

The Oppression of isiXhosa Literature and the Irony of Transformation

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This article will contend that the natural development of isiXhosa orature and literature, as with all South African indigenous literatures, ended with the arrival of European missionaries in 1799. The apartheid policy then exacerbated the destructive approaches to indigenous languages already in operation as it designated separate language boards for language development. These boards operated in the 'homelands' and were generally conservative, corrupt and oppressive. The manuscripts they recommended to publishers were for the most part only those that could be prescribed in schools. This resulted in the publishing of material that was parochial, apolitical and neutral in style. Often the material prescribed was written by the board members themselves. For instance, Lennox Sebe, erstwhile President of the Ciskei, produced an isiXhosa book entitled *Ucamngco*, for prescription, though it seems to contain little original material. Laurence Wright has shown that the opposite was true for English literature written by black South Africans and published internationally in the 1970s, at the height of apartheid (2004, 47). He describes, for instance, how one of the manuscript readers of Peteni's seminal novel, *Hill of Fools* (1976), rejected it as irrelevant and unsuitable for publication precisely because it made no reference to South Africa's turbulent politics. Throughout this period, however, only apolitical novels were published in the indigenous languages.

Today, speakers of African languages themselves are loath to read literature written in indigenous languages. The only book that sells well in African languages is the Bible. Has isiXhosa literature, then, lost its sense of place, its sense of spirituality, or the will to provide mature commentary on the society in which we live?

I would argue that the continual oppression and trivialising of these literatures, and hence their unnatural development, has led to this lack of identification with the indigenous written word by speakers of African languages. Consequently this literature suffers from a lost sense of place. Currently the Department of Arts and Culture, the Department of Education and the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) face the task of implementing Section 6 of the National Constitution which calls for the equal treatment of all of our languages (Kaschula 1999, 67-73). This admirable policy has yet to be implemented in the literary and publishing world. The lack of visible realisation at government level (where most politicians have capitulated to the use of English in parliament) does little to convince the speakers of indigenous languages of the worth of their languages. This, in turn, plays itself out in the publishing world where publishers do not seek out or produce books in these languages, except for schools, as there is no perceived adult market.

I will begin by outlining the history of the literary development of isiXhosa. The influence of the missionaries on isiXhosa publishing is crucial here. I will then analyse how political oppression influenced the development of isiXhosa literature, including oral poetry. Finally, I will assess the effects of political liberation and societal transformation in South Africa.

Literary Eras in isiXhosa Literature

Albert Gerard (1971) recognises four eras in isiXhosa literary history, beginning in 1810. My analysis will add a fifth: the 'transformation era.' It is important to view these eras against a detailed historical backdrop as each period is influenced by socio-political events.

Missionary Influence and Oppression: 1799-1860

This era was characterised by strong missionary influence. The arrival of Van Der Kemp in the Eastern Cape in 1799 saw the acceptance of Christianity by Sicana Ntsikana, the first Xhosa convert, who was also a prolific oral poet. Ntsikana used the forms of praise available in the indigenous poetic tradition (*izibongo*) to praise God in the same way as he would have praised a chief (Kaschula 1995, 71). As a result he is credited with creating the first isiXhosa hymns, which are still sung in the Presbyterian Church today (Hodgson 1984, 24-40). This changed the thematic repertoire of *izibongo* and introduced a powerful religious influence

still strongly evident in isiXhosa orality (Kaschula 2002, 65-100). But it was the Reverend John Ross who provided the real impetus for the initial development of written isiXhosa literature during this era. He arrived in Cape Town in September 1823, bringing with him “a small Ruthven printing press, with a quantity of type, paper and ink” (Shepherd 1945, 3). Shepherd sums up the significance of Ross’s arrival for the development of the written word in isiXhosa as follows:

Arriving at Chumie on 16th December, the press was got in order on the 17th; on the 18th the alphabet was set up; on the 19th fifty copies were thrown off; and on the 20th Bennie recorded that a new era had commenced in the history of the Bantu people.
(1945, 3)

What Shepherd fails to point out, however, is that the press printed only material which was didactic and Christian in nature. Right from the beginning, therefore, the printing and publishing of isiXhosa material was strictly controlled and subject to serving specific and limited objectives.

