

“My novel, *Hill of Fools*”

R.L.Peteni

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Introduced by Jeff Opland.

Transcribed and edited by Laurence Wright.¹

- - - This, then, is the first of two lectures on African writing in English, one specific, one general, and it is my very great privilege to introduce to you this morning a published author, Mr Peteni, who has written a novel *Hill of Fools*. Mr Peteni was born a staggeringly long time ago for a man so very well preserved, 1915, and he studied at Lovedale and at Fort Hare, which was then the University College of Fort Hare, and since then he has lead a very active life in a broad range of activities: he has served as Principal in a number of schools, he has taught throughout the Ciskei – he was born in the Ciskei – and now he finds himself as lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Fort Hare. He is also a politician and has been a Member of Parliament in the Ciskei government, and has also been involved in church affairs – he is a lay preacher in the Presbyterian Church. But it’s primarily his literary activities that interest us this morning. His novel *Hill of Fools*, which is set right here in the Ciskei, not far from Hogsback, has as its background the rivalry between the Hlubis and the Thembus in this particular area, which is I may say quite a change from the rivalry one always hears of in the Ciskei between the Xhosas and Mfengu,² and the book was published earlier this year by David Philip and will be published towards the end of this year in a paperback in the African Writers Series by Heinemann. Now it would have given me very great pleasure to call upon Mr Peteni to speak to you this morning, except that he is suffering from a severe attack of bronchitis, occasioned by rather a hectic conference programme that he has just been attending, and I wonder if you would excuse me if I offer to assist him by reading his paper to you. Mr Peteni, I think, has displayed considerable courage in actually honouring his commitment in coming to be with us this morning. But let me just read his paper and then he’ll be perfectly happy to answer any questions that there might be afterwards.

[Whispered interchange.]

Well, Mr Peteni will read until his voice gives out, and until he is physically unable. But it is then my very great pleasure to ask Mr Peteni to read his paper to you this morning, on the writing of his novel:

[Applause.]

Thank you Mr Chairman, ladies and gentlemen. In my first paragraph I've listed some poor misgivings. I have to mention the one that has been mentioned by the Chairman now, the fact that I'm so ill, which made me terribly worried, but I had to come. Now the first misgiving with regard to the lecture itself, arises from the fact that this is the only novel I've ever written and I'm fully aware of its many blemishes, even though there have been many flattering reviews of it in the press. The second misgiving is due to the fact that this is the first time I have ever had to address people on what I myself have written. I would much rather listen to or read what other people say about it. In fact, I must confess that my first reaction when I received the invitation to speak at this festival was to decline it. But then I said to myself, they must have noticed - that is, the organisers - something in the novel which I myself am not aware of, or they just want to crucify me during question time, so I decided I would be as humble as a lamb, and sick though I am, I've come here carrying my cross, this Hill of Fools, and ready and willing to be sacrificed. The third misgiving arises from the fact that I'm addressing a distinguished gathering of academics for the first time at Rhodes University. That in itself requires some nerve. But on the whole I'm glad to be here, and I thank the organisers of the festival for inviting me. It is an honour, and I appreciate it fully, and I thank you on behalf of Fort Hare for strengthening the links between the two universities. I hope I'm not disappointing the people from Fort Hare whom I see here, that I'm not able to deliver myself as I should have liked to. The honour doesn't fall on me alone, but on Fort Hare also. My fourth misgiving is born of the fear that I may unconsciously praise my own work and thereby giving offence or I may find fault too much. To put this differently, my honest attempt to make an appraisal of aspects of the novel may sound to you like self-praise, and in attempting to avoid this, I may make the mistake of being too hard on myself. Having said this it only remains for me to ask you to bear with me, as I try to tell you what I hoped to achieve in writing Hill of Fools, which is what I was asked to come here to do. And if you'll bear with me, I'll pause here for a time and ask the Chairman - - -

