely implied, Boers violation of the peace-pact entered with Mpande who helped them to defeat Dingane.

Another change from **The Girl Who Killed to Save** and Ntsikana is that the monarch, or his variant the tyrant, has eclipsed the saint as principle character. The assumption is that the monarch, within primitive society, is the representative of order and history. He is the link between man and the gods or ancestors, "He holds the course of history in his hand like a sceptre."[36] Shaka in the opening scene is able to prophesy the course of the play before his death: "I see foreign white swallows and strangers, coming to rule over you. I shall be avenged." (p.70) Shaka proceeds to cast his shadow over the entire play, if not personally, than through the character of Jeqe, his bodyservant who, at one point, exclaims that "it was remembrance of Shaka that made me speak as I spoke for he spoke as I speak." (p.105)

The stature of Shaka as the earthly representative of order and history is confirmed when upon his death, lighting and thunder sound his passing. (p.74) And it is in Shaka that we find the classic martyr-tyrant paradox. Although he is not exempt from "extrovert wild deed" (p.74) Shaka is celebrated for his attempts to unite the different African nations, a process that is seen as being a natural progression of history and as regenerative as nature itself:

> What stream is this that moves! still, doth move; / Which does not seek to lose itself in the joy / Of th' larger, living whole, and thence be conveyed / As clouded mist up back on high to be distilled; / And, fresh, return to blast new lease of life; to seep / Far down subterranean depths both cool and sweet, / From which all brooks, all streams and rivers find their soul?" (p.73)

Shaka's murder is a negation of history and the search for unity. Dingane and Mkabayi, his paternal aunt, are described as "foul a pair of nation breakers as ever lived." (p.111) Having established the lack of legitimacy of Dingane's rule, Dhlomo proceeds to show how, in obvious reference to the modern white oligarchy, it can only survive through continuous use of

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[35] Dhlomo, "Literary Theory and Criticism", p.7.

[36] Walter Benjamin, **The Origin of German Tragic Drama**, p.65.

intimidation and violence. The eventual collapse of Dingane is also brought about by violence, or to use Dhlomo's favourite term, revenge. However, since the Boers conquest of the Zulu nation is based on treachery as well, the scenario is not complete, the implication being that if modern society is not democratic and open to peaceful changes by those in power, then violence can only beget violence.

This warning is emphasised by constant allusions to the covert forms of resistance that oppressed people engage in. Dhlomo creates a number of characters that parade as fools or as being dumb, who hide their observations and wisdom "under the cloak of simplicity and jest." (p.104) This is a deception that Dhlomo notes in South African society: 'how often one hears people say the African is happy, care-free and insensitive because he smiles - ignorant of the fact that behind those smiles and calm expression, lie a rebellious soul.[37]' The play, in a sense , is part of this deception. Its presentation of a disintegrating past is to show the importance of unity if African liberation is to be achieved. Strongly implied as well is the rejection of any alliance between Africans and whites since the latter cannot be relied upon. While critical of Dingane, Dhlomo presents him with a degree of sympathy. Dingane's mistrust of white friendship and resistance to white encroachment slightly shifts the scales of his stature from tyrant to martyr and he joins the terrain of Shaka if not his rank. Given the many signs of covert dialogue with the modern audience, what may appear as an innocuous Choral Dance-Song is in effect a militant directive to the audience: 'Brandish your spears, men! / Brandish your spears, and they die! / Was this the land of our fathers? / Was this our government? / Lead us in song, boy! /Take up your spear, young man! / He who is here will be astonished! / He who sees will be astonished! / Heyiya, / Ji! (p.88)'

An important sub-theme of Dingane is to question conventional depictions of colonial conquest. Dhlomo shows that the events that lead up to Blood River were based on suspicion and the fear of conquest on the part of the Africans. The reputation that preceded the Trekkers was one that did not augur well for their meeting with the Zulu nation. As the "chosen race" in search of the "promised land" (190-91) the Trekkers were known to enslave and ill-treat people and to disregard their cultural practices. This is borne out by their appropriation of communal land on their arrival under the pretext that it "...(was)... open space unoccupied." (p.89) In short the Boers "...seek the very freedom and independence they are out to destroy among us!" (p.85) This is the context that Dhlomo feels Dingane's attack on Piet Retief needs to be understood. Dingane and Dhlomo are vindicated later when the Trekkers start preaching racism (p.101) and live up to their reputation as oppressors.