On one hand, this setting up of the printing press laid the foundation of written isiXhosa and the subsequent development of the novel. On the other hand, however, missionary influence was an inhibiting factor in the natural development of isiXhosa literature, especially insofar as thematic repertoire is concerned. Authors were encouraged to write about specific topics in a didactic and Christian way. Anything traditional was to be condemned as heathen. Swanepoel states that the coming of the missionaries:

also had a deep negative side, since they were instrumental in a process of change in which both message and method had often been to the detriment of the people they came to serve The missionaries . . . started the traumatic process which became known as colonisation.
(1993, 3)

The colonial attitude has, consciously and subconsciously, been perpetuated by many isiXhosa authors themselves, as may be seen in numerous works which deal with the conflict between indigenous versus western value systems and where the western ethic prevails. For example, in Tamsanqa’s drama *Buzani Kubawo* (“Ask Father”) (1958), and Sinxo’s novel *uNomsa* (“Nomsa”) (1922), traditional marriages are portrayed as unworkable. It is suggested that true love can only emanate from a relationship where there is freedom of choice and association (Kaschula 2003, 60).

Newspaper Influence: 1860-1910

Jeff Opland points out that “in any literary history of Xhosa, we cannot properly ignore the contribution of newspapers to the development of Xhosa literature” (1995, 126). This has been extensively documented (Opland 1983, 1995) and will not form the main focus of this article. It was during this period (prior to the emergence of books in isiXhosa), Opland argues, that isiXhosa literature was relatively uninhibited, especially as Xhosa newspaper editors like William Gqoba emerged in the 1880s. In a conference paper, Opland suggests that:

Although Xhosa literature in books effectively starts in 1909, Xhosa newspapers had long provided a medium for the publication of literature, and Xhosa literature had already fought for and won its editorial independence in newspapers (an independence unattained by Xhosa books) and had come of age.

He describes a marked difference between the work in isiXhosa that reached print in newspaper circulation:

Ephemeral Xhosa literature in newspapers is at times freer and looser in expression than literature published in books, which is intended largely for prescription in schools, produced in language appropriate for schoolchildren, in standard spelling.

(1995, 1)

Through the newspaper medium, newly literate Xhosa writers, many of them converts of Ntsikana, for example, Tiyo Soga, W. W. Gqoba, W. B. Rubusana, John Tengo Jabavu, Cyril Mhala, S. E. K. L. Mqhayi, and many others were encouraged to submit poetry, much of it Christian in nature, to newspapers and journals such as *Indaba*. The printing presses were under the control of the missionaries such as Bennie and Ross, from the Glasgow Missionary Society, who had set up a press in the Tyhume valley. Their establishment later became Lovedale College, located near Fort Beaufort in the Eastern Cape (Satyo 1993, 67-68). The imaginative prose genre in isiXhosa writing had yet to be established, though it had existed in the oral forms of epic and panegyric, as well as folktales, for centuries.

The history of written isiXhosa literature asserts that the later collapse of this newspaper industry led to direct missionary control over publishing of isiXhosa books and hence the loss of independence of the book in isiXhosa literature, at least in terms of thematic repertoire. I will explore this manipulation during the various developmental stages of isiXhosa literature.

Creative Writing: 1910-1950

This period saw the emergence of creative work such as novels, short stories and dramas and a shift away from newspapers to the publication of books. Only in the twentieth century did imaginative prose fiction emerge, introduced predominantly by S. E. K. L. Mqhayi. Mqhayi and H. M. Ndawo are considered the founders of the isiXhosa novel. Mqhayi's first work *uSamson* ("Samson") appeared in 1909. His novel, *Ityala lamawele* ("The Law-Suit of the Twins") (1914), gained him acceptance as one of the best isiXhosa writers, a reputation which still holds. Mqhayi's work, together with that of A. C. Jordan and R. L. Peteni, has received the widest attention of all isiXhosa authors.

