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PATTERNS OF CONFLUENCE: DEVELOPMENT IN SELECTED NOVELS IN ENGLISH BY BLACK SOUTH AFRICAN WRITERS

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PATTERNS OF CONFLUENCE: DEVELOPMENT IN SELECTED NOVELS IN ENGLISH BY BLACK SOUTH AFRICAN WRITERS.

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This dissertation explores the patterns of confluence - the interaction between oral and written traditions - in early black South African novels, from the vantage point of recent debates on orality and literacy.

Part One stresses the continuity of oral and written literature, attempting to move away from absolute distinctions towards relative, situational contexts. The first chapter outlines different approaches to the oral tradition, while critically analysing two "great-divide" models of orality and literacy which continue to influence literary studies. Chapter Two shows the black novel's continuity with the syncretic form of the early black writing published in missionary newspapers.

Part Two consists of a study of the patterns of confluence in three early black novels. Chapter Three examines the syncretic pattern of Thomas Mofolo's *Moeti oa Bochabela*, showing the mediatory presence of missionary texts - an uneasy blending of Christian didacticism and Sesotho mythology.

Chapter Four explores the influence of the historical romances of H. Rider Haggard on early black writing. "Ideas of orality" formed part of the stereotypical portrayal of black races in these novels. Thus Sol Plaatje's

incorporation of Tswana oral tradition in his historical romance, *Mhudi*, forms part of a "double-voiced" dialogue with Haggard and the romance genre.

Chapter Five consists of a thematic study of a hitherto neglected novel, A.C Jordan's *Wrath of the Ancestors*. Jordan's use of Mpondomise oral tradition allows him to draw together the mythical and social dimensions of the "School-Red" conflict. Unlike Mofolo and Plaatje, the 'pagan' worldview is not undermined by Christianity, but by a sense of the inexorability of the forces of history.

The conclusion places this study in the context of literary studies in South African English universities today, while cautioning against over-simplistic and uncritical tradition-building.

Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own, unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University.

(P. Esterhuysen)

30th day of August , 1988

To those who 'lived' with the dissertation: my parents,

the Morgans - and, especially, Judith

Preface.

A critical discourse appropriate to African Literature has long been a source of contention. Twenty five years ago Chinua Achebe lambasted Eurocentric critics for their lack of knowledge and the biases in their approach to works by African writers:

> We are not opposed to criticism but we are getting a little weary of all the special types of criticism which have been designed for us by people whose knowledge of us is very limited.[1]

This complaint became the common refrain of many African writers and critics over the years that followed. An intrinsic part of this argument is the claim that African literature is rooted in an indigenous oral tradition, thus a knowledge of the forms of this tradition is a prerequisite for an understanding, or evaluation, of this literature. An example would be Ernest Emenyonu's statement prefacing his discussion on the 'requirements' of a literary critic:

> What many Western critics issue on African literature is a reflection of a profound lack of knowledge about African cultural traditions coupled with an ignorance of the existence, nature and depth of the heritage of African oral tradition.[2]

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1 Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet On Creation Day* (London: Heinemann, 1975), p 46.

2 Ernest Emenyonu, "African Literature: What does it take to be its critic?", *African Literature Today No 5: The Novel In Africa*, ed., Eldred Durosimi Jones (London: Heinemann, 1971), pp 9-10. Also see Solomon O. Ivasere, "Oral Tradition in the Criticism of African Literature," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 13.1 (1975): pp 107-119, and more recently Chinweizu et al, *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature* (Washington: Harvard U Press,

Whether the situation has improved is debatable. However, since then a large number of literary critics and folklorists have focused on the oral sources of African novels. In Nigeria, studies of Achebe, Tutuola, Okara and Soyinka testify to the variety of interactions between oral forms and written narrative.[3] There have also been controversies. When Amos Tutuola first published *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* European critics were quick to applaud its "Africaness", and make portentious claims about the novel's incorporation and synthesis of a grab bag of mythologies, or its oral style. These generalisations were soon undercut by less enthusiastic Nigerian critics who showed that Tutuola's use of myth derived from Yoruba mythology, that was at times mediated through the popular, indigenous fiction of Daniel Fagunwa. Moreover, that his so-called oral language resulted from a direct translation from the Yoruba idiom into English - his "oral" or "surreal" style was a reflection of his abilities as a second language speaker of the English language:

> his English is that of the Yoruba user, not of the average educated user but of generally the user with post-primary education at approximately the level of present-day Secondary Class Four.[4]

1983).

I would like to stress from the outset, that the term "oral tradition" is used in its generic sense to denote the oral medium. When used in the context of Africa it is not meant to imply that African oral traditions are identical or homogenous, or connected to a particular kind of society.

[3] See for example Bernth Linfors, *Folklore in Nigerian Literature*. (New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1973), Kofi Awonoor, "A Study of the Influences of Oral Literature on the Contemporary Literature of Africa," diss., U of New York, 1972, and Emmanuel Obiechina, *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel*. (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1975).There have also been innumerable articles on the oral influences of specific novels.

[4] A. Afolayan, "Language and Sources of Amos Tutuola," *Perspectives on African Literature*, ed., Christopher Heywood (London: Heinemann, 1971), p 54. For an account of the controversy see James

The controversies played an important role in providing a specific focus for scholarship drawing on the oral tradition, and underscored the danger of more 'impressionistic' analyses.

On the other hand, Nigerian studies also serve as a reminder that literary scholarship does not take place in a vacuum; one needs to be sensitive to the role of academy in Leavis-type tradition-building. In post-independence Nigeria an English literary curriculum was retained, and supplemented by courses in African literature, despite Nigerian critics attempts to place "African works written in English outside of the British tradition, in a line of continuity with indigenous, vernacular, or oral literature."[5] The result was the assertion of a genealogy (beginning with Yoruba and Igbo oral traditions and then moving, via Fagunwa, to Tutuola, Achebe and Soyinka) which tends to over-simplify the oral/writing continuum and to underplay the social relations imbedded in oral tradition - a genealogy, nonetheless, tailor-made for a supplementary course.

In Kenya, attempts at tracing 'historical continuities' took a more radical form, involving the abolition of the English Department and the foundation

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Booth, *Writers and Politics In Nigeria* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981).

[5] David Attwell, "The British legacy in anglophone African literary criticism," *English In Africa* 11.1 (1984): p 89. Also see Arthur Ravenscroft, "University Syllabuses and 'African Literature'," *Bulletin of the Association for African Literature In English* 1 (1964): pp 1-4, and Kole Ogungbesan, "A Reappraisal of English Literature Syllabuses in Nigerian Universities," *Journal of the Nigerian English Studies Association* 5.1-2 (1972): pp 86-93. Although part of my argument has been extrapolated from Attwell's article, I use 'tradition-building' in a more narrow sense. See Landeg White's review article, "Literature and History in Africa," *Journal of African History* 21 (1980): pp 537-546.

of a Department of Literature with Africa as its "organising principle".[6] Occupying pride of place in the syllabus, according to Ngugi (an active participant in the debate), was the study of oral literature:

> Orature (oral literature) has its roots in the lives of the peasantry. It is primarily their compositions, their songs, their art, which forms the basis of the national and resistance culture during the colonial and neo-colonial times. We three lecturers were therefore calling for the centrality of peasant and worker heritage in the study of literature and culture.[7]

Not unexpectedly, one often finds a more critical view of the relationship between written and oral literatures in the writings of East African critics:

> If the task of tracing connections between the vernacular/oral/traditional and modern literary cultures was to be fairly easily accomplished in West Africa, in the East the vernacular culture and that of what Mazrui calls the 'Afro-Saxons' were more clearly polarized.[8]

In sharp contrast to both East and West Africa, however, there have been few studies exploring the confluence of oral and literary traditions in the black South African novel, either at the general level, or in specific analyses of individual novels.[9] This situation is exemplified by the

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[6] This event which took place in 1968, (and the debate that followed), is described by Ngugi in *Decolonising the Mind*. (London: James Currey, 1981), pp 89-102.

[7] Ngugi, p 95.

[8] Attwell, p 92.

[9] An exception can be made of critical scholarship pertaining to Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka*. See for example B. Obumselu, "Mofolo's Chaka and the Folk Tradition," *Papers In African Literature*, ed., Christopher Heywood (Sheffield Papers on Literature and Society, 1976), and C.F. Swanepoel, "Reflections on the Art of Thomas Mofolo," *Limi* 7.1-2 (1979) pp 63-76.

published proceedings of a Conference on Orality and Literacy held at Natal University three years ago.[10] Of the three studies devoted to modern African literature, two focused on the transition from oral tradition to written text in creative writing from West Africa. The third study explored the children's stories of Marguerite Poland. Given the absolute dearth of literary scholarship in this field it would seem that that Mbulelo Mzamane's words at the 1981 York Conference are still relevant today:

> In dealing with creativity among blacks most scholars tend to deal with either oral or written forms, but very seldom with both, as if these entities are not mixed in the creative process of black writers in South Africa.[11]

The aim of this study, then, is to begin redressing the imbalance.

During the seventies the battle over oral literature as a legitimate subject of study was fought and won, leaving in its wake a number of studies and collections of oral genres from all over the continent exemplified by the Oxford Series. And the last decade has been characterised by renewed and vigorous debate about the nature and the consequences of literacy, and about the differences between spoken and written language. The transitional state of literacy today, a topic hardly conceivable fifty years ago, formed the subject of the 1985 Wolfson College Lectures. Gerd Baumann in an introductory address aptly summed up the debate:

> To ask what it is, and what it does to a person, or people, or a society to 'be literate' has become a

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10 Richard Whitaker and Edgard Sienaert, eds., *Oral Tradition and Literacy* (Durban: Natal U Oral Documentation and Research Centre), 1986.

11 Mbulelo Mzamane, "The Uses of Traditional Oral Forms in Black South African Literature," *Literature and Society in South Africa*, eds., Landeg White and Tim Couzens (London: Longmans, 1986), p 147.

> question of wide interest. The political, cultural, and cognitive effects of literacy are as yet open issues, but issues of crucial importance.[12]

This situation has lead to a renewed emphasis on oral tradition and orality within the context of different cultures and societies. The trend has been to move away from absolute distinctions towards relative, situational contexts. In the words of the linguist, Deborah Tannen:

> It is important to stress that it is the awareness of strategies that have been associated with oral and literate tradition that has been enlightening. I have come to believe ... that these strategies are not limited to orality vs. literacy, and certainly not to spoken vs. written language, but rather can be seen to interplay in spoken and written discourse in various settings.[13]

Thus this dissertation aims to draw on transcribed oral narrative and recent theoretical debates, while undertaking a textual analysis of early black novels.[14] In order to carry out more in-depth analyses, I have limited the study to three specific novels written by pioneering black writers all of whom had their roots in the rural areas.[15] Obviously, then,

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[12] Gerd Baumann, ed., *The Written Word Literacy In Transition* (Oxford: Oxford U Press, 1986), p 2.

[13] Deborah Tannen, ed., *Spoken and Written Language: Exploring Orality and Literacy* (Norwood: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1982), p 4.

[14] Although the oral tradition is often linked to ideas of an 'African aesthetic', and the search for evaluative criteria, such questions are not addressed (at least explicitly) in this study. I believe that only when we have a more concrete idea of the confluence of oral and written forms in the black novel can more profitable theorising take place.

[15] All three novelists were part of the same elite class but had different backgrounds. Despite retaining strong ties with rural communities, Plaatje's experience of the metropolis shaped his world-view, and *Mhudi*. Mofolo, by contrast, had spent most of his life in the Morija Christian community of Lesotho when he wrote his first novel.

this study cannot claim to be exhaustive or even fully comprehensive, instead it should be viewed as a preamble to a far larger project exploring the continuities (and no doubt disruptions) with later black writing much of which has focused on an urban experience.[16]

It would be impossible to thank adequately all those who have contributed to my research. Foremost among these have been my colleagues in the Division of African Literature, who provided a stimulating environment, while offering support and encouragement. I would also like to thank the librarians of the Africana library for their valuable and ever-willing assistance.

Jordan, who belonged to a later generation, spent his formative years as part of the School community in Transkei.

16 An important transitional voice was that of R.R.R. Dhlomo. His short stories published in *Sjambok* anticipate a different approach and a new setting. See R.R.R. Dhlomo, *Twenty Short Stories, English in Africa* 2.1 (1975).

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PART ONE

Please arise, you things with brains
That fly 'mongst the stars and the moon,
Arise and take up sticks
So that you do research with rigor
And stop splitting hairs over trivial folktales....[17]

Chapter One.

Introduction.

Although there are few studies on the influence of oral tradition on the black novel in South Africa - the literary scholar is entering a terrain often spoken about, and a territory much spoken for. Many assumptions about orality and literacy, and the nature of 'oral societies' of the past abound. This introduction (by no means a systematic or exhaustive critique) sets out to outline in brief certain sets of ideas and assumptions which directly impinge on a study of *South African* literature. By engaging with the 'models' sketched out below I hope to provide a context in which the assumptions (and perhaps limitations) underlying my *literary* approach will become clearer.

In a paper presented at the 1981 York Conference, the Black Consciousness writer and scholar, Mbulelo Mzamane, accused literary scholars of ignoring the mix of oral and written tradition that characterised the "creative process" of black South African writers. He then went on to add:

> In practice the distinction between traditional oral modes and Western literary forms does not exist or,

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[17] David Yali-Manisi, "The Bird of the Forest Grows Restless," trans. Jeff Opland, *Zulu and Xhosa Oral Poetry Performed and Explained*, Guide to the Video Recording, (Durban, Natal U Oral Documentation and Research Centre, 1986).

> at least, is never clearly demarcated. Black writers often operate, unconsciously most of the time, within both traditions.[18]

While Mzamane's words call attention to a hiatus in Southern African literary studies, they also point to a dilemma which faces the scholar who attempts to respond to his call. Ideas about the oral tradition and its influence on the modern writer are inextricably and explicitly tied to p litical ideologies. This is not surprising given that the collection of oral literature and *volkskunde* has long been associated with nationalist movements. For instance, the discipline of folklore was given great impetus by the nationalistic strand of European Romanticism in the early nineteeth century:

> The outburst of nationalism in Europe following the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars has often been remarked as one of the strands in Romanticism. Along with this went an emphasis on local origins and languages, accompanied by an enthusiasm for the collection of 'folklore' in various senses - what would now be called 'oral literature' (ballads, folk songs, stories) as well as 'traditional' dances and vernacular languages and 'customs'. The political and ideological implications of this return to 'origins' are obvious, and the appeal was all the more forceful because of the Romantic stress on the significance of the 'other' and the 'lost', and the virtue of 'unlettered' and 'natural' folk both now and in the past.[19]

In a comparable way oral tradition emerged as a symbol of unity and identity in the Black Consciousness movement in South Africa during the seventies.[20] Through an assertion of "blackness" the movement set out

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[18] Mzamane, "The Uses of Traditional Oral Forms in Black South African Literature," White and Couzens, p 147.

[19] Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1977), p 34.

[20] For a comprehensive account of the Black Consciousness movement during the seventies see Gail Gerhart, *Black Power In South Africa: The Evolution of an Ideology* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1978). Also see Kelwyn Sole, "Culture, Politics and the Black Writer: A Critical Look at Prevailing Assumptions," *Publisher-Writer-Reader:*

to counter the inferiority experienced by the 'oppressed', and to provide a united front in the struggle against racial oppression. Culture was a keyword in this philosophy as this definition by N. Chabani Manganyi clearly shows:

> Beginning with Negritude in the 1930's and the notion of the *African personality* during the 1960's there emerged in the United States and later in South Africa the *black consciousness* movements. I want to suggest that these movements, discontinuous as they appear and isolated both in temporal and geographic terms as they have been, are symptomatic of some profound need in the inner world of the black collective psyche to materialise a new identity to harness all the resources of its cultural and historical unconscious.[21]

Accordingly, Black Consciousness organisations such as the South African Students' Organisation (S.A.S.O.) and the Black People's Convention (B.P.C.) spearheaded a resurgence of cultural activity in the townships aimed at black audiences. Poetry recitals, for instance, became an important forum for Black Consciousness philosophy. Out of this milieu emerged the poetry of Serote and Gwala, the writings of the *Staffrider* 'school' and the inception of black publishing houses like Skotaville. There was also a renewed emphasis on the political role of the writer, and on rediscovering the cultural 'heritage' of the past. In the writings of writers like Mzamane, Gwala and Mutloatse we find that the relationship between the contemporary black novel and oral tradition is not merely of literary or intellectual concern, but in fact encapsulates the assertion of a cultural identity within the political struggle against apartheid. The black writer is intrinsically linked to an oral heritage (which was

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Sociology of Southern African Literature, ed., Susan Gardner (Johannesburg: Department of Comparative Literature U of the Witwatersrand, 1986).

21 N. Chabani Manganyi, *Mashangu's Reverie and other essays* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1977), p 54.

communal and democratic) even if the cord be an unconscious one as in the case of the early Serote:

> Like many of his contemporaries, therefore, he started writing without models, other than the English poets he had read as prescribed works at school and the African oral tradition, which is lodged *deep in the soul of every African writer*.[22]

This 'essential' bond naturalises and legitimises the black writer's commitment to an explicitly political art:

> The African tale dealt with a wide range of subjects, so that whenever a child wanted an explanation about anything, an appropriate tale could always be found to illustrate the point. ... This phenomenon has been carried over to written literature. The protest tradition, for instance, is built on a given number of situations which we find prevalent in South African society. The short story or poem within the tradition has a social and political purpose, like any other traditional tale. To suggest that Black South African literature should dispense with the protest element, as Lewis Nkosi advocated in 'Fiction by Black South Africans' from *Home and Exile*, is to ignore the African communal ethic which has given rise to the 'political tale'.[23]

This is not the place to explore all the symbols and motifs of Black Consciousness philosophy. What is of concern is to show that Black Consciousness writers have foregrounded certain oral traditions, and ideas about oral tradition. The emphasis, as Mzamane's essay shows, is less on the continuity of form and more on the continuity of purpose. When the black writer writes "committed" literature he is said to be fulfilling the same functional role as the traditional poet or storyteller:

> Notions on committed literature and the functional purpose of literature among Africans derive from the traditional role of the poet and story-teller as the embodiments of traditional values and the people's 'collective conscience'. The African writer is still expected to articulate the people's problems and

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[22] Mzamane, p 152.

[23] Mzamane, p 149.

> complaints, and to project their collective aspirations.[24]

The genres of oral tradition which most 'fit' this functional model are that of the praise poem (especially the *izibongo* of the heroic age of Zulu history) and the didactic tale.[25] Thus Black Consciousness writers tend to highlight the *imbongi's* licence to criticise, and to view praise poetry as a poetry of heroic action:

> Heroism remains an essential weapon in the liberation struggle in South Africa. So whether it is Dennis Brutus writing about Luthuli or Mongane Serote paying homage to the role of the African woman in the struggle, there is in all the poets a common urge to turn to izibongo.[26]

Moreover, the relationship between the modern black writer and his audience should be, according to these writers, analogous to the 'organic' bond between the praise poet and the community:

> All I am saying is that the black writer should concentrate primarily on his immediate audience. What goes on in the community forms the basis of his writings. He is deeply rooted there - and his authenticity is there or not there for one to see, hear and feel.[27]

From the Black Consciousness perspective a particular model of the relationship between oral tradition and writing emerges: one which revolves around ideas about the role of the storyteller/poet in pre-colonial black society and which stresses the functional and communal basis of

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[24] Mzamane, p 148.

[25] This is not to say that praise poetry has not had a pervasive influence on black narrative fiction. The works of Mofolo, Dube, and more recently Mazisi Kunene, stand as eloquent testimony to this influence.

[26] Mzamane, p 147.

[27] Mothobi Mutloatse, introduction, *Forced Landing* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1980), p 2.

his art. This model underplays the variety of oral traditions (let alone the complexity of power relations in traditional society), which leads to an over-simplification of the diversity that marks the interaction between oral and written forms. For instance, no reference is made to less stylised, more informal traditional genres such as riddling and the telling of proverbs. Nor is there mention of urban forms such as township lore which qualifies as oral tradition but is performed under very different contexts: street-corners, shebeens, and (as Ndebele reminds us) even on buses and trains:

> I have listened to countless storytellers on the buses and trains carrying people to and from work in South Africa. The majority of them have woven masterpieces of entertainment and instruction. Others were so popular that commuters made sure they did not miss the storytellers' trains. The vast majority of the stories were either tragedies or comedies about lovers, township jealousies, the worries of widows.... And we have to face the truth here: there were proportionately fewer overtly political stories. When they talked politics, they talked politics; when they told stories, they told stories.[28]

A functionalist approach to oral tradition also ignores its very important empathic dimensions, as Peter Thuynsma observes in an analysis of the elements of performance in the Xhosa *ntsomi*:

> Those elements that do comprise the overall structure need, I think, to be relegated to a secondary rung in favour of the relationships that the artist engineers between herself and her listeners, and between herself and her tale. Indeed it is safer to focus on the performance aspect in a way not possible with praise or other more ceremonial oral expression.[29]

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[28] Njabulo S. Ndebele, "Turkish Tales, and Some Thoughts on S.A. Fiction," *Staffrider* 6.1 (1984): p 47.

[29] Peter Thuynsma, "Xhosa Ntsomi: The Language of Gesture," *The English Academy Review* 4 (1987): p 78. The critical writings of Isidore Okpewho explore these empathic dimensions within the context of African oral tradition.

Although Black Consciousness philosophy is less pervasive today, it has left us with a dual legacy: a useful emphasis on the interaction of oral and written forms, but a model of that interaction which tends to collapse important formal distictions.[30]

But are there clear-cut distinctions to be made between oral and written traditions, between orality and literacy? What precisely do we mean by the term 'oral'? According to Ruth Finnegan there are three different, but related, criteria for orality: oral composition, oral transmission and oral performance.[31] Different theories tend to foreground one element at the expense of others. Oral-formulaic studies, for example, inspired by Albert Lord's approach in *The Singer of Tales* have placed greatest emphasis on oral composition, that is composition which takes place during performance as in the epic tales of the *guslari*.[32] Lord was influenced by Milman Parry's discovery that the epic bards of Yugoslavia committed their long tales to memory, not by word-for-word memorisation, but through stock phrases which enabled them to improvise during performance:

> The poet who composes with only the spoken word must be able to fit his words into the mould of his verses after a fixed pattern... In composing he will

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30 cf. Gwala's words in a recent review of the COSATU worker poets: "By infusing social issues with their personal experiences they have resurrected oral poetry from the tombs of the past and given it a new life." Mafika Gwala, "The Oral Poetry of Mzwakhe Mbuli and the COSATU Workers," *Staffrider* 7.1 (1988): p 91.

31 Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, p 17.

32 Albert B. Lord, *The singer of tales* (1960; New York: Atheneum, 1968).

> do no more than put together for his needs phrases which he has often heard or used himself, and which, grouping themselves in accordance with a fixed pattern of thought, come naturally to make the sentence and the verse; and he will recall his poem easily, when he wishes to say it over, because he will be guided anew by the same play of words and phrases as before.[33]

Parry termed these "phrases", formulae, which he defined as: "a group of words ... regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea".[34] In the *Singer of tales* Lord expanded the concept of the formula, and turned his attention to other epics which exist today in written form: *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey* and and the Old English *Beowolf* etc. This approach was adopted by scholars of other oral and written traditions. Written texts were analysed according to their "formulary density" which was taken as evidence of oral composition. The oral-formulaic approach does not, however, appear to have been as influential in studies of African oral tradition.[35] Furthermore, African studies suggest that the practice of composition-in-performance does not extend to all oral traditions. Oral poets in Somali, for instance, have been shown to make extensive use of verbatim memorisation.[36] And among the Zulu, as Cope points out, some *izibongo* performances

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[33] Cited in John Miles Foley, *Oral-Formulaic Theory and Research: An Introduction and Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1985), p 15.

[34] Foley, p 31.

[35] Southern Africa studies following this approach would include: Jeff Opland, *Xhosa Oral Poetry* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983) and Harold Scheub, *The Xhosa Ntsomi* (Oxford: Oxford U Press, 1971).

[36] See I.M. Lewis, "Literacy and cultural identity in the Horn of Africa: the Somali Case," *The Written Word: Literacy in Transtion*, ed., Gord Baumann (Oxford: Oxford U Press, 1986).

> derive from written compositions, written either to be read in public or to be memorized for public performance. This would be in keeping with the Zulu tradition for in my experience, compositions are prepared in advance and not during the performance.[37]

Although oral-formulaic theory, at first blush, seems to offer a promising approach to African literature - it would be marvellous to discover an 'oral style', for instance - this is not borne out by actual analysis. Moreover, as we shall see, oral-formulaic theory in practice can lead to rather dangerous over-simplifications.

A far older tradition closely aligned with folklore studies has been the 'historical-geographical' school (also known as the 'Finnish' school). This school foregrounds the element of transmission and makes use of a widely-comparative methodology. The first folklorists compared variants of folktales (and other items) in order to trace their history and reconstruct the original proto-type or Ur-form. In order to facilitate this comparison vast classificatory systems were developed culminating in Stith Thompson's *Motif Index of Folk Literature*. These systems emphasised the content of a tale and abstracted themes and motifs from their social context.[38] However, by the early sixties a new generation of folklorists had begun to entertain doubts about the seemingly endless pursuit of variants - in the words of Melville Jacobs:

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[37] Trevor Cope, "Literacy and the Oral Tradition: the Zulu Evidence," Whitaker and Sienaert, p 153.