Amongst Dhlomo's surviving plays Cetshwayo is arguably the most important, complex and militant. The militancy displayed would not be out of place in the dramas of '76 and after. The play, in its range and treatment of themes and issues, pre-empts the Youth League and the Black Consciousness Movement. As in Dingane, violence, conspiracy and the quest for unity envelopes the play. There is also the intent to rectify colonial myths and distortions in a period that is not only parallel with the '20s and '30s, but, in many ways, laid the basis for the segregationist policies advanced by Hertzog.[38] Thematically the play covers a broad canvass. It analyses imperialism, the contending social forces in South African society, issues of race and class and the role of white liberals and African collaborators. These

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[37] Dhlomo, "Literary Theory and Criticism", p.6.

[38] See Couzens, The New African, pp.135-140.

are issues that the AAC, in the wake of the Hertzog bills, had to address itself to.

In Cetshwayo the creeds of romanticism and nationalism embrace in a powerful gestalt, feeding off each other in spite of their contradictory implications. The play opens with a communal scene, serene and peaceful. Time is measured by a shadow cast by a stick planted into the ground and "well-built maidens" (p.120) sing, swing and sway to their work-rhythms. This tranquil state is ruptured by a warrior returning from the Battle of Ndondakusuka who reports Cetshwayo's triumph over Mbuyazi, his brother. This clash between brothers prompted by the lust for power (p.120) is, like Dingane's assassination of Shaka, the defilement of nature, the beginning of disunity and it bodes ill for the future: "The umbilical cord of the Race is broken....If thus ourselves today we slay, / Who will our star next day defend? " (pp.117-118)

The contending social forces, all treacherous in one way or another, are presented in the main body of the play. Mpande, the old monarch, represents the old tribal order that favours peace and collaboration with white authorities. (p.120) The old order, impotent as it is, is adept in using traditional customs to ensure its own interests and survival. Mpande and Masipula, his Prime Minister, twice invoke tradition to placate Cetshwayo from attacking Shepstone. Cetshwayo personifies the new and revolutionary forces and he embodies the tyrant-martyr dichotomy. Like Dingane, Cetshwayo ascends the Zulu throne by force and not through popular will. He is also not adverse to "kick and stab" his desires and policies into being. (p.120) However, the more the colonial forces advance to conquer the Zulu nation, the more there is an increase in his matyr-status. Cetshwayo becomes "the risen spirit of Shaka" (p.152) and his death marks a decisive victory in the expansion of colonialism: "Dingane, Mpande, Cetshwayo - I saw their star's rise and shine and then sink in the west." (p.168)

The rest of the contending groups can be grouped together as the different faces of colonialism. There is John Dunn, an English adventurer, farmers, missionaries and Sir Theophilus Shepstone, the Administrator of Natal. They all share the same vices of greed and racism despite their different persuasions and aspirations. They are united by their abhorrence of Cetshwayo whom they caricature as a blood thirsty savage. Dhlomo in defence of Cetshwayo presents their actions and opinions as based on racist premises and political aspirations. The farmers, "true pioneers who bear the brunt of...opening up...this dark continent" pressurise Shepstone to take some action against Cetshwayo. It becomes apparent that their paranoia about an eminent attack by Cetshwayo is a facade to conceal their class aspirations:

> Why should niggers own land? What do they know about land purchase, boundaries, tillage and values? We want more land, but cannot get it owing to the hostile attitude of Cetshwayo and his hordes....Our great trouble is water. A farm of six thousand acres and no adequate supply of water is desert land. Well-watered lands are held by Cetshwayo and can only be got by smashing his power and military organisation." (pp.133-134)

Similar expositions challenge colonial myths and distortions and indicate the imperialist nature of their 'civilising mission.' The struggles between the different groups are eventually resolved in favour of Shepstone and Dunn, temporarily as far as Dhlomo is concerned, and a period of decay and oppression sets in. This is implied in the stage directions for the penultimate scene: 'The field is the same as that described in Scene One, but it shows signs of neglect and deterioration, and the cultivated piece of ground is smaller. Now a beaten path runs through it, and there are several shrubs where there were none before. (p.165)' The warrior returns as a spent old

man and recounts the distances the community has travelled. He manages to salvage out of the ruins, with authorial approval, victory for commoners and nature:

> To think that kingdoms great have come and gone; great heroes flared up but to crash and die; mighty events into oblivion sunk; but woman, mute, suckling her young, this sod of soil upturned, the drunken lazy homely fires, this tree that ne'er to anything aspired, the hoary insubstantial things devoid of power, like love and laughter, beauty and sweet song, still goon undisturbed; disturbed, still are, and will remain, defying all the fury and the quake of War, Disaster, Greed, Ambition, Power...let be - our life! (p.168)

The holders of power, however, are not moved by pleas, however eloquently expressed. When Dhlomo wrote **Cetshwayo** he must have been conscious of the predictable intransigence of the Hertzog government and the futility of making representations to it. Despite the opposition to the bills by Africans the dangers of co-option must have been prominent in his mind. The Hertzog government held a series of regional conferences attended by African chiefs and other selected African leaders in 1935[39] and by June 1937 members of the AAC were competing for the Native Representatives Council's indirectly elected seats.

One of the concerns of **Cetshwayo** is to locate the origins of Herzog's segregationist policies and to demystify their supposed benefit for Africans and sympathy for African culture. As noted earlier, Shepstone's policies are stripped of their deceptive mask and persistently identified with racism, exploitation and the colonial administration's attempts to appropriate those practices and structures of the defeated precolonial society that seem amenable to the creation of colonial hegemony through indirect rule: 'My policy is to recognise Native custom and law in so far as they are not incompatible with the principles of Christianity and civilisation. I want to civilise the Natives along their own lines - not to make them artificial Europeans. (p.143)'

As audience we are likely to be aware of the hollow nature of such statements because since his first entrance onto the stage Shepstone has, out of sheer ignorance, been disrespectful to "Native custom and Law." Dhlomo's response to the policy of parallel development is to refute the possibility of its practical implementation, given the integration of the economy, and its denigration, through racism, of the universal brotherhood of man:

> Sir, your policy seeks to create two different civilisations and two conflicting states in one country....It would be dangerous even if it were possible. You cannot have two parallel lines that do not meet in human affairs where life is relative. Human influences, feelings, thoughts and actions seep and penetrate through the strongest walls. To my mind, Sir, there is no western and eastern, white or black, civilisation. Like God, these things have no plural, are one, and are for you, me, them, all." (p.143-144)

Since experience has taught Dhlomo that good and evil are more than just medieval abstractions but that they take on concrete forms in political and economic struggles, the *immorality* of Shepstone's policies is supplemented with a presentation of their socio-political determinants. For Dhlomo, racism

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[39] Carter and Karis, **From Protest to Challenge**, p.5-8.

and exploitation become synonymous with the interests of the white oligarchy and imperialism, and Shepstone says as much in the play:

> We want war. We must have war. We shall have war....The defeat of Cetshwayo and the control of the Native population would mean a great source of wealth by means of taxation; would provide an unfailing reservoir of labour; appease the Transvaal Volksraad, pacify and win over the Boers, and settles once and for all the boundary disputes between black and white. (p.146)

The conclusion of Dhlomo's critique would seem to suggest that since dialogue with the government had thus far delivered practically nothing and because racism and exploitation are experienced through coercion, they cannot be resolved by diplomacy or through moderate representations. After all, "all life is friction." (p.148) This much is realised by Cetshwayo, "Thrones are won in battle, not in court or debates" (p.120), and his principle foe, Shepstone, whose view is that "it is not a question of ethics. It is one of arms and government. He who has power rules and dictates." (p.146)

Cetshwayo, then, calls for more vigorous resistance to the Hertzog bills. While Dhlomo's critique is informed by the resolutions of the AAC, the AAC's middle-of-the-road approach must have disenchanted him. He accepts as due course the creation of petty chiefs "who will have no real power but... be responsible to the Government", (p.144), but he draws the circle of potential collaborators, or conspirators, wider to include leaders from the ranks of the middle class. The inverse action of the circle is obviously to narrow inwards and eventually isolate the true patriots, the geniuses:

> Few will see through it; and of those few, few will have the courage to stand up against it....Those who dare will be branded and rejected by both sides - the Europeans calling them agitators and aping idiots; the Natives ostracising them as usurpers and deserters. Thus their opportunist leaders, thinking of their immediate personal gains and prestige, and not of the ultimate greater gain and progress of the race, will stand up for the system and for the Chiefs, supporting with spacious and 'patriotic' arguments the retainment of customs and usages that will help perpetuate their serfdom, or, at least, retard their progress. (p.145)

The possibility that "opportunist leaders" is a reference to leaders of the AAC who stood for election cannot be discounted. It is given more plausibility by Dhlomo's tangent attack on Christianity and white liberals. Christian churches, in particular The Methodist Church and The Episcopal Synod of the Church of the Province of South Africa, and white liberals were part of the opposition to the bills since their first public appearance.[40] Dhlomo is cognizant of these facts and we see this in the Colensos attack on Shepstone and, interestingly, in that the major sustained critique of Shepstone's policies is made by Park, Shepstone's senior clerk. The articulation between race and class, race and nationality, becomes a problematic dilemma for Dhlomo and Cetshwayo: "Now would I offer everything to know friends that are friends and friends of my position only." (p.150) Dhlomo's final position, despite the above qualifications, is clear and uncompromising. Christianity is rejected as another hypocritical face of colonialism which, while proclaiming high sounding virtues, is also party to "cheat, ruin, feign, find fault and drag people down." (p.127) It is also left to a missionary to articulate the irrational power of racial consciousness: "...in foreign lands and among foreign people

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[40] Peter Walshe, **The Rise of African Nationalism**, Hurst, 1982, p.161.

even the worst and lowliest of your race becomes your brother and companion, appeasing for the moment your race hunger, helping you to find, express, reflect and be yourself." (p.134)

The character of Dunn can be read as symbolic of liberal whites. Dunn is caricatured as a "white man turned Native" (p.134), and is ostracised by the white community who suspect his loyalties. He is, on the other hand, the only white person who attempts to reconcile and integrate himself into Zulu life with the tacit approval of Cetshwayo who regards him as "my harmless dog, greedily lapping the rich, fresh milk of Zulu wives I give him." (p.121) We note this with scepticism since we know that Dunn is the most ferocious in stirring up hostilities against Cetshwaya. Dunn largely orchestrates Cetshwayo's downfall and eventually kills Cetshwayo and proclaims the *beginning of white rule.* (p.176) *Dunn is the least sympathetically portrayed* character in the play and his killing of Cetshwayo is an interesting alteration of historical facts, suggesting a destructive end for Africans who enter into any alliances with liberal whites.

It is left to Dabulamanzi, the Field Marshall of the Zulu armies, to reject any alliances with whites, collaboration with the government, and moderate politics, moments before his death:

> Black man! Black man! Trust yourself. Serve yourself. Know yourself. Had the black man himself trusted as he has the white, we would have achieved much. Has he served himself as he has the white man, we would not be here now. Had the black man himself known and that power exploited, we would be our own lords....Black man you are your own enemy! You are your own oppressor. I die! But ah! The morrow cometh and no man, can say it nay. My people! Don't stand there like fools. Don't stand cowering. My people! Get out of the bush! get out and fight. Our Soul lives. The battle still rages. Ah! Hear the warrior's Song. Our Soul lives. Wake them up. Call them out. Lead them forth. (p.176)

Dabulamanzi's dialogue is an outright rejection of white tutelage, showing the distance that Dhlomo has travelled since his first two plays. The emphasis on self-determination and self-reliance was to be an important theme in African politics from the fifties. It was especially taken up by the Black Consciousness Movement in the '70s, as evident in their mobilising slogan: *Black man you are on your own!*

CONCLUSION.

There has been thus far a passing problematisation of Dhlomo's ideas on history. What remains is to briefly note the limitations of the depiction of history in The Black Bulls. There are indications in The Black Bulls that, despite the historical and socio-political emphases, Dhlomo is also searching for a metaphysical, immanent truth beyond the reach of colonial ideologues. The ahistorical orientation of such a disposition is, at times, exacerbated by the romantic ethics that underpin the nationalism that is operative in the plays. The antimony of romanticism is that while it is a response to specific socio-political conditions, romanticists prefer to deal in transcendental truths for "the romantic...(prefers)...dim and flickering or diffused lights to clear ones."[41] Consequently the profound critiques of human alienation depicted by romanticists and their involvement in political agitation tends to be seriously circumscribed by their deification of mystery, subjectivity and