There is a tendency in human beings to pay no heed to events in small remote areas. They would rather concern themselves only with those events which make headlines, with political upheavals and industrial conflicts centred in large metropolitan regions. Yet there is always drama and human conflict in the humblest rural village. In selecting a pastoral theme and small fictitious villages in an obscure corner of Keiskammahoek as the setting of the novel, I had an ironic intention. Themes illustrated in these obscure villages would, I believed, have more universal application than they would if I had selected a larger centre, identifiable personages and known political trends. I did not want anybody to sit back, complacent, feeling that the spotlight was on Lennox Sebe's Ciskei alone, or Kaiser Matanzima's Transkei, or John Vorster's apartheid South Africa. The spotlight is on the Ciskei, yes, on Transkei, on South Africa, on any other country where public life and personal relationships are bedevilled by tribalism or racialism or any form of sectionalism. I did not wish to analyse the present Ciskei as politically constituted, as one of the 'homelands' of South Africa, because I feared that I might be carried away by criticism of the policy of 'separate development' and weaken the impact of the theme of clan or tribal prejudice which was my main concern. Separate development is a temporary dispensation and is limited to South Africa. Perhaps in a few years it will be remembered by students of history alone. But tribalism or sectionalism in one form or another will I believe continue long after separate development has disappeared from the body politic. Perhaps in saying this I am a prophet of doom. I hope I am proved wrong, but events in the rest of the world give me no hope.

Chinua Achebe has demonstrated that human drama can be enacted in the small villages of Igboland in Eastern Nigeria. The issues he probes involve belief in and worship of gods and goddesses, clashes between clans, tensions within the family unit. His novels are a vivid record of village organisation, of seasonal festivals, of disease and death. Achebe's novels served as my model and inspiration, even though I did not have his skill as a novelist, nor his broad vision, nor his deep insight into the nature of man. And so with Achebe's inspiration I went back to the region where I was born and grew up, although when I became an adult I spent only fleeting visits there. After the death of my parents, my visits became fewer and fewer.

In following the literary tradition Achebe has established, I am in good company. Bernth Lindfors states:

Achebe has had a profound influence on many other Nigerian novelists - - - particularly the young Igbo's who began writing in the nineteen-sixties. Authors like Nkem Nwankwo, Chukwuemekwa Ike, Elechi Amadi, Flora Nwapa, E.C.C. Uzodinma, John Munonye, and Clement Agunwa have followed in his footsteps, making use of many of the themes and techniques he introduced into Nigerian fiction. Nowhere is his inspiration more evident than in the way proverbs, folktales and other bits of oral lore are woven into the fabric of their novels.

(47)

Achebe himself enunciates his intention in clear terms. It is to use "a new English still in full communion with its ancestral home, but altered to suit its new African surroundings" (30).

Achebe's rendering of Igbo language forms in English appealed to me so much that I decided to go back to my own Xhosa language with a similar purpose. I felt that his device gave English a charm and freshness which could be as delightful as the sort of English spoken by Thomas Hardy's yokels. I felt that Xhosa was rich enough in proverbs, flexible enough in its turn of phrase, and wide enough in vocabulary to be treated in a similar manner. My aim in giving literal translations of Xhosa proverbs and idioms is to transport the reader to the district of Keiskammahoek, to make him feel he is in the company of Hlubi and Thembu villagers, listening to their quaint speech. Here are a few examples:

The first example is just after Bhuqa has told Zuziwe that he loves her. The quotation is "Bhuqa was confident that he could talk the girl into a corner - - - There was no bush to which she might run and hide" (9-10). Now that is a type of expression which is typically Xhosa, but rendered into the English. Another one is after Ntombi and Zuziwe have been fighting at the river. One of the little girls comes up and says, about Ntombi, "She's just a collection of bones, that thing. How I hate her" (14). And another one, Ntabeni at church, he's praying. Somewhere in the middle of the prayer he says, "Help us to prepare for our last days on earth when the blue fly buzzes round us as we lie helpless on the mat of death" (51). Now for those who know Xhosa will remember that phrase coming directly from the Xhosa. "Help us to prepare for our last days on earth when the blue fly buzzes round us as we lie helpless on the mat of death." I don't know if anybody knows Xhosa. In Xhosa we say "Xa kubhubhuzela impukane eluhlaza." Now that is the rendering of that performance. And then another one is a description of the Hlubi boys who decide to run away from the Thembu boys after they have ambushed Bhuqa. This is a proverb from Xhosa: "there is joy in the coward's home and sorrow at the brave man's home" (85).