A younger generation also emerged during the 1920s, with writers such as G. B. Sinxo and J. J. R. Jolobe. Missionaries still exerted a measure of control over the themes addressed by many of these early novelists, but some stylistic experimentation now emerges. Satyo, in Gerard, states the following:

These writers deliberately took the bare Gospel narratives and clothed them in realistic detail in order to "localise" them and make them intelligible to the Xhosas. Books like *UNolishwa* (1930) and *UNomathamsangqa Nosiqebenqa* (1937) by H. M. Ndawo and *Umzali Wolahleko* (1933) by G. B. Sinxo, and *Intombi Yolahleko* (1953) by E. F. Gwashu are good examples of such works.

(1993, 74)

One of the most renowned isiXhosa novels, *Ingqumbo yeminyanya* ("The Wrath of the Ancestors") by A. C. Jordan, however, was not to appear until after the beginning of World War II.

The inhibitions placed on the natural development of isiXhosa literature by the missionaries are best illustrated in Jeff Opland's analysis (1990) of the circumstances surrounding the publication of Jordan's *Ingqumbo yeminyanya* ("The Wrath of the Ancestors") (1940) and his later work, *Kwezo mpindo zeTsitsa* ("On the Banks of the Tsitsa") (1972). It is clear that Shepherd, the missionary publisher, did not approve of the ending of Jordan's novel, regarding the suicide committed by the main characters as the ultimate triumph of evil over good. Although the book was finally published in its unaltered form after Jordan refused to accede to Shepherd's request for a different ending, this disagreement affected their relationship. It may even have stalled the publication of the work for two years. The book appeared only in March 1940, though Shepherd intimates that the delay was

due to his excessive work load, rather than any other factors (Opland 1990, 139). Shepherd did, however, write to Jordan on May 6, 1938 as follows:

We would have preferred to see the story end in a different fashion. There is a suggestion of the triumph of evil over good. I understand, however, that you have fully discussed this with Mr. Bennie and that you do not see your way, from an artistic point of view, to alter the end.

(qtd. in Opland 1990, 139)

Although this letter falls short of being dictatorial, it does suggest a subtle attempt at interference and the manipulation of both plot and ending. This echoed the oppressive view taken by school administrators to Jordan's work, particularly the Controller of Stores in the Department of the Administrator, Cape Province, who responded on November 21, 1940, in a written letter to Lovedale Press that "the Department is not prepared to accept for inclusion in the catalogue of books and requisites approved for use in the primary schools your publication 'Ingqumbo Yeminyanya,' and the fee paid by you at the time this book was submitted is accordingly forfeited" (Opland 1990, 135-147). Perhaps the reason for this rejection was that the book was thought unsuitable for school children as it subtly espoused indigenous values, including respect for the elders and for Mpondo traditions. Nevertheless, the book went on to become a classic not only in isiXhosa but also internationally in translation.

At a later date, when Jordan began to negotiate the translation rights of the English version of the book, his relationship with Shepherd soured further and Jordan finally published the translated version with Heinemann. In the interim, the entire matter was handled by lawyers. The replacement of a more personal relationship between Shepherd and Jordan with a purely legal, asocial arrangement is illustrated in the final paragraph of Shepherd's letter to Jordan's attorney dated March 17, 1950:

We would only add, that . . . we are not now interested in any English translation of INGQUMBO YEMINYANYA and we give him every right to negotiate elsewhere. When the relationship of author and publisher is put on the footing Mr. Jordan favours, it is not worth extending or even maintaining.