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[41] E.J. Hobsbawm, **The Age of Revolution**, Abacus, 1980, p.313.

empiricism. African nationalism, on the other hand, because of its intense dialogue with colonialism and racism has tended to glorify a postulated utopian precolonial past and condemned its abuse under colonialism:

> Upon the throne sat our leader great / Who ruled the land with wisdom, peace and love, / According to traditions ancient, pure; / .... The land was rich with maize, with freshness green! / Yielding all kind of food for living things; /And cornfields, brown their heads, shook golden ripe! / The trees sang peacefully of sweet content, / And music-swept the rivers warbled on. / ...Then came the white man - and a cold wind passed! / Then spoke the white man - and a dark cloud came! / Then moved the white man - and a storm then blew! / Amazed, the people saw - saw all too late!" (pp.158-159)

The depiction of a dignified, if somewhat romanticised, past in **The Black Bulls** has the objective aim of liberating Africans burdened by a psychological and cultural sense of inferiority. Important as this is, it cannot be denied that it can equally be socially restrictive. Admittedly passages such as the above are countered by Dhlomo's depiction of internal conflicts within precolonial societies but even then conflict is largely confined to the kraal of the king. The use of the monarch, or members of the middle class in Dhlomo's later plays, as the incarnation of history, confines the struggles of the ordinary populace to the periphery. History becomes the terrain of the great leaders or the enlightened few while the commoners enter and exit its stages as indistinct matter - Old Man, Old Woman, Girl, Warrior and so on - and are mere spectators of life:

> Well, we...who are we to speak and comment! We shall wait upon you, the higher ones. It is the great places, the great things and the great ones who count and grow. We, the lowly, remain remaining....The great come and go. How great, they come and go! We, the common people, like the soil and pain, remain remaining, ever ourselves though never ourselves!" (p.119)

The motif of conspiracy that is pivotal in **Dingane** and **Cetshwayo** also marginalises the participation of the lower classes in political developments and it critique's the actions of conspirators on a predominantly moralistic level. The tendency for allegory to privilege sliding meanings can work against the identification of the socio-political causality that is aimed at. A case in point is the centrality accorded to fate, omens, gourds, shadows and ghosts that fleetingly appear only to retreat back into the wings of the stage. They can all be fascinating enigma's to unravel if ones wish is to immerse oneself in the labyrinth of *meaning* but the extent to which they illuminate social contradictions is debatable. What they do achieve, however, is to locate socio-political struggles outside of historical determinants and to inscribe politics with a deep sense of pessimism.

The profound depth of Dhlomo's pessimistic condition can be gauged in that even the resurgence, from the forties, of African resistance characterised by industrial and popular struggles was not enough to move Dhlomo towards mass-based radical politics. In the essays "Masses and the Artist", "The African Artist and Society"[42] and in **The Workers**, one of the last plays written by Dhlomo between 1940-1941, there is an appropriation of Marxist terminology and analysis but the depth of Dhlomo's alienation and elitism

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[42] Dhlomo, "Literary Theory and Criticism", pp.61-62 and pp.71-72.

precluded any unambigious commitment to popular struggles and materialism.[43] The Workers reveals a more sophisticated understanding of labour and production than that found in The Girl Who Killed to Save. The glorification of the dignity of labour and worker promises to be industrious and loyal are replaced by a realisation that because of the contradictory positions occupied by labour and capital in production, theirs will always be a conflict-ridden relationship. However, one can also detect in the play residual beliefs in the powers of reason, and, the dependence of the working class on middle class leadership. At the same time, the likelihood of a negotiated reconciliation between workers and capital or Africans and the white oligarchy would seem to have been a practical impossibility for Dhlomo. The Workers ends on an apocalyptic note. When workers confront management, the police are called in and an epic battle ensues. The stage is "plunged to utter darkness" with "the noise of human cries" amidst explosions, debris and fire. There is a hint that despite the violence and loss of life, workers will emerge victorious out of the debris, but that it will be a 'tragic victory.' (p.226-227) Persistent as the contradictions of class and ideology are in Dhlomo's play, they do not detract from the gradual democratisation of his themes and characters. The Black Bulls present us with a body of work that is firmly secured in any discussion of the history of Black Performance in South Africa.

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[43] See Couzens, The New African, p.215.