Then another one, still describing the same boy's running away: "It was as if they wanted to sink their hips into the ground" (86). In Xhosa we say, "basimbela isinqe": it was as if they wanted to sink their hips into the ground. And then Duma making comments during the faction fight, says, "the Thembus are standing still, thoroughly sated with the broiled meat, as the saying goes!" (105). In Xhosa we say, "badikwe yeyokosa": satisfied with the broiled meat given before you go to the main portion. And at the funeral of Katana old Nkala says, "This was a thing done on purpose, this death of Katana" (110): "yenziwe ngabom". And then another one. One of the ladies, Dakada's wife, has been told that Nkala has been saying something about her, and she is very furious, and she is talking to her husband and she says, "What does he think he is, that thing with a forehead jutting like a baboon's?" (113): "uzicingela ukuba uyintoni? Haa nto itsha ngesiphongo esingathi sesemfene." Now that's directly from the Xhosa too. And then another one: old Mvangeli is addressing the family council to discuss the jilting of Ntabeni by Zuziwe, and he addresses the meeting in this manner: "MaBhele" – now that term itself, MaBhele, that's Xhosa – you would expect a person to continue in Xhosa when he's addressing people like that – "MaBhele, I have called you here as the fathers of this home to decide on a matter which concerns your daughter, Zuziwe, and Ntabeni, her fiancé" (128). And then another one: one of the Bhele elders is talking to Zuziwe, trying to persuade her to go back to Ntabeni, and he says, "Understand this clearly, girl. Reject Ntabeni and you reject us. If you reject us, a flood of water enters the house" (129). The last portion, it was a proverb in Xhosa, "angena amangi endlwini". It means that everything will go wrong. Then another one: it's spoken by Mvangeli and he says to Zuziwe, "There's a heap of tomorrows ahead of you" (130): "amangomso ayimfumba phambi kwakho", which is a typically Xhosa one. And, lastly, at the funeral of Zuziwe, Duma wants to attack Bhuqa for attending that funeral, and he says to Mlenzana, "Kwedini, Mlenzana" – now that, also, is typically Xhosa [inaudible] – "Kwedini Mlenzana" - - - "have you forgotten what you are, a thing circumcised only yesterday" (148). Now those are some of the examples I was giving in the way of trying to bring in the Xhosa atmosphere.

But at the same time, I aimed at reaching beyond the Xhosa ethnic group to send my message to any part of the world where there were people willing to listen. My need was the same as that of Achebe, as explained by Eldred Jones in *African Forum*: "He required a medium which would be universally accessible but which would also ring true in the mouths of characters whose

outlook and ideas were very different from those usually conveyed by English. He therefore loaded English with freight from the traditional Igbo mind and, without changing the structure of the language, changed its character” (96). Achebe confirms this explanation in his own assessment: “The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best, without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience” (29). I offer no apology for these rather long quotations. They bring out clearly what I was trying to achieve, even though I was not very successful with the experiment.

I believe the bulk of black writing in English by black South African writers has up to now been protest writing. Some of the writers are in exile. They cannot return to South Africa even if they wished to, some of them not even as visitors. It is to be expected that the dominant note in their works is one of bitterness. They are preoccupied with the themes of conflict and protest to the exclusion of almost every other theme. There is also a growing number of black writers within South Africa who use poetry as a medium for conveying their discontent with the present dispensation. The racial theme dominates their poetry. Arthur Ravenscroft, in a paper read to the Grahamstown conference in 1974 – that conference on the English-speaking South Africans – describes their poetry as “the authentic voice of African experience in the townships” (321). African writers, whether at home or in exile, have been criticised for concentrating on protest writing in English to the exclusion of themes which would produce greater variety and perhaps greater literature. Ulli Beier, writing in *Black Orpheus*, reports that: “There is a general feeling among West African writers that South Africans indulge in continuous protest writing. They have often and severely criticised this. It has been said that they are full of self-pity, and that their continuous, spineless protesting is becoming a bore and fails to arouse sympathy.” Beier rejects this view, saying: “It is difficult to see how the South African writer can escape the recurring themes of race prejudice, apartheid and suppression. Some writers may have been moved to self-pity by the situation but others have certainly not” (49). Beier goes on to give Dennis Brutus as an example of a writer who has not been self-pitying or even self-centred. The point here is that there is such criticism of black South African writers by other black writers.