(qtd. in Opland 1990, 139)

With Jordan's second book, *Kwezo mpindo zeTsitsa* ("On the banks of the Tsitsa"), a book of essays and short stories, there was an inordinate delay in publishing. Shepherd received the manuscript in 1946 and verbally agreed to

publish it, but never did so. The book did not appear until 1972, after Jordan's death and long after Shepherd had left Lovedale. The question as to whether this was a deliberate snub by Shepherd of Jordan and his literary writing remains unanswered. There is, however, nothing in the content of the stories that suggests that Shepherd should have been similarly resistant to the publication of this collection, as he was to the publication of *Ingqumbo Yeminyanya*. This suggests perhaps that their conflicted personal relationship was largely to blame for the delay in publication.

Diversification of Publishing Houses: 1950-1990

This period saw a movement away from Lovedale Press to new publishing houses, often, as has been seen in the case of Jordan's work, with connections outside of South Africa. Publishers such as Oxford University Press, Shuter and Shooter, Heinemann, Via Afrika, Juta, Maskew Miller Longman, Macmillan Boleswa and others began publishing creative works in indigenous languages, although these were aimed mainly at the school market. Despite this diversification of publishers, the thematic repertoire remained controlled, not by missionaries, but by apartheid authorities and the language boards which insisted on politically and socially neutral material. The commissioning editors for African language publications in mainstream publishing companies were initially white and monolingual. The readers who vetted the material were isiXhosa speakers, often conservative writers, who themselves upheld the attitudes of the regime as to what should be published. A system was thus created which fed only 'law-abiding' and conservative material into the school market.

Transformation: 1990 Onwards

This period saw the setting up of black-run printing presses such as Skotaville (with Mthobi Mutloatse as director), Vivlia and BARD publishers. The latter have, in the 1990s, published works by popular authors such as Welile Shasha and Ncedile Saule, as well as new authors such as Mandla Matyumza. In the 1990s, black directors, like Mpuku Radinku in Via Afrika Publishers, began taking up positions in previously white-owned companies. In 2002, New Africa Books emerged under the leadership of director, Brian Wafawarowa, funded by the black empowerment group NAIL and Johnnic. Black commissioning editors were employed and mother-tongue editors began working on works in their own languages. Although the industry was transforming in the early 1990s, however, there

was a dramatic decline in spending on books. This was the result of the Department of Education's lack of focus and its inability to purchase textbooks because of internal restructuring. Amalgamations and restructuring of publishing companies, accompanied by a shift in focus towards English, exacerbated the situation.

These factors inevitably affected the publishing of creative works. In the early 1990s, companies such as Heinemann misread the market. The Mamela Afrika Writers Series, initiated in 1998 by Heinemann, published high-quality literary works in indigenous languages, including Reverend Ngewu's award-winning works in isiXhosa, but the series proved unsustainable and was abandoned in 2001. For the first time, however, black South Africans could now oversee the creation and publication of creative works from beginning to end.

This sets the scene for a transformation era where isiXhosa writing can be liberated from its past to develop naturally. If the elevation of indigenous languages as equal-status languages achieves increased literacy in these languages among all South Africans, this will result in a wider adult readership which, in turn, will encourage the publication of more creative works which do not cater only for the school market.

Another important feature of this period is the introduction of writing competitions in indigenous languages, such as the Maskew Miller Longman African Heritage Awards, the Sanlam Prize for Youth Literature, and the M-Net Book Prize, which is open to writers in all South Africa's national languages. This is in line with the South African Constitution, which recognises the equal status of all eleven official languages. Transformation is also happening via the world-wide web. The LitNet site hosts the isiXhosa literary site, *Isikhundla Sababhali* and the isiZulu site, *Phezulu*. Seminal South African works such as Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*, *Indlela ende eya enkululekweni* (2001) and Andre Brink's *Dry White Season*, *Umqwebedu* (1991) have been translated into isiXhosa and further enhanced the visibility of the language and stimulated the notion of transformation. Publishers such as New Africa Books have also begun experimenting with translating the Siyagruva Series of English novels for young people into isiXhosa. These novels feature contemporary South African issues such as HIV-AIDS, xenophobia, homophobia and sexual harassment. To date, three titles have appeared: *Lajuxuj' igqirha lem' etiphini* ("Divine Dump Dancer") (2004); *Khwela-khwela, yimoto kaMama* ("Mom's Taxi") (2004) and *Oomashayela Phezulu* ("In the Fast Lane") (2004). These translations have been facilitated by cooperation between the publisher and PRAESA (Project for the Study of Alternative Education in

South Africa). Such cooperation is valuable in transforming and raising the status and visibility of isiXhosa literature.