[38] These few brief comments obviously can't do justice to a method which has had a major influence on folklore studies. For the ongoing debate about the merits and demerits of this approach see the *Journal of Folklore Research* 23.2-3 (1986). A useful summary of debates within the discipline of Folklore Studies is to be found in Jan Harold Brunvand, *Folklore: A Study and Research Guide* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1976).

> Why should they (folklorists) collect more stories and more versions of already obtained stores? Why should they spot and categorize into motifs, plots, tale types, themes ... functions ... motifemes?[39]

Rejecting "the exclusivity of the one-dimensional pursuit of texts through time and space," these folklorists began to emphasise elements of performance above transmission.[40] Although this study often draws on a comparative method - for instance the tale of the Kholumolumo as it appears in Mofolo is contrasted with similar tales in oral collections - I have tried to place the narrative within its cultural (and historical) context rather than abstracting it, and I have avoided the classificatory jargon.[41]

The past twenty years have witnessed an increasing emphasis on the performative aspect of the oral tradition. In the field of folklore and related fields there has arisen the 'contextual school' whose eclectic approach has been influenced by a whole host of other disciplines. Its most pervasive influence has been that of socio-linguistics especially the theories of Dell Hymes regarding "communicative events". Certain types of "communicative event" have been of central importance to folklorists,

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[39] Linda Degh, introduction, *Journal of Folklore Research* 23.2-3 (1986): p 79.

[40] Degh, p 79.

[41] In this study I have also tried to avoid simply cataloguing an endless collection of motifs in black novels that could be said to resemble motifs abstracted from different South African oral narrative traditions. Examples have been selected in order to illuminate a wider theme, and in such a way as to preserve a sense of context. For an example of the pitfalls of this approach see C.T. Msimang, *Folktale Influence on the Zulu Novel* (Pretoria: Acacia, 1986).

namely "those utterances which transform the role of speaker and listener to those of performer and audience."[42]

Within a contextual approach, the context of an oral performance is considered an intrinsic component of the event's meaning and not just a useful *obiter dictum* to a transcription or recording. There can be no dichotomy between a verbal 'text' and its actualisation:

> "Meaning" ... is not only the paraphrase of a statement into its logical constituents, but the comprehension of the entire system of relationship that made the communication of an act of speaking possible, including its cognitive, expressive, and behavioural dimensions.[43]

This has lead to a shift in focus from absolute distinctions between oral and written events to an emphasis on the context in which different characteristics of the differing media come into play. Despite this shift there are still scholars who perpetuate "great divide" theories which sweep across cultures and across history in order to make distinctions between oral and written cultures - with the medium of oral expression as the basis for differences. One such theorist is Walter J. Ong whose theories of oral noetics explore the evolution of the word from "primary orality" through writing and print and other forms of residual orality to the "secondary orality" of the electronic age:

> Recent studies have shown how oral noetic processes - ways of acquiring, formulating, storing and retrieving knowledge in cultures unfamiliar with writing or print - have certain distinctive features as compared to the noetic processes of cultures possessed of writing ... and how these distinctive

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[42] Dan Ben-Amos, Introduction, *Folklore: Performance and Communication*, eds., Dan Ben-Amos and Kenneth S. Goldstein (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), p 4.

[43] Ben-Amos, p 3.

> features are related to what can be called an oral lifestyle.[44]

These "distinctive features", according to Ong, are also internalised. The individual in a primary oral culture, we are to believe, also thinks orally:

> For human thought structures are tied in with verbalisation and must fit available media of communication: there is no way for persons with no experience of writing to put their minds through the continuous linear sequence of thought such as goes, for example, into an encyclopaedic article. Lengthy verbal performances in oral cultures are never analytic but formulaic.[45]

Although Ong's theories have been heavily criticised for, among other things, lacking cross-cultural validity, he is not easily dismissed. His approach seems to be in the ascendant and his work is being used in studies pertaining to Southern Africa, and in literary studies. A recent example would be Gerhard Fritschi's *Africa and Gutenberg: Exploring Oral Structures In the Modern African Novel*. Fritschi explores the modern African novel as a "synthesis of an oral sensibility with a literate form". He outlines his intention

> to analyse and interpret how the traditionally oral Africa - perhaps its orality even newly reinforced by the influence of the electronic media - carries on and integrates its heritage in a world shaped by the combined alphabetic and Gutenberg revolutions.[46]

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[44] Walter J. Ong, *Interfaces of the word: Studies In the evolution of consciousness and culture* (Ithaca: Cornell U Press, 1977), p 96.

[45] Ong, p15. Walter Ong addresses some of these criticisms in his more recent work. See, for instance, Walter J. Ong, "Writing is a Technology that Restructures Thought," *The Written Word: Literacy In Transition*, ed. Gerd Baumann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

[46] Gerhard Fritchi, *Africa and Gutenberg: Exploring Oral Structures In the Modern African Novel* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1983), p 1.

Thus Fritchi brings a baggage of terms derived from Lord, Ong and Havelock to bear on the novels of Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe and Gabriel Okara. Like the Black Consciousness movement, he has a rather homogenous view of oral cultures and of the antimonies between 'traditional' and modern societies. This shows itself in constant little caveats exemplified by his interpretation of the "half-bodied baby" in the *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*:

> The story's perculiarly African meaning may be interpreted as a portrait of a certain type of African affected by Western influences, corrupt and greedy, morally lost between two cultures, a too heavy burden for his African parents.[47]

This colonial stereotype of the educated African alerts us to the fact that many of the generalisations made by Fritschi sound suspiciously like colonial depictions of 'primitive man'. Especially the blatant generalisations about the African "oral mind". Achebe's success we are told in his first three novels stems from his portrayal of the ways "an oral mentality understands and expresses reality."

> Particularly with the proverb he depicted a reasoning moulded by recalling devices, a reasoning which is communal in time and space, thus favoring closed, conservative, authoritarian thinking. It is a mentality which structures actuality empirically, having a facet-like, operative, non-sytematic understanding of the world.[48]

Throughout his study Fritschi makes uncritical use of dichotomies such "oral/literate mind" and "oral/literate culture" which hark back to the colonial anthropology of Levy-Bruhl.[49] However, whereas Levy-Bruhl made claims for cognitive capacity according to cultural traits, Fritchi

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[47] Fritchi, p 42.

[48] Fritchi, p 77.

[49] See L. Levy-Bruhl, *How the Natives Think*, trans. L.A. Clare (London: Allen Unwin, 1926.)

implies that cognitive capacity is linked to media. And although he admits, citing Ong, that developments in verbal communication can not account for "everything in culture and consciousness", he depicts orality and literacy without making any attempt to place them in a social-historical context. As a result his study emerges as an updated version of *How Natives Think*. There is also no admission that the literacy which he has in mind belongs itself to a specific context; it is neither autonomous, nor universal. This model of literacy, Brian Street argues, is predominant in academic literature and underlies the thinking of many literacy programs:

> The model tends, I claim, to be based on the 'essay-text' form of literacy and to generalise broadly from what is in fact a narrow, culture-specific literacy practice. ... The model assumes a single direction in which literacy development can be traced, and associates it with 'progress', 'civilisation', individual liberty and social mobility. It isolates literacy as an independant variable and then claims to study its consequences. These consequences are classically represented in terms of economic 'take off' or in terms of cognitive skills.[50]

That Fritschi has this "essay-type" of literacy in mind emerges in his analysis of Amos Tutuola, who is shown to be a perfect example of the survival of an "oral mind". It is with more than a sense of *deja vu* that we read this paternalistic description of Tutuola's intuitive powers:

> I do not want to say that Tutuola consciously chose his tales and a technique of personification and dramatisation to portray aspects of his contemporary African individual and society. I doubt whether his mode of thinking knows such mental transformation.[51]

Fritschi contrasts Tutuola's depiction of death "as an ordinary person" with the definition of death in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in order to

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[50] Brian Street, *Literacy in theory and practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1984), p 2.

[51] Fritchi, p 40.

foreground the differences between an an oral culture's knowledge of death and that of a literate culture. Needless to say, the kind of literacy embodied by the Encyclopaedia Britannica conforms to the literacy model described by Brian Street. It would seem that both Ong and Fritschi make the error of generalising from a single type of literacy - the literacy of the academic world. The point which Fritchi overlooks in his ludicrously grandiose juxtapositions is that there have been many different kinds of literacy (just as there are many kinds of oral tradition) practised throughout history. This holds true for the African continent today:

> It is even more important to remember - since it seems to be more easily forgotten - that it is not just in the last generation or two that writing has gained significance as a medium for communication in the so-called 'Third World'. A degree of literacy has been a feature of human culture in most parts of the world for millennia. This has rarely meant mass literacy (a fact significant for the popular circulation of oral literature) but has meant a measure of influence from the written word and literatures even in cultures often dubbed 'oral'.[52]

The approach then of this study is to view the differences between the spoken word and the written word as part of a continuum - as a continuing dialogue which constantly reshapes their relation. In the words of Ruth Finnegan concerning the nature of 'oral' poetry:

> The basic point then, is the continuity of 'oral' and 'written' literature. There is no deep gulf between the two: they shade into each other both in the present and over many centuries of historical development, and there are innumerable cases of poetry which has both 'oral' and 'written' elements.[53]

Likewise (as we shall see in the next chapter), the black South African novel forms part of an ongoing historical dialogue between oral and

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[52] Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, p 23.

[53] Finnegan, p 24.

written traditions. The patterns of confluence have their beginning in early Christian hymns, in the reduction of indigenous oral narrative and poetry to writing, in the transmission by word-of-mouth of written texts, and in the first tentative stories written for newspapers in the nineteenth century - patterns characterised more often by humble continuities than by grand distinctions.

Chapter Two.

Patterns of confluence: early black writing in South Africa.

The history of black writing in South Africa during the nineteenth century is characterised by the conflux of oral and written tradition, a conflux which is not without its tensions and contradictions. In this chapter I shall trace some of the patterns of confluence, showing their continuity in, and influence on, the early black novels of the twentieth century. My intention is not to present a comprehensive picture of the developments in black writing. Instead, I have focused on particular examples in order to foreground larger themes and wider trends.[54]

The complex, interweaving patterns have their beginning in the life and art of Ntsikana. Ntsikana, who lived in the Eastern Cape at the turn of the century, was a prophet and councillor in the Rharhabe paramouncy of the western Xhosa. After a conversion experience he gathered together a small group of followers and preached about the "Thing" that had entered him. In the words of his son:

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[54] Wherever possible I have selected texts which have been translated into English. For a more in-depth treatment of this period of writing see:
Albert Gerard, *Four African Literatures* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1971); Landeg White and Tim Couzens, eds., *Literature and Society in South Africa*; and B.W. Andrzejewski et al, eds., *Literatures in African Languages: theoretical issues and sample surveys* (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1985). I am particularly indebted to A.C. Jordan's pioneering study *Towards an African Literature: The Emergence of Literary Form in Xhosa* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1973).

> On reaching home, he told them what had befallen him, and also that they must not listen to Nxele, who was misleading the people, but listen to this Thing that had entered him. "This Thing that has entered me enjoins that we pray, and that all must kneel!" Thereafter he held divine sevice at all times, and he was wont to put on his kaross of leopard-skins, and read therefrom.[55]

In his sermons Ntsikana synthesised the doctrine of Christ (which he had heard as a child) with symbols and images rooted in the traditions and life experiences of the Xhosa people of that time. He also composed four hymns which formed an important part of his "divine services":

> Ntsikana's four hymns were woven into his order of service. Tradition has it that he would stand in front of his hut at dawn, chanting the hymn that is known as '"*Intsimbi" Ka Ntsikana* - Ntsikana's Bell' to call his people to worship. When this was finished he would go into his hut followed by his congregation and would settle them down with the singing of '*Dalubom* - Life Creator'. After talking to his people for a time he would raise the 'Pollheaded or Round hymn'. Preaching and prayers then followed, and finally they would finish with the "Great hymn - *Ulo Thixo omkhulu ngosezulwini*'.[56]

It is for *"Ulo Thixo omkhulu"* (Thou Great God) that Ntsikana is most renowned, a hymn which, according to Janet Hodgson, took its musical form from a traditional wedding song, while its literary form was that of a praise poem - "but the praise is of God as creator, defender and protector, not an ancestor or chief."[57] Typical formal features associated with panegyric such as the use of praise names, alliteration and repitition abound (as this extract from Bokwe's translation shows):

> He is the great God, who is in heaven;

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[55] Cited in Jordan, p 45.

[56] Janet Hodgson, "The Genius of Ntsikana: Traditional Images and the Process of Change in Early Xhosa Literature," White and Couzens, p 29.

[57] Janet Hodgson, "Fluid assets and fixed investments: 160 years of the Ntsikana tradition," Whitaker and Sienaert, p 190.

> Thou art Thou, Shield of truth.
> Thou art Thou, Stronghold of truth.
> Thou art Thou, Thicket of truth.[88]

The hymn was first transcribed in 1822 (a year after Ntsikana's death) and versions have been republished ever since. Moreover, the hymn - or rather variants thereof - has also been transmitted through oral tradition into the present day:

> As with the oral transmission of praise poetry, changes have taken place in the process such as transposition in the arrangement of lines, while some lines have been dropped altogether and others added which relate to contemporary experience.[89]

From the point of view of the literary historian, the hymn is of great significance - as A.C. Jordan points out:

> The importance of Ntsikana lies not in the legendary smitings by the shafts of sunrise, nor in the rising winds and readings from karossos. The fact that his Hymn of Praise is the first literary composition ever to be assigned to individual formulation - thus constituting a bridge between the traditional and post-traditional period - is of great historical significance.[90]

A similar inter-feeding pattern can be detected in Ntsikana's life story, which became the first oral narrative to be reduced to writing. After his death, Ntsikana's life history was perpetuated in the sermons of his disciples, and was first written down by J.L. Dohne of the Berlin Missionary Society, who published it in German. The appearance of a missionary newspaper saw the first of a proliferation of Xhosa and English writings on the prophet:

> This dynamic within the Xhosa written tradition continued to gather momentum in the early decades of the twentieth century. It was constantly fed by

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[88] Hodgson, "The Genius of Ntsikana", p 30.

[89] Hodgson, "Fluid Assets and Fixed Investments", p 192.

[90] Jordan, *Towards an African Literature*, pp 50-51.

> the oral tradition, and in turn fed back into the living tradition.[01]

The life of Ntsikana also provided the inspiration for numerous literary works, beginning with the poems of W.W. Gqoba and A.K. Soga in the latter half of the nineteeth century and continuing well into the twentieth century:

> In the literary field there continued to be an interweaving of the oral and written traditions, but one hundred years after Ntsikana's death it was no longer mainly a question of recording the oral sources in the second and third generation of his following. Rather, the oral sources provided inspiration for creative writing, while the written works elaborated and emphasized different facets of this material.[02]

The genealogy of the life story of Ntsikana encapsulates many of the important stages in the history of black creative writing. The first, most crucial, stage was the reduction of the Xhosa language to writing by missionaries from the Glasgow Missionary Society around 1821. This was followed by the setting up of a printing press and (as was to be the pattern throughout Southern Africa) the printing of a vocabulary, an elementary grammar book, tracts and a collection of hymns etc. Thereafter, the missionaries began translating books of the Bible, beginning with the New Testament. Sol Plaatje - writing about Robert Moffat who was translating the scriptures into Setswana during the same period - underscores the magnitude of the task which confronted these early missionaries:

> To realize what this means, it must be remembered that, being first in the field, he had, so to speak, to create the language from a literary point of view - to use it, that is, not only as a written medium

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01 Hodgson, "Fluid Assets", p 195.

02 Hodgson, "Fluid Assets", p 197.

> of thought, but for the expression of entirely new ideas....[03]

The publication of the Xhosa Christian newspaper, *Ikwezi* (The Morning Star), marked an important milestone in South African literary history. According to A.C. Jordan the writings in this newspaper constitute

> the earliest record of anything ever written by a Xhosa-speaker in Xhosa. So it is that the earliest record of anything ever written by any Bantu-speaking African in his own language in Southern Africa was made at the small printing press at Old Lovedale about the end of the first quarter of the nineteenth century.[04]

The first writers were the converts of Ntsikana and their offspring, and their writings revolved around the prophet. *Ikwezi* was succeeded in 1862 by the Lovedale paper, *Indaba*, which published articles in both Xhosa and English. Like the Sesotho newspaper, *Leselinyana*, founded at roughly the same time, *Indaba* became an important forum for black writing in the form of essays, short stories, biographies and (mainly) didactic poetry.

The most memorable contributions to *Indaba* came from Tiyo Soga ("The Dove of the Nation") whose moralistic essays - urging the Christian community to honour their chiefs and to have respect for non-Christians, for example - testify to the widening gulf between the Christian and

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03 Sol Plaatje, *Sechuana Proverbs with Literal Translations and their European Equivalents* (London: Kegan Paul, 1916), pp 3-4.

04 Jordan, *Towards an African Literature*, p 38. In this chapter the focus falls mainly on Xhosa writers. Although the Tswana language was written down early on in the nineteenth century, forming the medium for a cluster of missionary newspapers, the absence of a standardised orthography seriously impeded the development of a Tswana literature. The Zulu language, on the other hand, was reduced to writing at a much later stage - thus we find comparatively little Zulu writing taking place in the nineteenth century. The rich history of Sotho journalism and creative writing is dealt with in the chapter on Mofolo.

pagan communities. His greatest piece according to Jordan was a harrowing description of a journey by ox-waggon through a drought-stricken area in the Eastern Cape. Jordan stresses the significance of these early writings:

> The legacy of the first fifty years of Xhosa literary activity is to be respected. If some of our readers are inclined to think that we are over-indulgent when we make this remark, we have only to remind them that these first writers had no written traditions to guide them, no Homer or Sophocles, no Herodotus or Plutarch, no Dante or Petrarch on whom to model themselves.[66]

The first writers might have had no written tradition to guide them, but they certainly had an oral tradition which, as the life history of Ntsikana shows, exerted a powerful influence. *Indaba*, like many other Christian newspapers, fostered this influence by publishing oral narratives and poems reduced to writing - an area in which Tiyo Soga made an equally significant contribution. In an article published in the first edition of *Indaba* entitled "A National Newspaper" he outlines his personal vision of the newspaper as "a beautiful vessel"

> preserving the stories, fables, legends, customs, anecdotes and history of the tribes. The activities of a nation are more than cattle, money or food. A subscriber of the journal should preserve the copies of successive editions of *Indaba* and at the end of the year make a bound volume of them. These annual volumes in course of time will become a mine of information and wisdom which will be a precious inheritance for generation (sic) of growing children.[66]

Soga himself was an avid collector of the oral traditions of the Xhosa people, according to his biographer, John Aitken Chalmers:

> Even from his own countrymen he was ever collecting facts as to past events, genealogies, ancient customs, and battles. Few of his own nation

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[66] Jordan, *Towards an African Literature*, p 42.

[66] Donovan Williams, *Umfundisi A Biography of Tiyo Soga 1829-1871* (Lovedale: Lovedale Press, 1978), p 98.

> surpassed him in their knowledge of the history of the Kafir race, and certainly none surpassed him in his graphic power of describing a battle. I have seen him long past midnight sitting in a Kafir hut, note-book in hand, jotting down some incident or tale or bloody fight as described by an old wrinkled countryman of his own.[67]

The material was to form part of a book that was never written. Fragments of the genealogies, praise poems, proverbs and folktales were, however, published in *Indaba*.

In 1876 *Indaba* was superceded by two other papers. One of these became *Isigidimi samaXhosa* (The Xhosa Messenger) - a paper which was published entirely in Xhosa. Its editor, William W. Gqoba, was also a collector of oral tradition - he was particularly interested in oral history and wrote a first-hand account of the cattle-killing episode. Entitled "The Cause of the Cattle-Killing at the Nongqawuse Period", it was only published after his death. This short narrative has a syncretic form and clearly illustrates the marriage of oral and written conventions. For instance, its beginning echoes the spoken voice (of Xhosa history) in the recital of participants and their genealogies:

> From Tato's came Maramnco, son of Fadana, accompanied by Shele, son of Zizi. From the Ndungwane came Dulaze, son of Qwesha, related to Ndarala. From the Tshatshus came Mpoke, son of Mfeneni. From the Ngqika came Namba, great son of Maqoma. From the Gcaleka....[68]

The vision itself is described dramatically and evocatively - in a style more reminiscent of fiction. It might even be considered a precursor of the short story, and as one of the first fictional appropriations of history by a black South African writer:

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[67] Cited in Williams, *Umfundisi*, p 112.

[68] Cited in Jordan, pp 71-72.

> Just at this time, there was a tremendous crash of big boulders breaking loose from the cliffs overlooking the headwaters of the River Kamanga, whereupon, the men gazed at one another wondering, for they were seized with fear. It seemed that some unknown thing on the cliffs was going to burst into flames.
> While they stood wondering, the girl was heard saying, "Just cast your eyes in the direction of the sea."
> And when they looked intently at the waters of the sea, it seemed as if there were people there in truth, and there were sounds of bulls bellowing, and oxen too. There was a huge formless black object that came and went, came and went and finally vanished over the crests of the waves of the sea.
> Then it was that all the people began to believe.[69]

The formulaic ending embodies the convergence of the different traditions, offering a sense of closure while underscoring the narrative's close kinship with oral tradition:

> Such then was the Nongqawuse catastrophe. The people died of hunger and disease in large numbers. Thus it was that whenever thereafter a person said ar unbelievable thing, those who heard him, said: "You are telling a Nongqawuse tale."[70]

A similar syncretic pattern is to be found in Gqoba's two long verses, "The Great Discussion on Education" (1,150 lines) and "Discussion between the Christian and the Pagan" (850 lines), serialised in *Isigidimi* just prior to the author's death in 1888. According to Jordan, the poems

> preserve the imagery that characterizes the traditional praise-poem, as well as showing the influence of the new learning not only in subject matter, but also in technique.[71]

The latter poem consists of a debate between Present-world and World-to-come along the lines of the expository dialogue in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Present-world argues the Pagan viewpoint, stressing

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[69] Jordan, p 72.

[70] Jordan, p 75.

[71] Jordan, p 68.

not only a hedonistic appreciation of the plenitude of life, but also more shrewdly the political repercussions that have accompanied the arrival of Christianity:

> You deserted your chiefs and came to the Whiteman;
> You destroyed our rule and sided with the enemy;
> But your faith is lean and shrivell'd
> Even like a chameleon whose mouth is smear'd
> With nicotine on a sultry summer's day.[72]

To this World-to-come can only lamely reiterate theological arguments about the 'eschaton':

> Why boast you of sin
> That stalks man to the grave?
> Will you stay a sinner,
> Like a locust that dies
> On a dry stalk of grass?[73]

In the end Present-world concedes defeat, however, the soundness of his argument undermines the didactic force of the ending. This tension suggests - as Gerard argues- that Gqoba's poems are last-ditch attempts at reconciling the ideals of Christian faith with the reality of British imperialism.[74] Although these verses are not, strictly speaking, narrative poems, the discussions are punctuated with accounts of historical incidents and folktales in a form that foreshadows later fictional prose narratives. Moreover, the influence of Bunyan (and the tensions which undercut the didactism) anticipate the first ever black novel, Thomas Mofolo's *Moeti oa Bochabela*, and perhaps even the first-ever English

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[72] Jordan, pp 64 65.

[73] Jordan, p 65.

[74] Gerard, p 39.

novelle: R.R.R. Dhlomo's *An African Tragedy*[75] In addition, Gqoba's recounting of historical incident in order to make a moral point foreshadows the historical novels exemplified by Plaatje's *Mhudi* and R.R.R. Dhlomo's *UShaka*.[76]

Recent studies of political oratory in pre-literate African societies testify to the way in which the context, techniques and conventions of speech-making "ensure that many sides of a case are put at the same time as maintaining the proprieties due to different statuses".[77] Debate occupied an important place in many early South African societies, and oratory skills were firmly embedded in oral tradition, particularly in oral forms such as proverbs and riddles. Benedict Vilakazi writing in the late forties, underscores the status and fuction of proverbs in Nguni society:

> When quoted in law-suits and strenuous discussions, they serve a useful purpose in minimizing friction and bringing about adjustment and harmony. They are of social and intellectual importance, for Nguni assemblies admire a spokesman who has a great store of proverbs and who can aptly and readily quote from it on appropriate occasions.[78]

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[75] R.R.R. Dhlomo, *An African Tragedy* (Lovedale: Lovedale Press, 1928). For the influence of Bunyan see Shelley Skikna, "Son of the Sun and Son of the World: The Life and Works of R.R.R. Dhlomo," diss., U of the Witwatersrand, 1984, p 167.

[76] R.R.R. Dhlomo, *UShaka* (Pietermaritzburg, Shuter and Shooter, 1960.

[77] Brian Street, *Literacy in theory and practice*, p 57. Also see M. Bloch, ed., *Language and Oratory in Traditional Societies* (London: Academic Press, 1975).

[78] B.W. Vilakazi, "The Oral and Written Literature in Nguni," diss., U of the Witwatersrand, 1946, p 244.