Nadine Gordimer, in a paper she read to a conference organised by the English Society of the South African Indian Teachers' Association, draws attention to another problem for the writer of protest literature. In reply to her own question, "What is a writer's freedom?" she says: "To me, it is his right to maintain and publish to the world a deep, intense, private view of the situation in which he finds his society. If he is to work as well as he can, he must take, and be granted, freedom from the public conformity of political interpretation, morals and tastes - - - There will be those who regard him as their mouth-piece; people whose ideals, as a human being, he shares, and whose cause, as a human being, is his own. They may be those whose suffering is his own. His identification with, admiration for, and loyalty to these set up a state of conflict within him. His integrity as a human being demands the sacrifice of everything to the struggle put up on the side of free men. His integrity as a writer goes the moment he begins to write what he is told he ought to write" (45-46).

An important point for an unknown writer to consider is that many publishers will not publish black writing in English, if it does not concentrate on race prejudice, apartheid and oppression. A reader who was asked to give an opinion on my manuscript before it was accepted for publication, did not find sufficient evidence in it "of the impact of cultures, of African society in transition". He suggests that I should be encouraged to write another novel "in which the contemporary predicament of Africans is the main concern." He was in effect suggesting that I abandon my attempt and write another novel. I take it he did not recommend my manuscript for publication [see Butler reference].³ Another reader felt that, "The point that, although Zuziwe and Bhuqa manage to transcend their tribal shells, they are ultimately destroyed by the social laws which govern migration in South Africa should be given greater emphasis" [see Chakava]. This refers to Bhuqa's failure to secure a permit for Zuziwe to settle in Port Elizabeth. This reader – he recommended publication, by the way – was suggesting that I pursue what I regarded as a subsidiary theme. I felt that this would draw the reader's attention away from my main themes, and from the rural scenes and rural people at the centre of the novel. The view of another reader, who was generous in his praise – too generous, I think – went in the opposite direction. He said, "A powerful factor in its favour – that is, in the novel's favour – is the author's ability to combine the old and the new, black man's law and white man's law, the rural and the urban" [see Rive]. Clive Wake, in a recorded talk which appears in *Protest and Conflict in African*

Literature, makes important comments and asks some pertinent questions: “Is African literature so absorbed in the present state of Africa that it forgets its future as literature?”(49). It brings us back to the very delicate problem of maintaining the right balance between commitment and creation. Commitment can be creative, in the literary sense, but it can also destroy creation. In other words, is the African literature of the present and immediate past simply going to be the kind of literature that, in a few years, will be of interest only to the sociologist and historian, or the academic literary historian?

Please allow me to digress a little. The late Dr A.C. Jordan, formerly of the University of Cape Town and later of the University of Wisconsin in the United States, wrote a Xhosa classic, *Ingqumbo yeminyanya*, translated as *The Wrath of the Ancestors*, on lines comparable to those followed by Chinua Achebe [– though I may say, long before Achebe wrote his novels (interpolation by Opland – ed.)]. It is a living, human story of a young Mpondomise prince, who reluctantly leaves the University College of Fort Hare before completing even one half of the first year, and takes up his hereditary position as King of the Mpondomise people. His ideas are too far ahead of those of the people he has to lead, and his reign ends tragically, with the death of all those he loved. He himself commits suicide. The story is one of the most powerful I have ever read in any language. It is written in polished Xhosa. Its literary merit is very high indeed. It was translated into English and submitted to a publisher, or publishers, in the United States, who turned it down because, as they said, the novel dealt with issues which were irrelevant to the struggle in Southern Africa – or words to that effect. Now if these publishers had said the translation was stiff, I would have agreed with them, but the charge of irrelevance was the one thing which was untrue about the novel. The novel deals with African society in transition, with people clutching onto old, traditional things in order to endure or survive in the new dispensation. The fault was in the publishers, or their manuscript readers, who believed that a story on South Africa is relevant only when it tells of township life in places like Soweto, or analyses political conflicts or lays bare the evils of apartheid. Rural South Africa, such as that described by Dr Jordan, does not exist for them. Fortunately for non-Xhosa speaking South Africans, the Lovedale Press has I believe accepted an English translation of Dr Jordan’s book for publication. This will be published fairly soon – shortly.⁴