Since the development of isiXhosa literature was severely curtailed by previous government policies, its transformation cannot take place without societal transformation. In this regard, Swanepoel asserts that:

[a]uthors are prone to be viewed as system supporters, to be taken seriously, and their image decreases; language, a symbol of identity and nationhood, is stigmatised; literature, a celebrated articulator of freedom, suffers. Together language and literature come to be seen as instruments of apartheid

(1993, 269)

Since 1990, the political changes brought about in South Africa have liberated not only the people of South Africa, but authors as well, releasing literature to be an articulation of freedom and thereby restoring it as a symbol of nationhood. By implication, nationhood, identity and society in South Africa are based on the concept of transformation, re-birth and re-creation.

With regard to the transformation of the production and publication of literature in the quest for a more extensive and comprehensive South African identity and literary output, further comparative research into the socio-political changes affecting the different indigenous languages in South Africa is required in order to facilitate a clear comparison of the state which the different bodies of South African literatures now find themselves. Swanepoel concludes that:

In Southern Africa, with its “luxury” of so many emerging literatures, it is almost imperative that comparative studies should get underway, especially if scholars of literature are serious to develop a unified view of Southern African literature.

(1990, 43)

With regard to transformation in African literature, Irele asserts that:

I personally take the view that the African is being transformed not only into something or somebody else, but into something or somebody new, and I similarly tend to look upon our literature as tending towards the transposition of an old scale of feelings and attitudes into a new key of expression.

(1971, 17)

The modern isiXhosa novel depicts transformation in a number of ways, but primarily through the creation of characters and setting. The characters may be grouped as follows: country or rural figures; migrants who move between shanty towns or locations in urban areas and rural family homes; and those who are born in the urban black areas and have no rural association.

With regard to migratory characters and first-generation urban dwellers, Abner Nyamende, when analyzing Dikobe's *The Marabi Dance* (1984), refers to Martha's "unresolved dialogue between urban and rural space" and asserts that Martha's "deprivation of space mirrors that of Dikobe himself" (1996, 192-93). It is this unresolved dialogue, which can now finally be resolved through the transformation of South African society, which will hopefully be reflected in new isiXhosa literature. This will not only involve the exploration of a "vanishing space," but depict a new space with its accompanying identity changes (Nyamende 1996, 193). This would essentially involve cultural flexibility, a mixing of tongues, of discourses, of cultures – for all South Africans. Perhaps it is this aspect which holds the key to cultural continuity within a flexible and changing South African space and identity. Identity is continually negotiated in relation to situation. Essentially this is what should feed the 'normalisation' of isiXhosa literature. Identity is "anchored to political, economic and cultural hegemony, and comes most unstuck in moments of crisis" (De Mel 1995, 175-76). Many may argue that the political crisis is now over in South African and that this should prepare the way for a more mature and natural development in isiXhosa literature.

A fourth dimension has now been added to the former three-way dialectic between country, city and migratory characters. In this lie the origins of transformation literature: a literature that will fill the thematic vacuums created by authors and literatures manipulated by the ruling elite for the purposes of apartheid education. Perhaps we will see the emergence of characters who lead regular urban lives within recognisably suburban environments and experience all the complexities of urbanisation previously not possible for black South Africans. This aspect will hopefully be explored further in isiXhosa and other South African literatures.

J. M. Coetzee, when critically commenting on poetry by white South African poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, talks of "the poetry of empty space," which creates the impression of an empty land (1989). There is an emptiness which also exists in isiXhosa literature, though for different reasons. This is a silence which represents the emptiness created by strict apartheid censorship laws and one which still needs to be overcome. This vacuum may also be filled through a process of transformation which will allow for the natural development of isiXhosa literature for the first time.