Sol Plaatje records that proverbs played a similar role in pre-colonial Tswana society. They also facilitated the expression of antithetical ideas:

> The whole truth about a fact cannot always be summed up in one pithy saying. It may have several different aspects, which taken separately, seem to be contradictory and have to be considered in connexion with their surrounding circumstances.[70]

For Gqoba, then, the 'debate form' allowed for the expression of this proverbial lore, while lending a narrative frame structure in which other short narratives could be loosely slotted in.

One of the first short stories written by a Sotho writer, Azariele Sekese, also takes its form from the debate. Sekese, too, was concerned with preserving the oral traditions of his people. During the last two decades of the nineteenth century he contributed many articles on Sotho customs, history and oral traditions to *Leselinyana*, the Sotho Christian newspaper. Many of these were collated and published in book form in 1893 as *Mekhoa ea Basotho le maele le litsomo* - the first book published by a Mosotho. Not unexpectedly, the author drew on his extensive knowledge of Basotho oral traditions when writing *Pitso ea Linonyane* (The Meeting of the Birds). This satirical tale tells of a meeting called by the small birds who are being persecuted by Phakoe (hawk). A debate between the birds and hawk ensues presided over by Lenong the vulture who, it transpires, is a rather partial judge.

In creating his characters, Sekese was undoubtedly influenced by Sotho bird-lore such as the "song" of the hawk transcribed by Everitt Segoete, (another pioneering Sotho writer):

> Shake-shake the wing,
> Snatch away the bile of the Motlyane,

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[70] Plaatje, *Sechuana Proverbs*, p 13.

> At eventide take that of the lark.
> Sher-r-re, sher-r-re, whizz, black hawk!
> I trod on the wet manure, slipped and fell.
> The hawk is there where the road slips down
> Tearing to pieces the remains of a dove.[80]

The characterisation of the hawk in Sekese's satire reminds us of this song - perhaps because Motlyane is the chief complainant:

> Then stood forth Motinyane, eyes timid, even afraid to look at the grand Lords; he is an old mannikin, his head is already grey; he is leaning heavily on the stick in his hand. Now and again he grips his own throat, speaks and says: "My Lords, you will ask what is this that opens the debate? Indeed I am nothing; even if it is so ... I do not like to die or have my children killed year by year. I have only one request. Phakoe must be disposed from his office as lord; he is finishing off the nation-of-son-of-bird. Even though I am withered, I am kept busy all day running away from him, dodging midst hedges. I do not know how he will ever masticate me, seeing that I am so old...."[81]

The birds' discussion also provides a frame for stories recounted by some of the participants. For instance, the owl, after complaining bitterly about her ostracism by the other birds, goes on to tell the assembly how she became a night bird. And as in Gqoba's verses, Sekese's "Meeting" ends with a Christian message: the partridge quoting passages from the Bible calls on the Hawk to repent his sins - in terms of the satire a plea for the overhauling of the tribal judicial system in Lesotho.

The debate motif recurs again in a black novelle written at the turn of the century (but published only in 1914) - Samuel Mqhayi's *ITyala lamaWele* (The Law-Suit of the Twins).[82] Contrary to Sekese's tale, this

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[80] G.H. Franz, "The Literature of Lesotho," *Bantu Studies* 4.2 (1930): p 155.

[81] Franz, p 176.

[82] Samuel Mqhayi, "The Case of the Twins," trans., August Collingwood, *New African* 5 (1966), pp 5-8, 41-44, 74-76.

narrative is a vindication of the traditional Xhosa judicial system. A system of law which, as the author explains in his foreword, was based on precedent and involved much time and effort. A.C. Jordan extols the narrative for its "beauty and dignity" of language, and the scrupulous and detailed recreation of proceedings at the Chief's court:

> The stating of the case by the plaintiff, his cross-questioning by the councillors, the calling-in of witnesses, the *hlonipha* language used by the mid-wives in submitting evidence, the declamation of the bard at the end of each section, the reaction of the men to *izibongo*, the unassuming manner of the sage Khulile as he makes an exposition of the principles underlying the law of primogeniture, the pronouncement of the verdict and Chief Hintsa's sympathy with the senior twin in pronouncing it, the humble but dignified manner in which Babini receives the verdict against him - all these give a beautiful picture of social life among the Xhosa during the reign of Hintsa.[83]

The second half of the book forms a historical account of the Xhosa people from the time of the arrival of the "White men" until the First World War and the death of black soldiers in the *Mendi*. Although the links between the novelle and the history seem tenuous, Jordan argues that the two parts should be viewed as a whole conjoined by the line of development that can be traced through the poetry which punctuates the narrative:

> In the law-suit as well as in the early chapters of the history, the versification, in keeping with the theme, is in the style of the traditional *izibongo*, but with the acceptance of the new loyalties by his people towards the close of the book, the bard himself begins to experiment in modern versification. Therefore, to be fully appreciated *ITyala lamaWele*, though partly fact and partly fiction, partly verse and partly prose, must be viewed as a whole.[84]

Fiction, history and poetry, albeit in a more integrated form, are the ingredients of many of the early novels written in the first two decades

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[83] Jordan, pp 107-108.

[84] Jordan, p 109.

of the twentieth century - ingredients which underscore a pattern of narrative continuity. Narratives and poems transcribed from oral tradition paved the way for longer narratives, typified by the frame narrative, which formed the historical precursor to the early novels. A typical example of an early novel is John Dube's *Insila ka Tshaka* (translated as *Jeqe the Bodyservant of King Tshaka*) - the first Zulu novel.[88] The novel - really a romance consisting of a series of interlinking episodes - tells the life story of Chaka's bodyguard, Jeqe, who is a witness to the terrible cruelty and insatiable lust for war of the Zulu king in the last days of his reign.

Unlike Haggard's Zulu romances, the bloodshed is balanced by details from "orderly life" such as Chaka's participation in the First Fruits festival and the spontaneous performance of Chaka's praises by Jeqe's brother. And, as in Mofolo, many episodes have their origin in the Praise Poem of Chaka. For example the deed which epitomises Chaka's wanton cruelty - the slitting open of the womb of a pregnant woman - is distilled from the praise name:

> The Startler devoured an unborn child.[89]

After the death of the Zulu King, Jeqe quits Zululand and travels to Tongoland - a journey punctuated by the almost obligatory encounter

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[88] John Dube, *Jeqe the Bodyservant of King Tshaka* (Lovedale: Lovedale Press, 1951). Although Dube's novel was written as late as 1930, it typifies an earlier "phase" of black novel writing. This might be explained by the fact that Zulu writing emerged at a comparatively late stage in South African history.
For the sake of consistency, Mofolo's spelling of "Chaka" will be used throughout this dissertation.

[89] "The praise poem of Shaka," *Izibongo Zulu Praise-Poems*, ed., Trevor Cope (Oxford: Oxford U Press, 1968), l 200.

with a lion. Less typical are Dube's evocative, ethnographic descriptions such as the torch-lit portrait of the children playing question and answer games, riddling, and performing folktales:

> Then they sang the song of Ntunjambili. That great mountain crag that rises high out of the plain and looks across the Tugela river to the mountains of distant Zululand. In the rock is a deep cleft that from a distance looks like the entrance to a fairy castle and there is a legend that two homeless wanderers, a young boy and girl, found refuge when pursued by giants. This is the song of Ntunjambili:
>
> "Ntunjambili, Ntunjambili,
> Open that I may enter.
> Ntunjambili, Ntunjambili,
> Open and let me enter."
> "No mortal man may enter here,
> For this is the house of swallows.
> No mortal man may enter here,
> But only the flying swallows."
>
> The rock, however, opened to let in the wanderers but closed again before the arrival of giants.[87]

In Tongoland, Jeqe meets and falls in love with a girl called Zaki who is being courted by the chief's son. A fight ensues and Jeqe is mortally wounded and left to die. However, he is rescued by Sitola the queen of the Tonga diviners, who takes him to her island where his wounds are healed. During his two year stay on this Haggardesque island he is taught the art of healing and divination.

Thereafter, he journeys to Swaziland (which is being plagued by dysentry) in order to earn the *lobola* demanded by Zaki's parents. His medical expertise helps him win the favour of Sobuza, the King, and he is appointed royal physician. This means embracing Swazi custom and tradition, which needless to say form the basis of fairly lengthy descriptions. Zaki comes to live in Swaziland and - save for a brief

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[87] Dube, p 37.

interlude when Jeqe returns to Zululand which leads to a war between the two countries - the couple live to a ripe old age.

The mix of elements that is *Jeqe the Bodyservant of King Tshaka* underscores the novel's continuity with the patterns of confluence and syncretism so characteristic of the "journalistic" writing of the previous century. As Shelley Sklkna observes:

> Journalism was both the reservoir for literature and the water which filled it.[88]

Other written texts also played an influential role in the history of black writing. Over and above the Bible and the ubiquitous *Pilgrim's Progress*, there were, for instance, the writings of missionaries and explorers. The opening chapter of this dissertation examines Thomas Mofolo's *Moeti oa Bochabela*, which has been selected instead of Mofolo's classic *Chaka* because it reveals with certain clarity the patterns of confluence, and has not been widely studied.

In the first chapter it is argued that Mofolo was profoundly influenced by Casalis's ethnographic work, *The Basutos*. Casalis describes the existential anguish of individual Basotho prior to the arrival of the missionaries, and Mofolo's hero Fokosi is almost certainly modelled on these. Moreover, Mofolo explores the similarities between the hero of a Sotho fabulous tale and the Christian Saviour - an idea which, too, has its antecedents in Casalis. This mediatory presence results in an uneasy blend of didacticism and indigenous oral narrative.

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[88] Sklkna, p 33.

It is also likely that the Paris missionaries, in their sermons, exploited the similarities between the figure of Christ and the boy-saviour of the fabulous Kholumolumo tale. Today one finds variants of this tale which have been thoroughly Christianised. This suggests (recalling the Great Hymn's path through oral tradition) that the study of oral tradition should not only embrace indigenous genres but also Christian (syncretic) oral tradition including hymns and sermons. The influence of the "new songs", B.W. Vilakazi's term for the hymns, can be detected, for example, in the novels of Thomas Mofolo - a variation in the patterns of confluence (and worthy of a brief digression).[88]

Gabriel M. Setiloane in *The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana* describes how the character of the missionaries left their stamp on the hymnology of many of the churches:

> Such joy and victory as there was in the teachings of the early missionaries would not have been expressed in any other than sturdy Spartan tones. It was the very nature of the Evangelical Gospel they preached, influenced by Puritanism and Pietism from German Moravians, that the Good News of Salvation be expressed, not in exhilirating shouts and shrieks of joy ... but in sombre tones of dignity.[89]

According to Setiloane two themes predominate in Sotho-Tswana hymns. In the hymns of the Methodists and the Paris Missionary Society, Christianity is seen as *'seforo'*, a place of refuge, a fortress of comfort:

> 'Seforo' (haven) is a very expressive word, especially from the topography of Lesotho, reminding

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[88] B.W. Vilakazi, "The Conception and Development of Poetry in Zulu," *Bantu Studies* 12.2 (1938): p 124.

[89] Gabriel M. Setiloane, *The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana* (Rotterdam: A.A. Balkema, 1976), p 118.

> one of the times when such places were a real help to physical salvation for some people.[01]

while in the hymns of the London Missionary Society, on the other hand, the predominant theme is that of life as a journey.

Some of the missionary societies were opposed to syncretism, fearing that the "purity" of the gospel might be contaminated by heathen influence, and went so far as to discourage their converts from composing their own hymns. They could not however prevent the hymns being 'translated' according to the everyday life experience of successive generations of black South African Christians:

> What the missionaries brought from their homes as current theological understanding, and talked about in catching imagery as the "eschaton" where preservation is given, rest attained and all journeys end, was understood in practical terms by their hearers, who were, even then, harassed, chased, uprooted, homeless and panting. So they sang and passed on to their children (whose material situation has not been much of an improvement on their own) the tra.. lations of those eighteenth and nineteenth century .vmns impressing them with their own stamp of , and harmony, and appropriating them, al' slant in meaning; because, for them, the, , different experience and arouse longings anc much more down to earth than their writers[02]

These themes of journey and refuge which embodied the life experiences of the early Christian converts are also central to Thomas Mofolo's allegorical novel *Moeti oa Bochabela*. After journeying through Southern Africa, and crossing the sea, a pursuit summed up in the lines of the hymn

> We seek rest
> A place of everlasting rest,

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[01] Setiloane, p 119.

[02] Setiloane, p 122.

> Which is above (in heaven).
> The journey we have undertaken,
> What a great one it is!
> For it comes from destruction.[93]

the hero, Fekisi, literally finds refuge "In the arms of Jesus". (The title of a Paris Missionary hymn). The expression on his face confirms that he at last is at rest:

> They found Fekisi looking up to heaven, the mist had disappeared, his face was full of joy, rejoicing and peace, the peace of one who has found the Son of Man.[94]

These points may seem a little trite given that *Moeti oa Bochabela* is such an explicitly Christian work. On the other hand Mofolo's classic, *Chaka*, which is very different, contains similar themes. In a sense Chaka's life follows a completely antithetical pattern to that of the traveller to the East. Both heroes are shown to be remarkable youths whose courage sets them apart from the other children but who are alienated from their peers - Chaka because of the social stigma attached to his illegitimacy and Fekisi because of his all-consuming quest for knowledge. Both leave their communities. But whereas Fekisi's quest takes the form of a homeward journey, Chaka's alienation leads him to give reign to his ambition which condemns him to a perpetual state of homelessness.

Many episodes in Mofolo's novel derive from actual incidents distilled in Chaka's praise names. For example, the lines:

> He who armed in the forest, who is like a madman,
> The madman who is in full view of the men.[95]

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[93] Setiloane, p 119.

[94] Thomas Mofolo, *Traveller of the East*, 125.

[95] These praises form part of the praise-poem of Shaka in the James Stuart collection. See annotation in Trevor Cope, *Izibongo Zulu Praise*

form the basis for the episode in which he fights and defeats the madman of the forests of the Mfolozi river who is stealing the cattle and property of the people of Dingiswayo's royal place. The theme of homelessness, however, which is not explicit in the praise poem is, nevertheless, an important and recurring motif in the novel. For instance, when Chaka arrives at Dingiswayo's kraal he asks the councillors to announce him to the king with these words:

> "Tell the king and say: Here is a homeless wanderer who wishes to be taken up and protected by you...."[06]

And when he falls in love with Noliwa, Dingiswayo's sister, his acute awareness of his position prevents him from declaring his love:

> Chaka loved Noliwa exceedingly, but could never see how one belonging nowhere like himself, a homeless wanderer without relations to claim him, could ever marry a child from such a prestigious house, one whom Dingiswayo loved so much besides.[07]

Throughout the plot Chaka remains the "homeless wanderer" - forced by Isanusi to kill the only person who might have provided him with a home. In the end he can find no refuge, nor rest from the dreams that continually plague him and dies alone - not even the wild animals will touch his body. Whereas Fekisi is greeted by a chorus of welcoming voices, Chaka is damned by the multitude:

> When those had vanished, he saw *uDonga luka Tatiyana* crammed full with the people he had wiped off the face of the earth ... and he heard a voice coming from that multitude mocking him and saying:

Poems, p 88. Also cf. the praise-poem cited by Mofolo in the novel on pp 119-120.

[06] Thomas Mofolo, *Chaka*, trans., Daniel P. Kunene (London: Heinemann, 1981), p 49.

[07] Mofolo, *Chaka*, p 74. Unlike the episode with the madman, the story of Noliwa is entirely fictional.

"Chaka, murderer of your own brothers, the blood of your own father!"[88]

If Thomas Mofolo was profoundly inspired by missionary hymns, he was equally influenced by the less sublime but extremely popular Victorian romance novels of Rider Haggard. Many scholars have shown how these works helped to distil and perpetuate deep-rooted stereotypes about foreign (ie. non-European) races and cultures. Haggard's vast output had an important effect on the European perception of Africa as many of his novels were set in Africa and drew on African history and oral traditions. These traditions he had heard from fellow colonials in South Africa or gleaned from ethnographic accounts of the time. Haggard was an important influence on early black writers, providing an example of the fictional treatment of South African history, and a model for the incorporation and depiction of indigenous oral tradition.

The model was a flawed one, however, for within the melodramatic context of much of his fiction many of these traditions became inevitably distorted. Moreover, analysis of some of his novels suggests that - what

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[88] Mofolo, *Chaka*, pp 166-167. His predicament reminds one of another hymn:
Fiery retribution
Goes forth ahead of Him
And a multitude of those in glory,
Surround Him as witnesses.
Translated from the Tswana by Gabriel Setiloane, p 121.

Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi* also contains the motifs of journey and refuge, but 'refuge' is reinterpreted along the lines of the love theme. The hero Ra-Thaga composes a hymn to the place in which he and his wife first found refuge, "Re-Nosi" (We-are-alone):
I long for the solitude of the woods,
Far away from the quarrels of men
Their intrigues and vicissitudes;
And the morning dew
Made all things new;
Where nobody was by
Save Mhudi and I.
Sol Plaatje, *Mhudi* (London: Heinemann, 1978), p 71.

might be termed - "ideas of orality" form part of a loosely composite iconography of the "savage". The oral nature of Zulu and Xhosa culture is expressed in a way that suggests that the Nguni people have an inferior mentality and an undeveloped morality. These ideas are explored in a lengthy chapter on Sol Plaatje, which shows how *Mhudi* is in part a stylisation of, in part a rejoinder to, the historical romance genre. Because *Mhudi* has been extensively analysed by other literary scholars the emphasis falls less on the text, and more on the romance genre and "ideas of orality".

Unlike the novels of Mofolo and Plaatje, Jordan's *Wrath of the Ancestors* deals with contemporaneous events - for this reason the influence of the romance seems less pervasive. Vilakazi tells us that the novel was inspired by the legends of the Mpondomise kings:

> In 1933 his purpose to write a book became stronger after accompanying some Mpondomise chiefs to a meeting in the Transkei. On crossing the Thina River he was shown the deep pool in which the Mpondomise Chief Majola was buried.[00]

Wrath of the Ancestors, Jordan's translation of his extremely popular Xhosa novel, is the subject of the last chapter in this dissertation. Moreover, the preliminary remarks concerning this novel, with which we conclude this chapter, also take us back to the beginning. For, in his writing, Jordan was a direct descendant of the early Xhosa writers who were the focus of his literary scholarship. Even in the English version of *Wrath of the Ancestors*, the influences of Gqoba and Mqayi are clearly discernable. For instance, the novel takes up Gqoba's dialogue between Christian and pagan, from the vantage point of a different juncture in history. And the plot shares the powerful sense of moment that

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[00] Vilakazi, "The Oral and Written Literature in Nguni.", p 335.

characterises Gqoba's account of Nongqawuse - a kinship concretised by Thembeka re-enacting the formulaic ending. From Mqayi, Jordan derives his fine eye for detail which emerges in his evocative and authentic portrayal of the rituals of initiation among the traditional Mpondomise people.

Unlike his predecessors, Jordan comes closest to reconciling the tensions and contradictions that form part of the patterns of confluence. Through techniques of juxtapostion and convergence, he achieves a momentary balance between the mythical world-view of the Mpondomise and the "progressive" outlook of the School people:

> Jordan's is a towering achievement, because he altered the form inherited from the oral tradition, he made possible radical alteration in the traditional conception of the conflicting themes.[100]

Tthis moment of reconciliation, however, is counterpoised by the novel's deep sense of history:

> The young chief's commitment renders him powerless, but it is his world that will ultimately prevail.[101]

And it is this world that will form the basis of most of the later black novels written in English.

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[100] Harold Scheub, "Xhosa Oral and Literary Traditions," Andrzejewski, p 581.

[101] Scheub, p 581.

PART TWO

Chapter Three.

Colonial pilgrim and the Kholumolumo: patterns of synthesis and displacement in Thomas Mofolo's *Traveller to the East*.

"Allegory," Martin Price writes, "releases the will to believe, overriding all empirical evidence or restraint."[102] This observation might well have been directed at Thomas Mofolo's allegorical first novel *Moeti oa Bochabela*. *Moeti oa Bochabela* (which translates as *The Traveller to the East*) describes a Mosotho's search for God in a pre-Christian era, and is written with obvious didactic intent.[103] The plot forms an exemplum with the implicit theme: to become a Christian involves certain loss which requires fortitude and bravery. Thus when the hero, Fokisi, dies he is received into the house of God with these words:

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[102] Martin Price introducing Swift's "Tale of a Tub" in *The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Oxford U Press, 1973), p 193.

[103] Thomas Mofolo, *Moeti oa Bochabela* (Morija: Morija Press, 1907). All page references are from H. Ashton's English translation, *Traveller of the East* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1934). Unfortunately this appalling translation is the only one available. I have, however, followed Daniel Kunene in referring to the novel as *Traveller to the East* See Daniel P. Kunene, "Ntsoantsatsi/Eden: Superimposed Images in Thomas Mofolo's *Moeti oa Bochabela*," *English in Africa* 13.1. (1986): pp 13-41. I have retained the orthographic conventions used by Ashton regarding "Ntsoanatsatsi" and "kholumolumo".

> Thou shalt reign with Me, because thou hast not been afraid, and hast left thy country for My sake. p 124.

Despite the didacticism, however, the novel marks an important beginning of a dialogue between Western written narrative and the oral traditions of Africa. Over the years many scholars have commented on its syncretic form. In 1933, for instance, Alice Werner remarks in a chapter devoted to tales of swallowing monsters:

> It may be worth noting that a Christian writer of Basutoland has made use of the Swallower legend as a dim foreshadowing of the promise of a Redeemer.[104]

A year later, G.H. Franz in a review of the literature of Lesotho writes:

> Like the *Pilgrim's Pregress*, it is an allegory well sustained throughout. The great difference between the two books, however, is that whereas in *Pilgrim's Progress* the characters are all personifications of Virtues and Vices, in *Moeti* the characters are real men and women, and exemplify types. Thus, throughout the book, there is something far more material. The book is Bantu in character and spirit, and therefore far more suitable for the Bantu than the *Progress*.[105]

More recently this theme is taken up by Tim Couzens in a review of early black writing. He argues that the novel is an "extended fable" in which the protagonist, "accepts Christianity without rejecting the customs of his people and the essential truth lying at the heart of Sotho mythology."[106]

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[104] Alice Werner, *Myths and legends of the Bantu* (London: George Harrap and Co., 1933), p 207.

[105] G.H. Franz, "The Literature of Lesotho," *Bantu Studies* 4.2 (1930): p 173.

[106] T.J. Couzens, "Early South African Black Writing," *A Celebration of Black and African Writing*, eds., Bruce King and Kolawole Ogungbesan (Oxford: Oxford U Press, 1977), p 3.

These statements, which appear in review-type articles, do not do justice to the complex nature of the syncretic form of the novel. Mofolo did not simply marry different forms and traditions out of whim, but was deeply inspired by the writings of the French missionaries, and the popular fiction of his time. Moreover, these reviews give the impression that Christian belief and Basotho myth are completely and harmoniously synthesised. This is in fact not the case; the syncretic pattern of *Traveller to the East* is fraught with tensions and inconsistencies.

Once Fekisi, the traveller, is taken aboard ship by the white hunters he is well on his way to "salvation". Significantly, literacy plays a part in the transformation process:

> Fekisi was quick to observe that these people knew how to talk to each other although t'ey were not together. One man makes little marks, they will arrive and speak where they go to (sic).
>
> He asked and it was explained to him, and then he was taught to read and write. His heart rejoiced exceedingly, when he found that the things he was seeking existed, and even others which he did not know. He accepted all they told him, he believed them. pp 112-113.

Here the author mirrors the important role accorded to literacy in the conversion of the Basotho race. Indeed the novel reflects the intr-sic role played by the Paris missionaries in the development of African Literature. And the inconsistencies in the plot can only be understood within the context of the history of the French missionary involvement in bringing literacy to Lesotho. Thus this history will have to be briefly sketched before an analysis of Mofolo's allegory can be undertaken.

The introduction of writ'ng, almost a hundred and fifty years ago, was intimately linked to the efforts of the newly-formed Paris Evangelical Missionary Society (PEMS). In 1829 the Society sent their first

missionaries to South Africa. Among them was Samuel Rolland who brought with him a small printing press. Rolland ended up at Berseeba in Lesotho where he established a missionary station. The mission grew steadily, and after six years there were enough literate converts to warrant a printi g press. First to be printed were tracts and a small collection of hymns. By 1845 the entire New Testament had been translated, and the next three years saw the first printing of the Gospels and the Book of Acts. The mission station was destroyed in the 1858 war between the Basotho and the Boers. Rolland fled to Bethesda with his prized printing press.

Two years later Adolph Mabille set up another press at Morija. This press was eventually combined with Rolland's to form the foundation of the Morija Printing Works. In 1864 Mabille launched a Sesotho newspaper, *Leselinyana la Lesotho* (Little Light), which ran for a year before being interrupted by another war with the Boers. Publication resumed in 1870, and has continued ever since. One of the first black newspapers, *Leselinyana* played an important role in fostering black writing. For many years it was the sole medium for aspirant Basotho writers. Although the newspaper's main focus was on doctrinal matters and the affairs of the Church, it also covered political and social events. An 1864 edition, for instance, carried stories on Lesotho, news about the activities of Mzilikatze in Southern Rhodesia and snippets from Madagascar, Tahiti and Persia.[107]

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[107] This account is based on details furnished by Albert Brutsch, the present Morija Archivist. Also see Albert Gerard, *Four African Literatures* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1971), pp 103-104.