I decided to write a book about conflicts which I had observed in my childhood days. These conflicts had left a deep impression on me, and they are still common today. Being a child of a man you might describe as a 'school man' or a 'church man', strict with his children, progressive in outlook, I was not personally involved in these conflicts even as a boy. I spent my adolescence at Lovedale and Fort Hare. On leaving school, I did not return to my home area and so I am still not involved in these rural conflicts. It may well be, however, that I have a deeper insight into them than people who live in the midst of them. One of my main aims, in *Hill of Fools*, was to explore the fighting instinct and demonstrate its dominance of human affairs, in private life as well as public life. The fighting instinct expresses itself in the form of violence in a number of situations in the novel. The main occupation of the warrior boys is faction fighting, with Diliza as the chief symbol of violence. Zuziwe is the embodiment of the opposing principle of non-violence. She is a gentle, loving person. She has no prejudice against those belonging to the other village. She judges a person according to his nature. This is the ideal set forth in the novel. It is part of the irony of the story that her love sparks off a series of events which culminate in violence and death. The name of the book, taken from the name of the hill above the Hlubi village, is meant to stress the folly of people who resort to violence to settle their differences. Whenever men engage in these futile, senseless faction fights, they sink to the level of dogs. Hence the parallel between the dogs' attack, which ends with the brutal killing of the cat, and the faction fight which ends with the brutal killing of Katana. Man is not superior to the beasts of the field when he allows himself to be dominated by his instincts, particularly the fighting instinct and the mating instinct. Both instincts, in their unrestrained form, are demonstrated in Diliza and to a lesser extent in Katana and the other warrior boys. Violent clashes are a common phenomenon of the natural world. In some cases it is the will to live or the instinct of self-preservation which leads to violence and killing. In such cases the violence is understandable, but that does not lessen the horror of it and the sorrow of the victim's family. The hawk's swoop on the family of fowls belongs to this category of violence. One wonders what God's purpose was when he made some creatures weak and helpless, without the means to protect themselves, and others strong, swift and vicious, with the will to spread terror and death even though they were not seeking food or shelter by their attack. The dog's attack of the cat belongs to this category of senseless violence as in the lines, "What the source of the dogs' anger was, it was difficult to say. The cat had not interfered with them. But every member of the dog community

in the neighbourhood responded to the call to battle, and a large contingent of dogs gathered at the battlefield and joined in the fight that was no fight” (22).

As far as Ntabeni is concerned, church-going is more of an entertainment than an act of faith or piety. I believe that Ntabeni represents many a church man in the African scene, certainly in the rural South Africa I know. He represents the type by his officiousness during church services, by his enjoyment of authority as a deacon, and by his habit of giving loud responses “whenever a person he favoured was praying” (48). Ntabeni’s attack by means of prayer of the elder who made the announcement is perhaps exaggerated. [–This was a scene in the church: Ntabeni was a very ambitious man who was promised the hand of the heroine, Zuziwe, and naturally she is reluctant. So he wants to push himself up in the estimation of the village and becomes very emotional - (interpolation by Opland – ed.)] Ntabeni’s attack by means of prayer of the elder who made the announcement is perhaps exaggerated. Such attacks are not common, but the incident has been adapted from real-life incidents which former students of Lovedale know quite well. The attack by prayer is, however, thematically relevant. It reinforces the theme of violence. Ntabeni is not a fighter. In fact he is a coward, but he has the same desire to attack and hurt and kill as Diliza and Katana and other warriors. However, he prefers to attack by prayer within the safety of the church building or to attack a weak unprotected girl or to attack by sending others to face his hated enemy. He is not much of a lover either. [That I think is an understatement. (Interpolation by Opland – ed.)] He loves himself more than he loves Zuziwe. He is merely concerned with the impression he makes on the villagers as the fiancé of the prettiest girl in Kwazidenge. He is willing to risk Zuziwe’s life with a dangerous love potion to prevent Bhuqa taking her from him.

I come to another important theme of the novel – clan prejudice, or tribal prejudice. A short biographical note on myself might serve to give you a better understanding of my own background to the problem. I grew up at Zingcuka and went to school at Lovedale and Fort Hare. Both places were predominantly abaMbo or Mfengu areas in which my father was well known and highly respected. We are of the Zizi clan and my mother is of the Hlubi clan. Both are leading abaMbo clans. I grew up unaware that there was division between Xhosa-speaking clans inhabiting the Ciskei. My first teaching post was at Heilbron in the north-east of the Orange Free