A further development in isiXhosa literature which evidences transformation is the broadening of thematic repertoire to include current socio-political debates. This is illustrated by Peter Mtuze's award-winning collection of short stories, *Ungakhe uxelele mntu* ("Don't tell a soul") (1990) where contemporary issues such as the continuing effects of apartheid, and the death penalty that was invoked for anti-apartheid activities, are explored. R. F. Mcimeli's *Kazi ndenzeni na?* ("I wonder what I've done?") (1995) explores the oppression that women and children experience in and around Mdantsane near East London. The novel is essentially a feminist work centred on the city and hardships brought about by change and is an excellent example of what I've termed transformation literature. The gap between country and city has been bridged, yet the characters battle to come to terms with the changes brought about by city life. Mcimeli's *Ingqaka kamaQhudeneni* ("My grandmother's curdled milk"), a book of folklore, won the Maskew Miller Longman African Heritage African Literary Award in 1993.

Transformation literature covers all genres. For example, Ncedo D. Mcani's *Uhambo lwenkululeko* ("Journey to Freedom") (1998) explores the hardships faced by students in South Africa's transition to democracy. Their intolerance at the pace of change after the release of political prisoners is highlighted: their final reward is freedom. Satyo suggests that "[i]t remains to be seen whether *glasnost*, South African style, is likely to have any significant effect on the quality and nature of literary output in Xhosa as well as other African languages" (1993, 88). It would seem that this *glasnost* is in fact taking place, though to a limited degree. The transformation of publication of texts in isiXhosa will gain momentum and succeed only if increased literacy manages to create a wider adult readership, if the market for school readers itself is successfully liberalised, and if publishing houses can continue to cater adequately for the needs of these readers once they leave school.

It is of grave concern in this regard that some of these works of transformation literature are already out of print. Mtuze's *Ungakhe uxelele mntu* ("Don't tell a soul") is no longer available, perhaps because it has never been used in schools. When a nation's literature is dependent on prescription for schools in order to survive, the irony of transformation is patent. Clearly there is little or no adult readership. Furthermore, many publishers show no innovative strategies to create high quality works in isiXhosa which will remain cheap and accessible. This also reflects the nation's attitude towards its own languages. If anything, the numbers of people reading in isiXhosa have dropped. The development and maturation of isiXhosa literature is thus in a double bind. Only political intervention,

coupled with a change in attitude by speakers of isiXhosa themselves, will change this scenario. With funding from the Ministry of Arts and Culture, one publisher, Realities Xhosa, is taking control. Innovative relationships, where political intervention is coupled with private enterprise, may go a long way to changing the publishing industry in isiXhosa. Realities Xhosa, for instance, is a new publishing house specialising in the publication of isiXhosa literary works. Their new titles include *Amazwi amatsha* (“New Words”) (2005) by well-known isiXhosa poet and academic Abner Nyamende, as well as a re-issue of Sindiwe Magona’s novel *Kubantwana babantwana bam (To My Children’s Children)* (2006). A collection of essays by Magona and a collection of short stories by new isiXhosa writers, edited by Magona, also form part of the 2006 list. Ironically, however, this publishing endeavour is run by second-language speakers of isiXhosa.

Oppression, Liberation and Izibongo

It has been shown that the emergence of written isiXhosa literature relied on the missionaries and their printing presses. However, oral literature in isiXhosa had existed long before the amaXhosa knew anything about reading and writing (Jordan 1973, 3). The interaction between oral and written literature is now well recognised (Kaschula, 2002). The introduction of writing, according to Satyo,

heralded a new era of broadened and, no doubt, enriched literary activity . . . literary gems from other languages and cultures were made available to the Xhosa; a literary product, once finished, could be preserved . . . and the missionaries seized this opportunity to preach the Word.