When the Xhosa newspaper, *Indaba*, appeared in 1862, Tiyo Soga (an early Xhosa writer and nationalist) welcomed it as an important vehicle for preserving the legends, customs and history of his people:

> Our veterans of the Xhosa and Embo people must disgorge all they know. Everything must be imparted to the nation as a whole. Fables must be retold; what was history or legend should be recounted; what has been preserved as traditions should be related.... All anecdotes connected with the life of the nation should be brought to this big cornpit, our national newspaper Indaba.[108]

The first editors of *Leselinyana* might well have been following a similar injunction, for many articles on Basotho customs and history appeared during its first thirty years. An important contributor during this period was Azariele Sekese, who wrote articles on Basotho history and customs based on oral accounts.[109] Sekese's series on the life of Chaka, which appeared while Mofolo was studying at Morija, may have aroused the interest that culminated in the writing of Mofolo's classic, *Chaka*.[110]

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[108] Quoted in Donald Williams, *Umfundisi: A Biography of Tiyo Soga* (Alice: Lovedale Press, 1978), p 98.

[109] These articles were compiled and printed in book form in 1893, appearing under the title *Mekhoa ea Basotho* - the first ever published work of a Mosotho. A.M. Sekese, *Mekhoa ea Basotho* (Morija: Morija Press, 1896).

[110] *Leselinyana* was undoubtedly an important source of reading material for the first Sesotho writers. Other sources were the Bible, (printed in its entirety in 1881), Mabille's translation of *Pilgrim's Progress*, and the missionaries' autobiographical writings. For example Z.D. Mangoaela - another early writer and a friend of Mofolo - lists the books that he read as a child:
"Besides the Bible and a hymn book, my father had a book called *Phutollo ea Mantsoe a Bibele* (Explanations of the Words of the Bible), and also the *Leselinyana* because father was an evangelist and catechist I shall not be far wrong in saying that these books and the *Leselinyana* were read more by me than by anyone else in our home. I was continually hunting for old copies of the paper in our house and re-read them. And so I grew up with a love for reading and a longing to know of the things of the past." G.H. Franz, "The Literature of Lesotho", p 159.

The Paris Missionaries, Morija Press, and the newspaper played a pivotal role in the writing career of Thomas Mofolo. He was born into a Christian family in 1876 and was baptized by a PEMS evangelist. The local school which he attended was run by Everitt Segoete, a teacher-evangelist, who became the young boy's mentor. After attending the Maotise Secondary School, Thomas began studying theology at the Morija Bible School, aged seventeen. When he completed the course he stayed on to be trained as a teacher. After passing the third year examination in 1899, Albert Casalis, Principal of the Bible School, offered him a job at the Morija Printing Works and Book Depot.

While working as a proof reader and reporter Mofolo developed a great love for reading. He was especially drawn to works on the history of Southern Africa and the popular late-Victorian writers, Rider Haggard and Marie Corelli (He is said to have written a novel, now lost, in rejoinder to Marie Corelli's writings).[111] Many of these interests crystallized in *Traveller to the East*, his first novel, which was written in serial form for *Leselinyana*. Among other things, this may account for the strain of extreme didacticism[112] as well as its loosely-catenated structure.[113]

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[111] According to Albert Brutsch, the present Morija archivist, the novel was called *Fallen Angel*. Personal interview, 15 April 1987.

[112] His second novel *Pitseng*, also overtly Christian, was serialized in 1910. *Chaka* which is markedly different was never serialized. Mofolo had begun writing his third novel, when a personal scandal forced him to leave Morija. *Chaka* was to be completed only twelve years later - and was published in 1925.

[113] The novel can be divided into four distinctive episodes each

The missionaries were very pleased with *Traveller to the East*; they urged the readers to buy the book, "the very first one that has come out of the head of a Mosotho ever since the Basotho existed under the sun."[114] According to Daniel Kunene, Basotho readers, too, were excited by the publication of a novel which spoke of "the things of God" and the "affairs of the world" - as one reader described its allegorical nature.[115] The type of allegory alluded to is known as an allegory of ideas: "in which the characters represent abstract concepts and the plot serves to communicate a doctrine or thesis."[116] According to M.H. Abrams, "The central device in the typical allegory of ideas is the personification of abstract entities such as virtues, vices, states of mind, and types of character...."[117] As a whole, Mofolo's novel does conform to this type of allegory, and was most likely influenced by *Pilgrim's Progress*.[118]

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containing different levels of symbolism: life in Lesotho; the journey to the sea; the voyage across the sea, and the hero's death in the Land of the East. Basotho oral narratives which have been transcribed by missionaries and folklorists evince a similar episodic structure.

[114] Daniel Kunene, p 34.

[115] Kunene, pp 33-37.

[116] M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1971), pp 4-5.

[117] Abrams, p 5.

[118] Mofolo's novel is reminiscent of the first part of *Pilgrim's Progress*, although the extent of Bunyan's influence may always be a source of debate. It is quite likely that Mofolo would have read the work as a student, after all it had been translated by a PEMS missionary, and was published by Morija Press. Moreover, Daniel Kunene, a

Traveller to the East, however, cannot merely be dismissed as a nineteenth century African imitation of the seventeeth century classic.

Central to both narratives is the motif of the journey. Christian, the hero of *Pilgrim's Progress*, leaves his village and undertakes a journey in pursuit of salvation. He travels along a typical seventeenth century English highway - complete with hills, sloughs and robbers. The highway becomes a metaphor for Christian life. Problems and triumphs that confront the Christian who tries to live according to the dictates of his faith are represented by concrete events which befall the traveller on a highway. And like other pilgrims, Christian encounters fellow travellers who accompany him for part of the way. This allows Bunyan to incorporate expository dialogues on doctrinal matters (such as those between Christian and Hopeful).

Fekisi undertakes a very different journey in *Traveller to the East*; one more appropriate to Southern Africa. There is no highway - like other travellers in the early nineteenth century, he has to make his own path through jungles and rivers, across plains and deserts, threatened by wild animals and exposure to the elements. Unlike Christian, he is a solitary traveller - until he meets the hunters. While Bunyan drew on pilgrim's tales, chapbook romances and, no doubt, everyday experience on English highways, Fekisi's venture has its antecedents in Basotho oral tradition, the travellers tales published by explorers and missionaries, and the popular romances of Rider Haggard.

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leading scholar in the field of early Sesotho writing has shown that the second novel, *Pitseng*, contains allusions to Mabille's translation. Kunene, p 32.

Christian's leave-taking in *Pilgrims's Progress* is a rather hurried affair. One day he reads in his "book" that the city is doomed to burn in a fire from heaven. Greatly distressed, he cries out:

> "What shall I do to be saved?" p 17.[119]

His plea is answered by the appearance of Evangelist, who gives him a parchment-roll bearing an injunction to fly from the coming wrath. Christian obeys, setting out immediately in the direction indicated by Evangelist.

Fekisi's departure, on the other hand, is much more protracted - the culmination of a gradual process of growing awareness. Mofolo begins the story by situating the events in the plot within a dichotomous framework of light and dark. This dichotomy condenses history and Christian morality into trans-history: the narrator divides the history of Lesotho into two antithetical epochs, a past of dark and a present of light:

> The person whose history we are telling lived in the days when the land of Africa was still sunk in this low state, still truly in darkness. p 9.

There is also the intimation of a third epoch or period, a distant, mythical past which endures in the oral tradition and customs of the Sotho people. During this period the Basotho were said to have been somewhere beyond Ntsoanatsatsi - the place where the sun rises:

> The origin of the Basuto appears not to be too well known. When our elders speak of themselves they say, the tribe of the Basuto comes from Ntsoanatsatsi. p 9.

Here they were close to God:

> Fekisi asked where God lived. They said, they did not know, but it seemed as if he lived on the other side of Ntsoanatsatsi. p 37.

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[119] John Bunyan, *The Pilgrims Progress* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947). All quotations refer to this edition.

Elements of the same dichotomy are also evoked from the outset to suggest Fekisi's intrinsic estrangement from his society. He is at odds with the age of darkness because he is a man of light:

> He was a man in the full meaning of the word "man", a man as the Creator planned man to be.... p 7.

From the beginning the hero seems to function as a type - emblematic of pre-Lapsarian man, an embodiment of virtue:

> the very man described when it was said: All creatures shall fear him, shall be obedient to him and shall honour him, because he has a glory of his own, which other creatures do not possess. p 7.

Such intrinsic "glory" would seem to preclude character development. Yet as the plot unfolds Fekisi emerges as a person who has emotions, desires and thoughts. Thus although in his conduct and outward actions, the hero has the constancy of a character-type, his inner being is more 'rounded' (in the Fosterian sense of the word) - is able to develop and change. Without completely deviating from the type, Mofolo explores Fekisi's mental development and the shift in his conception of God, which comes about through a gradual process of observing the natural world, finding out about oral tradition, and experiencing a growing desire to escape the evil which surrounds him.

Just as the hero's consciousness blurs his typicality, so the symbolic framework gives way to a more realistic portrayal of the country and its inhabitants. The author depicts the natural landscape of Lesotho, lyrically and with an eye for small details:

> At that season the country was green everywhere, the grass was green and plentiful; there was abundance of water, everywhere streams were heard; the Kaffir corn was coming into leaf, it was already high enough to hide an over-turned pot. p 27.

Such details embue the allegory with a level of realism which is reinforced by the inclusion of ethnographic detail, the description of the rituals that

accompany birth and death, the empathic portrayal of the bond between the young herdboy and his cows - and the praise poetry. These details soften the stark polarities of light and dark, and reinforce our sense of the hero as a full-blooded person concretely grounded within a specific socio-cultural milieu.

There is also a sense of a specific historical moment, despite the crude categories of the trans-historical framework. The author adumbrates some of the traits which characterise this epoch of darkness:

> It is of the days when there was no strong chieftainship, the tribes still ate each other. So when a person went to sleep, he did so in terror that his enemies might fall upon him in his sleep. p 8.

Victorian romance fiction presents a similar picture of 'primitive' societies. This was based on Hobbes' idea of a "pre-social" state which was ruled by might, and lacked a centralised form of government as well as the institutions to curb man's baser instincts.[120] In his exaggerated portrayal of the evils of pre-colonial Basotho society, Mofolo was, no doubt, influenced by the depiction of black societies in the romances of his favourite authors.[121] On the other hand, some of the Hobbesian traits characterise an actual period in Basotho history - the tumultous times known as *lifaqane*. The migration of the Tlokwa and the Ngwane into the

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[120] See Brian Street, *The Savage In Literature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975).

[121] As Alice Werner writes in a review of the novel: "This picture of tribal life strikes one as unduly black, but perhaps the shadows have been deepened, half or quite consciously for artistic reasons. Moreover,one finds that native converts, flushed with the joy of enlightment and progress, are apt to exaggerate the evils of their former state and overlook its better feature; they want, like most young and enthusiastic reformers, to scrap the past wholesale." Kunene, p 33.

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Caledon valley sparked off a devastating internecine war which spread throughout the Southern region. During the 1820's entire families and tribes were massacred, and food became so scarce that some groups turned to cannibalism. Fekisi's story belongs not to the "long night of African history" (as Achebe describes colonial history) but rather to a specific hour - the decade before the arrival of the three PEMS missionaries.[122]

Mofolo's writing was greatly influenced by the PEMS missionaries, many of whom had pursued literary careers of their own (not forgetting their translation activities). Arbousset and Lemue wrote an account of their travels entitled *Narrative of an Exploratory Tour to the North-East of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope*; Casalis produced an ethnographic work, *The Basutos*, and Ellenberger collaborated on a history of Lesotho, *History of the Basuto*. All of these works would have been read by Mofolo.[123] Yet another missionary, Jacottet, had an interest in folklore. His *Treasury of Ba-Suto Lore*, whose publication coincided with *Traveller to the East*, is an extremely valuable collection of *litshomo* as they were being told at the turn of the century.[124]

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[122] Ellenberger and MacGregor were the first historians to portray the *lifaqane* as an "era of unparalleled darkness in southern Sotho history" - a portrait undoubtedly informing Mofolo's sense of history. See J. Cobbing, "The Case Against the Mfecane," paper presented at a 1983 UNESCO conference, p 12.

[123] Albert Brutsch, personal interview, 15 April 1987.

[124] T. Arbousset and F. Daumas, *Narrative of an Exploratory Tour to the North-East of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope* (Cape Town: C. Struik, 1968).
E. Casalis, *The Basutos* (Cape Town: C. Struik, 1970).

These works offer us important insights into the workings of the novel. For instance the hero, it turns out, is inspired by a real-life historical figure, an early convert who was called Sekesa. In *The Basutos* Casalis devotes a section to "African religious ideas". He argues that the tribes must have had an idea of a Creator, but this has been entirely lost save for the speculations of a few individuals:

> Nevertheless, here and there were found active and intelligent minds, continually tormented with the desire to know the first cause of all things.[125]

One such mind belonged to Sekesa who told the missionaries how he had been tormented prior to their arrival. His 'soliloquy' (recorded by Arbousset and quoted by Casalis) is worth repeating in full, for it contains the nucleus of Fekisi's meditations:

> "Twelve years ago I went to feed my flocks. The weather was hazy. I sat down upon a rock and asked myself sorrowful questions; yes sorrowful, because I was unable to answer them.
> "Who has touched the stars with his hands? On what pillars do they rest?" I asked myself.
> "The waters are never weary; they know no other law than to flow, without ceasing, from morning till night, and from night till morning; but where do they stop? - and who makes them flow thus?"
> "The clouds also come and go, and burst in water over the earth. Whence come they? Who sends them? The diviners certainly do not give us rain, for how could they do it? - and why do I not see them with my own eyes, when they go up to heaven to fetch it?"
> "I cannot see the wind, but what is it? Who brings it, makes it blow, and roar and terrify us?"
> "Do I know how the corn sprouts? Yesterday there was not a blade in my field; to-day I returned to the field and found some. Who can have given to the earth the wisdom and the power to produce it?"
> Then I buried my face in both my hands.[126]

D.F. Ellenberger and J.C. MacGregor, *The History of the Basuto* (London: Caxton Publishing Co., 1880).
E. Jacottet, *The Treasury of Ba-Suto Lore* (London: Kegan Paul and Co., 1908).

[125] Casalis, p 238.

[126] Casalis, p 239.

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[125] Casalis, p 238.

[126] Casalis, p 239.

Similar, equally "sorrowful" questions disturb the protagonist, one beautiful summer's day, as he takes his cows to the water-hole:

> The beauty of the country, the joy of all the animals, the joy of all the vegetation were heavy on his mind. He wanted light on who it was that made the grass grow in its season. By whom was the sun made to rise every day? By whom was the rain made to fall, and where did it come from? What was the lightning? p 31.[127]

Casalis goes on to mention the Basotho myth of the reed bed, saying that not every one was prepared to accept the answers furnished by legends:

> Still there were those people who refused to believe these legends, and who went everywhere in search of something more satisfactory, but without success. On our arrival among the Basutos we found a man who was called 'Father Reed', because he was continually inveighing against the generally received notion, declaring that it was impossible for reeds to produce men, and that one might as well say that he himself was a reed.[128]

Like "Father Reed", Fokisi is unconvinced by the answers which he receives from the elders. They are unable to answer his questions about God, and appear impotent in the face of the evil committed by members of the tribe.[129] Fokisi's spiritual search is turned into a physical journey

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[127] These parallels are further underscored when Fokisi, after being rescued by the white hunters, 'soliloquizes' about his search for God: "They marvelled at his wisdom, the depth of his thoughts, when he said: "Many times I sat down and cried, I asked myself questions which were too hard for me; and when I was unable to answer them and to learn the reason of them I would cry bitterly:
"Who is it who created the earth? Who made the heavens and the stars? Who made the sun?
"What is the sun held by that it does not fall down on the earth? Where does the rain come from, by whom is it sent?
"After what fashion does the grass grow? etc., etc." p 114.

[128] Casalis, p 241.

[129] The symbolism of the plot is often inconsistent with the more realistic depiction of tribal life. For instance we are told that the herdboy passes the tribal court everyday on his way to pasture. However this

across Southern Africa, and the realism of the Lesotho episodes gives way to historical allegory. M.H. Abrams distinguishes two main types of allegory: the historical allegory and the allegory of ideas (mentioned above). In the historical allegory, "characters and actions ... signify ... historical personages or events."[130] Thus Fokisi's trek across the sub-continent is a metaphorical depiction of the soul-searching of individuals such as Sekesi prior to the arrival of Christianity. According to Casalis these spiritual quests met with no success until the missionaries arrived bearing the Gospel. In order for the allegory to be consistent with this view of history, Fokisi, too, will only be able to reach his destination with the assistance of 'foreign agents'.

Yet there is one important divergence between the novel and Casalis's ethnographic study. Casalis argues that Basotho religious practices were "vague" and "unintelligible" and evinced no sign of the "idea of a Creator". The narrator of *Traveller to the East* contradicts this point of view:

> Basuto of old, even those who lived then, truly believed that there is a living God, who has made all things. p 9.

Moreover, Fokisi asks questions about the nature of God, and his role in the scheme of things:

> If these things were done by God, who was said to be very just, where was that God? Did He hear if any one called? Why was He silent when people hated each other so bitterly, and killed each other for no reason?

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court does not seem to have any function for it takes an eclipse of the sun to punish the murderers of Sebati.

[130] Abrams, p 4.

These ideas, foreign to Casalis, may well have had a more secular source: the historical romances of Rider Haggard. In his introduction to *Nada the Lily* Haggard reveals his conception of 'primitive' Zulu religion:

> Umkulunkulu's character seems to vary from the idea of an ancestoral spirit, or the spirit of an ancestor, to that of a God. In the case of an intelligent person like the Mopo of this story, the ideal would probably not be a low or therefore he is made to speak of Umkulunkulu as .e Great Spirit, or God.[131]

Haggard's underlying assumption that the notion of a Supreme Being would be arrived at by a rational person - regardless of their culture - was one which was popular at the time.[132] Moreover, the rational person would be expected to question the presence of evil in the world. Thus Mopo, after witnessing the murder of Piet Retief, asks:

> Why does the Umkulunkulu who sits in the Heavens above allow such things to be done on the earth beneath?[133]

And if intellect cannot furnish all the answers, there is always the world of dreams.[134] Mopo receives his answer in a dream in which Haggard condenses Zulu mythology with Graeco-Christian ideas of judgement, hell and heaven. The hero finds himself on the banks of a large river:

> It was gloomy there, the light lay low upon the face of the river, but far away on the farther side was a glow like the glow of a stormy dawn, and in the glow I saw a mighty bed of reeds that swayed about in the breadth of the dawn, and out of the reeds came men and women and children, by hundreds and

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[131] H. Rider Haggard, *Nada the Lily* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1892), p xii.

[132] See Street's analysis of the Tarzan novels, pp 171ff.

[133] Haggard, p 204.

[134] Herbert Spencer, a Victorian anthropologist, believed that "primitive religion" had its origin in dreams. See Street, p 172.

> thousands and plunged into the waters of the river and were buffeted about by them.[135]

According to Zulu myth the first people emerged from a reed bed. Thus Haggard couples this metaphor with the metaphor of a "stormy dawn" to signify birth into the world. The earthly world itself is represented by the river - some individuals spend a long time in the waters, others pass through fairly quickly. All end up at the cliff on the other bank:

> behind the bank was a cliff, mighty and black, and in the cliff were doors of ivory, and through them came darkness and the sound of laughter; there were other doors also, black as though fashioned of coal, and through them came darkness and the sound of groans.[136]

Seated in front of the gates, passing judgement on the emerging throng, is a Zulu mythical figure, *Inkosazana* - Mother of the Heavens:

> And those who came up before her throne greeted her, so she pointed now with the wand of ivory in her right hand, and now with the wand of ebony in her left hand.[137]

According to Zulu oral tradition, *Inkosazana* is a figure of revelation whose appearance foreshadows great calamity. The gates and the judgement form no part of this myth; it is clear that the author is drawing on Christian iconography to suggest that evil deeds will have to be accounted for in the after-life.

Fekisi also receives an answer to his questions in the shape of a dream, a dream with a similar syncretic pattern and imagery. As in *Nada the Lily*, the hero sees a reed bed in the midst of a dawn:

> Far away, towards Bochaba-tsatsi he saw Ntsoanatsatsi, but he saw it in the distance, in the dusk. He saw the great reed bed, surrounded by

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[135] Haggard, p 84.

[136] Haggard, p 84.

[137] Haggard, p 85.

> the marsh of many waters; in the midst of that marsh were the reeds growing together thickly; in the midst of the reed bed was a small bare piece of ground; in the midst of this space was a great spring gushing out strongly; in the midst of that spring he saw the sun rising and appearing there. And on account of the distance, when it was still on its road to light the earth, he saw another sun appearing in the same place. ... On each side of that marsh were trees of fine growth standing in line with wide branches; near them were others of great beauty, bearing fruits much to be desired, among those trees were beautiful flowers, red, yellow, white, all colours. p 57.

The densely-layered dream image of Ntsoanatsatsi - the sun rising out of a reed bed from the centre of paradise - condenses Judeo-Christian and Basotho myths of origin. The author seems to imply that all men, black or white, share an equivalent mythical past. Moreover the East is accorded special significance by Christians and Basotho alike. For Christians, north-east points to Israel, the Holy Land; the significance of the East within Basotho tradition is detailed by the narrator:

> All Basuto of those times and even in these days have a great love for the East. When they lose a person by death and that person is put away in his grave, they place him carefully with his face turned towards the East, so that when the sun rises, it may strike against his brow. p 60.

As Fekisi's dream continues, there appears an image signifying destiny and revelation:

> As he was admiring, there passed a form like that of a man, surrounded by a transparent mist. He just glanced at that form, he saw that it was surrounded by a mist, the hair of that form swept the ground, he did not see where it ended, but it was very beautiful. The beauty of the face of that form blinded his eyes, tears fell from his eyes. He covered up his head, and at once he wakened up from his sleep. That form was ascending to the glory above, opposite the spring. p 57.[138]

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[138] cf. the Methodist hymn translated by Gabriel Setiloane:
Ah, what a fleeting thing our life is
Glory and youthful power?
It is a dream that entrances,

The dream makes it clear that the answer to Fekisi's quest is located geographically in the East, and spiritually in the body of Christ - and at this point in the plot different symbolic levels converge. At the literal, realistic level - which portrays Fekisi as a real person within a socio-historical context - the hero must quit his country and journey to the Indian Ocean in pursuit of other religious beliefs. Such a journey will be filled with the hazards that confronted all nineteenth century travellers: wild animals, shortage of water, heat etc.. Mofolo was not only influenced by written travellers' tales, he also would have been aware of Basotho oral "travellers tales". Mangoaela tells us that the young Mofolo delighted in the hunters tales recounted by the older boys during his childhood. Moreover, the tactics which the pilgrim employs to vanquish the lions are recounted in the former's collection of animal encounter tales.[139]

In terms of an allegory of history (as we have shown), the journey is a metaphor for the search of men like Sekesa and "Father Reed", and signifies their conversion to Christianity. Conversion implies a rejection of the past, a rejection of patterns of behaviour, both individual and socio-cultural. Fekisi's adoption of a new identity on board the ship (coupled with his change of clothing) reinforces this aspect of the allegory - and suggests a return to the absolute shades of light and dark. It also exemplifies a form of cultural chauvinism entirely at odds with the syncretic pattern of the novel. As Kunene so pertinently observes:

A mist that passes with the dawn.
Gabriel Setiloane, *The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana* (Rotterdam: A.A. Balkema, 1975), p 193.

[139] Z.D. Mangoaela, *Har'a Libatana Le Linyamatsane* (Morija: Morija Press, 1911).

> It appears that Mofolo fails to distinguish between those things which must be universally recognised as evil, i.e. repugnant to the moral sensibility of any society (wanton killing, sexual promiscuity are but a few examples), and what must be accepted as legitimate custom and traditions of the Basotho regardless of what anybody else might think of them.[140]

Finally, *Traveller to the East* allegorizes a journey within, a journey into spiritual consciousness, and towards salvation, like that of Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress*. Mirroring this journey is the internal shift from the Basotho conception of the Supreme Being to the Christian conception of an omnipresent messiah who died in order to redeem the world. It is this level which contains the most inconsistencies, and is contradicted by other levels. Early on in the narrative it is implied that the idea of a redeemer is not necessarily incompatible with Basotho oral tradition the life and death of Christ is foreshadowed in tales of the Kholumolumo.

Deeply disturbed by the apparent imperviousness of God to the evil in the world, Fekisi turns to the old men of the tribe for an answer. These men relate a tale about a monster, the Kholumolumo, which appeared in the mythical days of Ntsoanatsatsi. In the story all the people are devoured by this monster except a pregnant woman who hides and gives birth to a son. The boy has magical powers and grows into a man almost instantly. His mother tells him about the monster, which he kills, earning the gratitude of the rescued people who make him their chief. But this arouses the jealousy of the older men who bring about his death.