State. There was one other Xhosa-speaking graduate besides me. We were well-received by the community and we felt at home even though the people spoke Sotho which we could not understand at first. We soon learnt it. We made friends with Sotho-speaking lady teachers and the lessons moved faster. Both of us married these lady teachers. Young as I was, I was appointed vice-principal under a white principal in the very first year of my service at the school. When I went to teach at Soweto three years later I became aware of discrimination against Xhosa-speaking teachers from the Cape. After spending fifteen years in Soweto, I returned to the Eastern Cape, to a Xhosa-speaking community, fondly believing that I had seen the last of tribal prejudice. It came as a shock to me when I realised that, with the introduction of homeland politics based on the recognition of chiefs and the re-establishment of tribes, the prejudice that grew between abaMbo clans and Rhaharbe clans – all of them Xhosa-speaking – was worse than anything I had heard in Soweto. Then I read about Rhodesia, Nigeria, Uganda and visited Kenya in 1973, and gained the impression that tribal differences in the rest of Africa were as serious a problem as they were in South Africa. One could dismiss tribal prejudices in South Africa as the inevitable result of the policy of separate development, which laid emphasis on differences between the tribes and paid scant attention to similarities. But one could not dismiss tribal prejudice in independent African states in the same way. I came to the conclusion that clan or tribal differences are much more serious problems than colour discrimination by a white minority government. It is this background which made me decide to present through the medium of a simple rural story the seriousness of clan or tribal prejudice. It is as timeless and universal as sin itself.

I selected two small villages for my purpose, the Hlubi village and the Thembu village. The Hlubis and the Thembus are equally guilty. The chief Hlubi representative of prejudice and intolerance is Duma, Zuziwe's eldest brother. The chief Thembu representative of it is old Ngoma, Bhuqa's father. Both stand out because they are close to the two young people who try to break down the walls of prejudice. The fact that both of them are not completely successful in what they seek to achieve, does not lessen the amount of injury and suffering they cause. But as long as there are loving people like Zuziwe, peace-lovers like Mvangeli, men of principle like Mlenzana, and men like Bhuqa who, though thoughtless and mischievous at first, is capable of

learning from his mistakes, there is hope for the world. Bhuqa's analysis of the cause of Zuziwe's death is clear evidence that his character has developed. He has passed into adulthood:

Zuziwe died because my father didn't want her, not because I didn't want her. My father hates her people. He wanted me to hate then too. He threatened to throw me out of the house if I married a Hlubi girl. I tried to make him understand that I was not asking to marry a Hlubi girl. I wished to marry a girl called Zuziwe Langa whose heart was as beautiful as her face. I wish to God there were no such things as Hlubis or Thembus and that there were only people. Had it been so, I wouldn't have lost my Zuziwe.

(148)

Inter-marriage may initially be opposed by narrow-minded prejudiced traditionalists, but it is the best cure ultimately for the cancer of tribalism and prejudice.

The Xesi river has always held a deep fascination for me, especially during the rainy season when it comes hurtling down from the mountains in flood. It has a double function in the novel. It separates and links the two villages. The bridge of stones is a concrete example of the structures which it behoves people to build when they find themselves in two hostile camps. The river is a symbol of prosperity and disaster: prosperity in supplying both villages with drinking water, and facilitating cleanliness and in its convenient location for social gatherings; disaster when it is in flood and brings death to man and beast alike. It is at once the place where hostilities break out and where reconciliation becomes possible. It is at the river where Ntombi fights Zuziwe, and Ntabeni lays an ambush for Bhuqa. It is at the river where Bhuqa declares his love for Zuziwe and where young children, Thembu and Hlubi, swim together despite the hostility between the two villages, thereby giving hope for the future. The paradox reflects the paradox of the two villages, both of which have elements of peace and order and prosperity, existing side-by-side with conflict, violence and disaster. The progress of the river, through shoals, rapids and falls, towards the sea and its everlasting cycle, reflect the cycle of recurring faction fights and the bigger cycle of human life from birth through countless hazards and disasters to death. The influence that the river has on the lives of the villagers is directly brought out in the effects that it has on Zuziwe, after she has been assaulted by Ntombi:

She looked through her tears at the current of the river without actually seeing it. After a time she noticed that two distinct currents came from the two sides of the island higher up the river and met at a point opposite the spot where she sat - - - Her contemplation of the

eddies and the splashes and the chaos in the current of the river gradually brought peace and quiet into her own soul, and stilled the strong currents of feeling which had rioted inside her body. Her grief was dulled and the tears stopped flowing.