(1995, 71)

Unlike the book, the oral word in the form of *izibongo* always retained some autonomy in the form of socio-political commentary of a political nature, even during apartheid, probably because most of the enforcers of apartheid could not understand what was being said. Opland concludes that,

Xhosa oral poetry invested the book with negative connotations (equating its destructive power with the artillery), and asserted its defiant independence of the cultural stranglehold of print long after its exponents had themselves become literate.

(1995, 45)

This independence is evident in the anti-colonial poetry of David Livingstone Yali-Manisi, an *imbongi* whose work and life has been extensively researched by Opland (1983), and more recently in the work of Bongani Sitole (Kaschula, 2002).

There are, however, also clear examples of the manipulation, exploitation and censorship of this form of literature. In 1871 John Stewart, the Principal of Lovedale College, rejected the publication of an isiXhosa *izibongo* recorded at a chief's son's circumcision ceremony, on the basis that,

[t]he inducements to young men to forsake their education, and to leave their employments, for the ceremonies of circumcision are so many, that we cannot afford to place an additional one before them by throwing the halo of song and romance about the practice
(qtd. in Opland 1995, 31)

There are also clear examples presented in Opland (1983, 266-68), where oral poets such as Qangule were harassed and ultimately forced into exile for their anti-homeland statements. Sitole himself "rolled up his skins" during the apartheid years, only to re-emerge as Nelson Mandela's first *imbongi* in the Transkei region after Mandela's release from prison in 1990 (Kaschula, 2002). Sitole's *izibongo*, depicting and providing a critical socio-political commentary of the complexities of the early 1990s, are contained in *Qhiwula! Return to the Fold!*, which was re-issued by Via Afrika Publishers in 2006.

The *imbongi* has constantly been transforming since the earliest times. First came the move from praising chiefs to praising God, and then the shift to praising trade union movements, political parties and popular leaders. The oral word has always retained a form of resistance and independence, though certain oral performers like the well-known orator, Mzwakhe Mbuli, were harassed and imprisoned during the apartheid era. Nevertheless, unlike the printed book which is easier to control and censor, the word in its oral form remains a powerful barometer of freedom of speech, even in contemporary South Africa.

Concluding remarks

Throughout the history of South Africa, the flourishing of literature in African languages has been retarded – by religious censorship, by conservative publishers who colluded with the nationalist government, by general censorship in the Publications Control Act, and by the corrupt

practices within language boards (Maake 2000, 129). In response to this history, which pervades the current situation, Sibiyi argues for a more holistic approach to the contemporary promotion of literatures in African languages, including the use of the internet, newspapers, and radio to critique works and to provide a platform for the development and visibility of these literatures (2000, 55). This visibility has recently been increased with television programmes such as *Entabeni* and films such as *Tsotsi* and *UCarmen eKhayelitsha*, which are scripted in isiXhosa and other languages. The latter two won an Oscar and Golden Bear Award respectively – serving to focus national and global attention on the dynamic beauty and power of South African languages. This, in turn, may relieve the tension that presently exists between writer and reader, and will also serve to fill the empty spaces in isiXhosa literature, as discussed earlier.

Scholars point out that the tension between missionaries, politicians, educators, orators and writers has existed for a long time. Insofar as isiXhosa literature is concerned this tension existed between leaders in these fields from 1799 to 1994. But Oladipo points perhaps to a useful way forward:

This tension need not be antagonistic, however. But for it to be healthy African leaders would have to realise that, although literature could be subversive or dangerous, it is essential for the ruler. It is essential because it not only questions the half-truths of the politicians . . . but imagines a new and better world.

(1998, 10)

Perhaps in a free South Africa, the natural development of isiXhosa literature will not only be permitted, but will flourish as the language reasserts itself. This will be dependent on the effective implementation of language policy and a mature attitude of speakers towards their mother tongue. Such a change of attitude will equip them to make informed decisions for both themselves and their children with regard to language and reader, language and writer, language and work, as well as language and education.

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