Tales of swallowing monsters are found throughout Southern Africa, and are still being transmitted in the rural areas. Moreover, variants appear

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[140] Kunene, p 15.

in Jacottet's collection (published around the same time as Mofolo's novel). These make for illuminating comparison with the story recounted in *Traveller to the East*. The versions collected by Jacottet are stylistically very similar to the tale told by the elders: the sentences have the same elliptical quality, and extensive use is made of repetition for dramatic effect and to convey the duration of time. This is clearly illustrated if we contrast, for instance, different versions of the boy's fight with the monster. In Jacottet, the boy is called Sankatana:

> Kholumolumo put out its tongue when it saw him; he cut the tongue. It put out another tongue and cut it, again he cut this one also. It put out a third tongue.... He stabbed it in the belly; a man cried inside it: Do not pierce me. He stabbed again a second time, a dog barked and so on.[141]

The repetition is even more pronounced in the novel:

> It stretched out its tongue and tried to lick them up but the boy stabbed its tongue and cut it; it tried to lick them up, he stabbed its tongue and cut it; it tried to lick them up, the boy stabbed its tongue and cut it. ... When he pierced its belly a person screamed from inside and said: 'Do not pierce me, make a hole over there.' When he tried to pierce there a dog howled.... pp 35-36.

Comparison emphasises the 'oral qualities' of the elders' tale - Mofolo successfully emulates stylistic features usually found in passages that have been directly transcribed from an oral performance. This transcriptive style not only sets the tale apart from the rest of the narrative (reinforcing our sense of "old time"), but also foregrounds the extensive use of repetition throughout the novel. For instance the lyrical landscape descriptions evince a similar, although more subtle, repetitious use of language:

> The sun rose gently, it rose in a clear sky, a sky as clear as crystal. It rose with no wind blowing, everything was pleasantly still, not a branch or leaf was stirring. p 69.

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[141] Jacottet, *Treasury of Ba-Suto Lore*, pp 70-80.

Comparison also shows, however, that the story of the Kholumolumo, as it appears in the novel, is incomplete, it lacks an ending. The two variants collected by Jacottet have different endings. The first ends with the young boy allowing himself to be murdered; his heart escapes out of his dead body and changes into a bird. The second version is far longer, fusing two separate episodes. Sankatana is the owner of a miraculous ox which is stolen and eaten by a gang of thieves. However, at the boys command, the ox returns to life, killing the thieves as it reconstitutes itself. As they make their way home, the ox warns the boy that the bread has been poisoned by his mother. The boy gives the bread to his father who then dies. Although the stories are rather different, they do have in common the motif of regeneration - the boy (in the first) and the ox are able to transcend death. Mofolo omits the metamorphosis episode, concluding almost brusquely:

> My readers know this fable and its ending. I will not relate too many details. p 36.

The second variant merits only one sentence:

> The men told Fekisi the tale of the boy Sankatana. p 37.

Initially it seems that the boy is meant to be a prefigurement of Christ in *Traveller to the East*. He is called a saviour:

> again when he (Fekisi) remembered the fable of the boy and Kholumolumo and how the people had killed their saviour, he decided it would be good for him to depart from a race of such great evil. p 39.

while the monster is later compared, indirectly, to evil:

> He asked himself what might the Kholumolumo be, and did it perhaps make an end of people as evil did, so that there was no man left alive. p 85.

Such comparison could be taken to imply that conversion to Christianity is more a process of continuity than a complete transformation. This is underscored by the dream in which Christ appears superimposed over

Ntsoanatsatsi, making Fekisi's quest a dual one: to find God and to return to the origin of his people. But by omitting the regenerative episode, Mofolo makes it clear that he is loathe to extend the analogy. This is confirmed when both the boy and the monster literally disappear from the plot once the hero undertakes his pilgrimage. They are evoked once more when Fekisi meets the hunters, only to be as quickly dismissed:

> On his side he told them all about Basutoland, all about the story of the boy of Sankatana and about Kholumolumo.... They told him that some of his ideas were near the truth, but many were wrong. They told him stories of their own land like those of Sankatana and Kholumolumo. p 111.

Fekisi is converted and the Kholumolumo, along with other Basotho customs and beliefs, becomes displaced by the religion of the hunters. It is ironical that a historical romance like *Nada the Lily* (mentioned above) can, despite its colonial prejudices, admit a more complete synthesis of Western and African ideas - perhaps because Haggard was writing in a largely secular tradition.

The missionaries were aware of the similarities and the parallels in the legend and the death of Christ, probably exploiting them in their sermons. Sixty years before the novel was written, Casalis records a variant of the legend where the monster is named Kammapa, and the little boy, Ditaolane. He makes the comparison with Christ:

> The supernatural conception of Ditaolane, his birth in a stable, his quality of a prophet, his premature wisdom, the victory he gained over Kammapa by becoming his victim, and the persecutions he suffered, seem to be so many points of resemblance to the history of our Saviour. I must add that the natives declare themselves incapable of giving the explanation of this extraordinary legend.[142]

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[142] Casalis, pp 236-237.

Like Mofolo, he refuses to accept that the Basotho tale contains "an essential truth".[143] At most the *tshomo* contains a partial truth; Casalis is willing to see the monster as a symbol of evil:

> Can this tale be a confused tradition of the redemption of man wrought out by Jesus Christ? I certainly should not venture to affirm that it is so, but Kammapa might, without much difficulty, be supposed to represent Satan.[144]

The idea that Sankatana was a Christ-like figure might also have been distilled from oral tradition. Today one finds a Christian Basotho oral tradition in which the characters and the plot are interpreted along Christian lines. An example would be a story I collected from a domestic worker which ended with these words:

> Now to explain the story, the Kholumolumo is a *dulwal* who wants to seize all the people of God. Sankatana is Jesus Christ who goes and delivers sins.[145]

The passage across the sea signifies the process of conversion, and contains the most explicit level of historical allegory:

> The number three is suspicious. Are these men surrogates for the three missionaries, Arbousset, Casalis and Gosselin who came to Lesotho in 1833? Their ministrations to the sick Fokisi and the total process of symbolic cleansing they administer during the sea passage strongly suggest a metaphorical

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[143] cf. Tim Couzens: "(Fokisi) accepts Christianity without rejecting the customs of his people and the essential truth lying at the heart of Sotho mythology." Couzens, "Early South African Black Writing," p 3. In fact, in the end, Fokisi completely rejects the customs of his people and their "essential truth".

[144] Casalis, p 237.

[145] Oral tale performed by Emily Dhlamini, a domestic worker, during a literacy reading group. Collected by the writer in Johannesburg on the 8th June 1987. S.M. Guma also encountered this Christian oral tradition when researching Sesotho oral tradition. S.M. Guma, *The Form, Content and Technique of Traditional Literature in Southern Sotho* (Pretoria: J.L. van Schaik, 1967).

> re-enactment of that episode in the history of Lesotho.[146]

It is also shot through with contradictions. After Fekisi is taken on board, the narrator explains the rather fortuitous presence of the hunters (a novelistic equivalent of the *deus ex machina* of classical drama):

> They were people who had been sent by the great chief of the East to get him elephant tusks. p 108.

Yet when they arrive at the Land in the East, we are told that it has no ruler:

> What did astonish Fekisi a little was to hear it said that there was no chief; God is the Chief; but their acts quickly showed him that indeed it was so. p 119.

Again, when Fekisi asks the hunters whether they know of a land wihout evil, a land where God and righteousness dwell, they reply:

> Among all the lands there is no such land. p 110.

Yet their reply is contradicted by the narrator's description:

> We should be amazed if we found a nation which had no police, no gaol, no taxes and no chief.p 119.

Although the Land in the East may appear to be a utopia, it is not the Ntsoanatsatsi of Fekisi's dream. But then nor is Fekisi's ultimate destination - the Celestial City of *Pilgrim's Progress*.

A comparison of Christian's arrival at the Celestial City with Fekisi's transfiguration in the house of prayer shows that the ending bears a remarkable resemblance to the episode in the Puritan allegory. The transition from earthly to eternal life is embued with a similar visionary quality, while the diction is elevated and Biblical. In *Pilgrim's Progress* Christian and Hopeful cross the river of mortality and are conducted up a mighty hill by two angels:

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[146] Kunene, p 30.

> There, said they, is the Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the innumerable company of angels, and the spirits of just men made perfect. p 163.

At the gate to the Celestial City they are met by a company of the Heavenly Host. The angels introduce the two pilgrims, saying:

> These are the men that have loved our Lord when they were in the world, and that have left all for his holy name, and he hath sent us to to fetch them, and we have brought them thus far on their desired journey, that they may go in and look their redeemer in the face with joy. p 164.

As they enter the gate a great shout goes up:

> Blessed are they that are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb. p 164.

Fekisi attends a festival in the house of prayer. During the sermon the priest proclaims:

> you have come to Mount Zion, the home of the living God. p 122.

As his words ring throughout the church, a great mist begins to form. Within the mist Fekisi sees the Son of Man, flanked by six men. He runs forward with arms outstretched:

> Aha, my Jesus, I have longed for Thee, oho! let me go home with Thee, to the home of God. p 124.

To which Jesus replies:

> To-day shalt thou be with Me in My kingdom. Soon shalt thou enter the holy city. Thou shalt reign with Me because thou hast not been afraid, and hast left thy country for My sake. p 124.

These sentiments are echoed by a multitude of voices:

> Throw open wide the doors for him, and let him enter, because it is he who has loved the Son of Man in adversity and in prosperity. p 124.

Further similarities between these two passages include the use of Biblical metaphors of the City to connote the after-life, and the idea of a face-to-face encounter with Christ. Significantly, both allegories contain

the same moral, that finding salvation entails some form of leave-taking. Christian has "left all for his Holy Name", while Fekisi has - spiritually and physically - "left" his "country". In the end the syncretic pattern - disrupted along the way by inconsistencies in the plot - is entirely displaced by the didactic message. Fekisi's quest for Ntsoanatsatsi ends at Mount Zion - with not a single reed bed in sight.

Chapter Four.

The Incomplete Frame in Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi*: giving voice to the 'other'.

In an article on the depiction of black races in colonial fiction, Francis M. Mannsaker writes:

> at times it seems the most striking aspect of the black presence in imperial fiction is its human absence. I do not mean to suggest that the novelists of empire ignore the black or coloured races - that is patently untrue - but they are not interested in them as 'characters' in an old-fashioned sense, as individual personalities.[147]

Put another way, other races believed to be morally and intellectually inferior are hardly ever accorded a voice of their own in colonial fiction. In the romance novel, one of the most popular forms of fiction and a powerful shaper of racial prejudice, other races are collectively represented by a limited number of character types.[148] These vary from the 'noble savage' to sub-human barabaric hordes. But regardless of type, when black characters speak it is usually to confirm their difference

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[147] Francis M. Mannsaker, "The dog that didn't bark: the subject races in imperial fiction at the turn of the century," *The Black Presence in English Literature*, ed. David Dabydeen (Manchester: Manchester U Press, 1985), p 81.

[148] The depiction of 'primitive' races in English popular fiction is explored by Brian Street in *The Savage In Literature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975). Also see *The Black Presence in English Literature* and Martin Burgess Green, *Dreams of Adventure, and Deeds of Empire* (New York: Basic, 1979).

and inferiority, or to pay obeisance to the European race and its acoutrements. For example, the 'noble warrior' of *King Solomon's Mines* takes his leave of Allan Quatermain (perhaps one of the most vainglorious of popular hero's ever) with these words:

> "I do perceive that thy words are, now as ever, wise and full of reason, Macumazahn; that which flies in the air loves not to run along the ground; the white man loves not to live on the level of the black."[149]

Less noble types, on the other hand, are depicted as being bombastic - speaking much, but with very little to say (the narrator in this passage is Allan Quatermain):

> For whole hours he danced and sang and took snuff and saluted with his hand, telling me the story of his deed over and over again, no single version of which tale agreed with the other. He took a new title also, that meant "Eater-up-of-Elephants"; he allowed one of his men to bonga - that is, praise - him all through the night, preventing us from getting a wink of sleep, until at last the poor fellow dropped in a kind of fit from exhaustion, and so forth. It really was very amusing until it became a bore.[150]

In terms of its depiction of the 'other', Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi*, by contrast, is a romance with a difference. The first black South African to publish a novel in English, Plaatje made a foray into the romance genre with the explicit aim of countering this "human absence" and the popular stereotypes pertaining to black people in the fiction of his time. Franz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* characterises the evolution of black writing in terms of three phases. The first phase corresponds to a period of "unqualified assimilation", while the third phase signals the beginnings of a "revolutionary literature". Of the second phase he writes:

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[149] H. Rider Haggard, *King Solomon's Mines* (London: Longmans, 1885), p 150.

[150] H. Rider Haggard, *Child of Storm* (London: MacDonald, 1913), p 49.

> In the second phase we find the native is disturbed; he decides to remember what he is.... Past happenings of the bygone days of his childhood will be brought up out of the depths of his memory; old legends will be reinterpreted in the light of a borrowed estheticism and of a conception of the world which was discovered under other skies."[151]

Plaatje's attempt to create a voice for his people corresponds to the second phase - and contains some of the contradictions implied in Fanon's defintion. As we shall see, his merging of Tswana oral history, legends and proverbs within the conventions of the romance novel creates a sense of ambivalence. This, combined with contrasting elements of stylisation and parody, makes the novel at times seem an uneasy rejoinder to the late-Victorian romance. A genre which is typified by the innumerable popular 'African' romances of Rider Haggard.

Henry Rider Haggard's output over forty years exceeded seventy romances, firmly qualifying him as one of the most prolific and popular romance writers of his time. Many of his novels were set in Africa and were loosely based on his experiences as a young clerk in the Colonial Government of Natal. These works played an important role in shaping and disseminating a distorted image of the 'dark continent' and its inhabitants in the European imagination. The 'Africa' of his fiction is a composite image: it is a dark, exotic, magical place with arid deserts, ghostly jungles and battle-swept plains. A continent abounding with ancient ruins and hidden treasure, it is peopled with noble warriors (the Zulus and Swazis), degenerate savages (all the other tribes), evil tyrants, power-wielding wizards, pure virgins and 'femme fatales'.

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[151] Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p 222.

All of these elements are blended with actual historical occurences and ethnographic detail to form an incongruous mix of mythology and 'real-life'. Equally contradictory is his depiction of other races; at times he draws explicitly on Social-Darwinist ideas of racial superiority, while at other moments in the same narrative the racism is more subtle, derived from seemingly antithetical notions. For instance, in *Child of Storm* Allan Quatermain begins his tale with a 'meditation' on the "eternal principles" of human nature - which are the same for all races:

> While man is man - that is, before he suffers the magical death-change into spirit, if such should be his destiny - well, he will remain man. I mean that the same passions will sway him; he will aim at the same ambitions; he will know the same joys and be oppressed by the same fears, whether he lives in a Kafir (sic) hut or in a golden palace....[152]

Under-riding Allan Quatermain's belief in "eternal principles", however, is the colonial's contempt for the subject races which emerges in his interactions with black characters. Thus although he often battles to keep pace with his servant, Saduko, for example, racial pride precludes complaint. This is conveyed in an aside to the reader:

> as a matter of principle I would never admit to a Kafir that he was my master at anything....[153]

According to Morton Cohen, Haggard's biographer, *King Solomon's Mines* was one of the most succesful novels of its time, "for many Englishmen Africa became the Africa of *King Solomon's Mines*."[154] The success of this boys' adventure story, and others in the Allan Quatermain series, has

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[152] Haggard, *Child of Storm*, p 15.

[153] Haggard, *Child*, p 32.

[154] Morton Cohen, *Rider Haggard: His Life and Works* (London: Hutchinson, 1960), p 79.

led to many of his other romance novels being overlooked - novels which are more sensitive in their depiction of other races, which 'problematize' their portrayal of other cultures. One such novel, *Nada the Lily*, is unique for it sets out to present the point of view of a black man.[105] In the Introduction Haggard outlines his aim: to capture the "remarkable spirit" of the Zulu kings and to preserve almost-forgotten incidents of history. He also acknowledges the difficulty of attempting to speak with the voice of another culture:

> "It will be obvious that such a task has presented difficulties, since he who undertakes it must for a time forget his civilization, and think with the mind and speak with the voice of a Zulu of the old regime."[106]

The novel, written in 1890, is set in Zululand in the days of Chaka and Dingaan - the heroic age of Zulu history. Haggard uses a framing device to make his imaginative leap across a vast cultural chasm more plausible. A "White Man" is stranded in an unexpected snowfall which has caused his oxen to bolt, and seeks refuge in the kraal of an old, blind witchdoctor called Zweete. Zweete it turns out is Mopo - the man who assassinated Chaka. During an eleven day sojourn, the old man relates his life story, a story which straddles momentous events in Zulu history in which he was a participant, even an instigator:

> Then the old man told him the tale that is set out here. Day by day he told some of it till it was finished. It is not all written in these pages, for

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[105] Haggard was prompted to write such a novel by his friend, the anthroplogist Andrew Lang, who wrote in the *The Scots Observer*, "How delicious a novel all Zulu, without a white face in it, would be!" D.S. Higgins, *Rider Haggard: The Great Storyteller* (London: Cassell, 1981), p 129.

[106] Haggard, *Nada the Lily* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1892), p x.

> portions may have been forgotten, or put aside as irrelevant. Neither has it been possible for the writer of it to render the full force of the Zulu idiom nor to convey a picture of the teller. For, in truth, he acted rather than told his story. Was the death of a warrior in question, he stabbed with his stick, showing how the blow fell and where; did the story grow sorrowful, he groaned, or even wept. Moreover, he had many voices, one for each of the actors in the tale. This man, ancient and withered, seemed to live again in the far past. It was the past that spoke to his listener, telling of deeds long forgotten, of deeds that are no more known.[107]

Haggard also makes use of the fictional oral narrator to incorporate Zulu oral narratives, to make the fiction seem more authentic. These oral accounts he had heard from fellow colonials in South Africa, or had read in ethnographic accounts such as Callaway's work dealing with the Zulus.[108] The presence of a black narrator and the syncretic design of *Nada the Lily* set it apart from many Victorian romances so successfully that the novel's distorted presentation of Zulu culture - which is drowned in melodrama and blood - escapes even modern day scholars. J.D.V. Terblanche is only echoing common sentiment when he writes:

> For an author to capture the wildness and grandeur of the proud Zulu race of a hundred years ago is truly a remarkable feat. On the evidence presented in *Nada the Lily*, Haggard's claim that he understood

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[107] Haggard, *Nada*, p 4.

> Of course Rider Haggard is unable to cross the cultural chasm that separates the Victorian aristocrat and the Zulu *nyanga*. All he, in fact, achieves is the small leap from thinking (and speaking) with the mind of a late-Victorian English gentleman to imagining the kind of thoughts that a more intelligent savage would be likely to have. This approach practised by early anthropologists like Andrew Lang is termed the 'If I were a horse' approach, and was soon abandoned because it imprisons the anthropologist within a vicious circle of his own assumptions. See Street, *The Savage*, p 163.

[108] Henry Callaway, *The Religious System of the Amazulu* (Springvale: Blair, 1870). See the introduction to *Nada the Lily*.

> Zulu customs and ways as if by instinct, is completely justified.[100]

Mhudi bears an uncanny resemblance to *Nada the Lily*. Moreover, Plaatje outlines his intentions in a preface reminiscent of Haggard's introduction (quoted above):

> This book has been written with two objects in view, viz. (a) to interpret to the reading public one phase of 'the back of the Native mind'; and (b) with the readers' money, to collect and print (for Bantu schools) Sechuana folk-tales, which with the spread of European ideas, are fast being forgotten. p 21.[100]

Both novels, then, were written with the aim of making accessible the 'mind' of the black man, and to preserve oral traditions which the authors felt were in danger of being forgotten (because of the perceived changes taking place in black societies). This is no mere coincidence; it is likely that Plaatje wrote what he termed his 'epic' with *Nada the Lily* in mind. *Mhudi*, it will be argued, is in part a stylisation of, and a rejoinder to, *Nada the Lily* and Haggard's other 'Zulu novels'.[101] And Plaatje's depiction and incorporation of Tswana oral tradition forms a fundamental part of this dialogue with the romance genre.

This may seem surprising since so much critical attention has been directed at adumbrating the influences of Shakespeare (and, to a lesser extent, Bunyan). For example, Brian Willan writes:

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[100] J.D.V. Terblanche, "H. Rider Haggard: A Critical Study of his Prose Fiction," diss., Potchefstroom U for C.H.E., 1955, p 41.

[100] Sol Plaatje, preface, *Mhudi* (London: Heinemann, 1978). All page references refer to this edition.

[101] The Zulu novels include *Nada the Lily*, *Child of Storm*, *The Ghost Kings*, and *Finished*.

> Plaatje was struck particularly by the way in which Tswana oral tradition and the written traditions of English literature - above all, Shakespeare, which he knew best - shared a common fund of literary and cultural symbols. In *Mhudi* he was concerned to explore the possibilities that this perception presented....[102]

The homage paid to Shakespeare has tended to obscure the fact that *Mhudi* is written in the form of a historical romance and, no matter how diverse its influences, draws on many romance conventions (including the incorporation of ethnographic detail and African oral genres). In a letter to Silas Molema, his mentor, Plaatje describes the novel which he had just completed as "a love story after the manner of romances":

> I am still busy writing two books. One is a novel - a love story after the manner of romances; but based on historical facts. The smash-up of the Barolongs at Kunana by Mzilikazi, the coming of the Boers and the war of revenge which smashed up the Matabele at Coenyane by the Allies, Barolong, Boers, and Griquas when Halley's Comet appeared in 1835 - with plenty of love, superstition, and imaginations worked in between the wars. Just like the style of Rider Haggard when he writes about the Zulus.[103]

Similarities abound in the plots of the two novels.[104] Both are set in Southern Africa in the early nineteenth century before white domination, and chronicle the 'epic' events which accompanied the rise of Zulu military power: the disruption of black societies, great migrations and mighty battles. At the centre of both narratives is a tyrant king: Chaka in

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[102] Brian Willan, *Sol Plaatje: A Biography* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1984), p 352.

[103] Willan, p 254.

[104] Tim Couzens lists twelve similarities of plot. He does not however take this any further; his concern, instead, is to show that *Mhudi* is a 'prose epic'. Couzens, "'The New African': Herbert Dhlomo and Black South African Literature in English," diss., U of the Witwatersrand, 1980, pp 262-266.

Nada and Mzilikatze in *Mhudi*. These military leaders, during moments of crisis, prophesy the eventual conquest of their people. Chaka utters his prophetic curse while dying from stab-wounds inflicted by Mopo:

> "Twice he looked on each; then he spoke, saying: "What! do you slay me, my brothers - dogs of mine own house, whom I have fed? Do you slay me, thinking to possess the land and to rule it? I tell you it shall not be for long. I hear a sound of running feet - the feet of a great white people. They shall stamp you flat, children of my father! They shall rule the land that I have won, and you and your people shall be their slaves!"[165]

Mzilikatze's prophecy is uttered during a rallying speech to his defeated armies:

> "If Tauna and his gang of brigands imagine that they shall have rain and plenty under the protection of these marauding wizards from the sea, they will gather some sense before long.
>
> Chaka served us just as treacherously. Where is Chaka's dynasty now? Extinguished, by the very Boers who poisoned my wives and are pursuing us today. The Bechuana are fools to think that these unnatural Kiwas (white men) will return their so-called friendship with honest friendship. Together they are laughing at my misery. Let them rejoice; they need all the laughter they can have today for when their deliverers begin to dose them with the same bitter medicine they prepared for me; when the Kiwas rob them of their cattle, their children and their lands, they will weep their eyes out of their sockets and get left with only their empty throats to squeal in vain for mercy!" p 175.

As both novels were written after the historical events they portray, these prophecies are embued with a special force, and the omniscience of the narrative voice is underscored. *Mhudi* does differ from Haggard's romance in one important respect. Whereas Mopo's tale is firmly located in an age that has passed, the story of Mhudi and Ra-Thaga also looks

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[165] Haggard, *Nada*, p 172.

to the future. Tim Couzens argues that Plaatje turned to the past in order to predict future events beyond his lifetime:

> "Just as Mzilikatze uses this fable as a predictive device to warn the Barolong, so, in the context of his writings and his life, Plaatje seems to be using his novel *Mhudi* to warn the whites. History becomes for Plaatje a moral fable."[106]

The many similarities between *Mhudi* and *Nada the Lily* reinforce a sense of stylisation, and raise the spectre of accusations of 'imitation'. As a reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* wrote several years after the novel was first published:

> One wonders what secret fountain of African art might not have been unsealed if, in interpreting his people, a writer of Plaatje's insight had thought and written 'like a Native'. That might well have been the first authentic utterance out of the aeons of African silence.[107]

Plaatje has also been criticised for his "padded 'Victorian' style", which does at times become ponderous and excessively formal - especially in the characters' dialogues:[108]

> "Now, do tell me how you left Kunana that used to be our home. Kunana, where we enjoyed a peace and prosperity that were unequalled anywhere; where our cattle waxed fat along the green valleys and bred like

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[106] Tim Couzens, Introduction, *Mhudi*, p 19.

[107] Willan, p 363.