(13-14)

Now I pass on to a subsidiary theme. Women appear to be dominated by men in the novel, but in reality the opposite is true. Dakada blusters and fulminates to no purpose. Mrs Dakada dominates him. He tries to resist but it is futile resistance. She is still as aggressive as ever, even after she has been sent back to her maiden home. She fires abuse at him when they meet at Qoboqobo, after the death of Zuziwe. His wife speaks:

“Do you see now, Ndhlovu,” she asked, “do you see that Ntombi was right in what she said about this girl, and that you were wrong in taking her side?”

“I didn’t take her side,” replied Dakada, “I objected to Ntombi’s assault on the girl. If Zuziwe was unfaithful, Ntabeni should have dealt with her, not Ntombi.”

“Do you still doubt it?” Why do you say ‘if’? Of course she was unfaithful. Her pregnancy has made that quite clear. This girl must have bewitched you, I think. She was the witch of Kwazidenge. Perhaps you were her secret lover. You must have urged Nkala to accuse me of witchcraft so that you might get rid of me - - - You ought to hang your head with shame, Ndhlovu. How could you, a white-haired old man, feel passion for such a young girl? Did you really have the desire in your blood for that child? Sies! You are a dirty old man.”

(144)

Dakada’s reply reveals frustrated anger and gives a hint that he still looks forward to his wife’s return to him one day: “You can go back to Mnyameni and stay there until your mother teaches you how to speak to your husband” (145). Mrs Langa is not as aggressive as Mrs Dakada, but she is conscious of her power over her husband and is ready to use it when the need arises. Her promise to Zuziwe, “I shall speak to your father as soon as he returns from the fields” (64), reveals a confidence she has in her ability to influence him, to allow Zuziwe to tell Ntabeni. Zuziwe herself, though not in the strong position of a wife, is already gaining the ascendancy over Bhuqa by the use of the never-failing weapon of tears, reinforced with anger, and the implied threat to withhold her favours, in a protest. “Zuziwe, stop and listen to me” – this is Bhuqa. “I will not listen to you”, replied Zuziwe. “I have listened to you too much already” (126). She almost emerges as director, when they are planning an elopement to Port Elizabeth. These are indications that she would have become the dominant partner if they had married and lived together. I must confess that the theme of woman’s domination over man was not one of the

themes that I consciously intended proving. It just made its way into the story. But now that it has come in it is a true expression of my convictions with regard to the relationship between men and women. It is generally believed in traditional Africa, and in the Africa that is emerging from the old ways to the modern way of life, that man dominates - - [section missing – tape turnover] - - though at certain times, when he is drunk, for instance, or when he has grown old and inactive, or according to convention – this is due to man’s arrogance – [when] a man marries a woman who is much younger than he is – at such times, I say, the woman is stronger even physically. But morally woman is stronger all the time, though the man is obtuse enough not to realise it. A man’s physical assault of his wife is an expression of his frustration. He must buckle down even after he has assaulted her. The assault merely makes the wife’s case stronger. She is better able to torment him by continual reference to the assault, and she is better able to influence children, relatives and neighbours, against her husband. He cannot hold out against a determined attack. A wise husband yields whilst it can still be done gracefully, without losing face. Mrs Dakada’s determined stand against her husband is typical of the conflict between husband and wife, in all those cases where the husband is still labouring under the illusion that he is the stronger partner. Peace only becomes possible when the husband accedes defeat. Then the wife takes the lead while giving the impression that she is directed by her husband.

[– I’m rather pleased *he* read that passage – (comment by Opland – ed.)] The basic principle on which the novel is constructed is that of contrast between economic life and faction fighting, between production and destruction, between love and hatred, between peace and order, and violence and death. Communal ploughing and crop production, cattle rearing and milk production, are the main economic activities of people like Ntabeni, Mvangeli, Bhuqa, Mlenzana, Dakada and others who are not directly named. Warrior boys and their periodic faction fights disrupt the even flow of economic life. Diliza’s violence towards Zuziwe and the herdboys early in the story is one example of such disruption. It is only Mvangeli’s firm and quiet control of his sons which prevents Diliza’s provocative action from flaring up into worse violence. He puts an end to the conflict by promising that: “He would try to forget the incident, and hoped that his family would try to forget it too” (37). Mlenzana is engaged in the gainful activity of looking after a herd of cattle when the blowing horn is heard and disrupts the work he is doing. He’s compelled by male relatives, set on him by his cruel step-mother, to abandon the

cattle and join the band of warriors. Bhuqa is both a doubting warrior and a good farm worker. It is reported of him that: “He always makes it a point to complete his work before he joins the other boys under the mnquma tree - - -” (64). He plans to take a course of training in agriculture at Fort Cox, but circumstances compel him to join the police force. The pattern of contrast between productivity and destruction is nowhere so vividly demonstrated as in the drama of flight and pursuit when Hlubi boys are pursued by Thembu boys:

They ran across a field which had recently been ploughed and had been levelled with a harrow by the industrious owner until it was as even as a grass mat. A great deal of time had been spent on it, and the work had been done with loving care. But pursuers and the pursued had neither the time nor the inclination to show appreciation for the husbandry of the honest farmer. They ran across the field and left deep holes in the soft soil. No one heeded the damage to the carefully cultivated land. Every villager was interested in the drama of flight and pursuit. The fighter had full licence to despoil in a moment work which had taken a long time and a great deal of effort to accomplish.

(86)

Ntabeni is a hardworking, thriving peasant, but hard work does not redeem him. He remains vulgar and earthy, clumsy as a clod, with a tendency towards unrestrained gratification of the appetites. He has an inherently sinful nature, unredeemed by regular church-going. The theme of corruption through over-eating and over-drinking, is realised in him. This may be noted in such comments as: “During seasons of plenty he collected more beer into his stomach than church contributions into the money bag” (45). And: “It was a wonder to see all the food disappear into the stomach of one normal person without producing any ill effects” (47). Let us remember him only that we may try to avoid becoming like him. Let us rather remember Zuziwe, who is a worthy daughter of her father. Let us remember her as Mlenzana remembered her: “He hoped her blood was not spilt in vain and that it would help put out the angry fire in the villagers’ hearts. He hoped they would learn to value a man as a human being, and not hate him just because he came from the other village” (147). Let us remember her face, as Bhuqa saw it as he looked into her coffin: “That lovely, loving, peaceful face filled his heart with gratitude and inspired his soul with a song of praise for her noble life. Would that her face could continue to shine on all the villagers to the end of time” (150).

NOTES

1. This transcript was prepared in 2003 from a cassette recording housed in the National Literary Museum, Grahamstown (Peteni mss collection, NELM accession no. 97.7.191). The text is italicised where Peteni himself is reading. Sources and page references have been retrieved by the editor. Page references to *Hill of Fools* are identical for the David Philip and the Heinemann editions. Thanks to Peter Mtuze for transcribing the Xhosa proverbs, and to curators at NELM and library staff at the University of Reading for their help.
2. This comment of Opland's perhaps needs elucidation. The Hlubis (Peteni's mother was a Hlubi, as he tells us in the lecture) indeed belong to the grouping known as the Mfengu; the Thembu are among the oldest so-called 'Bantu' inhabitants of the region, pre-dating the arrival of the Xhosa themselves (let us call them the 'Xhosa-proper'). In popular usage, the entire Xhosa-speaking peoples of the Eastern Cape are often referred to as the amaXhosa, meaning in general all those clans and refugee groups who came under the sway of the 'Xhosa-proper' up to and during the nineteenth century. Today we might refer to 'Xhosa-speakers'. So what Opland is drawing attention to is that in place of a story reflecting too obviously the ongoing conflict between the Rharhabe Xhosa of the Ciskei and the local Mfengu clans (a staple of Ciskei Bantustan politics at the time), Peteni has chosen instead to write of a Thembu/ Mfengu conflict, less politically controversial. It is also noticeable that in the lecture Peteni refers to his people as the amaMbo, a less politically loaded term than Mfengu, a name which carries pejorative resonances of dispossession, rootlessness and, later, political collaboration.
3. This is evidently a quotation from a 1972 letter from Guy Butler, relaying the views of an anonymous reader to whom Butler had sent an early version of the ms for comment:

He [the reader] does not find sufficient evidence 'of the impact of cultures, of African society in transition, of people clutching on to old traditional things in order to endure or survive in the new dispensation.' He feels that you should be encouraged to write another novel, on a less isolated theme, in which the contemporary predicament of Africans is the main concern.

4. Peteni in fact wrote the Introduction to *The Wrath of the Ancestors*, "translated from the original Xhosa by Author with the help of Priscilla P. Jordan", and published by Lovedale Press in 1980.

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