[108] These criticisms underline the difficulty of fashioning a voice using the language and literary traditions which in the past have denied the validity of that voice to speak. Pertinent is Tim Couzens's defence of Plaatje's style:
"no doubt many readers have quickly rejected it for its supposedly imitative or derivative nature. This is a very superficial judgement. In the first place, it ignores the difficulties which faced a black writer at the time; the difficulties he had in getting published, the difficulties of a black writer in a society dominated by whites who could see no value in things black and who demanded 'standards of civilisation', that is, slavish imitation of the whites." Tim Couzens, Introduction, *Mhudi*, p 12.

> so many wild anima' ;...Kunana, where maidens sang and danced in the moonlight and made life merry with their mirth; Kunana, our former home, but now, one of the Matabele outposts. Do tell me, my sister, how you escaped and how you ever reached here." pp 38-39.

Plaatje's complex manipulation of history and (as we shall see) his use of Tswana oral traditions vitiates such criticisms; nonetheless, there is a double-voiced quality to the novel. This double-voicedness is especially evident in his descriptions of human and geographical landscape.

For Allan Quatermain, and no doubt many of his readers, Africa offered possibilities which Victorian England denied - possibilities of heroism as found in the Greek epics and the Mediaeval age of Chilvary. For instance, in *Child of Storm* Allan Quatermain compares his adventures to a Greek play:

> "Thus it was then that Fate wove me and my doings into the web of some very strange events; terrible, tragic and complete indeed as those of a Greek play, as it has often done before and since those days."[169]

Indeed Quatermain seems to regard himself as a latter-day knight; we are told that he is an avid reader of *The Ingoldsby Legends*.[170] Thus Haggard's 'Africa' is coloured by his superimposition of names and allusions belonging to different heroic traditions. His insistence in *Nada the Lily* on calling Umslopogaas's hyaenas, wolves and the axe, 'Watcher of the Fords", for example, suffuses the romance with the ambience of a Nordic saga. Despite his use of ethnographic detail and first-hand experience, then, Haggard's image of Southern Africa is an entirely

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[169] Haggard, *Child*, p 31.

[170] These verses by Richard Barham - noted for their comic treatment of Mediaeval Legends - were popular in Haggard's time. See Higgins, p 71.

distorted one. The Chaka of his novels holds court like some Mediaeval monarch, granting boons to those who have earned his favour, and despatching those who incur his wrath to a cruel death:

> "Peace!" cried Chaka. "Waste not the hours in talk, but to the work. Hearken! Wizards have bewitched me! Wizards have dared to smite blood upon the gateways of the king. Dig in the burrows of the earth and find them, ye rats."[171]

Likewise the wizards which abound in Haggard's romances. Despite being clothed in African regalia, replete with bones, bladders and snakeskins, they are little more than black versions of their counterparts in European mythology. The wizard Zikali, for example, who appears in many of the Quatermain tales owes a lot to Merlin the Kingmaker, as he sits in his cave casting spells and plotting the destinies of nations:

> "I believe it was your work, and not hers," I blurted out, ignoring his mocking questions. "You pulled the strings; you were the wind that caused the grass to bend till the fire caught it and set the town in flames - the town of your foes."
>
> "How clever you are, Macumazahn!... Yes, yes, I know how to pull strings till the trap falls, and to blow grass until the flame catches it, and how to puff at that flame until it burns the House of Kings."[172]

By contrast, Plaatje's descriptions of the highveld region, which forms the backdrop to the novel, are minutely, albeit lyrically, realized:

> The water-courses having ceased to roar, there was a dead silence over the immense plains, broken occasionally by the music of the birds as they chirped their songs on the hill-tops. But Mhudi missed the forests and the cooing of the wood pigeons of Bechuanaland. She missed the compact mokgalo and mogonono trees, the leaves of which had provided her with excellent awning when it rained by day or by night.... p 154.

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[171] Haggard, *Nada*, p 58.

[172] Haggard, *Child*, p 233.

But when the author makes use of words like 'wizard', 'sprite', 'kirtle', 'vale' and many others, the landscape is transformed into the landscape of the romance, the 'Africa' of Haggard's Zulu novels:

> "One old greybeard asked: "You say you saw a star with a tail?" Here the wizard invited the questioner to pick up the charmed emblems. The bones being picked up and thrown down and praised again, the wizard chanted: "A star... a big giant star... the biggest that ever appeared in the skies. Its tail will spread from the eastern to the western clouds, remaining visible for many a night. Cattle will die, cattle wil be captured, chieftains will sicken and die, and so will their wives and daughters and sons. There will be wars in Zululand, fighting in Basutoland, a stream of blood across the world. It will soak and drown many people in Inzwinyani." p 138.

These words are inevitably coloured by their association with the more melodramatic, even exotic, features of romance fiction. As a result the rejoinder is rendered ambiguous - an ambiguity personified by the 'silent' oral storyteller.

Another similarity which *Mhudi* shares with *Nada the Lily* concerns narrative structure - each narrative is framed within another narrative. As we have already seen, Mopo's story is made more plausible by being situated within the frame story of the 'White Man' who seeks refuge in the old man's hut, and who later publishes his story. The narrative frame in *Mhudi* is much less explicit and was, in fact, excluded from the first edition published by Lovedale in 1930. The complete version has only recently been restored and was published by Heinemann in 1977.

The Lovedale edition contains only a single narrative voice, the voice (or perspective) of the omniscient narrator who is impersonal, detached from the story it is telling, and who uses the 'third person'. The omniscience of the narrative voice is established through its ability to have access to the characters' inner consciousness. This is most explicit in this

episode in which Mhudi, who has ventured out alone in search of her husband, is preparing to de-camp for the night:

> She [illegible]alled at the stars and at their numbers; she did [illegible]eem to have noti[illegible]hat there were so many before. While she admired the greater and lesser brilliancy of each planet, she was baffled to find that what looked like [illegible]mpt space betwixt the constellations proved, on closer scrutiny, to be no spaces at all but further clusters of numerous smaller stars... Can it be that the stars also engage in fighting sometimes, and if so, did they kill one another's wives and children?
> pp 75-76.

In the original version there is another voice distinct from the narrative voice, one that belongs to a narrative persona called Half-a-Crown. The narrative voice introduces us to this 'hoary octogenarian' who is actually relating the story:

> "Half-a-Crown may be permitted to digress and describe the beauty and virtues of one of King Mzilikatze's wives - the lily of his harem, by name Umnandi, the sweet one." p 91.

Half-a-Crown is identified later on in the narrative as the son of Mhudi and Ra-Thaga. Thus the narrative of *Mhudi* is contained within a wider narrative frame which is only hinted at - the story of an oral storyteller who recounts the life history of his parents during the days of the *mfecane*. Occasionally this storyteller speaks directly to the reader and there is a shift from the 'third' to the 'first person' perspective:

> "You know, Half-a-Crown," Ra-Thaga used to say, "the Boers can do many things in this world but singing is not one of them. On that day, however, my father says the Boers sang as they never did before or since. He has been to Grahamstown and heard English congregations sing with a huge pipe organ that shook the building with its sound, like the pipes and brass horns of English soldiers on the march; he has been to Morija and heard Pastor Mabille, the best singer that ever held a church service, and the Basuto congregations render their beautiful hymns in answer to the signal he gave...."
> p 164.

Few passages are couched in the first person, however. For the most part, the oral narrator is 'silent' - his words are refracted through the narrative voice and the voices of the characters. This leads to a further sense of double-voicedness: there are moments when it is not clear whose perspective we are being offered, which voice is speaking.[173]

Nevertheless, the presence of an oral storyteller has symbolic import - for it is in African oral tradition that Plaatje finds a rejoinder to European stereotypes. Scholars such as Brian Willan and Tim Couzens have outlined in great detail Plaatje's interest in language and the oral traditions of his people.[174] While he was in London he published a collection of Setswana proverbs and collaborated with the linguist Daniel Jones on a book dealing with Setswana phonetics, one which incorporated traditional oral narratives. In his introduction to the collection of proverbs, Plaatje explains the apparent anomaly of proverb with contradictory sentiments:

> The whole truth about a fact cannot always be summed up in one pithy saying. It may have several different aspects, which taken separately, seem to be contradictory and have to be considered in connexion with their surrounding circumstances.[175]

These insights inform the novel: proverbs and other oral forms are incorporated into the narrative as a means of exploring the "several different aspects" of pre-colonial Barolong society. Moreover, they serve

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[173] For the publishing history of *Mhudi*, I am indebted to Stephen Gray, *Southern African Literature: An Introduction* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1979).

[174] Tim Couzens, Introduction, *Mhudi*, and Willan, Chapter 14.

[175] Sol Plaatje, *Sechuana Proverbs* (London: Kegan Paul, 1916). p 13.

to counter a "pithy" and stereotypical portrait, founded on intermingled assumptions about oral culture and inferior mentality.

Victorian ethnologists, from the early stages of their discipline, began to draw parallels between language and race. In 1860 Diffenbach, an ethnologist, wrote:

> Language distinguishes man from the inferior animals... From his language we can perceive the structure and disposition of his mind, his prevailing patterns and tendencies...[176]

Languages, like races, were classified according to hierarchies with the Latin, considered to be 'linguistically perfect', occupying the highest position. African languages, whose grammars were imperfectly understood - due to ignorance of their tonal properties - were usually placed near the bottom, depending on the language and the individual theorist. As the African races occupied an analogous position on the hierarchy of races it is not surprising that langauge became to be regarded as an indice of the mental or logical development of a race.

This is reflected in Victorian popular fiction where the speech of the 'savage' is often correlated with theories of black mentality. In Haggard's romances a contrast is drawn between Allan Quatermain, who is plain speaking, and his black counterparts, who speak in long-winded or obscure sentences. And when Panda, in *Child of Storm*, demands to be told the truth - he turns to Quartermain to find it:

> "How am I to know the truth?" exclaimed Panda at last. "Macumazahn, you were there; step forward and tell it to me."[177]

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[176] Cited in Philip Curtin, *The Image of Africa* (London: Macmillan, 1965), p 271.

[177] Haggard, *Child*, p 173.

Implicit in his words, and indeed throughout the novel, is the suggestion that black people are, whether consciously or not, natural-born equivocators or even liars. And these traits are encouraged by their oral culture:

> "I am glad to see that you are no boaster, Saduko," said Panda. "Would that more of the Zulus were like you in that matter, for then I must not listen to so many loud songs about little things."[178]

This dismissal of the tradition of praise poetry is an explicit example of cultural chauvinism, and shows how orality formed part of the iconography of the 'savage'. In these novels, the inferiority of the 'savage' is linked to the oral nature of his culture and institutions which engenders and perpetuates feeble-mindedness. When Allan Quatermain has taken part in a cattle-raid, he turns down his share of the spoils, because (as he confides to the reader) he fears they will bring him bad luck. A different reason is given to the other raiders, a rather subservient group of Zulu warriors:

> "Now, listen. I will not take those cattle because I do not think as you Kafirs think."[179]

The warriors are unable to comprehend the act; they respond with child-like adoration. An old man seizes Quartermain's hand and begins to kiss it:

> "Your heart is big," he cried; "you drop fatness! Although you are so small, the spirit of a king lives in you, and the wisdom of the heavens."[180]

This spontaneous and unquestioning adoration, we are told, is passed down in oral tradition:

> to this day my name is a power among them and their descendants. Also it has grown into something of a

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[178] Haggard, *Child*, p 117.

[179] Haggard, *Child*, p 100.

[180] Haggard, *Child*, p 100.

> proverb among all those Kafirs who know the story. They talk of a great act of liberality in an idiom as 'a gift of Macumazana', and in the same way of one who makes any remarkable renunciation, as 'a wearer of Macumazana's blanket', or as 'he who has stolen Macumazana's shadow'.
>
> Thus did I earn a great reputation very cheaply....[101]

The speech of the black characters is often sub-proverbial or aphoristic, supporting notions that black mentality is different to that of Europeans: it is lacking in logic: childlike or even mystical. More often than not, the aphorisms which flavour the black character's speech belong to an entirely different context, allowing Haggard to indulge in exotic metaphors and to suggest that the characters' responses are partly formulaic - that they are unable to think around received wisdom. 'Superstition', a much-used word in colonial fiction, encapsulates this view of 'savage' mentality.[102] Allan Quatermain expresses a common assumption when he asserts:

> I already know, that only weak-headed, superstitious idiots would put the slightest faith in the drivelling nonsense of deceiving or self-deceiving Kafir medicine-men.[103]

As it transpires, his words are contradicted by the plot of *Child of Storm*. Nonetheless, this does not, in the context of the novel, contradict his assertion that black people are weak-headed. Haggard is simply playing off one stereotype with another. Instead we are to accept that, being untaught, black people retain certain mystical abilities. Orality is

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[101] Haggard, *Child*, p 101.

[102] Brian Street devotes a chapter to a discussion about the kinds of prejudices which were embodied by the word 'superstition' in *Savage in Literature*, pp 154-184.

[103] Haggard, *Child*, p 49.

also often portrayed by Rider Haggard in quasi-mystical terms, inextricably linked to sorcery and magic:

> But now the doubts did come. Might she not be mistaken after all? She knew the marvellous powers of the natives in the matter of the transmission of news, powers so strange that many, even among white people, attributed them to witchcraft.[184]

Thus, although not always stated explicitly, many of the misconceptions and distortions pertaining to black culture and society centre around their oral nature. Moreover, this is usually coupled with the assumption that oral institutions give rise to an 'oral' or non-rational mentality - an idea which persists today, albeit in a more sophisticated form, in the phenomenological theories of scholars like Walter Ong. According to Ong, modes of thought and expression evolve as a society undergoes changes, brought about by the transformation of the word through writing. A society without writing is characterised by a high occurence of formulaic expressions - and a certain way of thinking:

> everyone in an oral culture expresses himself in formulas; and further still, not only does everyone talk in formulas, everyone in an oral culture also thinks in formulas. These oral thought patterns change only with the introduction of new script technologies, writing, printing, or electronic media.[185]

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[184] Haggard, *The Ghost Kings* (London: Cassell and Co., 1909), p 49.

[185] Summarised in Jeff Opland, *Xhosa Oral Poetry* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1983), p183. Also see Walter Ong, *Interfaces of the word: Studies in the evolution of consciousness and culture* (Ithaca: Cornell U Press, 1977).

The work of oral theorists such as Ong and Goody has been criticised for lacking cross-cultural applicability and for resurrecting a 'great divide theory'. Brian Street writes, "Writers concerned to establish a 'great divide' between the thinking processes of different social groups have classically described them in such terms as logical/pre-logical, primitive/modern, and concrete/scientific. I would argue that the introduction of literate/pre-literate as the criteria for making such a division has given the tradition a new lease of life just as it was wilting under the powerful challenge of recent work in social

'Oral thought', according to Ong, restricts the development of cognitive processes, which remain context bound. An inability to distance oneself from an utterance and a form of passivity are hallmarks of this way of thinking. The oral storyteller in *Nada the Lily* is unable to distance himself from the tale he is telling:

> in truth, he acted rather than told his story. Was the death of a warrior in question, he stabbed with his stick, showing how the blow fell and where; did the story grow sorrowful, he groaned, or even wept.[186]

And other novels by Haggard abound with aphorisms voiced by black characters, which express resigned passivity in the face of 'the inevitable'. For example in *Child of Storm*:

> Perhaps the spirits plant a tree for themselves, and to do so cut down many other trees.
>
> When two young bulls quarrel they must fight it out.
>
> He who walks into a storm must put up with the hailstones.[187]

The depiction of orality in Rider Haggard's Zulu romances, therefore, forms an important part of the distorted representation of black races. Oral tradition is seen as magical, mystical, inflated, leading to long-windedness and self-deceiving vainglory on the one hand, and an inability to think logically on the other. In addition, Haggard often incorporates indigenous oral narratives in a way that perpetuates the 'mystical' nature of savage life, furnishing the romance with the required

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anthropology, linguistics and philosophy." *Literacy in theory and practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1984), p 24.

[186] Haggard, *Nada*, p 4.

[187] Haggard, *Child*, pp 24, 170, 172.

elements of melodrama and exoticism.[108] In his preface to *Nada the Lily*, Haggard assures his readers that the Zulu lore assimilated in the novel has not been exaggerated:

> Perhaps it may be allowable to add a few words about the Zulu mysticism, magic and superstition, to which there is some allusion in this romance. It has been little if at all exaggerated.[109]

Nonetheless, even if the writer is faithful in his reproduction of oral tradition of other cultures, distortion may often arise out of a distorted context (and romance fiction can only be a distorted context). Brian Street defines this context as "the mass of orderly life" :

> such descriptions lack the sense of proportion that can only be achieved by putting them in their full context alongside the mass of orderly life and alongside the many other; less exotic or dramatic, aspects of the religious, political and economic life of ... 'primitive' peoples.... Needless to say, most popular reporting and novels dealing in such matters fail to do this, and their presentation is correspondingly distorted.[110]

Plaatje attempts to counter this distortion by providing a context neither melodramatic nor mystical - his novel emphasises the human side of Tswana oral culture. His portrayal of the oral nature of pre-colonial Barolong and Ndebele society is often very humourous. Almost all of the characters are depicted as storytellers in their own right; rarely is a

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[108] Haggard was particularly fond of the myth of Nomkubulwana - a white-robed woman who according to Zulu legend appeared in times of calamity. This myth provides the gist for many plots and allows the author to indulge in fantasies of white supremacy. For example, in *The Ghost Kings* the English heroine is believed by the credulous Zulus to be the white goddess of legend. Rachel takes advantage of their gullibility until rescued by the hero.

[109] Haggard, preface, *Nada*, pp xi-xii.

[110] Street, *Savage*, p 7.

point made or an opinion expressed, without a narrative being recounted to underscore the point:

> "Tsetsanyana is right," said Matsitselelo, with a security she was very far from feeling. "Kong-goane is as white-livered as that man who comes flying so swiftly from the invisible bogy. I think I notice some similarity between that runner and a man that accompanied my father to last winter's chase. He roused the camp one night (so the men related on their return) with a plausible story about a lion preparing to spring on my father's party in their sleep - and what do you think it was that he mistook for a roaring lion? A bush, a stationary little bush." p 89.

Moreover, tales in the Barolong community become quickly and widely transmitted, not because of magic, but because of human nature. Stories of great deeds and courage, or infamous acts of cowardice, spread like wildfire - accounts of Mhudi's first meeting with a lion are even said to have been recounted in the enemy camp. When Mhudi tells the tale to her husband Ra-Thaga, he comments:

> "So then," said Ra-Thaga, now lost in admiration, "you were the heroine of Motlhokaditse, whose bravery was the pride of the countryside! Why, the thrilling talk of your adventure will live as long as there breathes a member of our tribe." p 69.

However an oral medium of transmission does have its disadvantages:

> Thus Mhudi also became the talk of the people and many were the yarns spun concerning the two supernatural Bidis, as the Qorannas call the Bechuana. Anecdotes in the history of the two strangers were related and exaggerated with each repetition.... p 73.

The exaggerated 'yarns' of the Qorannas form a parody of the romance genre:

> Another story was to the effect that Ra-Thaga alone had vanquished the armies of Mzilikazi after all the Barolong were slain, and rescued his beautiful wife, who was a captive among the Matabele. Again, that she herself slew two Matabele soldiers who were attempting to follow her and thus inspired the remainder with fear. p 73.

Because oral accounts are prone to be exaggerated by performers who perform for effect rather than accuracy, news which has travelled far cannot be relied on. This is in direct contradistinction to the myth of the 'marvellous powers of the native in the matter of the transmission of news' perpetuated by Haggard.[101] While de Villiers and Ra-Thaga are away on a spying expedition, the community at Thaba Nchu hear that they have been arrested and massacred. The news proves to be a distorted version of another incident: the arrest of a white youth and the massacre of the witchdoctors. When the men, mourned for dead, turn out to be very much alive, the incident is distilled in a commonplace:

> "How agreeably unreliable was news from a far country," was the comment of men. p 134.

The many lion encounters, derived from Tswana hunting tales, also serve an important thematic function in the novel; they reveal the courage of the characters. In the previous chapter mention was made of Z.D. Mangoaela's Sesotho collection of animal encounter stories.[102] Variants of all the lion and tiger episodes in *Mhudi* appear in this collection: there are tales of tail-pulling and accounts of cowardly hunters who abandon their friends to the mercy of wild animals. (The friend manages to over-power the beast and the coward, who has announced the death of his friend, is revealed for what he is.) Equally significantly, these tales underline the congruity of context. The background information which Mangoaela provides, suggests that Plaatje has preserved the context in

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[101] This 'myth' also crops up in other colonial novels. See for instance Edgar Wallace, *Sanders of the River* (London: Warde Locke, 1911), pp 240-243.

[102] Z.D. Mangoaela, *Har'a Libatana* (Morija: Morija Press, 1911).

which these stories were told. They were recounted to extol the brave deeds of hunters and travellers in encounters with wild beasts. This is confirmed by Motsamai, another collector of Sesotho tales, who adds:

> Even if these stories are all true, and fearsome, yet to-day they do not affright us as much, for there are many such in the world. Still, we do feel goose-fleshy when we tell the story of another man, for we feel as though we are actually seeing him with our own eyes entering into danger, and again escaping therefrom.[103]

Perhaps most conspicuous of all - and an important part of the counter to stereotypes of other races and cultures - are the proverbial sayings which pepper the characters' speech in *Mhudi*.[104] Like the aphorisms voiced by black characters in Haggard's fiction, many of the proverbs refer to the natural world, reflecting the main occupations of the Tswana people prior to the arrival of the whites. As Plaatje writes in the introduction to *Sechuana Proverbs*, "most of the proverbs originated on the pastures or the hunting-field, and the wealth of the Sechuana vocabulary lies in the same direction."[105]

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[103] Quoted by G. Franz, "The Literature of Lesotho," *Bantu Studies* 4.2 (1930): p 72.

[104] Many of the proverbs cited by characters are to be found in Plaatje's *Sechuana Proverbs*. For instance, proverb number 124, "The wise dam sucks its young while standing up, the foolish one sucks hers lying down (not so ready to dart off when hunters appear)" forms the nucleus of Moroka's speech to the Barolong people - the speech in which he attempts to elicit support for the Boers:
"Men of the Barolong," he said aloud, "listen! Old people say that 'the foolish dam suckles her young while lying down; but the wise dam suckles hers standing up and looking out for approaching hunters'. This day has brought with it the most appalling news since we pitched our abode on the banks of the Sepane River." p 112.

[105] Plaatje, *Sechuana Proverbs*, p 8.

Proverbs play a pivotal role in the political and social lives of the Barolong and the Matabele, countering popular fiction's portrayal of African political institutions as undeveloped and based on the whims of a despot of the likes of Chaka or Dingaan. In *Mhudi* power is shown to be diffused through the upper echelons of black society. This is exemplified by the assembly of the chiefs at the *khotla* in order to decide whether or not to support the Boers, and is underscored by the warrior Gubuza's intervention after the defeated warriors have been sentenced to death by Mzilikazi:

> Now, Gubuza was the general who commanded all the armies of Mzilikazi. He was as popular among the nation as his prowess was renowned among their enemies, so that even the king could not ignore his word. Mzilikazi therefore promptly countermanded the sentence of death upon the defeated warriors. p 103.

The novels also shows that power is mediated through public debate, and that proverbs are the bricks and mortar of great oratory. And proverbial sayings, rather than epitomising mindless reliance on received widom, can be a creative thought:

> Chaka was not as great an orator as most of the chiefs but he excelled in philosophy. In the council his witty expressions and dry humour were equal to those of Moshueshue, the Basuto king. He spoke in a staccato voice, with short sentences and a stop after each, as though composing the next sentence. His speeches abounded in allegories and proverbial sayings, some traditional and others spontaneous. His own maxims had about them the spice of originality which always provided his auditors with much food for thought. p 111.

Moreover, since a single proverb may express only a partial truth, the whole truth requires a number of different, often contradictory, proverbs to express its complexity. The occurrence of contradictory proverbs allows for conflicting views to be voiced - facilitates dialogue. This is illustrated by the debate in the Matabele camp over the expediency of Langa's massacre of the Barolong at Kunana. The sentiments of the

majority of the warriors are articulated by Dambuza when he states, "I would rather be a Bushman and eat scorpions than that Matabele could be hunted and killed as freely as rock-rabbits," p 55. This commonplace is disputed by Gubuza whose argument is condensed in the proverb: "Wiseacres of different nationalities are agreed that cheap successes are always followed by grievous aftermaths," p 54. These 'unpatriotic' sentiments arouse the ire of the crowd, but Gubuza's right to speak is sanctioned by Mzilikazi in a speech which embodies the underlying moral and polemical thrust of *Mhudi*:

> "In every grade of life there are always two sides to every matter. There are riches and poverty; beauty and ugliness; health and sickness; wisdom and folly; right and wrong; day and night; summer and winter; fire and water. One cannot exist without the other," p 58.

All the characters in the novel show themselves to be perfectly capable of rational thought; nor are they trapped in the darkness of received tradition. When Chief Moroka presides over the case of Mrs Poe, he departs from the precedent set by King Chosa of the Bangwaketse who punished the adulterers. Instead he acknowledges that times have changed, demonstrating a greater flexibilty than the Boers with their written law. And one of the lessons which Ra-Thaga learns during his stay with the Qorannas is the folly of blind adherence to formulaic expressions. When Mhudi (who is a highly preceptive judge of character) warns him against going with the headman, Ton-Qon, her husband disobeys, citing the proverb: "Never be led by a female lest thou fall over a precipice," p 73. Ra-Thaga learns his lesson, and the novel ends with the hero vowing to heed only one voice - the sober judgement of Mhudi:

> "Never again," replied Ra-Thaga, raising his voice above the creak-crack, creak-crack of the old waggon wheels. "I have had my revenge and ought

> to be satisfied; from henceforth, I shall have no ears for the call of war or the chase; my ears shall be open to one call only - the call of your voice." p 189.

Perhaps more than anything else, it is Plaatje's characterisation of Mhudi which forms the most powerful rejoinder to the "human absence" in imperial fiction. Brian Willan eulogises her in his biography of Plaatje:

> She is the central, life-giving figure of the book, a woman of great beauty, courage, wisdom and determination. Her qualities stand in sharp contrast to the far weaker and less formed character of her husband, Ra-Thaga. Often Plaatje sets her qualities in a humourous way against the stereotype of submissive female behaviour....[196]

Although the idealised woman is a common stock figure in Haggard's fiction and possesses many of the traits which Willan lists (such stock figures include Nada, Mameema, She etc.) - the difference between them and Mhudi is simply that they are not really African. The beautiful black women in these romances neither look nor act like African woman - they are accidents of history as this description of Mameena seems to imply:

> She was a little above the medium height, not more, with a figure, so far as I am a judge of such matters, was absolutely perfect - that of a Greek statue indeed... Her features showed no trace of the negro type; on the contrary they were singularly well cut, the nose being straight and fine and the pouting mouth that just showed the ivory teeth....[197]

Mhudi by contrast is deeply rooted in the African soil.[198]

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[196] Willan, p 358.

[197] Haggard, *Child*, p 59.

[198] In Victorian times the view was held that black women might be considered comely or shapely - but never beautiful. Thus in Haggard's novels, beautiful heroine's like Mameena do not have negroid features. Such prejudices might well have been derived from the "Song of Solomon". The King James Version contains the famous line: "I am black *but* comely" (my emphasis). Bryant's *Olden Times In Zululand and Natal*, for instance, contains a photograph of a Zulu woman, bearing the inscription "Niger sum, sed formosa". Bryant,

Plaatje's novel, then, is an important repository of different Tswana oral traditions: legends, folktales, proverbs etc. And yet there is a noticeable exception, pertaining to an important realm of pre-colonial Tswana culture. No allusion is made to the religious beliefs and rituals of the Barolong - myth forms no part of the repository. In one episode the heroine does, indeed, address the "the Maker of the Universe", but her invocation is along Christian lines. Like Mofolo, Plaatje was an active Christian; no doubt his religious convictions shaped his portrayal of pre-colonial customs and beliefs. Mhudi's contemplation of the stars is entirely reminiscent of Fekisi's meditation on evil in *Moeti oa Bochabela*. And as we noted in the previous chapter, these and similar questions are asked by the more intelligent 'savages' in popular Victorian romances. For instance, Mopo in *Nada the Lily*, after re-enacting Dingaan's treachery, is moved to ask:

> "Say, my father, why does the Unkulukulu who sits in the Heavens above allow such things to be done on the earth beneath?"[100]

Mhudi is plagued by similar fundamental questions as she gazes at the stars during the night spent alone in the forest. And like Mopo, the God

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Olden Times In Zululand and Natal (London. Longmans, Green and Co., 1929), p 1.

According to a Biblical commentary, a precise rendering of the Hebrew would be: "black am I and beautiful". However due to the melanophobia of translators, "the adversive relation between the blackness and the beauty was emphasised". Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1977), p 307.
Ironically these are the very lines cited by Half-a-Crown when describing the beautiful Umnandi:
"Such was the description of her given to Half-a-Crown, the hoary octogenarian, that it reminded him of a remarkable passage in the Song of Songs, namely:
I am black but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem (etc.)." p 91.

[100] Haggard, *Nada*, p 204.

which she addresses belongs to a neo-Christian conception of a Supreme Being (as the Biblical diction suggests):[200]

> This immense dome, so lofty and yet so brilliant, suggested the power of its Maker, who apparently also made the trees and birds, and beasts and men - yes brutal men!
>
> Where is the God, this spirit, that made all these things? Does He not stroll around sometimes and examine His handiwork, and even me? I wonder how long it took Him to make this immense universe? Is He satisfied with it all and with me? Surely He cannot be pleased with the Matabele or with Ton-Qon; and if they too are the creatures of the God of Life, what did He make such people for?" p 75.

According to the black theologist and philosopher, Gabriel Setiloane, the Tswana concept of *Modimo* would be more adequately represented by the pronoun 'it':

> Birth and death, success and failure, health and sickness, justice and injustice, order and disorder, relations between men and women ... - all are subsumed under an intense communtiy of which MODIMO is the source and 'badimo' at once ITS mediators and ITS integral members.[201]

The exclusion of Tswana mythology is compounded by Mhudi's behaviour after she realizes that by marvelling at the stars she has broken a traditional injunction. Mhudi's response is more consistent with the fear-ridden, superstitious 'savages' of *King Solomon's Mines*, than with the courageous, level-headed heroine who has survived three encounters with lions:

> Then her native superstitions got the better of her. "It is said that we should never attempt to count the

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[200] The novel records the presence of missionaries, but there is no evidence that Mhudi has been converted. Her succumbing to 'superstition' suggest that perhaps she has not.

[201] Gabriel Setiloane, *The Image of God Among the Sotho-Tswana* (Rotterdam: A.A. Balkema, 1976), p 224.

> stars. Have I not perhaps been trying to count them?" Her flesh began to creep. "If so, what could happen to me? Had someone been trying to count the stars and so brought about the fate of Kunana?" p

Moreo[illegible]se "native superstitions" is used without a trace of irony [illegible]hat the integrity of traditional Tswana belief is not intend[illegible]of the rejoinder to colonial fiction. Especially as her "native superstitions" are presented out of context. The "taboo" concerning the stars is described by Junod in *Life of a South African Tribe*:

> It is taboo to try to count the stars. If any one attempts to do so people will say to him: "Keep quiet or you will wet the hut during the night!" Counting stars represents the torments of the soul! If a child has been deprived of food as a punishment for an offence, his parents will tell him, when he goes to sleep: "Go and count the stars," viz., "you will feel hungry and not be able to sleep; you will be as unhappy as if you had to count the stars."[202]

The heroine's reaction to the monkey's chatter, the following morning, perpetuates this pattern:

> Again her native superstitious beliefs overcame her as she recalled the traditional folk-tales, according to which monkeys were among the 'things that should never be seen'. She thought of her own little chequered life and remembered that, throughout that period of her early wanderings she had never seen any monkeys, hence her consistent safety. p 76

The monkeys' presence accentuates Mhudi's (and our) sense of foreboding - after all, suspense is a fundamental ingredient in the romance novel. Nonetheless, as is often the case in Haggard's fiction, this effect is achieved at the expense of a nation's traditions and customs. In this instance a folktale (usually told to children) becomes transformed into "native superstitious beliefs" and is embued with religious connotations

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[202] Henri A. Junod, *Life of a South African Tribe*, vol. 2 (London: Macmillan and Co., 1927), p 308.

- while actual Tswana beliefs, such as those pertaining to the ancestoral spirits (*badimo*), are never mentioned.[203]

To conclude, the synthesis of oral and written traditions in *Mhudi* is a complex one that needs to be teased out within the context of the popular fiction of Plaatje's time. The author draws on oral tradition in order to counter many of the stereotypes concerning black people - literally, to forge a voice for himself within a European literary tradition. But because the novel is directed at a white audience the result is an uneasy combination of stylisation (to make the enterprise accessible and acceptable) and parody; assimilation and rejoinder. Nonetheless, *Mhudi* is a pioneering novel, one which makes explicit the process of struggle underlying the development of the black English novel in Southern Africa - and a brave attempt at filling the human absence in the landscape of colonial fiction.

[203] This folktale, told in many parts of the country, concerns a clan of people who are said to have been very lazy. Instead of cultivating their own fields they would rely on other clans for food. Eventually, however, these folk were punished for their indolence when their hees, which they used only to lean against, turned into tails, and shaggy hair grew all over their bodies. Benedict Vilikazi furnishes this tale with a moral and a context:
"To prevent children from being lazy, they are told the story of the Thusi clan who were changed into baboons. Even to-day, children who are still told Nguni tales avoid the sight of baboons."
Benedict Vilikazi, "The Oral and Written Literature in Nguni," diss., U of the Witwatersrand, 1945, p 241.

Chapter Five.

Convergence and Juxtaposition in A.C. Jordan's *Wrath of the Ancestors*.

A.C. Jordan's *Wrath of the Ancestors* has an oral storyteller whose mythical tales and prophecies all come true.[204] The oracular ability of old Ngxabane imbues the plot with an ambiguous sense of inevitability - one which allows for the convergence of two contrasting levels of interpretation: the mythical, and the social. The pattern of confluence in *Wrath of the Ancestors* is therefore an intricate one; Jordan was the first black South African novelist writing in English to attempt to capture the complexity of the society of his time. In this, and in his incorporation of indigenous oral narrative, he clearly anticipated the developments in the novel during the fifties and sixties in other parts of Africa.

At the social level, the novel explores ethnic conflict in the Mpondomiseland of the thirties. In this Transkeian territory half-a-century of colonial domination had resulted in a schism between the traditional Mpondomise and those who had come to adopt Christian

[204] A.C. Jordan, *Wrath of the Ancestors* (Lovedale: Lovedale Press, 1980). All page references refer to this edition.

ways and beliefs.[205] This schism is reflected in the plot, giving rise to the tragic events that befall Zwelinzima and Thembeka. By focusing on the fated couple Jordan both explores and mitigates personal agency, providing us with a social frame for individual actions.

At another level, *Wrath of the Ancestors* is a story which upholds the worldview of the traditional Mpondomise, the so-called 'Red' people. Throughout the narrative the old man's presence points to the existence of the ancestral spirits and a world beyond the parameters of the natural world, but sharing its space. As the narrative tapers to a close, this 'other' world dramatically asserts itself by calling Thembeka to her death (thus fulfilling the old man's prophecy).

To date, *Wrath of the Ancestors* has been seriously neglected by literary scholars. This is partly due to the anomalous position it occupies in South African literary history - the novel belongs, not to one, but to two different literary traditions. It was originally written and published in

[205] At the time when the novel was written, this schism embraced the entire Xhosa-speaking population of Transkei and Ciskei, and was already generations old. A pioneering anthropological study by Philip Mayer (carried out in the 50's) describes the differences between the two rural cultures: "The people known as *abantu ababomvu*, 'Red people', or less politely as *amaqaba*, 'smeared ones' (from the smearing of their clothes and bodies with red ochre), are the traditionalist Xhosa, the conservatives who still stand by the indigenous way of life, including the pagan Xhosa religion. 'Red' Xhosa are not just a few picturesque survivals: on the contrary, they are a flourishing half of the Xhosa people today, and are particularly strong in the areas nearest to East London. The antithetical type, *abantu basesikolweni*, 'School people', are products of the mission and the school, holding up Christianity, literacy, and other Western ways as ideals. 'School' people - it must be added - are not just town people or people under town influence... The primary division into Red and School lies within the countryside itself, where two folk cultures ... are carried on simultaneously." *Townsmen or Tribesmen* (Cape Town: Oxford U Press, 1961), p 4.

Xhosa in 1940 as *Ingqumbo Yeminyanya* and was a huge success among Xhosa readers.[206] Daniel Kunene, a former student of Jordan's, describes the fervid response the work evoked among students, and how even illiterate men recruited school boys to read it to them, "and would not let them be until they had read the last word."[207] Kunene's account is an interesting example of a situation where a written text enters into oral tradition. This is reminiscent of the reception that Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novels have enjoyed, more recently, among the Kenyan peasantry. Indeed the Xhosa novel could profitably be analysed in terms of Ngugi's quest for "African" forms, using indigenous languages.[208]

A decade or so after its first publication, *Ingqumbo Yeminyana* was translated by the author himself.[209] Through a literal translation of many

[206] A.C. Jordan, *Ingqumbo Yeminyanya* (Lovedale: Lovedale Press, 1940).

[207] Daniel Kunene quoted in Albert Gerard, *Four African Literatures* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1971), pp 86-87.

[208] Although the Xhosa novel has been the subject of a number of dissertations, thus far no study has placed it within a wider African context. See, for example, S.Z. Qangule, "A Study of Conflict and Theme in A.C. Jordan's Novel *Ingqumne Yeminyanya*," diss., U of South Africa, 1974.

Ngugi cites the novel as an example of the existing African literary tradition in *Decolonising the Mind* (London: Heinemann, 1981). Ironically, though, he is reliant on Gerard's account, not being able to read Xhosa - this would seem to be a serious counter against those advocating the use of national languages.

[209] The English edition was published by Lovedale Press in 1980, thirty years after Jordan parted company with Lovedale because it would not cede him the rights to publish his novel elsewhere. See Jeffrey

Xhosa expressions, Jordan forged a new and distinctive idiom. Examples abound in the character's dialogues.[210] For instance many of Ngxabane's speeches are filled with metaphors and idiomatic expressions transplanted from the Xhosa:

> How can times have changed when we still feast and live? I swear by the Mpondomise that, as long as I have breath, as long as the lightning birds of your wives have not killed me, so long will I teach you the customs you don't know. p 141.

Moreover, unusual syntax and ideophones reinforce our sense of a different language community:

> Awu!" he cried. "To live long is to see things! Here is a disgrace. We sent out grey-headed men to find a woman fit to be the bride of our Chief. And what happens? These grey-heads return with their heads turned by a girl's beauty! p 149.

Quite unlike the "padded English" of *Mhudi*, this style of writing anticipates the syncretic style of *Things Fall Apart* published eight years

Peires, "Lovedale Press: Literature for the Bantu Revisited," *English in Africa* 7.1 (1980): p 74.

In translating the novel, Jordan seems to have made important changes to the plot. For instance, in the original, Thembeka and Zwelinzima force certain reforms on the Mpondomise: the former prohibits the cutting of young babies' fingers while the latter places a ban on all witchdoctors. In *Wrath of the Ancestors*, however, the couple are depicted as being more idealistic, less imperious. This is because their reign proves to be too short for reforms to be carried out.

[210] Although many Xhosa idiomatic expressions were directly translated, stylistically the English version is completely different. In *Ingqumbo Yeminyanya* an intensely repetitious style suggests a closer kinship with oral tradition. This is how S.Z Qangule translates Thembeka's response to the news of Mphuthuni's arrival:
"wasuka wanovala, wanomizanga, kwayinqaba ukuya apho ablzelwa khona."
"she became afraid, she became hesitant, she found it difficult to go to where she was being called." (literal translation) p 19.
S.Z. Qangule, p 177.
The English version is more prosaic in its description of Thembeka's fear: "she had misgivings, and she hung back, finding it extremely difficult to go where she was wanted." p 22.

later. In fact there are many formal and thematic similarities between the English novel and Achebe's novels of the past, especially *Arrow of God*.

In *Arrow of God* the setting is the 'pre-colonial' village of Umuaro. Here traditional ways of interacting, and rites of worship are being practised in the face of the gradual encroachment of the British administration and the missionary effort. The inevitable conflict which arises out of the foreign presence is explored through the character of Ezeulu, Chief Priest of one of the village deities. Ezeulu wishes to keep abreast with changing times and so decides to send one of his sons to the missionary school. At school the boy learns to repudiate the customs of his village. When he tries to suffocate a sacred python, the repercussions spark off a chain of events which form the novel's plot. The narrative ends with the death of Ezeulu's eldest son and the decline in Ulu's power, with many of the villagers turning to the Christian God.[211]

A similar incident, in which a sacred snake is violated, forms the nucleus of the plot of *Wrath of the Ancestors*. A young, mission-educated Mpondomise prince returns to the Transkei after spending his childhood in a Gaikaian village. He has "progressive" ideas which clash with the tradition-bound outlook of the conservative factions in the land. And so when he marries the Mfengu woman of his heart, going against custom and the wishes of his late father, tensions between the two communities are exacerbated. These are further compounded by the actions of Thembeka his wife who, having grown up in a "School" environment, has little understanding of, and sympathy for, Mpondomese tradition. When

[211] Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God* (London: Heinemann, 1964).

the *nkwakhwa*, the sacred snake of the House of Majola, coils itself beside her child, she reacts hysterically - her killing of the snake leads to open confrontation.[212] Whereas *Arrow of God* ends with the God of the missionaries consolidating His power, the forces of tradition triumph in Jordan's novel. Thembeka, deeply affected by the consequences of her deed, drowns her child and herself in the Bedlana River. Not long thereafter, Zwelinzima slips into the water to join them.

Both writers draw on oral tradition to create an authentic picture of traditional African communities in the early part of this century. However, whereas Achebe is writing in a post-colonial era with the explicit intention of countering colonial depictions of Igbo history (typified by Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*),[213] Jordan's intentions are less pointed, more detached.[214] The detachment of the narrative voice reminds one of another Nigerian writer, Wole Soyinka, although Jordan's is a different kind of detachment, less obscure. No sides are taken - there is a story to be told and this is carried out tersely and dispassionately.

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[212] The Zulu-English dictionary states that the *nkwakhwa* belongs to the genus, *Pseudaspis cana* C.M. Doke and B.W. Vilakazi, *Zulu-English Dictionary* (Johannesburg: Wits U Press, 1948). According to V.F.M. FitzSimons, this species of snake, known as the Common Mole Snake, is non-poisonous. *A Field Guide to the Snakes of Southern Africa* (London: Collins, 1970). Qangule, on the other hand, states that the *nkwakhwa* belongs to the poisonous brown cobra family.

[213] Joyce Cary, *Mister Johnson* (London: Michael Joseph, 1939).

[214] Achebe has compared his first novel with the return of the prodigal: "Although I did not set about it consciously in that solemn way, I now know that first book, *Things Fall Apart*, was an act of atonement with my past, the ritual return and homage of a prodigal son." Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (London: Heinemann, 1975), p 70.

But like Soyinka, Jordan draws on the oral traditions of his people, using techniques of juxtaposition and convergence to explore the social and mythical dimensions of his society. And as in Soyinka, the individual forms the focus of the novel.

The most explicit kinds of juxtaposition lie at the level of description. Contrasting details, mentioned in passing, assume greater significance as the story unfolds. The first example occurs in the the opening paragraphs which describe the arrival of ten horsemen at a homestead:

> These men looked like village travellers. They were all in riding- breeches, but it was obvious that two or three of them wore trousers only on very special occasions such as this one. p 3.

In contrast to the men, uncomfortable in trousers, is the young companion of a minor Chief:

> The other was a mere youth of about twenty, whose dress and bearing indicated that he was a college student. He wore a hat with the Lovedale college badge. p 4.

The meeting at Mzamo's homestead expands on the contrast and introduces major themes. A traditional beer-drinking ceremony forms the focus of conversation about the changing proclivities of the youth, and the deceitful ways of teachers:

> "Come and have a drink, then Mashiya!"
> "No, thank you, father. I don't drink."
> "What! Are you a schoolmaster, then?"
> "What do you mean, 'schoolmaster', Thole lenkunzi? exclaimed Maqhubela. "Is it not these very teachers who tell us where beer is to be found these days?"
> "No, Nozulu," replied Mzamo. "What I mean is that teachers drink on the sly."
> "Nonsense! Not these of the days of gaslights. Teachers drink with us nowadays."
> "Then why not let Dumakude's child drink? Come, have a drink, my boy. This stuff doesn't tell tales. And all of us here are your fathers."
> At this point Dabula intervened.
> "No, Dlamini," he said. "This child doesn't drink, and I don't want him to. He has so far escaped the habit. The youth of these days can't take their liquor." pp 5-6.

This conversation anticipates Zwelinzima's youthfulness and the important part played by teachers in the plot. Linked to this, at the thematic level, is the novel's exploration of the ambivalent nature of Western education within the context of a rural society like Mpondomiseland. This ambivalence is voiced by a progressive headman, who tells the missionary, Father Williams:

> We praised you and your people too soon for the light you brought, *Mfundisi*, not realizing that through your religion and your education, our children are learning to lose respect for the customs and traditions of their fathers. Now we have discovered that we are no longer being taught to be men. p 231.

Within the wider plot the ceremony itself forms the basis of juxtaposition with less ceremonial interactions. Despite the light-heartedness of the conversation, formal courtesies are nevertheless strictly observed - the beer is passed around according to age and the host fulfills his customary role. When his wife brings a *lala* of beer, he apologises for being forced to serve "the very dregs of his beer" at the "house of his dog". The slaughter of a sheep for supper calls for similar hyperbole:

> "I am afraid you will go hungry here, for we can only give you the little we have, and no more - the hard mielie-grains which we ourselves were going to have as our poor evening meal. Here, then are the grains, and he pointed to the sheep." p 11.

The ritual nature of Mpondomise interactions can be compared with the Igbo ceremonies described in *Arrow of God* (and both writers explore these to similar effect) - although Igbo formalities consist of actions rather than words:

> Ezeulu presented a lump of chalk to his visitors and each of them drew his personal emblem of upright and horizontal lines on the floor. Some painted their big toe and others marked their face. Then he brought them three kolanuts in a wooden bowl. A short formal argument began and ended. Ezeulu took

> one kolanut, Ezekwesili took the second and Onenyi Nnanyelugo took the third....[215]

And in both novels, traditional interactions are juxtaposed with the different customs among the "Whites".

In the informal atmosphere of Fort Hare University little attention is paid to age difference. When Zwelinzima arrives as a 'fresher' the warden of Beda Hall personally shows him around and invites him to lunch. The Bishop, modelled on the real Warden of Beda Hall, is the epitome of informality in the novel, and the ambience of the meal contrasts sharply with the earlier meal at Mzamo's homestead:

> On entering the dining-room he was relieved to find that he was not the only Black who had been invited. There were two students from Johannesburg, also shy "freshers" like him. For the rest, there were two White women who had a motherly kindness about them. They conversed with him so simply and unaffectedly that he soon found himself very much at ease and wondered why he had felt so awkward in the first instance. The Bishop, too, in spite of his grave countenance, proved to be an excellent conversationalist. He told many amusing stories and, by the time they retired, the students felt quite at home.[216]

The Bishop also characterises the "White" way of communicating in the novel - direct, to the point and with only lip service paid to formalities. This is emphasised when he visits Zwelinzima's step-father to urge him to honour Zanemvula's wish and not make Zwelinzima his heir. This "White" way is caricatured by the narrative voice:

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[215] Achebe, pp 257-258.

[216] Z.K. Matthews describes Bishop Smythe, the Warden of Beda Hall in his autobiography:
"By instinct he was free and fair and open, and he established relationships and a mode of life that have become known as the Beda Hall Tradition. He believed, for one thing, in self-discipline rather than imposed order." *Freedom For My People* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1979), p 76.
This description, significantly, encapsulates one of the novel's major themes.

> It must be remembered that when White people enquire after your health, they never wait for a reply. By the time you have finished clearing your throat, preparing to give a full account of drought and taxes, epidemics of whooping cough and other such calamities, you will find that the White person is already discussing something quite different. p 42.

The contrast between the episodes at Fort Hare and those in traditional settings foreshadow the tensions which arise when the Chief and his wife transplant a Beda Hall mode of life into a tradition-bound environment. For, in the view of the Red blanket people, even minor breaches of custom such as informality in dress and bearing will have grave consequences. Thus Ngxabane blames the non-appearance of the 'animal' on Thembeka's behaviour and dress in public:

> How could Majola reveal himself to a woman who does not even think it improper to appear naked in his presence. p 170.

The meeting at Mzamo's homestead, then, sets up a pattern of contrasts that are repeated throughout the narrative. These contrasts, along with Ngxabane's stories, foreshadow events and provide alternating social and mythical backdrops to the tragedy.

To return to the opening section and the storyteller. In many ways, Ngxabane is the complete antithesis of the Bishop. Clad in a bright red blanket, he is the most conservative figure in the novel (unlike Jongilanga, he never modifies his views). In contrast to Dingindawo, his belief in tradition is a reflection of integrity, and his prophetic tales serve as our point of entry into the mythical world of the belief system of the Red blanket Mpondomise.

Moreover, the responses which his tales evoke foreground the historical tensions and serious epistomological differences that exist between the

Red and School communities. The interchange between the old man and the host concerning Mpondomise burial customs is a revealing example:

> "You Mpondomise people really have strange ways. How did you come by this custom of burying your kings in river-pools?"
> "Aha! exclaimed Maqhubela, rising to his feet. "Come, Ngxabane, do tell us. Is it true that Majola was buried in that pool?" The old man was shocked at these remarks.
> "What is this, Dlangamandla?" he said to Dabula. "You don't say that you're travelling with mere babies! Do you mean to tell me, young man, that you didn't know that the royal prince sleeps there? If you ever dared enter that pool you would never come out again." p 8.

Mzamo, who is of Mfengu descent, contradicts Ngxabane's dramatic exhortion. His irreverent rejoinder is couched in ethnic terms:

> "That's what everybody used to say when we first came to settle here. But we *tough boys from the Thukela* (my emphasis) used to go in there and swim." p 9.

These words are vigorously denied by the old man. According to the traditional outlook, the natural and supernatural worlds coincide while the natural and social orders are linked. Symbols of this convergence derive, in the novel, from the natural world and include the earth, the pool and certain species of snake. When sacred custom is violated, the ancestral spirits will withdraw their favours until their anger has been propitiated with an offering.[217] Therefore Mzamo would not have been able to swim in the pool without being punished. Ngxabane blames the British conquest of the Mpondomise on the erosion of tradition due to

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[217] Monica Hunter, in a classic study of the Mpondo, describes how offerings are made at sacred pools. If the pool heaves, the spirits have accepted the offering; if, however, a snake appears, floating upside down, it is a sign that the spirits are angry. They will not accept the offering. *Reaction to Conquest* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1975), pp 256-7. W.D. Hammond-Tooke explores some of these symbols in "The Symbolic Structure of Cape Nguni Cosmology," *Religion and Social Change in Southern Africa*, ed. Michael Whisson and Martin West (Cape Town: David Philip, 1975).

foreign influences. Kings are no longer buried in water - and the consequence is White domination:

> "Where, where is our kingdom now?" he cried. "No sooner have we buried a king than his body is dug up again and desecrated by sorcerors. How then can the land be saved from the White people if the bodies of our Kings are carved up and distributed among sorcerors?" p 9.

The mythical tale of the *nkwakhwa* brings the storytelling to a close, and evokes a similar reaction:

> Ngxabane told them that the nkwakhwa is the spirit of the House of Majola. He explained that just as the wives of this house reverence the Thina River and never lift up their skirts when crossing it, a sign of respect for the ancestors of their husbands who sleep there, so do they also reverence the nkwakhwa. Neither man nor woman may kill it, for it is through it that the spirits of the ancestors confer blessings upon them. When a wife of the House of Majola conceives, the snake reveals itself to her, and in that way it is understood that the child she will bear is acceptable to the ancestoral spirits. p 10.

Some of the men ridicule the myth. Very significantly, their response prompts Maqhubela to recall an incident involving the snake:

> Maqhubela went on to relate that there was once a quarrel among them when they were schoolboys at St. Cuthberts because, while they were bathing in the river one Saturday, a nkwakhwa appeared, and he and other Fingo boys promptly killed it. This caused a split, the Mpondomise and the Fingo factions until the teachers intervened. p 10.

Thus from the beginning a further pattern is established: the snake myth is associated with ethnic conflict, and with bloodshed. When the pattern repeats itself through Thembeka's actions, the terrible consequences that ensue are made more plausible. And we are reminded of the heroine's Fingo origins. This pattern also embues the plot with a sense of inevitability - the characters are confronted with social forces that pre-date their lives. And yet this does not completely undermine the

choices which individual characters make, nor does it rob them of a tragic status.

As in the novels of Wole Soyinka, Jordan explores the consequences of a moment in history for, and from the point of view of, the individual. Ngugi's criticism might well have been directed at *Wrath of the Ancestors*:

> Soyinka's good man is the uncorrupted individual: his liberal humanism leads him to admire an individual's lone act of courage, and thus often he ignores the creative struggle of the masses.[218]

Certain episodes in the novel are based on actual historical events which have been transmuted by the plot. For instance the boycott of schools by the Red people in response to the killing of the snake is loosely mirrored on the pig-killing movement of the 1920's. This was a 'millenial movement' centering around the Garveyite preachings of Wellington Butelezi which attracted a huge Red following in the Transkei. Butelezi, a bogus doctor, proclaimed that the Americans were coming in aeroplanes to liberate Africa, provided his followers killed all their pigs and painted their houses black. When the missionaries and teachers spoke out against the movement, many followers took their children out of the schools, and faction fighting ensued.[219] In the novel, however, the faction fighting is precipitated by an individual's act; the wider political connotations are never alluded to. And towards the end, Jordan is more explicitly

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[218] Quoted in James Booth, *Writers and Politics in Nigeria* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981), p 118.

[219] Followers of Butelezi were called the amaFelandawonyes - the name which Zwelinzima's supporters adopt when they are plotting his return. For a neo-Marxist perspective of political struggles in the Transkei during this period see William Beinart and Colin Bundy, *Hidden Struggles in Rural South Africa* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1987).

concerned with Thembeka's state of mind than to explore political struggles.[220]

We first meet Zwelinzima and Thembeka during their student days. The episodes at Lovedale college and Fort Hare University offer us an insight into the characters of the young prince and his future bride in an informal setting. Major is popular among his fellow students, and is clearly marked as a leader. Thembeka, for her part, emerges as a person of integrity, possessing a strong will and a fiery temper. In contrast to the Bhaca princess (that missing signifier of submissive womanhood), she rejects a customary pre-arranged marriage. And she is undaunted when Mthunzini, her hapless suitor, enlists the missionary's help. In her meeting with Father Williams, she displays a forthrightness very different from all the other female characters in the novel:

> First, she listened patiently until he finished speaking, and then she thanked him for being so interested in the welfare of those who were as children to him and for his untiring efforts in advising them. As the old man was beginning to smile, thinking he had been succesful, Thembeka turned the tables on him. Without any hesitation she rejected the offer out of hand. She made it clear that she had absolutely no love for this man. It was true she could not name any fault in him, but the fact remained that she found it impossible to marry him. She was so emphatic in her refusal that the missionary turned red with embarassment. p 60.[221]

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[220] We must not forget the constraints placed on the would-be writer by the vernacular printing houses. It is unlikely that a novel exploring political struggles would have found a publisher.

[221] Is Thembeka the first 'feminist' heroine to appear in a black novel? Her madness and suicide certainly lend themselves to a feminist interpretation. As Tony Tanner writes about Charlotte Bronte's novel *Villette*: "the upsurge of all kinds of personal 'disorder' (whether rage, hysteria, sickness, mental derangement, or desperate emotion) into the bad or inauthentic order of society depicted in the book, are attributable to her sense of this whole problem of being a woman

When Thembeka becomes Nobantu, Mother of the People, this forthrightness finds expression in an assortment of social causes and activities - all of which mirror her progressive outlook. She organises the women, founds Child Welfare and Home Improvement societies, and becomes a Patron of the Wayfarers, a girl's society. Just as her husband uses the Bhunga sessions to condemn traditional divining practices, she, too, uses her social involvements as a platform for her views. For instance, she speaks out against the custom of scarifying young children. Unlike her husband, however, she never learns to temper her outspoken dismissal of tradition until it is too late. Furthermore, her lack of sympathy for the customs of the traditional Mpondomise is compounded by a lack of sensitivity and her quick temper.

When Dingindawo slyly suggests, in front of Ngxabane, that her child 'undergo custom' (a euphemism for scarification), she flies into a rage, threatening to sue anyone who touches her child. And there is also her treatment of Nozihlwele. When the latter tries to relate the legend of the snake, as it pertains to young brides in the House of Majola, Thembeka treats her account as if it were a joke - she does not pay the slightest heed to the young Red woman's words. These episodes temper our sympathy for the heroine when she commits the grave act of actually killing the *nkwakhwa* - the 'animal' which according to tradition she is expected to venerate. Although one can empathise with her shock at discovering a snake coiled beside her child, the fit of pique in which she kills the reptile is harder to condone:

> She picked it up by the tail, carried it to an ant-hill some distance from the house and left it there. Meantime, she went on muttering angrily to herself,

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in a male-defined context." Tony Tanner, Introduction, *Villette*, by Charlotte Bronte (Harmondworth: Penguin, 1979), pp 45-46.

> "Tyhu! Our children are in danger of being bitten to death by snakes, and all these people can do is shout, "Majola, Majola" all the time! p 184.

Immediately after the catastrophe Ngxabane makes it clear that culpability does not lie with Thembeka alone. Her act is the expected outcome of the flagrant disregard for custom that has characterised Zwelinzima's reign; thus the Mpondomise must share the burden of guilt, "We ... stood by and looked on at our own destruction." p 189. From the beginning the old man has been opposed to the king's choice of Thembeka as a wife. He argues that a wife, not a bracelet, is required and predicts that the Mpondomise will live to regret making Thembeka their queen:

> It is no mere whim on the part of people of royal birth to inter-marry. This practice dates back to the beginning of time. A royal house has certain practices and customs that must be jealously guarded. That is why it is necessary for a chief to marry a woman who is accustomed to these customs and practices and knows their meaning... This girl, whose beauty has turned your heads, will embarass you all here when she fails to give respect where it is due and violates every one of the sacred customs of the House of Majola. pp 149-50.

Ironically, although the old man's prediction comes true, it is not due to his perceptiveness. Thembeka, with her strong will and forthrightness, is no "bracelet". And yet, once again, he inadvertently reminds us of the social dimensions of what amounts to an impulsive, irrational act. Social dimensions echoed by the perspicacious Kalipha on the eve of his daughter's wedding:

> He was not without misgivings at this honour, for, having long since ceased to attach any importance to tribal custom, he was very doubtful if Thembeka would make a success of her royal marriage. p 153.

A lesson which Thembeka does not learn is the one delivered to her husband by the Thembu Chief - a character who represents the reconciliation of extremes. When asked why, as a progressively-minded

person, he opposed the extermination of goats (used in divining practices), his response is:

> "Jola allow me to ask you a question. Do you realize that it was the Thembu Chief who made that speech in the Bhunga?"
> "Yes, I realize that," replied Zwelinzima, amazed at the question.
> "Excellent! said the Thembu. "Now, Jolinkomo, if you want to know whether or not the Chief of the Thembu believes all this nonsense, as you call it, the answer is "Yes". But if you want to know whether I, as myself, believe it or not, then the answer is certainly "No". Do you understand me?" p 179.

Thembeka does not learn to separate her private being from Nobantu, her public persona: to act according to her principles and beliefs in private but to assume a different role in public. Social reasons ensure that, for the most part, she is oblivious to the offence which her behaviour is causing. We are told that she is unaware, for instance, that the drop in attendance at woman's meetings is due to her way of dressing and her trips to Umtata. These social forces are personified by Ding'ndawo whose malevolence compounds the conspiracy of events. As a source of division he is the human counterpart to the *nkwakhwa* - Mthunzini refers to him in his letter "the snake of snakes". Dingindawo exploits Thembeka's weaknesses, encourages Zwelinzima to make the wrong decisions and allows his nephew to alienate the Red people without intervening. Eventually, through his skillful manipulative powers, he succeeds in depriving his nephew of a power base, forcing him to take another wife - a compromise of principle which destroys Zwelinzima and Thembeka's marriage. Towards the end, however, events assume their own momentum, and mythical, natural and social forces converge to effectuate the heroine's final gesture. Dingindawo, too, becomes a victim when his son Vukuza drowns while trying to rescue the young mother and her child.

The convergence of levels of meaning in the novel is paralleled by the confluence of different kinds of narrative. *Wrath of the Ancestors* is, all at once: a realistic portrayal of social conflict; a tale of power and tragic decline; a detective story complete with purloined letters; a mythical tale of prophecy and retribution inspired by the legends of Mpondomise kings - and a fairy tale. Thembeka's physical and mental degeneration after she kills the snake, and the conspiracy of events on the fateful day of her suicide, embue the narrative with an aura of unreality. It is as if we have entered the world of the fairy tale or the *ntsoml* (a fabulous tale in Xhosa oral tradition). This is reinforced by the prevalence of a similar motif in many *//ntsoml* - the familiar motif of a heroine who breaks a traditional injunction, challenges a serpent or water monster, and is punished for her actions.[222]

One such variant is translated and re-told by Jordan himself in *Tales from Southern Africa*.[223] Entitled the "Maidens of Bhakhuba", it tells of a princess called Nomtha-we-Langa (Mother of the Sunbeam) who is undergoing initiation into puberty. One day she violates Xhosa custom by leaving her place of seclusion to join the young maidens of Bhakhuba, on their way to bathe in a pool. The princess, fearing discovery, convinces the girls to go to a more secluded pool called Lulange - a forbidden pool, said to be very deep.

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[222] Many variants appear in Harold Scheub's collection of Xhosa folk tales, *The Xhosa Ntsoml* (London: Oxford U Press, 1971).

[223] A.C. Jordan, *Tales from Southern Africa* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1973).

The girls swim in the pool without mishap. But when it is time to go home, they discover a slimy monster stretched out on top of their clothing. Each girl, in turn, approaches the monster, begs for her clothing, and is handed the garments. But when it comes to the princess's turn, she arrogantly refuses to beg:

> "What! Beg for my clothes from this ugly monster? How dare he lay his loathsome belly on the clothes of the maidens of Bhakhuba?"[224]

Instead of begging, she screws up her face and sings in an ugly, defiant voice "Nyi-nyi-nyi". The monster responds by biting her on the thigh - and the princess is transformed:

> there lay the princess in a heaped-up position, alive and conscious, but her face and whole body as ugly and loathsome as that of the monster.[225]

Thus Thembeka's decline 'reads' like an *ntsomi*, a huge irony in the light of her statement at the beginning of the novel. When Mphuthumi is relating the story told by Ngxabane about the true origins of Zwelinzima, she dismissively asks:

> "When are these fantastic Nongqawuse tales ever to end in this Africa of ours?" p 18.[226]

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[224] "The Maidens of Bhakhuba" in *Tales from Southern Africa*, p 64.

[225] *Tales from Southern Africa*, p 65. The princess is too ashamed to return home and is taken to live in a secluded hut in a faraway land. Eventually she is rescued by a prince.

[226] Her words recall one of the earliest pieces of prose written by a Xhosa- the account of Nongqawuse by William Gqoba, the poet-historian who is described in the Introduction. Gqoba's first-hand account of the cattle-killing incident, (translated by A.C Jordan), ends with this postscript:
"Such then was the Nongqawuse catastrophe. The people died of hunger and disease in large numbers. Thus it was that whenever thereafter a person said an unbelievable thing, those who heard him, said: 'You are telling a Nongqawuse tale'."
A.C. Jordan, *Towards An African Literature* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1973), p 75.

The convergence of events on her last day might be interpreted as furnishing an answer to her question. The fact that it is a wedding day is highly significant. A symbol of fertile union and new beginning is juxtaposed with the barren, divided state of her marriage, and the spiritual death within. Moreover, it is a wedding of the Gcaga clan which also venerates a snake. This snake, the mythical *nknyamba*, or light-bearing water snake, always attends the ceremony:

> when a young man of this clan marries, there must needs be a thunderstorm, because the 'animal' of the house must come and see the bride. At least this is the legend, and this they believe in Mpondomiseland. p 263.

Not only is this believed, but, more significantly, in the world of the novel such prophecies do come true.

> Sure enough, as the sun began to slope towards the hills, the clouds gathered quickly and in a very short time the sky was enveloped by an enormous blanket of clouds. Blinding flashes of lightning split the sky, thunder roared, and a fierce rain lashed the earth. p 263.

The final episode of Thembeka's life draws together all the symbols of Ngxabane's stories: the snake, the sacred pool and the buried king - images which recur in the plot and which link the different levels and world-views. The ever-recurrent image of water - a shaping metaphor which joins different levels of plot - reminds one of Soyinka's novel *The Interpreters*. For instance, the convergence of the metaphors of water and snake that heralds Thembeka's death is reminiscent of the 'martyrdom' of the equally idealistic Sekoni. Water is also a shaping metaphor in this densely-structured novel. Moreover, water is an element in Sekoni's dream to furnish Nigeria with electricity, and it is water that kills him:

> The rains of May become in June slit arteries of the sacrificial bull, a million bleeding punctures of the

> sky-bull hidden in convulsive cloud humps, black, overfed for this one event, nourished on horizon tops of endless choice grazing, distant beyond giraffe reach. Some competition there is below, as bridges yield right of way to lorries packed to the running-board, and the wet tar spins mirages of unspeed-limits to heroic cars... The Dome cracked above Sekoni's short-sighted head one messy night. Too late he saw the insanity of a lorry parked right in his path, a swerve turned into a skid and cruel arabesque of tyres.[227]

Thembeka's death is also precipitated by a storm. The 'snake-storm' raging outside her hut makes her greatly agitated:

> Meanwhile Thembeka was fidgeting and fretting like a mother animal calling for its young. As soon as the storm was over, she burst out of the house and ran to the Royal Place. There she found the children dabbling in the pools outside, and there was her Zululiyazongoma in the midst of them! p 263.

With everyone at the Royal Place away at the wedding, the demented woman is afforded a head-start. And in the aftermath of the storm, the river is in full flood; the would-be rescuers can only watch helplessly as the mother and her child (along with Vukuza who jumps in to save them) are swept away to be drowned. For Ngxabane these events are wholly explicable: the ancestors have called her to return the child. He predicts that the body will never be recovered:

> "You search in vain. The child has gone back to the ancient custom of the Mpondomise, whereby our chiefs were buried in water. He was a Chief by birth, and through him our ancestors are reminding us of the customs we have rejected and violated." p 264.

Once again his prophecy proves true and, at the mythical level, the plot completes a full circle. We have come back to where we started at the story-telling session at Mzamo's homestead, with the apparent triumph of the forces of tradition and conservatism.

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[227] Wole Soyinka *The Interpreters* (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1965), p 155.

But there is still a final juxtaposition and convergence. Unlike Achebe, Soyinka's writings have always been characterised by a refusal to idealise the traditional past (although he draws extensively on Yoruba mythology in both creative and theoretical works). In his play *The Lion and the Jewel*, for instance, the triumph of the wily old Chief is undermined by the irony of his instrument: a new, but useless stamp vending machine.[228] In his novel, *The Interpreters*, Soyinka's impartial approach to the old and new is expressed by the cynic, Egbo:

> "I have, I sometimes suspect, strained objectivity to its negative limits. What choice, I ask myself, is there between the ugly mudskippers on this creek and the raucous toads of our sewage-ridden ports? What difference?"[229]

Similarly, the triumph of tradition is undermined in *Wrath of the Ancestors* by the events which form the Postscript. Nomvuyo and Mphuthumi, the progressive-minded friends of the late couple, give birth to a son. His birth is in contrast to the House of Majola which has been left without an heir. Moreover, and significantly, his name (formed out of the linguistic union of the names Zwelinzima and Thembeka) means "Land of Hope". The child will preserve the memory of the departed couple; more importantly, he will perpetuate their way of life. The progressive credo of the final epitaph rings with the promise of a triumphant future:

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[228] Wole Soyinka, *The Lion and the Jewel*, (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1976).

[229] Soyinka, p 14. A similar point is made by James Booth: "Does the play then offer a celebration of the victory of healthy traditional values over slick modernity? If it does, it is an oddly wry one." *Writers and Politics in Nigeria*, p 115.

Stand firm and confident on your feet, young boy! There are glorious fields for you to conquer! p 277.[230]

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[230] It is perhaps ironical that the epitaph is couched in militant diction - the language of the now-absent Ngxabane.

Conclusion.

Since 1976 South Africa has witnessed a resurgence of political activity which has intensified in the last four years. Research for this dissertation was carried out against the backdrop of an unprecedented crisis situation, one which has led to much debate about the role of the university in a changing South Africa. The essence of the debate was summed up by Dr. Beyers Naude in his 1987 Senate Special Lecture:

> A process of deep fundamental social change is taking place in South Africa today which, in challenging and questioning many of the traditional concepts also includes the questioning of academic education, its goals and objectives and of the need for a totally new approach.[231]

One of the questions posed by a recent Perception of Wits survey was "How can university courses be made more accessible, relevant and useful?"[232] Addressing the issue of relevancy, Njabulo S. Ndebele, during the same lecture series, accused the liberal universities of serving the interests of an English cultural nationalism that is essentially derivative

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[231] Beyers Naude, "Education for Liberation," *The University and Its Communities*, Senate Special Lectures 1987 (Johannesburg: U of the Witwatersrand, 1987), p 4.

[232] Perception of Wits, *The Role of the University in a Changing Society* (Johannesburg: U of the Witwatersrand, 1986).

> constantly conjuring before itself the image of the metropolitan centre, and measuring itself, somewhat slavishly, against that image.[233]

Nevertheless, the past decade has witnessed some attempts on the part of liberal universities at reorientation. Steve Kromberg argues that the recognition of African Literature as a discipline was a part of this process:

> The establishment of the African Literature Department at Wits in 1983 reflected on the one hand the growing recognition of the discipline and on the other hand the (tentative) recognition by Wits University that it would have to start rooting itself in the African continent.[234]

Thus far African Literature enjoys the status of an independent discipline only at Wits University.[235] At other English universities African literary works are offered as courses ancillary to the study of English literature - and this has at times only been achieved after a protracted internal struggle.[236] This state of affairs begs comparison with the situation in Nigeria after independence, described in the preface. And it is possible that similar Leavis-type tradition-building will take place here, too.

Recently scholars such as Jeremy Cronin of the Philosophy Department at the University of Cape Town have begun stressing the pertinence of

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[233] Njabulu S. Ndebele, "The University: Redefining Commitments," Senate Special Lectures 1987, p 27.

[234] Steve Kromberg, "A review of the African Literature Division at the University of the Witwatersrand," Hons. diss., U of the Witwatersrand, 1987, p 60.

[235] Kromberg, p 60.

[236] See Michael Chapman, "Literary Studies in South Africa: Contexts of Value and Belief," *English Academy Review* 3 (1985): p 149.

the oral tradition to the study of black poetry (although his arguments can be generalised to include the black novel). In "Ideology and Literary Studies in South Africa" Cronin asserts that South African literary studies since the seventies have been dominated by ideological antimonies, form vs content, the particular versus the individual, and the public versus the private.[237] According to Cronin there have been two camps of critics, both of whom have perpetuated these antimonies. The formalists have tended to dismiss black poetry as lacking form, while the followers of the "historical/political" school have neglected a close reading of this literature, or placed too great an emphasis on the formal influences of a European literary tradition. Both camps have overlooked the fact that a great deal of black poetry is orientated towards "immediate communication":

> The new black poetry is drawing, for its forms, on a wide variety of traditional and contemporary oral traditions. ... To ignore these formal influences is particularly unhelpful when considering the poetic genre where form is closely related to content.[238]

For Cronin the study of the formal influences of oral tradition offers an approach to reconciling these antimonies:

> There is, then, in our opinion both the need and the possibility of carrying through, within the discipline of literary studies, a close reading of the new black poetry. It is a reading that will have to concern itself not just with the socio-political significance of this poetry, but also with the FORMAL means deployed in realizing this significance.[239]

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[237] Jeremy Cronin, "Ideology and Literary Studies in South Africa," paper presented at the 1985 A.U.E.T.S.A. conference.

[238] Cronin, p 12.

[239] Cronin, pp 12-13.

Given the formalist bent that has dominated the history of English literary studies in universities in South Africa - particularly at undergraduate level where even today a "Practical Criticism" form of close-reading is often perpetuated - it is likely that Cronin's argument will be heeded. There is a danger, however, that the oral tradition will be appropriated in an uncritical way by scholars and teachers more at home in English literature. Scholars and teachers who might, for instance, inadvertently resurrect colonial stereotypes by generalising about orality. Furthermore such an approach, as exemplified by the work of Fritchi (see Chapter One), could re-empower a narrow formalism which by universalising oral tradition would ignore African literature's crucial social-historical and *cultural* context.[240]

It is with this possible future scenario in mind that this study has been carried out. In the first part of this dissertation, then, I have attempted to show the complexity of the continuum of oral and written tradition, while in the body I have explored this continuum in textual studies of early novels - two of which have been almost entirely neglected by literary scholarship. Although the focus has overwhelmingly been on the interaction between orality and literacy, this interaction would be meaningless without the wider social context of the missionary involvement in early black writing.

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[240] Over the years the study of oral tradition has come to assume a central place in the syllabi of the Division of African Literature. For comments and criticisms pertaining to the Division's approach to oral literature see Steve Kromberg's dissertation. More recently Stan Frielich's "Winged Words/Caged Texts: Oral Tradition and Teaching African Literature," paper presented at the 1988 Natal U Conference on Orality, provides a detailed outline of the courses currently offered at undergraduate and honours level.

Christianity, in both education and writing, played an intrinsic role. The missionaries provided the "models", ran the printing presses and encouraged creative writing all with a spirit of prescriptive 'open mindedness' so characteristic of Christian liberalism.[241] And it is this background that loosely unites the novels studied. All three novels share a continuity with the stories and poems printed in nineteenth century missionary newspapers. Moreover, in attempting to find a voice for themselves within a literary tradition that had rendered them voiceless - and within the more concrete constraints of the politics of publishing - all three writers turned to the oral traditions of their communities. Their writings, however, to a greater or lesser degree, formed part of a dialogue with this Christian 'moralizing project'. As a result many of the early narratives are suffused with a sense of unease:

> Whether in indigenous languages or in English, their literature had a largely pastoral setting; the action was concerned with historical events, it was in effect a dialogue of two selves, the dramatisation of a dual personality - the traditional and the Christian.[242]

By the time Jordan's novel was written it was possible for distanciation, and the "dialogue of two selves" had become less double-voiced. But by then the sense of unease pervading early black literature had shifted "to a new dot on the previously empty horizon" - the town.[243]

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[241] See R.H.W. Shepherd, *Bantu Literature and Life* (Lovedale: Lovedale Press, 1955).

[242] Es'kia Mphahlele, "Landmarks of literary history in South Africa." *The Voice of the Black Writer in Africa* Senate Special Lectures. (Johannesburg: U of Witwatersrand, 1980), p 5.

[243] Tim Couzens, "Widening Horizons of African Literature, 1870-1900," *Literature and Society in South Africa*, p 71.

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